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To cancel or not to cancel

Framings of Cancel Culture in Discrimination-Critical Contexts

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Introduction

Recently, the expression “Cancel Culture” has turned into a buzz term that is used by people across the political spectrum in public discourse. While some denounce the activities of “cancelling” as a “war” on free speech and active destruction of debate culture, others believe it represents a useful tool to hold people accountable of their actions, particularly in a world where a large part of public debate takes place in the digital sphere. Some demand the use of alternative terms such as “Accountability Culture” or indicate that the activity of cancelling simply represents an already common form of voicing one’s critique which has been given a new label. This discussion raises questions such as who is allowed to speak critically in public debates and which form of speech is deemed acceptable.

Without a doubt, the internet as well as the success of social media platforms and the functions these are equipped with have led to the creation of spaces that facilitate both presenting oneself and the exposure and accusation of people whose behaviour or speech is not accepted by different groups of people. This opportunity to hold others accountable results in feelings of uneasiness and rejection particularly among those who turn into targets of this protest. Well-established feminists such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or Alice Schwarzer found themselves confronted with negative feedback following public remarks that were, in some cases, categorised as transphobic. For instance, people encouraged their online followers to stop supporting them by not inviting them to speak at universities or not buying their books. Similarly, the British author J.K. Rowling was famously cancelled, following her publicly voiced views on trans women. When social media users called for consequences for her actions, the term “Cancel Culture” quickly found its way into the debate and was used by those accused of having made discriminatory statements.

Recently, the cancelling of an event featuring the Jewish author Deborah Feldman sparked controversy in Austria. Feldman was supposed to speak at a literary reading at the Gartenbaukino in Vienna but was uninvited by the organisers who justified their decision by saying that following the latest events in Gaza and Israel

in October 2023, they could no longer guarantee the safety and benefit of the event[1]. The decision's aim was also to avoid further polarisation in times of already heated debate. Prior to the scheduled reading, Feldman had been facing backlash by some due to her book "Jewish Fetish", which was published in September and takes a critical stance towards what she sees as an exaggerated sensitivity when it comes to criticising the Jewish state particularly in Germany (Wurmitzer 2023). Similarly, the lecture series "Teach-In: Against the Present: Past and Future Perspectives on Palestine" which should have taken place at the University in Vienna was cancelled in the beginning of November 2023. The university's speaker Cornelia Blum explained the step by stating that the selection of speakers would have offered a limited range of perspectives. Additionally, there were indications that some of those invited had connections to BDS movements which openly dispute Israel's right to exist (Nimmervoll 2023). These events raise the question of whether cancelling events or no longer purchasing products or services by those whose opinions are resented are useful tools to negotiate controversies and opposing ideas in public debate or rather harmful to a liberal democracy that presumably thrives through conflicts and confrontations.

In chapter 1, this thesis aims to provide a definition of the concept Cancel Culture, illustrate its characteristics and trace back the history of this term by examining Political Correctness. Chapter 2 discusses the origins of online activism and how social media platforms have turned into spaces where users can push for social reform. In that regard, the question whether digital spheres are free from or permeated by power asymmetries will be assessed. Chapter 3 focuses on how Cancel Culture can be understood within the context of an attention economy and describes the Cancel Culture discourse as a populist one. Chapter 4 takes a closer look at Cancel Culture and its performative potential. Chapter 5 is dedicated to existing critique revolving around the term, its use in debates and the set of values it might stand for. Given my discourse analysis' topical focus, this thesis further provides an overview of currently ongoing debates about trans issues as well as feminists' role in this discussion in chapter 6. Chapter 7 examines the relationship

[1] https://www.gartenbaukino.at/programm/programmuebersicht/an-afternoon-with-deborah-feldman/ (accessed 29 December 2023).

between anger, resistance and activism since articles[2] about Cancel Culture frequently point out the aggressive tone that is used in online debates. Finally, arguments such as free speech or hate speech and their effect on Cancel Culture debates will be discussed.

This literary review part is followed by an analysis as this thesis tries to identify feminist perceptions of the concept of Cancel or Call-out Culture when voicing their thoughts on trans issues or commenting on the "trans wars" in general. Feminists' views on this issue spark interest as feminists frequently find themselves at the receiving end of accusations that they are part of a broader, detrimental Cancel Culture that poses a danger to the foundations of democratic society[3]. I am interested in why feminists decide to address the topic of accountability or Cancelling strategies and whether patterns regarding arguments in favour or against the concept of cancelling can be identified. It is argued that discrimination-critical contexts are not free from power structures which is why I want to establish whether the discussion of Cancel or Call-out Culture is used to maintain or challenge existing power structures. I am trying to achieve that goal by analysing texts by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Roxane Gay, Loretta Ross, Laurie Penny, Judith Butler, Kim Humphery, Nana Akosua Hanson and Alex Kofi Donkor by relying on the method of critical discourse analysis.

[2] For example: Mondegreen, Eliza. 2023. "The violent rhetoric of trans activists has to stop". https://unherd.com/thepost/the-violent-rhetoric-of-trans-activists-has-to-stop/ (accessed 29 August 2023); Jessel, Robert. 2023. "The Trans movement is becoming more violent". https://www.spiked-online.com/2023/08/08/the-trans-movement-is-becoming-more-violent/ (accessed 29 august 2023); Davies. Matilda. 2023. "Feminst campaigner assaulted by a trans activist at women's event". https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/feminist-campaigner-assaulted-by-a-trans-activist-at-women-s-event-b8rxrpg76 (29 August 2023); Chea, S.G. 2021. "Women Who Disagree with the Pro-Trans Movement are Met with Threats of Violence". https://www.eviemagazine.com/post/women-disagree-pro-trans-movement-threats-violence-death (accessed 29 August 2023);

[3] For example: https://unherd.com/thepost/why-women-suffer-most-from-cancel-culture/ (accessed 10 October 2023).

1 What is Cancel Culture?

To begin with, the term ”Cancel Culture”, its meaning and etymology will be described.

According to the online dictionary of Merriam Webster[4], “to cancel” defines not carrying something out, particularly when talking about performances, events etc. Other explanations focus on the ability to “destroy the force, effectiveness or validity” of something or someone. Finally, it is mentioned that “cancelling” can further refer to the public removal of support which frequently takes place in the online sphere. Merriam Webster[5] additionally offers a definition for the term “Cancel culture” which goes as follows: “the practice or tendency of engaging in mass cancelling as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure“.

An open letter titled “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate” which was printed by Harper’s Magazine in 2020 sparked a lot of attention and conversation about so-called Cancel Culture. In this letter, which was signed by 150 public individuals including authors and philosophers, cancelling was described as an attitude which is severely detrimental to public debate as it is in favour of “ideological conformity” as opposed to accepting different ideas. Cancel Culture was condemned by listing reasons how it allegedly restricted open debate in favour of ideological conformity.

Ng (2022: 14) explains that cancelling takes place when someone is “deemed to have acted or spoken badly (…), no longer following someone on social media or posting disparaging content” about someone. Ng (ibid. 15) further illustrates that the wish to cancel someone frequently derives from the desire to hold someone accountable for their actions.

The philosopher Richard David Precht (cited in Daub 2022: 9) associates Cancel Culture with the left’s wish to gain the sovereignty of interpretation when it comes to language, identity, one’s body and sexuality and perceives debates dealing with topics such as transgender or Cancel Culture itself as a new “authoritarian moralism”.

[4] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cancel (accessed on 3 July 2023)
[5] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cancel%20culture (accessed on 3 July 2023)

Clark (2020: 88) refers to cancelling as a “digital discoursive accountability practice” and defines the activity of “cancelling” as

> “an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one’s attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money”.

According to a Pew Research Centre Report (Vogels et al. 2021) published in May 2021, 44% of Americans state to have already heard of the expression of Cancel Culture. The degree of familiarity with it is dependent on age as those under the age of 30 are much more likely to have come across the term than those over 50. 49% of those who know Cancel Culture defined it as actions to hold others accountable. Only around 14% of those participating described is as practices that involved a form of censorship or “restriction on free speech”. A slightly smaller margin depicts it as “mean spirited attacks used to cause others harm”. 17% of those who believe calling outs serve to hold people accountable reckon that these processes can serve as a teaching moment that can help people reflect on their behaviour and potentially do better in the future. 20% of those who perceive call-outs as a form of accountability underline how helpful making someone aware of their mistakes can be and that this could be a strategy that might lead to the development of a better society. A third of those who think that Cancel Culture represents a form of unjust punishment associate call outs with rash, judgemental, overreacting behaviour that is caused by not considering the intentions or context of something posted online.

Cancelling is not a practice that came into being with the onset of the Internet but has existed in “offline” versions long before; e.g. in the form of boycotts or blacklisting (ibid. 88). Clark goes as far as to say that the term Cancelling has been used as a “journalistic shorthand” to exclude minority groups from participating in the online public sphere. Former versions of holding people accountable such as reading or calling out were rooted in the queer and black community which had to deal with a lack of resources, power and time. Clark (ibid. 89) explains that the conviction that everyone is able to take part in public debate as equals is simply untrue.

Daub (ibid. 13) summarises that definitions revolving around Cancel Culture are oftentimes blurry and that the expression can be interpreted in various ways

depending on the national context. Additionally, he depicts that current descriptions of this phenomenon resemble those of Political Correctness.

1. 2 Political Correctness

Daub (2022: 75) explains that the term of Political Correctness is similar to Cancel Culture in regards to its velocity of dominating public debate. Wilson (in Daub ibid. 75) notices a sudden increase in the number of newspaper articles dealing with the topic between the years 1989 and 1994. Political Correctness also made its way across the pond and was quickly employed in Germany. There, it seems to have reflected meanings different from its original one which used to be associated with left-wing politics and alleged moralism promoted by them. In Germany, deviating meanings such as “controversial” or “unpopular” were evident. Daub (ibid. 76) argues that Political Correctness and the debates associated with it are part of a collective memory that serves as a basis for the panic linked to Cancel Culture discussions. In the U.S. being perceived as politically correct was not something that was desired by people as it prevalently occurred in negative contexts. Likewise, Stade (2017: 108) states that referring to someone as politically correct was used to express disapproval or hostility and as a way of delegitimising strategies and actions that focus on antidiscrimination. Those who use it in a derogative way consider Political Correctness to be an “oversensitive reaction to perceived discrimination” and is opposed to “common sense”, which is depicted as virtuous. Stade (ibid. 108) defines Political Correctness as a fighting word which means that it can be used as a weapon.

The expression “politically correct” was first used by the Supreme Court justice James Wilson in 1793 and reflected the meaning of “in accordance with facts”. During the following centuries, the term barely occurred in public debate. Stade (ibid. 112) explains that in the 1920s, Lenin and Stalin were the ones who employed the word “pravil’nyy” to communicate which behaviour or actions were in agreement with the official party line of the Russian Communist party and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, it was never used as an affirmative self-description as Daub (ibid. 77) explains. While it stems from leftist discourses it was used in a self-critical fashion.

Daub (2022: 77) explains that authors such as Dinesh D’Souza who published the book “Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus” managed to

transform the aforementioned self-designation into an explicit and unironic program of the American left. Stade (2017: 118) describes the 1980s as a period of “political backlash”, which was characterised by right wing political groups investing resources in pushing their agenda in order to dominate the public debate. Stade further illustrates that the success of these measures becomes evident in the election of Ronald Reagan and Margret Thatcher as well as the popularity of pop culture productions that promoted “wealth, conspicuous consumption and self-indulgence”. Stade (ibid. 119) continues by saying that not merely authors but also comedians engaged in attacks on Political Correctness. For example, Bill Maher hosted a TV show that criticised Political Correctness and speech codes in general by spreading fundamental libertarian beliefs. These include a focus on individualism and individual freedom while denouncing “the state” or “the government” that, according to them, exist in opposition to these ideas. Hence, the freedom to exercise one’s freedom of speech or religion or own a gun contrast the idea of social justice. At that time, some North American comedians further explained that they would no longer perform at college campuses as these were permeated by Political Correctness. In his book, D’Souza emphasised the importance of free speech in favour of efforts to engage in anti-discrimination (ibid. 119). Political Correctness was supposedly a threat to fundamental ideas of American liberaltarianism and a danger to the university system. D’Souza claimed that there was even a “PC police” that promoted the development of a left orthodoxy. Instead of listening to and rewarding the best arguments, ideology and ethos allegedly dominated public discourse. Richard Bernstein’s 1990 article “The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct” which was published in the New York Times is also seen as pathbreaking for the public debates about Political Correctness to come. Bernstein (in Daub 2022: 83) describes developments such as growing intolerance, social pressure to conform or the fear of being accused of “thought crimes” such as racism, sexism or homophobia.

Daub (2022: 80) argues that Political Correctness represented the perfect concept for politicians to attract supporters both on the left and the right of the political spectrum. During the early 90s, particularly Bill Clinton’s government employed this vaguely defined term as well as other talking points introduced by Bush and Reagan to gain the sympathy of their former voters. These subjects included narratives of e.g. dangerous inner cities that were flooded by gangs and drugs. In 1991, George

H.W. Bush had warned graduates at the University of Michigan about Political Correctness and named some its characteristics. According to Bush, Political Correctness fought “diversity in the name of diversity” and “replaced old stereotypes with new ones” (ibid. 83). Disputes were approached with intimidations instead of relying on common sense which led to a culture of division and open ridiculing.

The disparagement of Political Correctness at that time worked easily as people did not perceive it as something positive. Instead, being politically incorrect was the desired outcome. Daub (ibid. 81) depicts those who prided themselves to be politically correct as “shadows” whose alleged exaggerated reactions and protest were largely imagined by conservatives. The politically correct had no names and did not take on a prominent role in public debate.

Stade (2017: 120) argues that in the 2010s, attacks on Political Correctness had the aim of pushing a narrative according to which the media and the political establishment were a “liberal elite” that looked down on ordinary people. Those who used common sense were allegedly robbed of their right to speak their mind and share “inconvenient truths” that were frequently about immigrants exploiting the welfare state and hence hard-working individuals for their own benefit. These talking points are still used by Donald Trump in the U.S. or the AfD, a far-right German political party.

Stade (ibid. 120) summarises that Political Correctness had since developed into a fighting term that is associated with certain attitudes including “oversensitivity”, “censorship” and “militancy” as well as an exaggerated focus on topics such as feminism or antiracism. In 2017, he argued that it was now a “weapon in the assault of the welfare state and its institutions” and complicit in the rise of fascism. Stade’s description of the Political Correctness discourse seems oddly familiar when thinking about the current debates about Cancel Culture. Before exploring how these arguments were given a second life prevalently in the online sphere as well as a new label in debates discussing Cancelling or Call-out strategies, an overview of online activism will be offered.

2 Exploring the roots of online activism

Ng (2020: 42) identifies the Arab Spring and “Occupy Wall Street” protest as the first major events that drew attention to social media platforms and their activist potential. They not only served for internal communication amongst the activists but also facilitated the widespread exchange of information as well as the documentation of protest. Protests revolving around the Arab Spring or Occupy Wallstreet were accompanied by a large number of offline activities such as people taking it to the streets. Ng (ibid. 42) opposes these with more current forms of “digital activism” or “hashtag activism” that have their starting points online. Hashtag activism gained visibility during social justice efforts such as #Metoo, #SayHerName or #Blacklivesmatter. Hashtags are considered very useful in that regard as they group posts adhering to a particular topic together, which makes it very easy to find publications according to topic of interest. Hashtags prominent in the Black Twitter space did not generate that much attention until the moment Twitter introduced trending topics in 2009 (Ng 2020: 52). For example, the hashtag #Metoo was not the first instance of calling attention to sexual misconduct in the digital sphere. Already in 2007, the same hashtag was used by African American activist Tarana Burke to spread awareness for the experiences of sexual assault victims. Later on, hashtags such as #YouOKSis or #SayHerName were employed to start debates about sexual harassment or police brutality towards women of colour.

This resulted in topics formerly restricted to Black Twitter users entering a broader sphere and becoming known to a greater part of the public. Ng (ibid. 53) cites the case of comedian and actor Bill Cosby who had been called out in online spaces that received little attention from mainstream media outlets for years. Only when another male, Black comedian drew attention to the issue in 2014, the story entered the mainstream and ultimately led to sexual assault charges in 2018. Hence, some classify Cosby to be the first celebrity who faced consequences owing to #Metoo activism. While there were some critical voices who pointed out that men like Weinstein were tried in the “court of public opinion” and should be seen as innocent until there was a conviction at court, the great majority agreed that raising awareness for these enormous differences in power and the unjust exploitation of women was important and valuable. Ng (ibid. 54) explains that an increase in the number of celebrities being called out led to a shift in the perception of call-out culture. Those who were not in favour of the growing attention for Cancel practices

or the consequences for the affected celebrities criticised that social media users acted similarly to a court, men's careers were destroyed despite the lack of proper evidence or that social media platforms created a poisonous culture overall. Ng (ibid. 60) emphasises that even though Cancel practices seem to cause "precipitous falls from grace" that come with serious financial drawbacks and loss of job opportunities for the celebrities under scrutiny, famous actors, comedians or celebrities have the financial means to make up for temporary unemployment or to make donations to redeem themselves. Generally speaking, loss of media attention tends to be a rather short-lived phenomenon.

In regards to calling out problematic behaviour of ordinary people who do not have a large social media following, endless financial means or power, critics argue that public callouts may not always be appropriate (ibid. 61). Moreover, there are calls to differentiate between those who expose patterns of problematic behaviour and repeated discrimination of others and those who published e.g. one inappropriate tweet years ago. Some commentators seemed to be reminded of "leftwing authoritarianism" and called for spaces that allowed for open debate, tolerance and the ability to admit that one is wrong (ibid. 62). Others would like to see a greater focus on "accountability culture", which some consider to be a more productive approach to conflicts in general. Instead of simply demanding cancelling practises for those accused of problematic behaviour, Brown (2020: 15) proposes that these should get the opportunity to unlearn harmful tendencies and engage in a process of betterment. She further discusses the importance of receiving an honest apology as well as providing time and space for the person being called out to join a conversation instead of being shut down and silenced. Brown (ibid. 16) calls for greater efforts as a community as opposed to considering ourselves to be individuals that fight on their own and engage in a culture of "uplifting and transforming" in contrast to "oppression and punishment". Those who cause harm should be given a second chance and should be invited to join conversations receive support and be faced with "satisfying consequences" as opposed to exclusion.

During the early stages of hashtag activism that largely remained digital, critics were sceptical whether these actions could really bring about long-term change and questioned the involved participants' commitment to the cause they promoted. For example, Gladwell (2010) argued that simply liking or retweeting cannot be seen on the same level as physical protests that require those who partake to even put their

bodies and safety on the line such as during the lunch sit-ins performed by students during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Gladwell points out that the existing enthusiasm linked to online activism is misplaced and exaggerated and even seems to render the accomplishments of offline activists in the past invisible. Gladwell lists protests and volunteering projects such as the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project, which was carried out in 1964. Volunteers supporting these civil rights efforts in the "Deep South" were arrested, kidnapped or killed, houses set on fire or bombed. Gladwell (2010) concludes that "Activism that challenges the status quo – that attacks deeply rooted problems – is not for the faint of the heart". Gladwell compares how those participating in risky offline protests had strong ties amongst one another which made them make great sacrifices for their peers. According to him, social media platforms merely forge weak ties among its users which results in little motivation to engage in "high risk activism".

The latter argument raises the interesting question whether the success and legitimacy of activism is directly tied to the potential dangers involved for participants. Instead of perceiving online activism as a form lazy or distanced form of protest, it could be argued that it provides a more inclusive form of expressing opposition. Not everyone has the resources to partake in offline versions of protest which can be due to a lack of resources that can include time, physical ability or safety. For example, as it has become evident in numerous news reports, trans people must fear physical assaults in case they engage in parades or demonstrations. Arguing that them staying at home and being involved in protesting from afar seems to represent a very privileged perspective on this debate. As it has been shown above, employing resistance strategies online by posting or creating hashtags do not represent safe ways of protesting and are frequently met with negative offline consequences for those who initiated the protest. Moreover, online activism allows one to engage in issues that do not happen in one's direct surroundings. It helps one to get involved in opposition movements and show one's support from afar. While some may argue that this is a very easy and comfortable form of protest, I would underline the potential benefits it brings.

Ng (2020: 44) further draws attention to how e.g. the #BlackLivesMatter protest put a spotlight on the scope and capacities of online activism. She goes on to criticise that debates revolving around Cancel Culture frequently obscure the amount of unremunerated labour that goes into engaging in activism online. Performing call-

outs involves labour that is not only invisible but also comes with dangers and stigmatisation. Nowadays, calling someone out means to raise someone's awareness for something problematic they have said or done. The fact that this practice actually stems from Black counter publics has received little to no attention in mainstream culture.

Ng (2020: 43) discusses another aspect of social media that is frequently criticised particularly in terms of online activism. For example, Twitter has a character limit for the messages that can be posted which causes critics to state that debates carried out on this platform are shaped by Twitter's focus on "brevity and speed of posting" which ultimately results in a "lack of nuanced debate and thoughtfully considered actions". At the same time, users have developed strategies to evade the issue of having to limit one's posts by creating so called threads. By clicking on a + sign below the first Twitter post, additional ones can be added in case more space is needed to fully explain an idea, concept, opinion etc.

Despite the criticism linked to online or hashtag activism, Jackson et al. (2020: 25), are convinced that this form of activism has played a vital role in transforming national consciousness in regard to issues dealing with social identity categories such as race and feminism as well as perceptions of power dynamics in digital spaces and should hence not be underestimated.

2.1 Cancel Culture and the role of social media

Ng (2020: 51) summarises that the early use of cancelling occurred for an "in-group audience" and was carried out by Black people. Additionally, the instances that were deemed worthy of cancelling were deliberately exaggerated for the "humorous effect", which reflects the playfulness linked to call-outs.

It is believed that the more mainstream act of "cancelling" had its beginning on the social media platform Twitter (Daub 2022: 92). Following "The Colbert Report", a satirical TV show, the first instance of using "cancel" in a hashtag occurred during the 2014 #CancelColbert campaign (Ng 2020: 26). On the show, Stephen Colbert did not perform as himself but a conservative news presenter. The incident that sparked the above-mentioned campaign was about Colbert employing discriminatory language towards Asian people to mock a real news report according to which a non-profit foundation for Native Americans was established by the Washington Redskins NFL football team's owner. The original intent of Colbert's

mocking was not to offend Asians but to express his support. The Stephen Colbert account then published a tweet about the episode which was met with opposition by the Twitter activist Suey Park, who consequently introduced the hashtag #CancelColbert which quickly turned into one of Twitter's most popular hashtags and generated 50.000 follow-up tweets within 10 days (ibid. 27). Some people commented in support of Colbert saying that people should not request the cancelling of TV shows or TV presenters simply over diverging opinions. Others expressed their support for Park saying that even though Colbert had the intent of advocating for marginalised communities, his joke still "ironically" mocked Asian people and did not produce any benefit for the community. While Park and other critics were accused of not being able to see the satirical aspect of Colbert's show, others drew attention to how women of colour were treated when they expressed dissatisfaction with content posted online. Following the #CancelColbert campaign, Stephen Colbert ended up presenting a more popular TV show. Park, on the other hand, struggled with the continuous negative backlash following her calling out Colbert tweet which caused her to even move cities because she no longer felt safe.

The way the media has changed, the distance between celebrities and their followers has grown increasingly smaller. Ng (2022: 17) points out that particularly U.S. Twitter adopted a crucial role in enabling public conversations between producers, content creators, actors or actresses as one could simply tag a celebrity to animate them to join a public debate. According to Ng (2022: 13) social media platforms are crucial places for celebrities as these provide them with space for self-expression and building their brand. Moreover, these platforms encourage interaction through various functions such as comment sections, share buttons, sending reactions etc. and hence generate a place for getting in touch with supporters. Consequently, choosing to present oneself on one of these platforms comes with financial benefits; at the same time, social media allows an easy documentation of undesired behaviour. Ng (ibid. 29) explains that cancelling actions and social media platforms are closely intertwined and dependent on one another as they not only serve as a "repository of undeletable digital discourses which may end up as evidential receipts" but also provide spaces for online users to engage in actions such as unfollowing or coming up with hashtags. Fans used digital media to change their way of organising and interacting among themselves (ibid. 18).

Similarly, they used these platforms to establish contact with producers and have a say in the development of series' storylines or to avert their cancellation.

It is vital to point out that the expression of dislike online and making use of cancelling practises is not restricted to holding certain targets accountable for their e.g. discriminatory behaviour but can also be fuelled by the rejection of groups of people based on their gender, sexuality or race. For example, people of colour or queer individuals frequently experience attacks on social media and are met with tactics that fall within definitions of "cancel" measures. Nonetheless, these activities are ultimately not recognised as "cancelling" techniques in public discourse. This raises the question of why the term Cancel Culture almost exclusively occurs in debates about the so-called "woke" left and their alleged agenda online. The question why "cancelling" seems to be associated with a particular group of people that are characterised by their progressivist efforts that tend to take place online In the mainstream media will be explored later on.

However, social media platforms not only encourage conversation among celebrities and their followers. They also serve as a place of resistance, participation and self-reflection. Tynes et al. (in Clark 2020: 90) emphasise that talking back and opposing the dominant discourse via posting on social media platforms is intersectional, multi-dimensional and less restricted. As discussed before, "calling outs" used to be part of Afro-American media strategies or "digital discursive accountability practices" (ibid. 89). When these call-outs turned into "Call-out Culture", the term which was formerly used by African Americans, was more broadly employed by progressive, young people with an affinity for the Internet. Daub (2022: 88) explains that at that time, the expression of calling someone out became more established particularly in regard to the online platform Tumblr. Tumblr is defined as a short-form micro-blogging platform that has the aim of bringing people that share the same interests together. Calling outs were used to deal with expressions or behaviour that was categorised as "problematic". In this context, Daub (ibid. 89) points out that "Call -out Culture" is by no means praised or pushed in these forums but rather used as a form of self-monitoring. It has the aim of counteracting certain debates turning "toxic" and "dysfunctional". Daub summarises that accordingly this strategy is not a way of prohibiting people who do not share their political ideas to speak but as an internal measure to keep discussions in online communities that are mainly left and deal with identity politics productive. However, similarly to the

way the original meaning of Political Correctness was distorted, Call-out Culture as a former control strategy was reframed as an important characteristic of discourses of the left. This becomes evident in the use of the expression “circular firing squad” which means that groups adhering to the political left seem to be more occupied with fighting and “calling out” one another as opposed to dealing with the common enemy. Call-out culture did not remain a popular term within public discourse. Daub (ibid. 92) believes that this is due to “calling out” evoking images associated with passivity, whereas “cancelling” describes a more active and hence more intimidating activity.

Cancellation, in itself, can come with a loss of online supporters which is then also linked to online personas’ income generated by sponsorship deals or business deals with companies (Ng 2020: 29). At the same time, it is oftentimes emphasised how ineffective online cancelling actions ultimately are. Famously “cancelled” celebrities such as J.K. Rowling or the case of #CancelColbert, which was explored in more detail earlier, reveal that those who are called out online frequently benefit from the process, generate a greater following or are even offered jobs that come with even greater attention. Ng (ibid. 29) argues that “Cancellings” are characterised by “continued views and digital discourses they create”. Additionally, those calling out celebrities often end up being exposed to threats and the famous “online mob”. For example, very recently, the expression Cancel Culture has come up in debates dealing with the popular German band “Rammstein”. Since May 2023, numerous women have shared their experiences of sexual assaults particularly regarding the lead singer Till Lindemann. Those women are met with threats and animosity in public discourse, which is why, many decide to remain anonymous. Regardless, their credibility is repeatedly called into question. Protestors’ attempts to stop the performances of Rammstein have resulted in the accusation of performing Cancel Culture.

2.2 Power dynamics in the (digital) publish spheres

It has been established that accountability strategies have been employed to shift existing power hierarchies in public discourse. Digital spaces have proven to be more inclusive and have offered visibility to a broad variety of perspectives which might bring up the question of whether digital spheres are free from these power hierarchies and thereby provide a level playing field for all of those who participate.

Collins (2000: 228) introduces the concept of a “matrix of domination” and argues that resistance to intersecting forms of oppression must be viewed with similar complexity as the process of creating specific patterns of domination through various domains of power. The importance of Black feminist thought and considering the world as “one in the making” stresses the relevance of both individual and collective responsibility (ibid. 290). It can be argued that the Internet has allowed women of colour to enter spaces where they can participate and hold others accountable as opposed to traditional centres of public discourse. The Internet grants access to almost everyone and hence provides opportunities to enable social justice and negotiate power dynamics. Jackson et al. (2020: 26) explains how raced and gendered counterpublics excluded from elite media spaces created interventions by employing “community centred frames”; e.g., by publishing newspaper reports about lynchings and “white mob violence”. Nowadays, these interventions are made possible by social media platforms that help pushing social justice topics of public discourse. According to Jackson et al. (ibid. 23) renegotiating the terms of public debate, challenging its boundaries and deciding which topics deserve attention represent immensely important aspects of democracy. Those with less privilege and power have always been the ones excluded from public debates and thus politics itself. Jackson et al. (ibid. 24) point out that despite this large-scale exclusion from mainstream discussion, those marginalised were never “fully voiceless” but managed to establish counterpublics in which the political values of people of colour, women, those who identify as LGBTQIA+, immigrants, poor, disabled and mentally ill people. According to Brock (in Ng 2020: 45), in its beginnings, Twitter had a large number of African American users which can be considered surprising considering that accessing media outlets or political spaces in general was somewhat limited. Brock further underlines that activism was not the sole purpose of Black media spaces as they were equally characterised by their focus on everyday usage by the publishing of funny videos or tutorials.

Ng (ibid. 45) explains that from a linguistic standpoint, e.g. Black Twitter exposes the use of Black vernacular English which is also informed by the practice of “playing the dozens” which is defined as a “verbal art game” that has the aim of “playfully insulting each other with hyperbolic attributions. Johnson (1995: 125) identifies patterns and codes them as “snaps”, “reading”, “dissing” and “throwing shade” as well as the practice of “verbal duelling” which, for example, has the aim of “putting

someone in their place" or to "set them straight". Johnson (ibid. 123) explains that snapping first used to be popular among homosexual African American men and African American women. "Reading" comes with two different meanings. While one can be considered serious and governed by rules, the second one is more "playful" and is also referred to as "cracking someone's face" and "calling someone out". Depending on the context in which the "dissing" takes place as opposed to provoking a confrontation, e.g. can actually have a positive communal effect and is understood as remarks made in good faith. According to Ng (2020: 48) this more serious form of reading is used to draw attention to social justice issues such as racism, misogyny, or sexism.

Brock (2020: 129) identifies "Rachetry" and "Respectability" as forms of signifying that can be seen as more serious forms of commentary and Black digital practice in online spaces. "Rachetry" is described as a digital practice of deviant political behaviour rooted in Black culture. Brook refers to it as "agentive deviance to external, internal, social and cultural orders" and perceives it as the intention to willingly and unapologetically perform Blackness in online spaces that have little to no interest in recognising Black agency. Users are provided with autonomy when not adhering to behaviour that is deemed acceptable. "Respectability" practices were linked to Black women's efforts to maintain or gain political agency and social acceptance by the employment of antiblackness. This describes the conforming to a set of norms that had the aim of distancing Black identity from stigmatised descriptions of Blackness that included "inappropriateness", "rudeness" or "ignorance" (ibid. 129). According to Ng (2020: 47) these forms of digital practices "informed the earliest manifestations of cancel practices".

Similarly, Hunter (2009: 1314), who wrote the book "Culture wars: The Struggle to Define America" and described an existing sacred/secular divide in American society and the impact it had on topics such as abortion or gay rights, claims that public discourse is shaped by elites that have a larger number of resources at hand as opposed to the general public. They can more easily access instruments of public communication and in doing so are in charge of public narratives and symbols. Hunter explains that this disproportionate division of power leads to a polarisation of topics and "rhetorical extremes" treated in public discussions as well as a loss of complexity and nuance. Hunter (ibid. 1316) claims that the general idea of these

opposing groups is that each other's opinions and attitudes are met with indifference as long as they are discussed among themselves. As soon as there is the attempt to widen one's sphere of influence, it is met with hostility and opposition. Hunter (ibid. 1317) illustrates that when the existing realm of pluralisms including religious, cultural, racial and ethnic ones was challenged due to expansions, perceptions of America's cultural identity and public underwent shifts and was re-negotiated. This process was accompanied by tensions, conflicts and even violence. Hunter summarises that "configurations of authority are never without challenge, never without conflicting pressures". Normative conflicts come with negotiations and identifying new boundaries in relation to public space and what can be said where. These decide who is in a position of privilege and influence. Hunter (ibid. 1321) concludes that this dispute results in the question of what extent of diversity and pluralism will ultimately be tolerated.

3 Cancel Culture debates and the attention economy

Daub (2022: 304) perceives debates revolving around Cancel Culture as ones that are deeply linked to the topic of economisation of attention. Arguments and narratives are created and pushed to the forefront as they guarantee media response and visibility. Franck (2019: 12) introduces the term of attention capital and defines it as a person's fame, prestige, recognition and reputation that can be built and maintained by effective presentation in the media.

As an example, Daub describes the German politician Sahra Wagenknecht's argumentation according to which so called "Lifestyle Linke" were the ones who seize public discourse and deliberately ignore formerly considered left-wing topics to push their ideology. Topics such as social equality are continuously pushed further into the background while others such as gendered language or veganism are awarded much more attention. According to Daub (ibid. 304) this image of left-wing, privileged individuals does not rely on self-portrayal but can rather be traced back to the presentation by conservative news outlets which dedicate numerous articles and opinion pieces to gender issues.

For instance, Daub (ibid. 307) cites a study carried out among voters of the Green and the Union (Christian Democratic Union of Germany and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria) by the German “Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach”. 24% of the Green party voters and 19% of the Union’s parties’ voters were in favour of using gendered language which does not reflect a significant demographic difference among the allegedly ideologically very different voters. Daub (ibid. 308) is convinced that even though ideas such as making the German language more inclusive by changing the make-up of words by adding an asterisk or colon represent left-wing ones, the dominating discourse about them is fuelled by the right-wing or conservative sources. In regard to the issue of attention economy, Daub (ibid. 309) asks the question why the topic is granted that much attention by certain news outlets. As mentioned above, the results obtained along party lines by the Allensbach study consistently reflected the broader public’s opinion concerning gendered language. The only party that stood out from the rest was the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany). Almost all of their interviewed voters agreed that the topic was irrelevant.

Daub (ibid. 312) summarises that Cancel Culture debates are characterised by their repetitiveness. As mentioned above, he sees the current discussions as a remake of the former Political Correctness discourse. Despite being a discourse characterised by outrage, panic and hysteria, it seems to have a calming or satisfying effect on people which might be linked to its recurring excitation people have steadily grown used to. Focusing on Cancel Culture means the simultaneous omission of other topics and hence the deviation of attention. From an attention economy perspective, it is not surprising that cancelling debates rely on individual instances and examples that lack context. Daub (ibid. 321) notes that the chosen examples clearly reflect which fears and feelings are considered worthy of media attention and supposed to be taken seriously. These cases lay out a society’s values and what is relevant to those who see themselves as part of this community. In doing so, those scared of Cancel Culture present themselves as a homogenous group of people that allegedly represent the majority. This reflects the concept of imagined communities introduced by Benedict Anderson. He (2006: 6) describes nations as “imagined” as those adhering to this community or group of people will never be able to personally know every member. The fact that this group of people represents a community is imagined as well. Similarly to nations, the “we” used by Cancel

Culture critics sees itself as a “deep, horizontal, comradeship” and thereby ignores the heterogeneity and pluralism inherent in each group of people.

3.1 Cancel Culture as a populist discourse

By drawing on Sauer et al. (2018: 160), it can be argued that rhetoric acknowledging and condoning the existence of Cancel Culture also reflects characteristics of populist discourse. Sauer et al. describe that this form of communication is based on a clear distinction between “the people” and “the power bloc”, the latter representing the political and intellectual elites. In creating this differentiation, right-wing populists oppose “the people” to “the other”, which can be made up of immigrants, people of colour, queer people etc. Right-wing populism claims to focus on the problems and difficulties of ordinary people and comes up with easy solutions. Mayer et al. (2020: 104f.) regard right-wing populism as a “political mobilising strategy”. They explain that populist politics are organised via “identity” or “antagonisms”. Pluralisms and divisions are resented while promoting the concept of natural inequality. Similarly, Wodak (2015a: 2) refers to populism as a “politics of fear” that relies on catering to various justified or imagined fears by identifying scapegoats. She argues that right-wing popularism adopts an “arrogance of ignorance, appeals to common sense and antiintellectualism”. Cas Mudde (2017: 6) regards populism as a thin-centred ideology that separates society into two different homogenous groups, the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite”. Hence, presenting those having great political or financial power as being part of the ordinary majority as opposed to the more obvious elite is not seen as a contradiction. The elite is not automatically represented by those who were politically and democratically elected by the voters. “Real power” is still yielded by “illegitimate” and immoral forces (ibid. 12). Mudde (ibid. 11) explains that the focus is on morality and values. In doing so, e.g. Donald Trump is considered one of “the people” despite his enormous political and financial power. Möller (2022: 9) states that the world is currently facing multiple crises that serve as a basis for the success of populist parties. This leads to not merely negotiating contents but also who is powerful in society and is perceived as the population, yet again, an assumed homogenous mass of individuals. Möller (ibid. 15) explains that the focus on “the people” can be traced back to the years 1917-1920 as this was the time when democracies were established and the question of who “the people” or “the nation” actually are and

how they can be characterised was raised. Möller explains that populist tendencies have always accompanied political systems as they illustrated the opposition of the common people vs. the powerful elite. The forming of democracies, however, reinforced populist tendencies as they attach a greater focus to the ordinary citizen and its power in a democratic society. Pelinka (2013: 6) further identifies an "ethno-nationalistic element" of current forms of populism. Dangers and fears are associated with globalisation and foreign influence which supposedly cause a threat to the nation. In regard to debates about the continuous modernisation of Western societies, Wodak (2015b: 3) explains that men are seen as "victims" of these processes. Populist political discourse targets those "injured" by progressivism and claims to maintain the status-quo. Dietze and Roth (2020: 7) focus on how gender and sexuality are selected as central topics in populist politics. Progressive achievements associated with these topics are blamed for structural societal problems. Feminists are held accountable for the rise of an elite that allegedly considers itself to be more deserving than others (ibid. 11). Schmincke (2020: 60f.) argues that gender adopts an integral role in right-wing populist discourse. The concept of "sexuality" is exploited as a battleground for what is oftentimes denoted as "culture wars" in the mainstream media. The areas that are continuously under attack include sex education, sexual diversity and gender. These topics are targeted by populist politicians are linked to other topics that are heavily emotionally charged such as family or marriage. For example, families adopt a crucial role in what is presented as a "natural" culture. The family is depicted as the place of "pure reproduction" of what right-wing populist discourse sees as "We" (Mayer et al. 2020: 111). In that regard, it is comprehensible why feminists who critically reflect on concepts such as the heteronorm are portrayed as "Other". The feelings and fears connected to these concepts such as the aforementioned family or marriage are transformed into "affective patterns" and directed against what they understand to be foreign, infiltrating powers. Additionally, feelings such as "concern" or "anger" are presented as "male virtues" that are legitimised in right wing populist discourse (ibid. 12). Conservative, traditional values are presented within a "new narrative" that claims to take back lost land and idealises a past or perceived status-quo that cherishes e.g. the gender binary or heteronormative family. Considering debates about trans rights, the "status-quo" can represent the maintaining of a dichotomous, patriarchal gender order and an emphasis on the traditional family. Legitimising the

existence of trans people disrupts the assumed natural order as communicated by populist forces (ibid. 15). Feminists or Cancel Culture are illustrated as an “inner enemy” whereas immigrants are considered the “outer” one to the “White national body”. Reisigl’s (in ibid. 14) concept of “calculated ambivalences” nicely summarises how right-wing populist discourse combines an “ethno-sexist exclusion of racialised Others” that uses alleged progressivism as a weapon against imported sexism or homophobia as well a “pro-natalism movement” directed at white and allegedly entirely emancipated women.

It can be claimed that those pushing the Cancel Culture discourse engage in populist tactics by employing “markers of inferiority” as they are trying to depict themselves as the supporters of the common people (Mudde 2017: 10). Mudde further describes this strategy as both “integrative and divisive” as it manages to bring together “an angry and silent majority” against a “defined enemy”. One of those inferiority markers is the recurring argument that hard-working individuals do not even have the time and resources to engage in topics important to cancellers such as gender, sexism, racism or transphobia that entirely contrast the will of ordinary people. Mudde (ibid. 16) sees the alleged will of all as a “simple sum of particular interests at a specific moment in time”. The creation of a presumed general will serves as a basis to criticise the elite that neglects the “real” problems that are associated with common sense. Common sense seems to be used interchangeably with “the will of the people”.

Similarly, populist discourse is characterised by opposition to an economic, cultural and media elite. Yet again, this group is presented as homogenous that rejects the “general will” of the people (ibid. 12). Wodak (2015a: 30) generally identifies a homogenous understanding of society as a feature of populist discourse. Mudde (ibid. 14) argues that those who use populist discourse are flexible in terms of how “the elite” is defined. Depending on the context, this can vary and be shaped by various secondary criteria. Mudde (ibid. 15) uses the example of right-wing, American populist Sarah Palin who portrayed the elite as “latte-drinking and Volvo-driving East Coast liberals” who exist in opposition to “real/common/native” people. In case of the Cancel Culture debate in Germany, Daub (2022: 313) discusses that those allegedly dominating public discourse are presented as moral elites that present themselves above everyone based on their moral purity. They further think

of themselves as the ones to decide what is right or wrong and sacrifice their sense of maturity and autonomy to moral obligations. Another aspect that could be added to this framing of an elite is the rejection of those who are proficient in regard to their handling of digital spaces and use of social media platforms to grow their power. Daub (ibid. 325) identifies a clear opposition to the development that these online spaces provide a voice to marginalised communities that were formerly not awarded attention by traditional institutions. Sauer et al. (162) discuss the success of populist strategies on the internet and the interactive nature of political communication online. For instance, the American Tea Party advances their populist agenda in the digital sphere by pushing "paranoid" narratives about their political opponents that come up with potential for "endless repetition", a feature that has been identified as typical of the Cancel Culture discourse as well. According to Larsson and Ihlen (2015: 12), communication on Twitter tends to play out within a restricted circle of people that share one another's views and thus reinforce them. These limited interactions or spaces are also referred to as echo "chambers". Interestingly, it can thereby be argued that the success of populism heavily relies on the Internet and social media platforms. According to Sekloča (2023: 6), populism's increase in attention capital can further be traced back to the support by citizens and the co-creation of a network that spreads the populist message of its leaders. Sekloča (ibid. 6) explains that

> in the networked public sphere, attention capital is strategically targeting citizens' attention in order to harness their labour power in the reproduction of political ideas.

What this means is that online users of social media platforms engage in activities such as liking, sharing or commenting which is considered political labour as it provides populist ideas with greater visibility and accordingly attention. Social media platforms share "attention maximising content" which in turn encourages users to share certain political beliefs which leads to the reinforcement of recognition. As Mudde (2017: 80) explains, populist demands tend to include requests to render democracies increasingly participatory. In that regard, ironically, the Internet represents a yielding space to allow participation and the feeling of "having a say" among ordinary citizens and hence members of the "non-elite". Falkinger (2007: 268), however, argues that in the digital sphere, the fair competition of ideas is disturbed given that certain actors convey their messages with "strong signal

strength". Influence grows when leaders focus on issues the public views as important or has been convinced of their importance. Combining topics with "threat, crisis and catastrophe" increases public attention. Attention is yielded by adding an emotional dimension as well as "ideologically toned catchphrases" to one's rhetoric (Sekloča 2023: 13). Sekloča (ibid. 14) further explains that people try to navigate the public, digital sphere by relying on "bounded rationality", which can be justified by the absence of resources to carefully examine all of the information that is available online. Online users' attention is severely limited and can be manipulated in a way that only a restricted number of agents are afforded visibility, which actually contradicts the idea of a more participatory democracy. Sekloča (ibid. 16) summarises that "democratization of reception is substituted by censorship of reception" as citizens' limited attention is exploited which results in the prioritisation of merely a selected number of topics in the public discourse.

Schäfer and Zürn (2021: 329) seek to find an alternative explanation for the continuous success of populist talking points and politics. They acknowledge the existence of both cultural and economic reasonings but further introduce a political explanation for these developments. They cite a study titled "European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism", carried out by the Pew Research Centre and published in 2019 (Wilke et al. 2019). According to the obtained results, European citizens share a considerable dissatisfaction with the political class. This is combined with a feeling of lacking political representation and the growing alienation of the political class. Schäfer and Zürn (2021: 341) describe a crisis of democracy that is based on multiple factors. One significant aspect is a loss of power when it comes to institutions that are traditionally occupied with reaching democratic decisions due to the growing power of institutions that act independently and are not reliant on democratic processes such as international courts or central banks. These are international institutions that take far-reaching decisions. At the same time, they are not dependent on the benevolence of a country's voters (ibid. 343f.). This leaves many people with the impression of limited options for political participation. The critique voiced by populist political actors thus falls on fruitful ground as it is partly based upon truth. Schäfer and Zürn (ibid. 361) do not believe that populist parties will fulfil their promise of providing solutions to this "crisis of democracy". On the contrary, they expect them to offer simplistic solutions for an alleged homogenous population that shares common goals. This

exists in stark contrast to institutions such as the European Union or the European Monetary Fund that institutionalise pluralism and emphasise the rights of individuals and marginalised groups.

A recent example that combines populist language with the issue of gendered language is a comment written by the Austrian head of the Provincial government Johanna Mikl-Leitner which was published in the Austrian newspaper "Der Standard" on 3 July 2023[6]. Prior to the publication of this text, the news that the local government in Lower Austria would ban the use of certain forms of gendered language that relies on the use of colons or asterisks that are usually employed to render language more inclusive and provide non-binary citizens with representation as well had spread and led to heated debate in online spaces. In her comment, Mikl-Leitner claims that the public outcry which followed the decision was mainly caused by the margins of Twitter and its "Empörungsspezialisten" and did not reflect the attitude of the broader public. In that context, the head of government repeatedly used the expression "normal denkende Mitte der Gesellschaft" that allegedly wanted the government to focus on more crucial topics. She then went on to ask these, to her, more important questions such as: How can I create a life worth living for my family? How can I ensure to acquire property for my family? Mikl-Leitner regrets the tone and volume of the current political climate and breaks a lance for society's centre that feels neglected and is the one that still maintains the importance of common sense. Mikl-Leitner perceives the centre of society as a "silent majority" that has interests that are not perceived as extreme and therefore not worthy of respect. "Klimakleber" are presented as left-wing extremists whereas those "on the other side" are people who believe in chemtrails and lizard people. Under the pretext of wanting to protect Austria's and Europe's economy complete support of climate issues is depicted as impossible.

Mikl-Leitner's text shows signs of Mudde's outline of populist discourse. For example, the head of the Provincial government creates two homogenous, opposing groups. According to her, there is an elite that occupies extreme positions on both the left and right side of public discourse. On the one hand, she sees them as Twitter users that have enough resources to thoroughly engage with negligible topics such

[6] https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000177212/johanna-mikl-leitner-gendern-der-stern-des-anstosses (accessed on 10 August 2023)

as gender or the environment online. On the other hand, Mikl-Leitner illustrates them as individuals that are in denial of reality and believe in non-human creatures that infiltrate governments. The “elite” does not want the people to have a say in political debates so that they do not have to give up any public space dedicated to their extremist positions. On the other hand, she presents herself as part of a group that values the family, acquiring property and makes decisions informed by common sense. In saying that those who hold these views are the “normal” ones, she tries to appeal to ordinary people and distances herself from her constructed elite despite being the leading public political figure in Lower Austria that can share an opinion piece in one of Austria’s most popular newspapers. Finally, pluralism among the positions she describes as opposing the “normal-thinkers” is entirely ignored as they are all given an equal status.

Judith Kohlenberger (2023: 84), a Viennese researcher focusing on migration and integration who examined societal polarisation in Austria, argues that this notion of a split society that harshly disagrees on topics such as the ongoing war in Ucraine, Covid measures or gender issues that are being discussed on social media platforms does not exist when empirical data is analysed. Instead, she describes the narrative of a polarised society and its deep trenches that allegedly extend all across the country as a semantically empty expression. Current political debates about what being “normal” means and whether or not one is still allowed to publicly declare oneself to be “normal” clearly reflect Kohlenberger’s argument that these hollow discussions support the story of a divided community. Interestingly, Kohlenberger notices that this depiction is not restricted to populist politicians or newspapers but is also used in political sciences. On the one hand, there is a group of cosmopolitan, middle-class intellectuals that identifies with “left wing” topics and holds values such as tolerance, open-mindedness and diversity. The latter group is constituted by those who cherish tradition and safety and project fears of foreign infiltration and social relegation on the “other”, a spot that can be taken by both foreigners and the “global elite”. Kohlenberger cites the German sociologist Steffen Mau (in ibid. 85), according to whom our population can be seen as a “Dromedargesellschaft” as opposed to a “Kamelgesellschaft”. The image of a dromedary and a camel tell the story of a community whose values align much more than it is frequently presented in populist discourse. Kohlenberger (ibid. 85) points out that contrary to popular belief, e.g. awareness regarding the climate crisis and

its dangers is widespread across different generations, income brackets and geographical regions. Additionally, despite there being tendencies, society and its beliefs are not consistent and homogenous. Beliefs and convictions can vary tremendously for each individual and cannot simply be assigned to a particular group of society. Kohlenberger (ibid. 86) arrives at the very tempting diagnosis that society is split into two groups within the process of politically or medially charging certain topics such as gender or trans issues. She concludes that the medial staging of debates results in the production of two contrasting opinion blocs that lack nuance and complexity.

4 Performativity and accountability processes online

Given that nowadays call-outs prevalently take place online, holding someone accountable turns into a public act, many agents, even if only in the form of an audience, participate in. Some might argue that the act of “cancelling” someone reflects a performance which is why the entanglement of the two will be explored in the following.

In describing social interactions in every-day life, Erving Goffman introduces the dramaturgical model of social life. In his theory, Goffman stresses that people are constantly engaged in a form of “impression management”. In doing so, they are trying to avoid situations in which they might embarrass themselves. People desire to conform to certain societal expectations and values as they are otherwise met with “alienation” can lead to feelings of shame (Simmel 1904 in Bates & LaBrecque 2020: 4). Shame establishes an interactive relationship between individuals and society and shapes social bonds inherent in communities.

In his analysis, Goffman draws on theatrical terminology to describe people in everyday interactions. People adopt roles such as actors on a stage and they are observed by an audience. Goffman (1959: 32) employs the term “performance” to describe “all the carried-out activities of a person in front of observers who are influenced by it”. The “front” is considered to be the part of one’s performance which “regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance”. Goffman creates different categories for what he

considers to be part of the so-called “front”. The first one is the “setting”, which describes the scenery, props and location in which a certain performance is delivered. The setting has an impact on the given impressions, the expected audience as well as co-participants. Personal front can further be divided into “appearance” and “manner” which both convey information in terms of social status and the individual’s temporary ritual state (ibid. 34). What is meant by that is that appearance illustrates, for example, whether the performer is engaged in a regular work, informal recreation or a formal social activity. This information can be deduced e.g. by the performer’s clothes or other props. In addition, personal front includes sex, age, racial characteristics, posture, speech patterns, facial expressions, bodily gestures etc. Another part is “manner”, which is used to refer to stimuli which inform us about which role and consequently behaviour will be adopted by a particular performer (ibid. 35). Overall, it can be said, that specific social situations come along with specific scripts that provide a framework in terms of how the different participating authors are supposed to behave in a particular setting.

Goffman’s concept of performativity can be used to reflect on the Cancel Culture discourse from two perspectives. On the one hand, it helps explain processes of shaming; on the other hand, it shows how it can be used as a verbal cue for identification and producing abusive speech.

In regards to the debate revolving around Cancel Culture, the argument of how it has allegedly evolved into a collective practice of shaming is worth examining here. For example, Norris (2023: 148) defines Cancel Culture as

> collective strategies by activists using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (someone or something) accused of offensive words or deeds.

Goffman (1959: 205) explains how “unmeant gestures” can evoke embarrassment which individuals aim to avoid by relying on impression management. Those with particular “social characteristics” have a “moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way” (ibid. 24). There are various strategies that avoid embarrassing incidents. These are referred to as protective or defensive practices. One measure mentioned by Goffman (ibid. 209) is to ensure a high amount of “in-group solidarity” by providing one another with continuous moral support and estranging the audience and framing it as inhuman. Goffman (1956:

266) argues that showing signs of being embarrassed seem to reflect “weakness, inferiority, low status, moral guilt” or “defeat”. Naturally, individuals participating in public discourse try to avoid behaviour that leads to shame and embarrassment to sustain a favourable self-image. At the same time, audiences try to evoke these feelings of personal constraint in an individual when they do not agree with someone’s exposed behaviour and believe that it violates a group’s established values or conventions.

From a historical perspective, shaming carried out by communities served as a useful tool to uphold social norms. According to Becker (1963 in Bates & LaBrecque 2020: 6), the “application of perception of others” is significant in the assignment of shame”. Bates and LaBrecque (2020: 6) argue that shaming can support the aim of contending a community’s norms and values. The avert of the Internet and smartphones has significantly facilitated documenting deviating behaviour which could then be used as a basis for consequential shaming actions. Braithwaite (1989 in Bates & LaBrecque 2020: 5) differentiates between two types of shaming namely stigmatic and reintegrative. While the latter focuses on the potential to experience redemption and learn from one’s mistakes, the other form leaves no room for apologies and depicts the person or group under scrutiny as a bad person. Nowadays, shaming (Bates & LaBrecque 2020: 8) serves the purpose of evoking change, which can be achieved by presenting dominant positions as outdated. Harsh and indignant reactions by those perpetuating the status quo served as additional justification for needed social change. Additionally, unreasonable responses helped calling the legitimacy of persisting dominant positions into question.

It can be argued that the expression Cancel Culture itself acts as a hollow, semantically empty framework that, alongside, depending on the subject, other terms, is used as part of an individual’s personal front and is part of a person’s speech pattern which ought to appeal to the desired audiences. According to Goffman (1959: 17), people can follow a plan in their way of acting to ensure a certain reaction among people. The purpose of doing to might be linked to a certain group’s tradition. Those hearing or reading the term “Cancel Culture” and how it is denounced can quickly infer that a specific user has a certain set of moral values. Yet again, this results in a homogenisation of groups and ideas. Regardless, the use

of the term Cancel Culture quickly serves as a form of self-identification and allows people to figure out who shares their set of moral values.

Additionally, choosing to present one's ideas in an online setting is a deliberate choice as users are aware of how easily attention and heated debated can be generated and then exploited. Share and like buttons serve as props in this setting. Debates originally sparked in an online context can swiftly spread beyond the frame of social media platforms as they are picked up by "offline" media outlets such as cable TV or the radio (Norris 2023: 148). Online debate has a substantial impact on the pace with which certain topics enter mainstream discourse.

Usually, a certain coherence between setting, manner and appearance is expected by the observers. If exceptions occur, that certainly leads to evoking of interest (ibid. 36). There are indeed situations when people purposely act this way and "threaten the polite appearance of consensus" (Goffman 1959: 24). In regard to Cancel Culture debates revolving around trans issues, it can be argued that a minority group that resists, speaks up and is angry does not meet the expectations of a script reserved for that marginalised group. Moreover, trans individuals do not fit the norms reserved for their assigned gender in society and hence provoke hostility expressed by the majority in society. Goffman (1963: 121) argues that

> [t]he stigmatized are tactfully expected to be gentlemanly and not to press their luck; they should not test the limits of the acceptance shown them, nor make it the basis for still further demands. Tolerance, of course, is usually part of a bargain.

This implies that those stigmatised based on their deviance from societal norms are supposed to willingfully accept their exclusion or be grateful for the acceptance that is awarded to them. For example, trans people are expected to hide the stigma they carry with them on a daily basis to not make the wider public aware of "how limited their tactfulness and tolerance is" (ibid. 121). Goffman refers to this form of tolerance as "phantom tolerance". Chapter 7 dealing with resistance and anger will further provide insights on how the lack of acceptance among trans individuals or activists who angrily raise their voices against the discrimination of minorities and thus do not follow the script afforded to them results in disapproval and rejection among the majority population.

5 Cancel Culture: A term under scrutiny

Daub (2022: 10) criticizes that those who use the term “Cancel culture” tend to pick apart individual cases while deliberately ignoring other ones that do not fit their narrative that the culture of cancelling someone is a severe threat to democracy and discourse in general. Daub is convinced that discussing Cancel Culture serves the purpose of not having to address other topics and (de)legitimising certain authorities. Additionally, Daub (2022: 12) explains that the apparent fear attached to Cancel Culture is by no means new but rather reflects an approach that was evident when Political Correctness entered public discourse. He notices that the way Political Correctness, Cancel Culture or Wokeness are criticised are all very similar. Ng (2020: 40) mentions that cancelling is often stated in the same breath as “wokeness”, which critics perceive as “empty performative politics” and “leftist politics gone awry”. Denoting this, according to Daub (ibid. 14), recurring phenomenon as Cancel Culture seems to be linked to the already discussed concept of attention economy and the fact that the mere use of the term generates attention. Isolated cases without providing context or drawing boundaries are used to claim the existence of Cancel Culture and justify why it is a threat for society as a whole. Similarly to Daub, Norris (2023: 155) addresses the difficulty of making definite statements about the relevance of Cancel Culture based on anecdotes or celebrity cases that receive a disproportionate amount of attention. While there are accounts of cancelled events or faculty members under scrutiny on college campuses, it is challenging to decide which events to include in one’s research. Moreover, a focus on Cancel anecdotes which reflect existing beliefs about cancelling or stories about famously cancelled stars such as J.K. Rowling have the potential to reinforce these assumptions and create distorted ideas about the frequency of cancelling events.

Furthermore, Cancel Culture is frequently associated with identity politics and the idea that it is majorly young people who are politically left-oriented that engage in cancelling practises is conveyed (ibid. 16). Daub criticises this perception by underlining the role of social media and the fact that emotionally loaded topics can easily and quickly lead to heated debates in the digital sphere. Immediately dismissing these developments as Cancel Culture render it more difficult to have a conversation about these phenomena. Additionally, relying on the term “culture” to refer to these online events already implies that those who use the expression

Cancel Culture want it to be understood as a form of detrimental ideology that poses a threat to expression of speech (ibid. 17). Daub (ibid. 17) summarises that debates revolving around Cancel Culture often claim to follow the aim of discussing real, existing problems but actually do the opposite by diverting attention from those that ought to be discussed in a democracy.

Those who hold power in society are the ones who are portrayed as victims of cancel culture activities. Daub (ibid. 20) believes that this kind of framing is particularly intended for an audience that is familiar with Christian fundamentalist “victim narratives”. This equally becomes evident in the use of particular vocabulary located in the realm of justice in this context including terms such as “court”, “punishment” or “blame”.

Daub (ibid. 22) sees a different motivation behind the continuous and exaggerated talk about Cancel Culture which he perceives as the fear to lose sovereignty over discourse and to not hold the most relevant position in public discussions anymore. Generally, Daub (ibid. 22) has identified patterns in terms of how cancel culture is depicted in public discourse. For example, historical comparisons are drawn on to emphasise the threat Cancel Culture allegedly poses. He cites instances that led to the association of Cancel Culture with Nazis, fascism in general or the DDR which blows individual cases out of proportion and hence results in maximalism or extreme exaggeration. Daub refers to this process as “projective narcissism”, which means that topics that irritate one on a personal level are illustrated as the downfall of Western culture.

Daub (ibid. 24) also perceived discussions about Cancel Culture as conservatism disguised as education, which he refers to as “culture pessimism”. The changing of values and calling out of misbehaviour is considered mass hysteria. These developments are not blamed on progressions within society but rather on intellectual elites that want others to blindly follow them and force their agenda on an entire society. Those who call out these fashions of the current zeitgeist consider themselves to be intellectually superior and further present themselves as advocates for those who feel alienated by the so-called intellectual elites.

Daub (ibid. 25) adds that this kind of framing can easily be dismantled as projection and serves as a form of self-revelation. Those defining Cancel Culture insinuate that there is a clear connection to identity politics and ideology while being oblivious to

the fact that this discourse produces identity-based politics for the white majority. In addition, the “woke” left is accused of constant whining, grieving and being irritated over the tiniest of issues. Simultaneously, this assertion is brought forward by people who seemingly lose their temper every time they encounter the expression “people of colour” or gendered language.

In his descriptions of the Cancel Culture discourse, Daub (ibid. 26) relies on the term “feeling” to a great extent. People seem to deal with a feeling of being under attack or of there being a constant threat. This feeling is then justified by telling stories of Cancel instances that often take place at American universities. These stories lack details and evidence of thorough research. Generally speaking, Daub (ibid. 27) identifies three different layers of meaning of Cancel Culture. First, he seems to confirm the existence of certain “media rituals” which are characterised by emotionality and aggression in online debates, which is partly encouraged by the way social media platforms and the Internet itself operate. Secondly, there is the belief that these online practices reflect a broader cultural change that is currently also taking place in the analogue world. Thirdly, there is the conviction that Cancel Culture leads to a division of society. Overall, this moral panic, as Daub calls it, starts as soon as existing power hierarchies start to shift.

Likewise, Clark (2020: 89) refers to the fear of being cancelled as a moral panic that is portrayed as equal to real harm that comes with an “unfounded fear of censorships”. She further describes the activity of calling others out as an “indigenous expressive form” that has been typically adopted by marginalized groups who traditionally lack a voice in the public sphere. Clark (ibid. 89) mentions James Davison Hunter, a representative of the Culture War thesis, which says that public discourse is a discourse of elites. These elites have the ability to determine debate culture online and use the term Cancel Culture to their advantage. What is meant by that seems to be that debates in which the issue of Cancel Culture has been raised have the tendency to lose track of the original topic or voiced critique that initiated the conversation, an issue Daub has equally raised. The critique expressed is invalidated and becomes obscure whereas the focus shifts towards a defamation of “wokeness”. It is claimed that adopting this strategy results in people’s freedom of speech getting restricted and a culture of censorship being established.

Given the repeatedly occurring argument by those who perpetuate the existence of Cancel Culture that American universities have been struggling with restrictions on free expression of speech, Pippa Norris (2023: 146) asked the question whether this phenomenon can really be empirically detected. Norris brings up congruence theory, according to which people have the feeling of being able to freely express their opinion when their ideological position exists in accordance with the dominant ones in society or a group. If one's convictions do not align with the prevalent positions in society, people are less likely to voice their opinions openly in debates. Those who feel backed by the dominant persuasions, in contrast, are more likely to speak up and choose a more straightforward approach in discussions. This is an effect that reinforces itself and represents what Noelle Neumann (in Norris ibid. 146) refers to as a "spiral of silence" which becomes evident in discussions of topics that are seen as polarising. This spiral works both ways depending on the larger societal culture. Those who hold the views of the perceived minority tend to withdraw themselves from the debate.

In addition, Norris (ibid. 147) relies on modernisation theory which illustrates that in industrialised and wealthy societies, more progressive values predominate. Less wealthy communities tend to maintain conservative ideas regarding questions of gender, sexuality, marriage or the family.

Norris (ibid. 156) reflects on a study that was carried out in 102 countries among 2446 political scientists in 2019. The participants were supposed to respond to questions inquiring their perception of academic life, freedom of expression and the relevance of political correctness. For example, the interviewees had to answer whether from their standpoint there was enough room and respect for having open debates with diverse perspectives as well as freedom of research and teaching at their university. In wealthy and progressive societies those with conservative standpoints were the ones who felt the situation had deteriorated for them. The opposite was observable in rather poor countries with more traditional values as the dominant position. Those who identify as left lament a worsening situation in regard to the free exercise of speech.

Thus, people might engage in "self-censorship" as they fear to offend others or being part of a conflict and consequently end up being isolated. This process leads to the

perception that support for a particular cause is much greater than it actually is (ibid. 152).

Norris (ibid. 153) explains that many post-industrial countries have undergone a cultural shift and have become more progressive. According to the modernisation theory, established by Inglehart (in Norris ibid. 169), Western, post-industrial societies' attitudes have steadily changed towards a more progressive approach to social issues since the 1960s. This is explained, for example, by growing and facilitated access to college education over the last decades. These developments have been met with opposition by conservatives which takes the form of increased intolerance, as well as support for undemocratic politicians. Similarly to Daub, Norris links the backlash caused by this development to a fear of losing "electoral power and cultural predominance".

Norris (ibid. 157) argues that it is therefore traceable why those holding conservative views feel as if they are silenced in tertiary education institutes which are attended by young, well-educated individuals who are more likely to have progressive beliefs. Nonetheless, the mere existence of a left-wing bias among scholars which has been determined by different studies carried out both in the U.S. and Europe does not directly translate into a "lack of tolerance for pluralistic debate". According to Sibley and Duckitt (2008: 273), who examined interrelations of personality, prejudice and ideological attitudes that are linked to prejudice based on data provided by 71 studies with an overall number of 22068 participants, it is rather those people who identify with right-wing beliefs that lack tolerance towards divergent political opinions.

Similarly, social media particularly gives a voice to the younger generation as they are the ones more prevalently using these spaces. As discussed above, young people are more likely to support liberal ideas which is why topics that are considered left-wing tend to be attributed more attention online. Despite these tendencies, the growing interest in Cancel Culture is not exclusively caused by online platforms as, even if publicly debated topics oftentimes take their starting point on the Internet, their expansion is additionally fuelled by traditional media outlets as well as interpersonal communication.

Hence, it can be concluded that whether or not someone is convinced of the existence of Cancel Culture significantly depends on the prevailing political culture

in society and on its degree of economic modernisation. Norris (ibid. 147) argues that outrage about Cancel Culture can be described as “rhetorical dog whistles devoid of substantive meaning” as well as myths and a form of distraction. She further suggests that the claimed existence of Cancel Culture adopts the purpose of a weapon and is used by right-wing groups. Liberals, however, suggest that the mere existence of this debate reveals that the proposed reality of Cancel Culture is false.

6 Trans wars and a backlash on gender

This thesis deals with the framings of Cancel Culture in online debates focusing on social identity issues such as gender, sexuality or race. Since there is a range of topics that falls within the scope of these identity concerns, this paper focuses on the alleged use of cancel practices in discussions revolving around transgender rights. In the following, the origins and main talking points of the oftentimes so-called “trans wars” as well as how social media platforms are used as a place for transgender activists and the backlash it entails will be examined.

Nagourney and Peters (2023[7]) argue that before the legislation of same sex marriages in the U.S., this topic had been a strong force for mobilising conservative voters. Currently, the issue of transgender rights manages to raise even more interest among conservative advocacy groups and manages to get the support of voters and donors alike. This has resulted in the passing of laws that strip people that identify as trans from many rights and has given them increased visibility which comes with greater vulnerability. According to the page “Trans Legislation Tracker”[8], which documents U.S. anti-trans bills, there has been a significant rise in legal attempts to restrict trans people’s access to and visibility in public life. Most bills revolve around preventing trans individuals altered birth certificates and hence state recognition, visibility of trans students, teachers and topics in schools or denying access to gender-affirming healthcare. The following graph[9] illustrates a recent rise in anti-trans legislation covering a period from 2015 to 2023. While in 2015, the

[7] https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/16/us/politics/transgender-conservative-campaign.html (accessed on 27 August 2023)
[8] https://translegislation.com/learn (accessed on 11 August 2023)
[9] https://translegislation.com/learn (accessed on 11 August 2023)

relatively low number of 19 bills was considered, the number has risen to 566 in 2023.

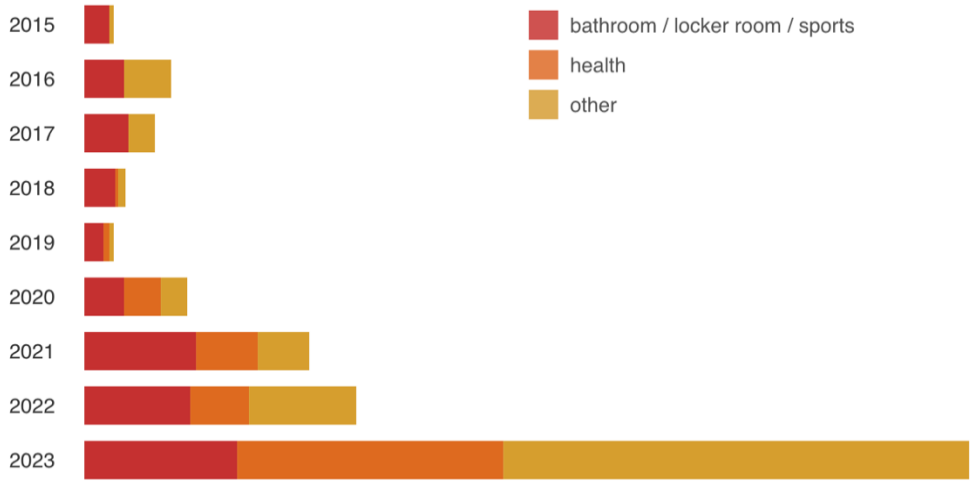


Figure 1 Overview of anti-trans bills between 2015 and 2023

This increase in bills reflect an overall worsening climate for trans people or generally people who use varying gender expressions.

Nagourney and Peters (ibid.) believe that growth in the number of trans-identifying individuals as well as growing awareness about trans issues, particularly among young people, have encouraged conservative groups to pick up the topic and use it as a political battleground to push their agenda. For example, the introduced bans on transition care in some states are justified by talking points such as the protection of children. Negative attitudes towards trans-rights issues are exemplary of a range of other subjects that, according to these advocacy groups, go hand in hand and reflect an overall hostile attitude towards issues including “wokeness”, science, Covid 19 associated restrictions or critical race theory. Conservatives have managed to frame these topics as so-called “parents’ rights” issues and communicated that American families were worried about their children and the complex themes they were allegedly exposed to. As opposed to same-sex marriage or abortion which is supported by the majority of the American public, trans rights subjects are not equally accepted and reflect a divide among Americans.

According to a Pew Research Center study (Parker et al. 2022: 4) carried out in May 2022, Americans’ attitudes towards transgender issues prove to be mixed. While the majority of those interviewed agreed that there was discrimination against trans people and protections in regards to their access to housing, jobs and healthcare

should be supported, the percentage of people who state that “a person’s gender is determined by their sex assigned at birth” has increased from 54% in 2017 to 60% in 2022. 54% of participants responded that society “has either gone too far or been about right in terms of acceptance” of trans people. Overall, the obtained results reveal that it is mainly young adults and democrats who were particularly accepting regarding topics of gender identity and the protection of trans people. By contrast, 66% of participants supported the idea that society had been too accepting of trans people (Parker et al. 2022: 5). In terms of legislation, support or rejection of policies dealing with the teaching of gender related issues or the persecution of parents helping their minor children access transition care align with democratic or republican party views. Interestingly, those in favour of protections for transgender people stated that their convictions had been significantly influenced by science or knowing someone who is transgender. Those who are vary of the acceptance of trans individuals answered that their beliefs were associated with both scientific and religious ideas.

The collected results additionally illustrate that about 43% are uncomfortable regarding how fast perspectives on gender related topics are shifting. This view is particularly popular among people older than 65. Responses obtained through an open-ended question format revealed that those concerned about the pace of change expressed worries about the long-term effects of gender affirming health procedures or that interest in the topic was just a short-lived and pushed by media outlets. Another issue raised was that too much attention was attached to these subjects in schools (Parker et al. 2022: 18).

Nagourney and Peters (2023) explain that the “save our children” appeal has already been used in 1977 when Anita Bryant, a Christian political activist and popular singer, protested a regulation which contested discrimination based on one’s sexual orientation in Miami-Dade County.

Nagourney and Peters (ibid.) describe how Republicans focused their anti-trans efforts on the topics of sports and young people’s access to transition care after having carried out polling among their voters to identify which talking points would generate the most attention and support. What followed were acts that banned transgender girls from taking part in girls’ sports in Idaho in 2020 or a ban on access to transition healthcare for young people in Arkansas in 2021. The most prominent

politician to push this ”anti-woke” agenda is Florida’s governor Ron DeSantis who is also among the Republican candidates to become president in 2024.

In the U.K., there has also been panic linked to a proposed change for GRCs (gender recognition certificates), which allow people to change their legal sex and receive an altered birth certificate. Formerly, receiving a GRC entailed costly and lengthy doctoral visits and reports. The proposed change meant that trans people could instead sign a statutory declaration of their gender which represents self-identifications. Gender-critical feminists advised against this change and predicted that men would take advantage of it by easily changing their gender which would then allow them to enter women’s only spaces to harass and assault them (Andrews 2021: 75). Similar debates can be observed in Germany where the so-called “Selbstbestimmmungsgesetz” (SBGG) has been a target of harsh critique by right-wing politicians and trans-exclusive women’s rights groups (Beisel 2023). This proposed bill is supposed to lower the threshold of changing one’s first name and gender at the registry office without undergoing intimate, costly and stressful psychological examinations. A recurring concern voiced by these interest groups is that trans women might exploit this facilitation to exert violence towards cis women in formerly safe spaces for women. Although these “worries” were dismissed by the legislators, the fact that these fears were considered and commented on in the explanatory memorandum, a document that is provided to parliament during “early stages of a bill’s passage through parliament”[10].

6.1 A fear of gender

Judith Butler argues that attacks on transgender individuals are part of a larger discomfort linked to the broader topic of gender.

Butler is expected to publish their book “Who is afraid of gender?” in 2024 and gave a public lecture about the treated topics at the University of Cambridge in April 2023[11]. In their speech, they explained how the term “gender” has turned into a “focal point for political mobilisation on the right” and is associated with a range of different dangers and fears such as the aforementioned potential harm of children, destruction of the traditional family model or loss of different gendered identities in general. This fearmongering which is framed as a debate by the political right poses

[10] The University of Sydney. “Legislation: Bills and Explanatory Memorandum”.
[11] Butler 2023 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yD6UukSbAMs&t=5234s) (accessed 26 July 2023)

a serious threat to already marginalised people such as the poor, Black and Brown people or those who identify as LGBTQIA+ which increasingly turns them into targets. Gender is depicted as a form of colonisation of the public sphere as well as a threat to traditional notions of the nation which yields enormous destructive power and is mentioned in the same breath as the invasion of public spaces through migrants. Butler summarises that gender provides form and focus to various fears of destruction on the right and that it poses a severe danger not only to a certain way of life but life itself, thereby triggering fears regarding the loss of an existential future.

In their talk, Butler states that the anti-gender ideological movement can be identified as a neo-fascist phenomenon and offers the following claims: Fascist passions are heightened by attacks on minority groups. These attacks appeal to a universal fear of destruction and lead to a redirection of that fear against women, trans people, LGBTIQA+ individuals etc.

Butler emphasises that those feminists who support these attacks are indeed “foolish” and criticises their logic that the alleged destruction of society through gender ideology can only be stopped by destroying those who believe in the concept of gender. Similarly, Butler explains that anti-gender advocates’ phantasm of being stripped of one’s right to sexed identity allegedly justifies the depriving of trans people of theirs. In online debates, those opposing the concept of gender are frequently referred to as TERFs. This acronym stands for “trans exclusive radical feminist” and is used as a label for feminists who do not include trans people in their feminist fight. While some argue that this expression is used in a derogatory way, others claim that it is simply a word that reflects someone’s political convictions. TERFs follow the belief that biological sex is the determining factor for deciding which gender can be assigned to a person. A more neutral term could be “gender critical feminists”.

Butler traces the origin of anti-gender movements back to Catholic doctrines from the 1990s when the United Nations debates took place. In 1994, the expression “gender” came up in a document for the first time and was then picked up and negatively commented on by U.S. right-wing Catholic associations at the Preparatory Committee Meeting as part of the 4th World Conference on Women in

Beijing in 1995 (Corrêa 2017[12]). The book "The Gender Agenda", which was published by Dale O'Leary, a prolific pro-life activist, depicts gender "as a neo-colonial tool of an international feminist conspiracy". The author perceives gender as an ideology that aims to infiltrate numerous countries.

However, already before, in 1985, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, regarded the idea to change one's sex "at one's pleasure" with great scepticism and called out going against nature and the "devastating consequences" this entails. The aforementioned United Nations Conferences represented an effort to categorise reproductive rights as part of Human Rights (Cas 2019: 647).

In the following, also the Vatican repeatedly criticised the idea of gender. For instance, John Paul II's encyclical Evangelium Vitae, published in 1995, heavily criticised the advancements of sexual rights and warned that a "culture of death" characterised by demands for abortion, artificial reproduction or euthanasia posed a severe threat to life (Vaggione 2020: 255). The Pontifical Council for the Family clearly condemned what they regarded as the work of powerful international advocacy groups to "impose new human rights on sovereign nations" which came with the "trivialisation of sex" in 2000. It was further claimed that these efforts pushed a lifestyle that represented a threat to the family, life and nations as sovereign entities (ibid. 256). Pope Francis, who is frequently portrayed as a progressive voice by many, continued this aversive approach to gender and denoted it as "colonial powers that seek to undermine national autonomy and sovereignty" and associated this ideology with the individualistic attitude to life characteristic of neoliberal societies. Furthermore, the Congregation for Catholic Education commented on these issues in 2019 and released a document according to which gender ideology was illustrated as unnatural as it ignored the "actual biological differences between male and female" (ibid. 257). Pope Francis further condemned that gender theory did not recognise the "order of creation" and named it in the same context as Hitler or the threat posed by nuclear bombs (Lopez 2015[13]). While the Vatican has become more liberal towards the integration of homosexual members underlining that homosexuality was not a crime in itself but rather a sin, it has continued to speak out against gender and transgender ideology in particular. Pope Francis' statements

[12] https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2017/12/11/gender-ideology-tracking-its-origins-and-meanings-in-current-gender-politics/ (accessed 27 July 2023)
[13] https://www.vox.com/2015/2/20/8078979/pope-francis-trans-rights (accessed 27 July 2023)

in a 2023 interview aligned with his earlier remarks repeating that it was a "dangerous ideological colonisation" and that it blurred "differences and the value of men and women". According to him, the negotiation of these differences was an integral part of humanity (Piqué 2023[14]).

Butler (2023) continues to explain that the expression "gender" is perceived as a code for a political movement that is shaped by ideas such as paedophilia and indoctrination that pose a threat and in doing so serve as a source for the fear attached to the potential destruction of the family or terms such as "mother" or "father".

Butler (ibid.) acknowledges the existence of fears of destruction but locates them elsewhere. For example, there are threats such as mass extinction, natural disasters linked to climate change or waging wars. Furthermore, it is women, trans, Black and Brown people who are killed at a disproportionate rate. For instance, a cohort study of 139484 individuals carried out in England found that trans people have a greater risk of mortality ranging between 34% and 75% as opposed to their cisgender counterparts This elevated mortality is particularly linked to external causes such as suicide or homicide (Jackson et al. 2023). Another study that compared the mortality rates of people with a private insurance in the U.S. between 2011 and 2019 along the lines of gender and race found that black transfeminine and non-binary people who were assigned male at birth were 2.38 and 3.34 times likely to die than Black cisgender men or women (Hughes et al. 2022: 1507). The increased mortality among Black and Brown trans people is attributed to high levels of stress experiences due to the effects of living in a society that promotes "White supremacy, cisnormativity and related interpersonal and structural violence due to misogyny". Hughes et. al (2022: 1512) further point out that these results need to be placed within the context of social stigma towards trans-people as well as an adverse political climate which can have severe consequences such as limited access to gender-affirming care or healthcare in general.

Moreover, it was found that those who identify as trans or gender diverse and do not receive gender affirming care showed the highest risk of mortality. According to the U.S. National Transgender Discrimination Survey, around 40% of participants

[14] https://www.lanacion.com.ar/el-mundo/entrevista-de-la-nacion-con-el-papa-francisco-la-ideologia-del-genero-es-de-las-colonizaciones-nid10032023/ (accessed 27 July 2023)

answered that they had attempted suicide in the past. These numbers exist in stark contrast to results obtained regarding the general public. In this case, 5% indicated that they had attempted suicide (Haas & Rodgers 2014: 13).

According to Butler (2023), the anti-gender movement exploits people's fears of destruction and subsumes them under the expression of "gender". Butler claims that the attacks on minority groups are not a simple backlash but rather a "promise of restauration of the patriarchal order". In this context, Butler underlines that this idea or "dream" of a patriarchal order has never existed in the past but that an ideal version of the past is simply created. With a return to this state, the allegedly existing "disorientation" would stop and white people would enjoy "uncontested white supremacy".

Butler attaches great importance to community building and solidarity to fight these fascist notions. They do not dismiss existing conflicts and profound differences on the left and among feminists but urge them to see past them to support the common goal of freedom and opposition of the fascist exploitation of fears. Butler wishes to see a world that provides freedom and protection for everyone. They point out the importance of focusing on our existence in relation to others and the need to establish equality as a basic condition for liveability. They urge the listeners to not "oppose discrimination against ourselves only to support it against others". Alliances must be forged to render ideas of love and freedom more desirable than the hate and fear fostered by the anti-gender movement.

6.2 Trans visibility online and backlash

Trans activism heavily relies on the Internet to promote their causes and get in touch with other trans people who might be in need of support. Despite the already discussed easy accessibility of the web that allows numerous people from all sorts of backgrounds to speak up, online spaces are not devoid of power hierarchies and frequently reflect the "real world" in its pushing of minority groups to the margins of public debate.

Gargoshavili (2023[15]) summarises how the safety of trans people is at risk due to discriminatory legislature and rhetoric. Moreover, freedom of expression is under

[15] https://www.accessnow.org/a-double-edged-sword-the-internet-as-a-tool-for-trans-activism/ (accessed 25 July 2023)

attack through various forms of internet use surveillance and restrictions which have already been carried out in countries such as Russia, Turkey, Hungary or Poland.

Even though online spaces offer many advantages in terms of community building and organisation, engaging in activism online comes with increased visibility for trans people. This visibility in turn is accompanied by more projection surface for discrimination and attacks. Visibility is frequently linked to the legitimisation of queerness in public. For example, being able to host a Pride parade is sometimes seen as proof of tolerance towards queer people (Stella 2012: 1823). Invisibility in turn is oftentimes presented as illustrative of the gay closet which symbolises discrimination and oppression. Embracing visibility, by contrast, is portrayed as calling societal norms in terms of gender or sexuality into question and is hence seen as an act of resistance. Skeggs (1999: 220) emphasises that visibility is also accompanied by undesired public scrutiny and violence. Opting for visibility may thus not be the right path for every geographical context or individual. Being “out and proud” is a privilege that is not afforded to everyone. Closetedness can provide safety and represent a form of resistance that is not “overt or explicitly political” (Stella 2012: 1843).

Jackson et al. (2020: 66) argue that particularly trans women of colour find themselves at the outskirts of feminist and queer “counterpublics”. In order to illustrate this point, they cite the case of trans activist Jennicet Gutiérrez, who was no longer allowed to be part of a LGBTQIA+ White House event after she had pointed out the dangers trans people are exposed to in U.S. immigration detention centres. Gutièrrez also faced lots of criticism by organisations that have protection of LGBTQIA+ rights at the core of their efforts. She was described as rude and her “lack of civilty” was criticised as she had interrupted Barack Obama who was president at that time.

Trans women are frequently framed as “disruptive” or “dangerous to civil society”. Other representations depict them as “hypersexual” or freaks that deserve the discrimination they are confronted with. These narratives were also supported by various media productions such as films or series. Jackson et al. (2020: 67) explain that within the past thirty years, visibility of trans people has increased a great deal. Only in 2013, the “Employee Non-Discrimination Act”, which included the protection of Trans identities passed in the U.S. further featured multiple events such as the

launch of the hit series “Orange is the New Black” which features Laverne Cox, who portrays a black, trans woman which gave rise to a greater visibility of trans issues. Despite increased awareness for transgender topics, trans people are still exposed to a greater risk of being attacked or murdered than their cisgender counterparts.

Conservative commentators present this increased visibility as a trend, a “transgender epidemic” or as a “transgender craze”. As it is the case in Abigail Shrier’s book “Irreversible damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters”, transgender identities and the alleged rise in young people identifying as such represent a public health crisis. Hsu (2022: 62) argues that even though trans issues are presented as topics that merely affect a negligible part of the population, they are actually exploited as a “political battleground” for a range of other social values. For example, trans identity is also presented a “threat to American families” which reflects Christian fundamentalist attitudes. In doing so, anti-trans activists are trying to keep protections for white, heteronormative, middle-class families in place.

Hsu (2022: 74) concludes that the increase in public transphobia has resulted in very narrow debates about trans issues. For example, there has been an exaggerated focus on puberty blockers, bathroom bills or gender segregated sports in public discourse which seem to distract from subjects that are actually relevant to trans youth and trans people in general such as facilitated access to health care, housing or the struggles of finding a job.

7 A woke mob spreads hate – being angry as a form of resistance

As discussed in the last chapter, trans activists tend to be presented as rude, loud or aggressive. In digital spheres, “Twitter mobs” allegedly attempt to erase those who do not share their opinion. This raises the questions of who is publicly depicted as loud, uncivil or disrespectful and who is allowed to raise their voice and be angry in the public sphere.

Ahmed (2004: 118) argues that emotions represent an aligning element for groups. For example, expressed hate or fear enable mobilisation of the “ordinary” which is allegedly under attack through “others”. The “normative subject” is depicted as injured and this injury is caused by the invasion of others. It can be argued that these

observations tie well with the reflections about populist discourse in chapter 3.1. Ahmed explains how e.g. mixed race couples, foreigners or rapists are illustrative of feelings of loss. Foreigners are associated with the fear of losing land or money, mixed-race couples bring about fears of impurity. Ahmed (ibid. 119) thereby introduces the concept of affective economies. What is meant by that is that emotions are used discursively and contribute to the formation of communities. They move around signs, figures and objects and thereby circulate which results in the production of affect (ibid. 120). Ahmed argues that affect can grow the more it circulates and is exchanged. Discourse and "sticky words" contribute to the creation of affect. In the case of the trans debate, it can be noted that those who oppose e.g. self-identification policies use language that mobilises fear of loss and destruction (ibid. 122). Ahmed applies the concept of the economy of affect to the nation and how it operates towards immigrants that are constituted as "hateful". Similarly, gender-critical feminists present the feminist movement or womanhood as something pure that is generally "hospitable" and generous, however, only to a certain extent. Boundaries are established by expressing who is hateful and evoking feelings of uncertainty and crisis. The anti-trans discourse relies on the repetition of a narrative that involves unspecified cis-men who are willing to exploit self-id laws to infiltrate women-only spaces and to harass and violate women. In doing so, a fear of intrusion is yet again generated. Women must allegedly defend themselves against these intruders and "return to values and traditions that are perceived to be under threat" and establish borders to ensure their security (ibid. 132). This narrative seems to align with Ahmed's description of the figure of the so-called "bogeyman". The "bogeyman" is seen as an object of fear that takes the form of cis people disguised as trans people in gender-critical perspectives on trans rights debates. Ahmed (ibid. 123) explains how the bogeyman acts almost as a shadow that cannot be grasped and could potentially strike anywhere. It serves as a justification for constant unease, fear and even violence against the other and leads to an increase in affective value. The bogeyman does not rely on a "fixed referent" which allows it to circulate easily. These results are similar to Daub's and Sauer's approach to populist discourse that they describe as shaped by narratives that can be repeated easily due to their anecdotal character and lack of context.

Ahmed's concept of the economy of affect becomes evident in her discussion of the case of a letter published in the British Guardian and signed by 130 feminists and

activists in 2015 (2016: 23). In this letter, the argument that the accusation that someone is trans- or “whorephobic” is used as a way to silence people and opposing opinions regarding, in this case, trans issues and the topic of sex work. Ahmed identifies that occurring terms such as “silencing”, “bullying” or “intimidation” are associated with trans activists whereas “critical”, “questioning” or “democratic” are linked to cis feminist activities. She locates the claims made in the letter within a larger debate about imposed limits on free speech. In the U.K., free speech includes all forms of speech apart from one that incites violence. In discussions about transphobia and how this accusation is allegedly exploited as a discursive weapon, Ahmed (ibid. 24) portrays this framing as an “ideological weapon” to establish a clear differentiation between “offensive statements” and “incitements to violence”. Ahmed argues that according to that line of reasoning, the claim that one is not free to express discriminatory views turns offensive speech into an alleged “minority view” and that those who feel discriminated are actually the ones who offend and restrict others’ right to voice their opinions freely.

Ahmed (ibid. 26) describes how the argumentation that the claim made by trans exclusionary radical feminists, namely that critical feminists’ speech is not hate speech “breaks down”. This is illustrated by Ahmed’s story of a pamphlet that was distributed by gender critical feminists in London, included highly offensive language and equated being trans with being violent towards cis women to the same degree as cis men. When critique regarding these talking points was raised, those protesting were depicted as trying to control and limit other people’s freedom of speech by “being offended”. This logic reveals that protests are judged and framed differently depending on their purpose.

Ahmed (ibid. 28) hence summarises that trans activists are often perceived or portrayed as the ones inciting violence. She explains that “violence does not begin with the one that snaps” and that its starting moment is not rendered visible on purpose. According to Cowan (2014: 502), those who draw attention to transphobia are presented as the oppressors and harassers as the mere existence of trans people poses a threat to the assumed homogenous group of cis feminists. Representing the idea of a killjoy, defined as a person who tries to spoil the enjoyment of others, trans people also call the alleged universal experiences of women as well as the “unreliableness of the body as a source of their identities” into question.

Trans-activists are presented as the ones refusing to engage in debates with gender-critical feminists. Ahmed (2016: 31) explains that “dialogues and debates” become “techniques of elimination” as anti-trans activists wish to erase trans people from feminist debates. Believing that having a conversation with those who desire to negate others’ existence stems from the privilege of not having experienced harassment that questions one’s mere existence repeatedly. Similarly, Andrews (2021: 75) questions the liberal assumption that debate is always “intrinsically valuable”. As a consequence, it is understandable that people refuse to take part in these debates and are yet again identified as the problem because of this choice. Allegedly, trans activists are the ones who oppose civil discussions, who are requesting too much and who exploit the allegation of transphobia as a means of not having to engage with legitimate critique.

In her essay “The Uses of Anger”, Lorde (1981: 8) points out the importance and fruitfulness of anger by saying that ignoring it and remaining silent has not resulted in any progress. Even though she addresses the subject of anger in the context of racism exerted particularly by white feminists, it can be applied to responses to transphobia as well. Lorde states that women reacting to racism are indeed responding to anger caused by “exclusion”, “unquestioned privilege” or “defensiveness”. According to her, anger should not be a paralysing force but used for growth and liberation. Lorde (ibid. 8) acknowledges the differences among women and that everyone’s experience of oppression differs from one another. However, there is no use in ignoring other women’s struggle simply because it is not shared by oneself. Having a fear of hate has the ability to stifle those fighting discrimination. In the presented context, Lorde (ibid. 8) defines anger as the “grief of distortions between peers and its object is change” and says that it does not evoke guilt in those being called out. Guilt “is a response to one’s own actions or lack of action”. Lorde continues that guilt is exploited as the perfect excuse for not responding and exposing defensiveness.

According to Lorde (ibid. 9), anger expressed by women is frowned upon in a patriarchal society. Causing others to feel anger means that one has not followed the rules of a patriarchal system that rewards those who act as they are supposed to. As opposed to Lorde, Kurt (2023: 80) does not talk about the usefulness of anger but of hate and perceives it as a powerful act that presupposes the overcoming of

shame. Kurt (ibid. 79) describes how throughout history the ugly was portrayed as negative, destructive and deviant. According to Platon (in Kurt ibid. 79) the ugly does not even have a legitimate existence whereas the beautiful is pleasurable. Here, beauty is not only linked to aesthetic aspects but further translates to questions of morality and what is perceived as right or wrong. Kurt (ibid. 79) argues that in social reality, these convictions can result in ideas of elimination of the hateful and that what is portrayed as ugly needs to repeatedly defend itself and fight for its existence which is particularly the case under "exploitative, colonial, racist and patriarchal conditions".

This association of hate with ugliness produces a condition of not being allowed to hate or not voicing that anger and frustration publicly. This state can be defined as one of "unopposed dedication" that is requested by the oppressed and does not even have to be openly articulated whereby it turns into self-obligation (Kurt 2023: 34). According to Dorlin (in ibid. 34), modern subjectivity is characterised by people's ability to defend themselves. However, not everyone has access to this skill to the same degree. Dorlin describes this state of having to accept the circumstances of not being able to express one's hate as "dirty-" or "negative care". This form of care entails tasks that many have come to understand as mental load. Ensuring one's own safety which potentially comes along with remaining silent and not making use of counterspeech publicly is a form of care work which is connotated as female and oftentimes associated with mothers' love for their children. This image of women as natural caregivers represents the moral values of entire societies and has the aim of maintaining a particular social order. Particularly throughout the 20th century, the ideal of the gentle housewife was increasingly established and turned into an ideal (Glenn 2012: 38). The introduction of a market logic into the private sphere led to a relegation of women's work into the limits of her own home which made it invisible. Despite its appreciation and portrayal as something desirable, it created a clear distinction between wage labour and care work which is not renumerated. Hence, women's gentleness and women's emotional and physical work was continuously devalued. For instance, Federici (2012: 22) sees the housewife as someone oppressed by the working class and capitalism. She claims that the continuation of capital is ensured by women's invisible caring and production of workforce. This logic exposes a contradiction as women's reproductive work is looked down on and seen as 2nd class regardless of its mandatory nature for capitalism.

The ability to be gentle is awarded prevalently to cis, hetero and white women. “Deviating” genders as well as queer racialised forms of femininity must try to adhere to this ideal in order to be rewarded with attention and the mere allowance to exist by the patriarchy (Kurt 2023: 37). Being loud and angry does not align with values such as sacrifice, self-abandonment and a caring nature and presents a threat to the social order that favours cis, hetero and white men. Male hate and anger are not portrayed as ugly but as legitimate and reasonable. It represents the state and authority. As a consequence, queer or trans people as well as people of colour rely on the strategy of presenting themselves as gentle or caring to survive in a society that oppresses and discriminates them (ibid. 38). Taking care of oneself by withdrawing from public discourse or by participating in it by posting online from the safety of one’s home is a specific form of self-care. As described above, gender-critical feminists portray trans people as dangerous and disruptive which becomes evident in debates dealing with the accessibility of women’s bathrooms or changing rooms for trans women. By not accepting the exclusion from these spaces and speaking up, trans women fail to adhere to the principle of a caring, gentle woman. Instead, they conform the suspicions revolving around their existence that deviates from the presumed natural order of the genders.

Lorde (ibid. 9) again emphasises that the recognition of differences among women should not be used to further draw them apart but serve as a source of knowledge. Even if that process comes with “discomfort and sense of loss”, the eventual result must not be destruction but growth. Lorde (ibid. 9) notices that her anger as well as the one by other women of colour is met with dismissal and the accusation that their anger created a “mood of hopelessness” and “prevented white women from getting past guilt”. Another accusation brought forward which resembles those repeated in debates revolving around transphobia is that this anger stood in the way of ensuring trusting communicate and action. Interestingly, Lorde responds to the accusation that she claimed to have “moral authority of suffering” by saying that her speaking was not fuelled by suffering but rather by fury and rage. Implying that the voiced anger of women of colour is a form of intimidation is yet again a form of destruction as it disables all forms of learning that situation offers. Instead, it reinforces “racial blindness”. Recognising others’ oppression does not mean one’s own is erased. Lorde (ibid.10) concludes her speech by using the powerful quote,” I am not free while any woman is unfree even when her shackles are very different from my own”.

Both Ahmed and Lorde show that the presentation of those being offended and discriminated against as troublemakers, killjoys and violent individuals who produce intimidation and guilt amongst those who initiated violence allows the latter group to not engage with the voiced criticism and reflect on their own actions. In the context of public discourse revolving around trans issues, they shift the focus, manage to control the debate and foster the image of the aggressive and loud trans activist by portraying the other as offensive and as a hindrance to civilised conversations. Because of that, trans people are perceived as not being worthy of sympathy or support in a patriarchy.

Clark (2020: 89) points out that critique does not need to be "wrapped up in niceties and polite speech" and should not meet that requirement. In many cases, the extent of oppression needs to be followed by a prompt and loud response.

7.1 Hate Speech vs. Free Speech

As mentioned above, call outs and accountability practices have been used to address and dismantle discriminatory or hate speech language online. While those who post gender-critical texts in digital spaces and insist on their right to freedom of expression, others prefer increased legal limitations in terms of what people can say online. Those who use derogative language regarding trans people insist on the differentiation between hate speech and their alleged critique. In the following, the potential power as well as the subversion of hate speech will be examined.

To begin with, a definition of hate speech will be offered. For example, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2015: 16) describes hate speech as:

> the use of one or more particular forms of expression –namely, the advocacy, promotion or incitement of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat of such person or persons and any justification of all these forms of expression– that is based on a non-exhaustive list of personal characteristics or status that includes "race", colour, language, religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well as descent, age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation.

In the following, Judith Butler's (2006) approach to hate speech will be examined. Butler not only explains why communication can hurt and be discriminatory in the first place but also offer strategies regarding how hate speech can serve as a source

for resistance (ibid. 206f.). One of Butler's most crucial conclusions is that speaking cannot be equated with acting and merely represents a vehicle of power. They explain how speech makes use of societal, communicative conventions and in doing so reproduces oppressive structures. A subject is dependent on its linguistic recognition and can thereby be existentially affected by linguistic violence which can result in it losing context and in doing so not being able to locate itself anymore (ibid. 15). The performative act of speaking cannot be entirely controlled by the subject and hence results in undesired effects.

Discriminatory language seems very powerful, however, does not have sovereignty (ibid. 32). As a result, those who are hurt by offensive language are not entirely powerless but rather can engage in the act of re-signifying degrading terms by re-evaluating them (ibid. 246). This strategy presents a way of undermining discriminatory language and empowers those hurt by it. The power attached to language is based on the societal agreement that such power is granted to it. Butler (ibid. 36f.) argues that when the power of language in not rooted in language itself but in what society makes of it, its impact and hurtful nature can be changed or even reversed which presupposes the differentiation between speech and conduct. Austin's (in ibid.11) theory of speech acts does not address this active role of addressees. Butler (ibid. 65) argues in favour of counterspeech as a form of revolting against injurious speech and explains that censorship results in the recirculation of hurtful speech, which, hence, repeats trauma.

Butler's ideas evoke the question whether it is enough or justifiable to simple leave those subjected to hate speech on the Internet stranded and left to their, as they put it, powerful devices in the form of free speech. It is difficult to determine whether freedom of speech should be put on a pedestal when it puts people's lives at risk. Justifying the acceptance of injurious language that increases aggressive behaviour towards trans people with the argument of free speech seems like a reflection of ideas competing on the free market. John Stuart Mill introduced the concept of the "marketplace of ideas" as part of his political theory in "On Liberty" (in Gordon 1997: 236). The market offers a range of ideas that compete with one another and thus bring the best one to the forefront. It seems to illustrate how ideas flow freely without underlying government control or intervention. This brings up the question whether

the market logic can be simply applied to free speech and the potentially abusive speech that it entails.

According to the European Court of Human Rights, freedom of expression is defined as

> (…) one of the essential foundations of [a democratic] society, one of the basic conditions for its progress and for the development of every man. Subject to paragraph 2 of Article 10 [of the European Convention on Human Rights], it is applicable not only to 'information' or 'ideas' that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population. Such are the demands of that pluralism, tolerance and broadmindedness without which there is no 'democratic society'. This means, amongst other things, that every 'formality', 'condition', 'restriction' or 'penalty' imposed in this sphere must be proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued. (Handyside v. the United Kingdom judgment of 7 December 1976, § 49).

Mill (in Gordon 1997: 238) underlines the importance of hearing all ideas regardless of whether they are true or false. False ones, for example, offer the opportunity for learning as they help one understand the arguments and justifications used to the opposing view which allows us to reflect on one's own ideas as well. He (ibid. 239) adds that also minority opinions must be heard and even "encouraged" as they reflect the "neglected interests, the side of human well-being which is in danger of obtaining less than its share". Thus, Mill's argument of the free flow of ideas reflects the powers of the marketplace only to a certain extent. While all ideas should be able to be voiced, one needs to keep in mind that power is not distributed equally amongst those who participate in the market. Ultimately, the prevailing ideas are those brought forward by the most powerful or numerous (ibid. 240).

This translates into the assumption that hateful speech should not be censored but rather seen as a resource for better speech that will prevail in the free market of ideas. However, in regard to hate speech directed at minority groups such as people of colour or trans people, the free market principle does not seem to apply. As noted before, the members who participate in the marketplace of ideas are not a homogenous mass as power is distributed unequally. When the dignity, rights or safety of someone are at risk, free expression should not be the priority. While democracy emphasises the importance of free speech and hence a pluralism of ideas, hate speech poses a threat to democratic principles such as equality and the

protection of human rights. Tsesis (2009: 501) also states that "[w]hen harassing expression is disguised as political expression it adds nothing to democratic debate". The European Court of Human Rights acknowledges these concerns by stating that:

> (…) tolerance and respect for the equal dignity of all human beings constitute the foundations of a democratic, pluralistic society. That being so, as a matter of principle it may be considered necessary in certain democratic societies to sanction or even prevent all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify hatred based on intolerance …, provided that any 'formalities', 'conditions', 'restrictions' or 'penalties' imposed are proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued. (Erbakan v. Turkey judgment of 6 July 2006, § 56).

This raises the question whether it is truly enough to simply address offensive language, strip it of its power which is given to it by the people and their societal conventions instead of demanding regulations and state intervention, as proposed by Butler. It can be argued that even altering the meaning of offensive terms in the attempt of stripping these words of their power requires their repetition and hence the recirculation of trauma, as it becomes evident in Butler's reflections on censorship (2006: 202).

Anti-trans argumentation, for instance, wishes to see trans people excluded from feminist political discourse as well as public places such as restrooms or changing rooms. Abusive speech against trans people causes harm as it puts the safety of its targets at risk. It might not directly "incite" violence but might create a climate that eventually leads to violent acts against trans people. Free speech authoritarianism aims at the legitimisation of speech that dehumanises trans people and excludes them from public discourse. Whitham (2020: 107) argues that this "liberal-rights talk" plays into the hands of fascist political actors who can portray themselves as liberals and defenders of political freedom. Whitham (ibid. 106) refers to this discourse as neo fascist "hate signalling". Those who oppose this form of authoritarianism claim that the argument in favour of speech is used to halt societal progress, defend existing privileges of the powerful and is exploited as a justification to engage in injurious speaking.

8 Analysis

8.1 Research question

The following analysis will be based on these research questions:

- What are different framings of cancel culture in essays produced within discrimination-critical contexts?
- To what extent do feminists' framings of the expression Cancel Culture differ from its popular understandings?

8.2 Methodology

The aim of my analysis is to analyse a selection of essays using the method of critical discourse analysis as proposed by Jäger (2012) as well as feminist critical discourse analysis by Lazar (2005/2017).

Critical discourse analysis is based on the assumption that language is a social phenomenon that has the potential to constitute practices including power, resistance or sovereignity (Fairclough 1995). Jäger et. al (2007: 8) initiate their depiction of discourse analysis by quoting Foucault according to whom each society has its own order of truth and thus also discourses it accepts as true. Therefore, reality is interpreted differently depending on a society's conventions, history and interests. Critical discourse analysis reflects on what is commonly accepted as given and therefore also functions as a political instruments that calls the status-quo into question. Furthermore, it does not have the aim of producing objective truths but focuses on discourse and how it functions in maintaining existing power hierarchies in capitalist or globalised societies (ibid. 19). Jäger et. al (ibid. 20) explain that discourses are carriers of knowledge and hence play a vital role in inducing certain behaviour and other discourses. Foucault (1983 in ibid. 22) explains that discourse enables power as well as disruption, resistance or critical evaluation. Discourse regulates conscience in the form of a "Fluss von Wissen", which translates to a "stream of knowledge". This image is supposed to reflect the back and forth as well as instability linked to the creation of knowledge and societies over time (ibid. 23). Discourse does not mirror societal reality but has a life on its own and hence equally produces reality and constitutes subjects. Discourse analysis evaluates how this production works and takes the knowledge people rely on in their formation of reality into consideration (ibid. 24).

According to Lazar (2017: 372), critical discourse analysis focuses on societal problems and their discursive dimensions. In order to draw attention to the connection of examining gender relations and ideologies within discourse and critical discourse analysis in general, the expression “feminist critical discourse analysis” was established (Lazar 2005: 2). It is the aim of FCDA to shed light on how gendered “power asymmetries become common sense in particular communities and research contexts” and how these can be demystified as a consequence. Lazar (ibid. 7) views gender ideology as hegemonic as it is oftentimes not perceived as domination but rather accepted by most people in society. This support and acceptance is achieved by discursive means, for example by repeating ideological assumptions that are portrayed as “commonsensical and natural”. This depiction renders the power hierarchies inherent in this discourse invisible. Lazar (ibid. 373) emphasises that FCDA is not merely occupied with examining discourse with a gendered lense but takes different structural inequalities into consideration by relying on “poststructural, transnational, queer, postcolonial and intersectional theories”. In my analysis, I will explore feminist discourse and draw attention to the aspect that it is also a site of power relations. Lazar (2005: 9) suggests that these power relations are a “struggle over interests which are exercised, reflected, maintained and resisted through a variety of modalities, extents and degrees of explicitness”. Modern forms of power are considered so effective because they rely on internalised norms about gender which are routinely expressed and thereby rendered invisible (ibid. 10).

Lazar (ibid.) provides an overview of five principles inherent in FCDA, the first one being the “ideological character of gender”. What is meant by that is that people can be divided depending on their understanding of gender. On group, which is considered to be more popular in public discourse, believes in the gender binary that comes along with certain gender stereotypes. The other recognises gender as a continuum that is shaped by fluidity and plurality. Fairclough and van Dijk (1992/1998 in Lazar ibid.) understand ideologies as “group-based socio-cognitive representations of practices in the service of power”.

The second principle is power which focuses on the concepts of patriarchy, a system that benefits men over women and is associated with other concepts such as heteronormativity, colonialism, capitalism and neoliberalism (ibid.). Additionally, it takes Foucault’s (1977 in Lazar ibid.) understanding of power and how it is linked to

modern power relations into consideration. Foucault perceives power as something that is not exercised by individual agents or groups in the form of episodic or sovereign acts but something that is widely diffused and thus permeates every aspect of life.

Similarly to Jäger et. al (2012), the third principle describes discourse as speech that constitutes social practices and is in turn shaped by them (Lazar 2017: 374). Discourse produces, reproduces or contests social orders. FCDA focuses on how gender is performed through discourse and which power relations are inherent in it.

FCDA further focuses on “critical reflexivity as a practice” (ibid.). This implies that the topic of reflexivity is employed by various actors for diverse discursive purposes. On the one hand, it can be used to actually foster social change towards a more equitable society. This can be achieved by e.g. implementing gender mainstreaming strategies in companies or creating environments that are inclusive for trans people. In doing so, it can be ensured that existing cycles of privilege and exclusion can be broken. On the opposite, the concept of reflexivity can be exploited by e.g. advertisers for non-feminist purposes such as generating financial gain. For instance, feminist sounding discourse is used as a marketing strategy.

The fifth principle brought forward by Lazar (ibid.) is the one of FCDA being a form of “analytical activism”. FCDA can contribute to the creation of communities of resistance that strive towards the building of a society that is inclusive of everyone. Critically reflecting on discourse and using one’s results for future research and teaching can be understood as a form of feminist activism. Keeping in mind that discourse produces and shapes subjects as well as reality, FCDA can be portrayed as feminist action that has material consequences for all individuals.

Jäger et. al (2007: 25) argue that the structure of discourses is made up of different threads and fragments that focus on particular topics as well as sub-topics. While a discourse fragment focuses on one specific theme, a discourse thread describes a discourse that is thematically consistent. Discourse analysis tried to identify these lines of arguments, their contents as well as their frequency (ibid. 26). Additionally, the concepts of discursive events and contexts are introduced which describe incidents that significantly shape or change the discourse revolving around a certain topic and have a substantial medial effect. Discursive threads operate on various discursive levels which point to social spaces such as politics, media, law, medicine

etc. discourse emanates from (ibid. 28). These different levels can overlap or impact one another. A discursive position describes the political standpoint someone is speaking from. Jäger et. al (ibid. 37) explain that critical discourse analysis serves as a political instrument as it draws attention to exaggerated, sensational use of language or to speakers' stance on democratic values such as equality or respect for human rights.

Moreover, Jäger et. al (ibid. 29) emphasise that discourse is usually characterised by the entanglement of different thematic threads and fragments even if it deals with one principal topic. Society's discourse is made up of all of these discursive elements that are untangled in the process of critical discourse analysis. Another category introduced by Jäger et. al (ibid. 30) is the one of discursive communities that are distinguished by their relatively similar perception of and assignment of significance to reality. For example, these groups might follow a certain ideology and share discursive positions.

In regards to my aim of examining the discourse discussing the controversial topic of trans identities, the concept of "Kollektivsymbolik" adopts a critical role in the planned analysis. Jörger et. al (ibid. 39) describe it as an element that supports discourse by producing emotionally loaded knowledge by simplifying complex topics and interpreting them in a particular manner. Additionally, this collective symbolism and its interpretations dramatise and denormalise the status-quo and call for its stabilisation. Usually, a system of collective symbolisms helps individuals orientate themselves within a complex modern industrialised society. Collective symbols follow their own logic, evoke certain images and can be combined in various ways (ibid. 44). These symbols provide a sense of cultural community within society (Link 1982 in ibid. 44). Critical discourse analysis tries to identify the evoked images and the effect this has on future societal courses of actions and the constitution of reality in general (ibid. 59).

So-called normalisms also adopt an integral role when it comes to the analysis of discourse. Normality is seen as a desired state in society, particularly when considering the many challenges and changes linked to an increasingly globalised and dynamic society (Link 1995 in ibid. 63). According to Link, the boundaries of normality are flexible and can be shifted depending on the outcome of discursive battles. This flexibility leads to fears of denormalization which resulted in two

approaches to deal with this issue. On the one hand, very narrow boundaries in terms of what “normal” is are established, which can limit progress and growth; on the other hand, there is the strategy to promote a very broad understanding of these boundaries (ibid. 64).

In my analysis, I attempt to focus on the relationship between the essays and the social and political issues they deal with. The texts will further be analysed in terms of how they use and conceptualise the term Cancel Culture. This will be done by relying on a corpus-based approach which will additionally determine whether certain terms repeatedly occur in relation to Cancel Culture and the way it is defined in these texts. In doing so, textual features such as lexis as well as the meaning certain vocabulary carries will be examined.

8.3 Selection criteria

The main criteria for selecting the texts for my analysis were as follows. They needed to be published by feminists who are active contributors in the public and digital sphere and do research in the field of gender studies. Publications were only included in the analysis if their author had a Twitter account and if the text included the expression or references to Cancel Culture or call-out/accountability culture. Moreover, I tried to select texts that additionally discussed transgender topics. In order to offer a selection of texts that is not restricted to the Anglo-European sphere, two more texts that illustrate the situation of feminist efforts and queer existence in Ghana were included as well. In that regard, different criteria were applied for the selection. The texts that were included in the corpora for this research were produced by activists that aim to conserve the LGBTQIA+ community’s rights in Ghana and reflect on online communication in connection to their work. This allows me to examine how the Cancel Culture discourse is shaped in a discrimination-critical context.

8.4 Discrimination-critical contexts

For this analysis, the term “discrimination-critical context” needs to be defined. Drawing on an article by Scherr (2017: 84-102), it can be assumed that “discrimination-critical contexts”, as I refer to them, are spaces in which those operating regard different forms of discrimination such as racism or sexism as social

issues. In these spaces, there is a consensus that these problems need to be solved and more thoroughly researched to grasp their meaning and complexity. Scherr (2017: 84) summarises that discrimination occurs in societal discourses and ideologies and is reproduced by e.g. speaking and acting as part of interactions. Scherr (2017: 89) further underlines the importance of nations and organisations in that they uphold discriminatory conditions. In general, scholars engaging in research in the broader field of gender studies do not only focus on gender inequalities in economics, politics or academia but also critically examines knowledge developed in a patriarchy and how discrimination experiences of individuals differ depending on the entanglement of social categories such as race, gender, sexuality or age. Gender studies rely on an interdisciplinary approach that draws back the curtains on how society is structured, which hierarchies of power persist and how these are informed by gender, sex, race etc (Pilcher & Wehelan 2005: 9-14).

In my own research, my presupposition is that the feminists I selected are part of a discrimination-critical context online since their own research revolves around topics such feminism, race, sex, gender identity, white supremacy, human and civil rights etc. Particularly intersectional feminism aims to provide a critical approach to the sometimes suggested feminist “we”, which implies a homogenous group of individuals with overlapping needs and realities (Lépinard 2020: 179) that creates a “false universalism”. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality and argued that women’s experiences differ from one another as they suffer from various forms of discrimination that intersect and accordingly create a broad range of realities that must be taken into account by feminist efforts (1989).

Butler (in ibid. 180) argues that this represents an “exclusionary discourse (…) in the name of women’s rights”. Lépinard’s reflections on exclusionary attitudes of feminists towards non-white feminists can be applied to the ongoing debate about whether trans people should be given space and visibility in today’s feminist efforts and discourse. Lépinard blames this attitude on existing power hierarchies in the feminist movement and how certain groups are trying to maintain their power and privilege. She further explains that discussions revolving around moral questions and values are an integral part of feminism as a “political project”. Feminism should be able to forge a political community that is aware of its “power asymmetries” and does not claim to represent a universal idea of what is means to be a woman in

regard to arguments about trans rights (ibid. 181). Lépinard (ibid. 182) calls for a community with “bonds between its members that do not reproduce exclusions, abjections and privilege”. She explains that the future of the feminist movement relies on questions of morality and that it is not enough to simply formally include minority groups and give visibility to their interests. Lépinard (ibid. 232) creates a “feminist ethic of responsibility” according to which feminism is not seen as a finished product but as open for new members and debate”. There must be a focus on equality as well as the acknowledgement that “those that may be enrolled in my claims speak back to me”. Particularly in regards to discussions about the definitions of womanhood, it can be argued that feminism should not defend an alleged “subject for feminism” that is exclusively worthy of that status but rather embrace the diversity of subjects that are put in connection with one another through feminist claims.

8.5 Process

This analysis will be carried out following the guidelines suggested by Jäger (1999: 175-187)

- To begin with, a list of eligible texts including bibliographic data, their context and origin of the selected texts written by Chiamamanda Ngozi Adichie, Roxane Gay, Loretta Ross etc. will be compiled. Examining the context of these essays and interviews and briefly presenting the respective author will adopt an essential role as I want to identify what event/situation triggered their creation and which goal is trying to be achieved with the chosen language.
- Next, the selected texts will undergo a close reading to identify discourse fragments adhering to or being associated with the larger discourse thread of Cancel Culture. During this step, I will further try to identify an author’s argumentative aims and single out topics that are dealt with in the text without being directly related to the topic of trans issues and Cancel Culture.
- In the following, the surface level of the texts will be examined in greater detail which covers the following aspects.
    - Headings and subheadings, graphic layout
    - Stylistic devices
    - Argumentation patterns
    - Allusions, collective symbolism, normalisms, idioms

- Lexis and style
- Use of pronouns (we!)
- Intertextuality
- Potential future perspectives

- Finally, a comprehensive analysis and interpretation that provides an overview of the above-mentioned elements serves as the basis for a visual representation of the identified discourse fragments and threads.

8.6 Selected texts and context

Nr.	Date	Author	Title
1	**15 June 2021**	**Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi** Twitter followers: 227.728 (10 August 2023)	**It is obscene: A true reflection in three parts**
Author: Adichie is a Nigerian author who was born in 1977. After initiating her university education at Nzukka, she transferred to the U.S. where she obtained a degree in Communication and Political Science. Adichie holds additional degrees in the fields of Creative Writing and African History and has written a number of acclaimed novels. Her TED Talk “We should all be feminists” has served as a first introduction to feminism for many[16]. The text under consideration was posted on her homepage Context: Adichie seems to have posted her text “It is obscene: A true reflection in three parts” following repeated critique that she was transphobic. These allegations were brought forward after, for example, she had said that trans women were trans women and had pointed towards the differences in experience by cis women and trans women who were born as male in an interview in 2017[17]. Adichie argued that trans women enjoyed the privileges afforded to them by society until their transition and could therefore not be equated with women born as women. Additionally, her commentary regarding a text about sex and gender published by J.K. Rowling was			

[16] https://www.chimamanda.com/about/ (accessed on 3 August 2023)
[17] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KP1C7VXUfZQ (accessed on 3 August 2023)

deemed transphobic since she referred to it as a “perfectly reasonable piece” despite its transphobic talking points (Allardice 2020[18]).			
Topics	Fame (bright yellow) Social Media (blue) Violence Feminism - Ideological orthodoxy Friendship – Loyalty Young people Gender Presentation of Self – in comparison with other		
2	**17 July 2021**	**Roxane Gay** Twitter followers: 888.390 (10 August 2023)	**Why people are so awful online**

[18] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/14/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-america-under-trump-felt-like-a-personal-loss (accessed on 3 August 2023)

Author: Roxane Gay was born on October 15th 1974 and is a popular feminist, author, professor, editor and regular commentator on social media and in various newspapers. She has worked as a professor at Eastern Illinois University, Purdue University, and Yale University and holds a PhD in Rhetoric and Technical Communication from Michigan Tech. Among her well-known works are "Bad feminist" (2014), "Difficult Women" (2017) and "Hunger" (2017). Her writing includes fiction, non-fiction, comics, essays and poetry. [19] Context: This text was published as a guest essay in the opinion section of the New York Times where Roxane Gay regularly contributes pieces. The New York Times is considered one of the most prestigious newspapers in the world and describes itself as "independent in its discussion of all topics of public interest"[20]. According to Influence Watch[21] and Allsides[22], the paper's editors used to avoid any bias in their reporting, however, has exposed "increasing amounts of left-wing bias", which AllSides describes as a "moderately liberal rating on the political spectrum". Since Gay's essay includes a link to a news story[23] about how the writer Kristen Roupenian's popular short story "Cat Person", published in 2017 was based on biographical details by a real-life person. The incident sparked a large-scale discussion whether real, lived experiences' employment in fiction stories was unethical.			
Topics:	Social Media – communication Violence Challenges of Real Life Power		
3	**17 August 2019**	**Loretta Ross** Twitter followers: 18.049 (10 August 2023)	**I'm a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic.**

[19] https://www.mtu.edu/alumni/recognition/profiles/gay-roxane.html (accessed on 4 August 2023)
[20] https://www.nytimes.com/1860/03/10/archives/the-newyork-times-an-independent-political-literary-and.html (accessed 4 August 2023)
[21] https://www.influencewatch.org/for-profit/new-york-times/ (accessed 4 August 2023)
[22] https://www.allsides.com/news-source/new-york-times (accessed 4 August 2023)
[23] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jul/09/the-cat-person-debate-shows-how-fiction-writers-use-real-life-does-matter (accessed 4 August 2023)

Author: Loretta Ross was born on 16th August 1953 in the U.S. and started off her feminist journey when she initiated her work at a first rape crisis centre in 1978. Ross is a legal consultant, trainer, author, speaker and lecturer and deals with topics including “Reproductive Justice, Appropriate Whiteness, Human Rights, Violence against Women and Calling In the Calling Out Culture”. Loretta Ross is also the founder of both the reproductive justice theory and the “Calling In” framework. Furthermore, she offers courses to learn about the principles of this approach. Ross also owns a podcast called “Dred Feminist with Loretta J. Ross” and is currently working on a book called “Calling In the Calling Out Culture”[24]. Context: This opinion piece was published in the opinion section of The New York Times.	
Topics	Social Media – Online Communication Call outs – Violence – Cancel Culture Call ins – Responding Respect Healing – Restoration

[24] https://lorettajross.com/ (accessed on 5 August 2023)

4	**18 March 2022**	**Laurie Penny** Twitter followers: 170.857 (10 August 2023)	**Cancelling, Crybullies and Consequences**
Author :Laurie Penny was born on 28 September 1986. They are a queer journalist, essayist, screenwriter and novelist and focus on topics such as health, sex, gender and politics. Penny has already contributed and edited texts for several newspapers including The New York Times, The Guardian or The Independent. They have already written eight books including “Bitch Doctrine”, “Meat Market” or “Sexual Revolution” and contributed to television shows.[25] Context: The essay under review was posted on Laurie Penny’s blog called “Penny Red”. Penny emphasises that this blog does not rely on advertising and is subscriber-funded. They want to support a concept of journalism that is accessible for everyone; hence, most of their texts are publicly available and can be shared.			
Topics	Internet – Accessibility for less powerful people - Communication Shame – productive Kindness vs. Being nice		
5	**22 September 2020**	**Judith Butler** (no Twitter profile)	**Judith Butler on the culture wars, JK Rowling and living in “anti-intellectual times”**
Author: The person interviewed is **Judith Butler,** who is one of the most prominent voices in feminism particularly known for their theories on gender, sex and power. Butler’s most popular works are “Gender Trouble” and “Bodies that Matter”. Butler completed their Ph.D. in Philosophy at Yale University and are currently working as a Distinguished Professor in the fields of Comparative Literature and Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. **Alona Ferber,** who conducted the “email interview”, is a writer, editor and journalist based in London. Ferber was born in Israel which has impacted her journalistic work. Felber covers a broad range of topics including Isreal/Palestine, Mideast, feminism, gender or motherhood[26].			

[25] https://lauriepenny.substack.com/about (5 August 2023)
[26] https://www.alonaferber.com/about (8 August 2023)

Context: This interview was published in “The New Statesman”, which describes itself as a “leading progressive political and cultural magazine” in the U.K. that was founded in 1913[27]. The paper prides itself with a range of influential contributors such as George Orwell or Virginia Woolf. According to the media bias rating by “Biasly” and “Media Bias/Fact Check”[28], the New Statesman is classified as “somewhat liberal”, “strongly biased toward liberal causes” as well as highly factual/credible.			
Topics:	Online communication – Attacks on trans activists - Tone Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism Individualism – Collectivism		
6	**7 July 2020**	**Kim Humphery** Twitter followers: 124 (10 August 2023)	**Trans rights have been pitted against feminism but we're not enemies**
Author: Kim Humphery is Director of the Northern Institute at the Charles Darwin University Australia. Her research focuses on the “socio-cultural and political dimensions of consumption and material life”. Other fields of interest include “community based arts and social enterprise” or “transfeminisms”[29]. Context: This opinion piece was published in the British newspaper “The Guardian”. The Guardian is owned by the Guardian Media Group that describes itself as a provider of “fearless, investigative journalism” that does not depend on commercial contributors[30]. The stories that are chosen are exclusively based on the group’s values. The Guardian Media Group, alongside The Observer and additional media businesses, is owned by the Scott Trust. The Trust aims to ensure that the Guardian can operate without party affiliation[31]. AllSides rates the Guardian as a “lean left” or “moderately liberal” medium[32]. The Factual identifies a “moderate left” bias[33].			
Topics:	Alliances - Divisiveness Communication Dealing with change		

[27] https://www.newstatesman.com/about-us-newstatesman (8 August 2023)
[28] https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/new-statesman/ (8 August 2023)
[29] https://www.cdu.edu.au/northern-institute/people/director-research-support-services (accessed on 8 August)
[30] https://www.theguardian.com/about (accessed on 8 August 2023)
[31] https://www.theguardian.com/the-scott-trust/2015/jul/26/the-scott-trust (accessed on 8 August 2023)
[32] ahttps://www.allsides.com/news-source/guardian (accessed 9 August 2023)
[33] https://www.thefactual.com/blog/is-the-guardian-reliable/ (accessed 9 August 2023)

	Media portrayal of feminism and trans issues

7	**4 May 2023**	**Régine Jean Charles (Interviewer)** Twitter followers: 3.527 (15 September) **Nana Akosua Hanson (Interviewee)** Twitter followers: 14.901 (5 September 2023)	**Feminism and Freedom in Ghana: The Ms. Q&A With Nana Akosua Hanson**

Author: Régine Michelle Jean Charles is the director of African Studies at the Northeastern University at Boston, Massachusetts. Her research focuses on Culture and Social Studies as well as Africa Studies, Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies. Dr. Jean Charles has published books dealing with Black girlhood or the Haitian diaspora and contributes to various magazines. [34]

Nana Akosua Hanson's work focuses on feminism and pan-Africanism. She is an activist, actress and writer active in Ghana. Hanson runs a theatre project called "Drama Queens". It chooses plays that critically reflect on the patriarchy or gender norms with the aim of disrupting the status quo and offers sexual education workshops. [35] [36]

Context: The interview was posted in Ms., a feminist magazine that came into being in 1971. In the 70s, Ms. Magazine dealt with contents highly uncommon and rarely talked about in the mainstream media. These included abortion rights, equal rights, domestic violence, care work or sexual harassment. Nowadays, Ms. Serves as a resource for feminist news stories and activism. It targets a multi-generational audience across the globe and aims to provide a space that encourages the interaction of feminists. [37]

[34] https://cssh.northeastern.edu/faculty/regine-michelle-jean-charles/ (accessed on 15 September 2023)
[35] https://norient.com/nanahanson (accessed 15 September 2023)
[36] https://www.dramaqueensghana.org/ (accessed 15 September 2023)
[37] https://msmagazine.com/about/ (accessed 15 September 2023)

Since August 2021 Ghana has been debating the so-called “Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values” bill which is strongly supported by religious and traditional politicians. Activism that informs about LGBTQIA+ topics can lead to prosecution and jail sentences up to 10 years. Similarly, Uganda signed a bill into law that is accompanied by 20 year sentences for “promoting homosexuality” or even the death penalty for “aggravated homosexuality” (Akalaare Adombila & Akorlie 2023) [38]. Despite the threat of sanctions and travel restrictions being imposed by countries including the U.S., there has been a rise in homophobia and its criminalization in various African countries. American Christian Conservative organisations provide financial support for these anti-LGBTQIA+ legal efforts (Byaruhanga 2023)[39].

Topics	Feminism and artistic expression Transformative potential of pop cultural productions Feminism and the media Feminism in a religious, patriarchal society Framings of Gender and Sexuality from a religious perspective Influence of US evangelicals Discriminatory Legislation Future global feminist efforts Mutual respect and collaboration among feminists		
8	**22 March 2022**	**Alex Kofi Donkor** Twitter followers: 7846 (30 September 2023)	Why Ghana’s LGBTIQ community needs your help

Author: Alex Kofi Donkor is an activist who fights for human rights and specifically for the rights of queer people in Ghana. He is the founder of “LGBT+ Rights Ghana” that has the aim of offering a safe space for queer people.

Context: It is likely that this text was posted in order to comment on Ghana’s anti LGBTQIA+ law that criminalises members of the queer community and those who advocate for this group’s rights. The law was already proposed in 2021 and has been undergoing ratification processes. It is assumed that it will soon be signed into law.

[38] https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ghana-supreme-court-rejects-bid-block-anti-lgbtq-bill-2023-07-19/ (accessed 30 September 2023)

Topics	Being queer/Coming out in Ghana Internet University – Self discovery Community building Oppressive government – fundamentalist leaders Call for action – International community

8.7 Results

The aim of this analysis was to identify recurring patterns in the framings of Cancel or Call-out Culture as well as additional subjects that are discussed in feminist examinations of the topic. This study shows that feminist authors researching gender topics generally expose aligning convictions particularly in the field of reviewing online communication, proposed beneficial future approaches to online debating culture and questions revolving around accountability and collectivism in feminism.

Fame

Adichie dedicates large parts of her essay to the topic of fame and the disadvantages that come with it. She starts off by associating fame with “territory” and hence power but quickly moves on to say that this power invites others to spread lies and exploit one’s public standing, attention and kindness for their own advantage. Gay equally draws attention to the topic of power but instead of mentioning the word “fame”, she uses “influence”. Despite her growing influence, she describes developing a large following online as an overwhelming experience as it comes with many comments, both negative and positive.

Adichie further argues that people seem to ignore that celebrities are human too and experience feelings such as “disappointment”, “depression” or vulnerability. Those who allegedly insult and degrade her are the ones who “have nothing to lose” implying famous people are the victims that are exposed to allegations and lies without any defence or protection. Those who accuse are presented as the ones holding power based on the assumption that they have the privilege of not being

[39] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66079603 (accessed 30 September)

dependent on the success of their actions. Both Adichie and Ross mention that they first chose to ignore lies that were spread about them online and link the act of spreading falsehoods to cries of attention that should be best left unheard.

Communication on Social Media

In the case of Adichie, social media is presented as a highly controversial place. She perceives it as a space where stories can “travel the world in minutes” and where false narratives can be turned into “the defining story about you”. She further portrays social media as a space she normally does not take part in. This becomes evident in passages where she talks about friends sending her tweets or telling her about insults made about her online. Similarly, Gay focuses on the topic of social media and how communication has changed on these platforms. As opposed to Adichie, Gay does not position herself outside the controversy linked to social media and Cancel Culture. She admits to having participated in “all kinds of ridiculous arguments and conversations”. Judith Butler suggests that the toxicity of the feminist online debate derives from the “anti-intellectual times” we live in and the speed of social media that is detrimental to “thoughtful” discussions. In a similar fashion, Butler admits having made mistakes but at the same times states how they have progressed because of those who challenged and confronted them. They resent the idea of no longer deserving to be engaged with because of these past mistakes since mistakes should not be an individual’s defining feature. Penny goes one step further, reports on her own experience and verbalises the feelings being called out evoked in themselves in detail. They talk about shame, guilt, defensiveness, dignity and rage and how these emotions are oftentimes projected onto the ones that held accountable and voiced their critique.

In comparison to Adichie, Gay also includes positive aspects of social media such as finding a community of like-minded peers that used to celebrate beautiful aspects of life with her. She also mentions how her work on social media platforms has challenged her as a person and has allowed her to form meaningful relationships. In her final paragraph, however, it seems as if Gay’s approach to social media has changed despite the discussed benefits. There seems to be a greater focus on “real life” and relationships with people less engaged in the online sphere.

Hanson addresses the advantages of the media and its potential to offer room to a diverse range of voices which can join public debate and thus create a “public forum”

in Ghana. Hanson wants to see more women in these spaces still dominated by men and emphasises the importance of providing visibility to various opinions to encourage the development of a democratic society and “push for social reform”. Here, it needs to be mentioned that Henson locates her feminist efforts in a country shaped by its patriarchal and violent society whose values have been shaped by religious leaders. These bolster the ideal of a society in which women are utterly dependent on men and people adhering to the LGBTQIA+ community are almost entirely erased from the public. Similarly, Donkor, who is an activist also operating in Ghana, points towards the Internet’s benefits by recounting his background of coming to terms with his sexuality and how online research has helped him while being at university in Northern Ghana. For the first time in his life, he had been exposed to ideas about gender and sexuality that were not issued by the church. Later on, Donkor started a blog for members of the queer community and offered information that was not censored by fundamentalist leaders. He explains how he has been using online platforms to challenge people’s opinions and make them think ever since. Despite the addressed positive aspects of social media platforms in the context of self-discovery, Donkor illustrates how Ghana’s public communication regarding LGBTQIA+ topics is characterised by the spreading of falsehoods and sensationalism which has had a negative impact on the lives of queer Ghanaians.

In societies which can be classified as progressive, social media gets associated with insults, a place where one can “put on a public performance”, implying that one takes advantage of the destructive potential a viral social media post can bear and which assists by not having to engage in a conversation about a particular issue. A Twitter post allows one to simply share one’s thoughts on a debate without dealing with the back and forth of a real time conversation. An activity Adichie describes as to “peddle falsehoods”. Likewise, Gay is convinced that conflicts are blown out of proportion which illustrates that it becomes increasingly difficult to figure out how “we as humans should interact in this place”. Similarly, Ross draws attention to the fact how the Internet allows people to intensify the scale of callouts for example by allowing them to act anonymously.

Gay’s account of communication online is different from Adichie’s in the way it addresses the responsibility of both the recipient and issues of critique voiced online. Gay states that online discourse is so saturated by aggression that those who are the target of critique tend to even mistake good-faith criticism for cruel

condemnations. The expression Cancel Culture is then used as a rallying cry as a reaction to someone being held mildly accountable. On the other hand, Gay equally laments how statements are presented without context or transformed into a bigger controversy because individuals are assumed to showcase their worst intentions online.

In general, it becomes clear that Adichie associates the people who use social media to communicate their beliefs as individuals who are naïve and incapable of or not willing to tell fiction from truth. She claims that “in this age in which people do not need proof or verification to run with a story, especially a story that has outrage potential that it can easily begin to seem true”. In this regard, the repetition of vocabulary such as “attention”, “performance” or “outrage potential” is crucial. Social media and the allegedly inherent focus on the generation of attention by all means seemingly lets people forget about their offline relationships whose intimacy seems incompatible with the public online spaces that reward those who are loud and put on a show. She insinuates that “social-media savvy people” only talk about kindness and compassion without being actually able to act on these emotions. Similarly, while Gay notices noble moral aspirations expressed in the online sphere, she senses a lack of “generosity”, “patience” or “kindness”.

How feelings and violence play out in online communication

Adichie’s text suggests an overlap of topics, namely the one of social media and violence. She repeatedly implies how the first person she is describing in her text refused to call and send an email to discuss or settle their conflict; instead, “attacks” were launched and social media followers were incited to “pick up machetes and attack”. Likewise, Gay employs the terms “attack”, “cruelty” and “aggression” when referring to communication online. When Ross speaks of Cancel Culture, she associates it with “feeding (its) cannibalistic maw”, “ruthless hazing” and “rigid political standards for acceptable discourse”. Butler acknowledges the “toxicity” of online debate but stands up for those who call out. In Butler’s email interview, it becomes clear that they resent that attacks launched in the direction of J.K. Rowling receive lots of space in media coverage whereas everyday discrimination and violence against trans people does not. They point to the hypocrisy of only condemning attacks a particular group of people. Butler additionally criticises that activists who loudly and boldly fight for their values are portrayed as showing

“uncivilised behaviour”. They argue that debate in a democracy must not always be “light” as there are many groups which have historically remained unheard so that their ”cry for justice is bound to be loud”.

Penny offers another perspective saying that the Internet has allowed individuals to share detailed accounts of what their lives are like. Penny argues that many active in the digital sphere are, however, not able to deal with these insights and stories of pain particularly when they might be involved in other people’s suffering. They suggest that the Internet has developed in a way that no longer enables the simple ignoring of other individuals’ experience and societal issues such as systematic racism. Penny maintains that instead of what Ross would probably refer to as “responding”, people tend to “react” to being confronted with their own ignorance. They “deny, dismiss, destroy”.

Shame

Penny proposes that ignorance is associated with shame in a way that turning a blind eye can protect one from having to engage in the “hard work of repairing harm”. Knowledge allows people to make judgements about whether something is right or wrong. The Internet has provided an overwhelming amount of knowledge one must deliberately ignore to claim innocence based on ignorance. Penny concludes that those used to “impunity” are likely to mistake “accountability” for an attack. They sustain that ignorance or denial in the face of suffering and pain is linked to shame. Awareness of other people’s struggles does not immediately translate into changed behaviour or apologies. They argue that societies that promote cultures of shame and sin do not offer a chance for redemption so that the adequate proposed reaction is destruction or attack. Penny portrays shame as severely detrimental to social change and laments the lack of a “framework for holding people accountable without rejecting their humanity”. Shame leads to people believing someone is intrinsically bad for making one mistake. Shame paralyses people and does not help them take the first step to “repair” or prevent” future harm. Shame results in defensiveness or aggressive behaviour which prevents engaging in the necessary work and taking on the responsibility to alter one’s behaviour. Penny blames cultures that have not taught their members that shame can be overcome or can even be productive. Penny criticises that those who are called out regard that call-out as harmful and a form of oppression in itself. In adopting that strategy, other people’s oppression is

turned into their own. Penny discusses how these people have even developed their own terms and topics they overtly focus on as a form of reactionary measure e.g. “anti-woke”, free speech or pronouns to evade feelings of shame. Penny insists that “feelings are not facts” and they are not objective. The Internet gave visibility to a myriad of social justice topics which causes people to learn how to sit in their feelings of discomfort, resentment and fear instead of accusing those who call-out of restricting others’ right to free speech. Penny refers to this behaviour as “moral cowardice” and covered up fear of change of the status quo. Some would rather prefer not being exposed to critique, consequences and the feelings that this entails.

Penny explains how social justice movements have relied on shaming and public shaming to draw attention to their efforts and values. This has been done with “savagery” and Penny calls these strategies “social weapons” that render others “socially untouchable”. The Internet and advancements of technology in general have invited an increasing number of people who hold less power to the conversation which offers them the chance to engage in call-outs. Regardless, these strategies of socially ostracising others are not restricted to those considered progressive or adhering to the left. Penny emphasises how these have been used by both progressivists and conservatives. Interestingly, they further observe that the term “Cancel Culture” is associated with who is using it. Shaming others as a marginalised person is seen as outrageous whereas powerful individuals can do so simply because it is “convention”. Penny explains how those holding power can use many tools to implement desired change such as policymaking. People at the margins of society engage in public shaming as they are otherwise worthless.

Fear

At the same time, Adichie addresses the existence of a second group of young people that is so fearful of making comments online and are “terrified of having the wrong opinion”. In Adichie’s final part of her essay, platforms such as Twitter are depicted as places characterised by a climate of fear. This perceived fear by young people Adichie states she has spoken to is linked to saying the wrong things, being turned into a target and thereby exposed to vicious attacks. Adichie says that this fear is the reason why these young people do not think for themselves, “learn and grow”. Altogether, what these two groups seemingly have in common is their inability to dig deep and actually educate themselves. While the first group does so because

they rely on ready-made mantras and fiercely believe in their moral superiority and authority, the latter is paralysed by fear. Ross also brings up the topic of fear and how public callouts result in an avoidance of meaningful conversations to not be turned into a target.

Kindness

Penny argues that the concept of kindness comes with lots of baggage particularly for marginalised people and women and girls. Frequently, kindness means ensuring that those who oppress or discriminate someone are not made aware of their misbehaviour and not confronted with the topic of shame. Other people's comfort used to always be prioritised. The rise of the Internet resulted in discriminatory language being used on a larger scale. Marginalised individuals no longer want to accept such behaviour just to make sure others do not need to engage with their potential discomfort.

Real life challenges as catalysts of heated (online) debate

Differently to Adichie, Gay notices a change in online communication which she perceives as fuelled by the challenges and crises evident offline instead of a new generation of young people flooding the digital sphere as suggested by Adichie. In contrast to the social media platforms where power imbalances seem to "flatten", in the real world, people allegedly feel voiceless. Hence, these platforms presumably offer a space where everyone has the chance to exert power and demand justice. Gay recounts her own experience in dealing with the news in describing how they sometimes make her feel like "drowning". Gay sees this helplessness as the source for justice-seeking behaviour online and is convinced that people are looking for emotional safety online as real life leaves them behind paralysed, unheard and furious. This anger, she suggests, translates into a "desperate hope" for perfection that holds off any "harm" or "suffering". Also, Penny mends the topics of real-life struggles with pain and communication online. They suggest that when the Internet was still a minority medium, crises were experienced as a collective. Now that everyone has easy access to digital content, people share their pain. Penny identifies an urge of "lashing out" at one another "if the future feels frightening".

In the context of Ghana, Donkor addresses the consequences of an ongoing and increasingly anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment such as the closure of a community centre for queer people in Accra. He believes that these dangerous and adverse attitudes

towards queer people are directly linked to real-life issues such as corruption evident in the public sector including courts or the police. Identifying queer people as scapegoats is a way of obscuring who is actually to blame for real and tangible challenges affecting the Ghanaian public. He further condemns how U.S. evangelical groups adopt a crucial role in spreading fundamentalist ideas and hateful propaganda in Ghana.

A new generation

Towards the end of her essay, Adichie starts painting the picture of a generation of young people that is divided in two groups. She portrays her two former students as adhering to the first group which is characterised by a lack of generosity or gratitude. These young people allegedly put their needs first, have a “slick and sleek” way of speaking but expose severe insufficiency when it comes to (emotional) “intelligence” or “talent”. The rules they establish for others do not apply to themselves. To them, intelligence and education are equated with the mindless repetition of hollow phrases which contradicts complexity or nuance.

Another issue that repeatedly comes up in Adichie’s text in relation to the formation of a new generation of young activists is the one of ideological orthodoxy particularly in terms of feminism. She claims that nowadays people participate in a form of feminism that is hypocritical, self-regarding and compassion-free” and accepts nothing else but ideological purity. This feminism is characterised by trends that are meticulously followed while nuances are ignored or even condemned. These feminists allegedly portray themselves as superior and mindlessly repeat empty phrases “to remain a member of the chosen puritan class”. In her arguments, Adichie relies on lexis associated with the topic of religion such as “God help us”, “out-angle” or “puritans”. In doing so, she seems to compare these feminists to committed and devoted supporters of a movement that upholds purity and believes that only those who strictly follow the rules will be saved from their sins. Nowadays, “puritan” is used to describe someone as prudish, intolerant or constricted. Similarly, Ross condemns how people go about criticising others and portray themselves as “the self-appointed guardians of political purity”.

Gender – Trans issues

Interestingly, Adichie merely dedicates a couple of lines to the topic of trans issues which sparked backlash online and ultimately resulted in her publishing the essay "It is obscene". In this short paragraph she repeats the statement from her 2017 interview ("a trans woman is a trans woman") and immediately goes on to say that this was part of a broader discussion about inclusivity and the acceptance of difference as an integral part of inclusivity. A little later, she repeats that she "fully support(s) the rights of trans people and all marginalized people" and that she has always been "fiercely supportive of difference". In that regard, it can be argued that her essay is not concerned with discussing her statements made about trans people, the critique voiced by her former students and providing more insights on the challenges faced by trans people in general.

Butler states they find it "worrying" how trans radical feminists' views on gender are presented as mainstream in the media. In a similar fashion, Humphrey describes that the portrayal of feminists existing in opposition to trans people is a "hostile" and "distressing" one. According to Humphrey, the ongoing public debate and its depiction in the media fuel the fantasy of a fight about whether sex based or trans rights are prioritised in feminist discussion.

They explain that feminists who categorise themselves as gender critical perceive the penis as the defining feature of an individual and perpetuate the fantasy someone with a penis disguises themselves as a woman to do harm. Butler condemns this portrayal that fosters fears and has nothing to do with the real situation for trans people who are very likely to be discriminated against. They further do not oppose the label "TERF" and point out that this form of radical feminism favours exclusion and hence deserves the name. Butler criticises that debates about trans issues are portrayed as if they are happening between feminists and trans activists. Humphrey agrees by saying that the flawed media depiction obscures the reality of an "alliance" of "mutual recognition" between the two groups that she perceives as "uplifting".

They underline how feminism has always supported the ideas that gender is socially and culturally constructed, historically changing and not strictly biological. Projecting fear on trans people robs them of their dignity. Feminism believes that everyone should be allowed to pursue their lives free from discrimination and violence against

the gender they identify with. Similarly, Humphrey underlines how all feminists share the goal of wanting to end all forms of oppression which also implies the discrimination of trans individuals. Identifying as trans is not a “shallow identity choice” that represents an attack on women’s rights. Humphrey repeats Butler’s theories by stating that these are “not fantasy” and based on “well-evidenced research”. While acknowledging the material reality of sex, Humphrey places importance on changing social and political perceptions of gender.

A way forward

Ross reflects on her own experience of both calling out and being called out. She laments how online call-out give rise to the use of strategies such as “individualizing oppression” and using “the movement” as one’s “personal therapy space”. Interestingly, she seems to recommend trying to detach oneself from one’s own experience when engaging in social justice work. Instead of using tactics such as “punishment” or “exile”, she requires activists to take their demands and efforts to real life. Excluding, she asserts by quoting Audre Lorde, equals using the “master’s tools” which “will never dismantle the master’s house”. Ross further condemns using language that implies someone is “disposable” or not allowing someone “due process” and protection” of their human rights. Ross’ essay contains many success stories in which the author reflects on how she needed to put her own anger aside to follow her agenda and keep educating despite being discriminated. She describes this strategy as “responding” instead of “reacting”. Ross is convinced calling outs and Cancel Culture cause social justice movements to slow down as these focus too much on people that do not agree with one’s agenda; instead she advises to draw attention to those “who profit from discrimination and injustice”. Ross states that call outs are justified in some cases such as for famous people that are “beyond reach” but emphasises that the critique voiced must be effective to help reach justice. She further suggests an alternative approach called “calling in”, which she describes as a “call-out done with love”. She does not say that public call outs must stop but instead must be carried out with respect. Suffering must not be weaponised as is exists in opposition with “healing and restoration”. The aim of call-ins and conflicts are productivity, support and grace instead of drama.

Penny points out that realising one might be involved in someone else’s suffering can be a painful but at the same time hopeful experience. Shame and guilt can be

overcome and can trigger a learning process regarding how to handle other people's pain. Penny advocates for "nurturance culture" that helps people work through shame by "owning the harm they have done" to become a full member of the community again. They want to see a change in call-out techniques used by individuals on the left and call for a culture of kindness.

Penny argues in favour of a different understanding of kindness that allows learning, acceptance of being wrong, healing, and repair. It should further not be equated with being nice as it allows those oppressed to maintain their boundaries and respect their needs. It means letting go of any convictions of resolving conflicts through dominance or violence. Similarly to Ross, Penny talks about giving one another grace and a "dignified bridge" to engage in a process of (un)learning. Penny consistently discusses how taking accountability and letting oneself engage in the process of learning and acquiring knowledge instead of hiding behind ignorance to protect one's innocence. The argument of freedom must not be exploited to justify one's desire to not care and not feel discomfort or inconvenience. By saying that screaming at one another on the Internet will not solve the problems and crises our world is currently facing, Penny holds both progressivists and conservatives accountable and wants people to turn their backs on individualism in favour of collective efforts to look out for one another. In the same fashion, Butler emphasises how people need to remember their dependency and understand that individualism will not solve the pressing social and ecological challenges of our time. However, feminism can persist if it reaffirms its focus on collectivity and solidarity. Butler argues that feminism needs a clear adherence to gender equality and gender freedom to promote the "complexity of (gender-based) lives as they are currently lived. Humphrey joins these efforts to foster community amongst feminists and wants people to understand that respecting and dedicating importance to trans issues does not equal rendering women's oppression and violence against women invisible. She wants people to embrace change and deal with it "generously, not defensively". Humphrey does not see a future in a "territory claiming war" and points out how alliances must be forged. Likewise, Hanson calls on the need of having "real conversations" instead of clinging to the "fluff" when being asked how Black feminists from all over the glove could support the feminist struggles in African countries such as Ghana. Hanson points out the importance of "mutual respect" and links it to values such as "honesty", "care", "mutual support" and recognition of

“difference and similarity without judgement”. Likewise, Donkor underlines the importance of letting members of the queer communities speak about LGBTQIA+ topics instead of allowing homophobes to control the narrative. Donkor’s text additionally entails a call for action regarding the international community. People are supposed to stand up against equality and provide financial help or expertise.

Displayed material / References

While Adichie includes entire emails in her essay that either show how two young individuals who had formerly been part of her writing workshops in Nigeria but repeatedly defamed her online thank her for her continuous support, praise her for her achievements or apologise for their own disrespectful and careless behaviour, her text does not include any of the tweets in which these individuals allegedly encourage followers to take up arms and attack her. It can be argued that this limited selection of “receipts” creates a certain difficulty in understanding both sides of the debate.

J.K. Rowling comes up in two of the texts selected for this analysis particularly when it comes to illustrating how poisoned online debate has become. Apparently, Rowling serves as the perfect example for someone who has been accused of being transphobic and been exposed to hate speech and cancel strategies as a result. Additionally, she represents values such as free speech and sex-based rights. Feminists such as Butler and Humphrey, who oppose trans exclusive radical feminism tend to have a very cautious and critical approach to Rowling. Humphrey argues that the dominant media portrayal of an alleged conflict between trans people and feminists can be partly traced back to J.K. Rowling’s tweets and blog entries. Butler is convinced that too much news coverage is dedicated to the harassment she has experienced as opposed to trans people’s.

Images

Roxane Gay’s essay is accompanied by an image that shows a greenish, glowy ball at the centre but furthest from the spectator. On top of it, there are scales surrounded by bright light dots. Usually, scales represent harmony, balance, equality or justice. On the left and right side of the ball, one can see two faceless heads facing one another. While the first of altogether four pairs is green, as one’s gaze wanders further into the background, the heads increasingly turn red. The heads are confined by red frames on each side. The floor resembles bars that are penetrated by holes.

Loretta Ross' essay comes with an image of a hot branding iron that has the same format as a prohibition sign. Branding irons are usually used to brand livestock and in doing so indicate ownership. Historically, branding was also used as a form of punishment for slaves or criminals. At that time, branding had the aim of leaving a permanent mark on someone's skin to indicate a specific status such as runaway slave, illustrate who this individual belonged to or depict which crime someone had committed (Keefer 2019: 661). Usually these marks were associated with stigma and the status of an outcast.Those who are marked were no longer considered part of human community (ibid. 662).

While the first image seems to point to the value of engaging in balanced debates on equal terms, the second one appears to be about the allegedly severe and painful consequences one faces when saying something "wrong". The burning iron represents how these individuals are marked, allegedly beyond restoration and not worthy of forgiveness. Altogether, the images used combine issues of free speech and debate culture.

8.8 Comparison of results with existing literature

Generally speaking, the obtained results tie well with those obtained by other researchers analysing the phenomenon of Cancel Culture. Here, it needs to be mentioned that no prior studies examining the specific relation of Cancel Culture and debates dealing with trans issues could be found.

As discussed in the theoretical part of this thesis, Adrian Daub (2022), identifies recurring topics and principles that are brought up by those who issue warnings against a culture of cancelling. Among them is that the voiced critique is directed at both individuals and those who support them, implied as a form of punishment and well-organised. The second principle is that cancelling someone allegedly equals retrospectively erasing them and the values they represent. Thirdly, those who condone Cancel Culture depict it as a reflection of an existing culture of self-censorship and pressure to conform to dominant ideas. Those who lament a growing power of Cancel Culture also associate it with a growing superiority of the Internet and emphasise its detrimental effects on public debate. My results complement Daub's as they provide another perspective on social media platforms in the context of the Cancelling debate. The feminist or discrimination-critical

framings of Cancel Culture obtained in my research do not overtly focus on the activity of “cancelling” and frequently do not even feature the term “Cancel Culture” but rather pay attention to a growing toxicity and aggression evident in online debate. Particularly Adichie expresses negative views regarding those who are active on social media. She frames social media platforms as places characterised by insults, attacks, a mob mentality and people who lack kindness, intelligence and complexity. The other feminists’ framings examined in this analysis acknowledge that participating in discussions online is challenging but see both parties at fault. My analysis suggests that among feminists, call-outs are not exclusively condoned and framed as “attacks” or a reflection of a lack of emotional intelligence. Instead, they are depicted as a starting point for learning processes and progress, which further aligns with results obtained by the Pew Research Center (2021). Feminists such as Gay or Penny also defend online spaces by depicting them as spaces that offer the opportunity to experience a sense of community and allow people to share detailed accounts of their lives. Donkor perceives the internet as a useful educational tool and strategy to get in touch with like-minded individuals.

In this context, this thesis additionally reviewed theoretical approaches to hate speech and took a critical approach to the “free market place of ideas concept” as well as recurring arguments defending free speech. Butler (2006), for example, believes that hate speech should not be condoned. Instead, the emancipatory potential of counterspeech should be underlined. Likewise, Mill (1997) perpetuates the idea that in a democracy, all ideas need to be heard which ignores an unequal distribution of powers in public spaces. The feminists included in my research do not directly address the topics of free or hate speech. Nonetheless, the talking point discussing an increasingly hateful climate in online spaces is thematised with, on the one hand, great concern (Adichie, Ross, Gay) and on the other hand understanding and empathy (Butler). Butler is convinced that those treated unfairly in society must raise their voices and demand justice which can take a what some may perceive as unpleasant approach. This thesis suggests that the protection of hate speech under the guise of safeguarding free speech principles puts marginalised groups at risk and trivialises their discrimination.

This paper further argues that the Cancel Culture discourse within the general public is a populist one as it paints the picture of a divided society that holds strictly opposing values. Chapter 3.1. compared populist talking points and, for instance,

took a closer look at a letter written by Johanna Mikl-Leitner. This thesis' critical discourse analysis revealed that, for example, Adichie subdivided the feminist movement in two homogenous groups that stand in stark opposition to one another. According to her, on the one hand, there are nuanced and authentic feminists capable of participating in complex discussions. On the other hand, this group is opposed by digitally affine, young feminists that praise orthodoxy as opposed to inviting multiple perspectives to feminist debate.

Interestingly, as opposed to the media discourse revolving around Cancel Culture and alleged self-censorship as identified by Daub, feminists' examination of these topics in my analysis come with reflections on the future of public debate and potential reasons concerning why individuals engage in cancelling practices. Instead of fostering fear and panic, feminists emphasise the collective power of feminism and human dependency. Furthermore, great focus is attached to mutual respect, embracing change and learning to overcome and productively use shame. Feminists also try to identify why people adopt cancelling techniques. A common talking point was the impact of real-life challenges and how these result in feelings of powerlessness and loss of agency. In addition, feminists share accounts of their own missteps and the consequences they faced as a result and how these made them feel. They explore where feelings of shame and discomfort come from and why it is worth dwelling on these.

Daub concludes that the Cancel Culture discourse is one pushed by people that are seemingly not aware of their power and influence; instead, they identify the development of a new Zeitgeist or a new generation that exerts their power online. Although my research reveals that power and fame are topics brought up by feminists when discussing cancelling strategies, it is mainly portrayed as a burden. Adichie states that famous people are stripped of their humanity and people forget that they suffer too when they turn into Cancelling targets. Gay explains how she was overwhelmed by her fast-growing number of followers. Adichie and Ross shared that their first reaction to turning into targets of Cancelling techniques was to ignore them. They do not seem to be aware of the fact that being able to ignore what people write about one on the Internet is a privilege too and that they, as famous writers with a large following have the power to shape the narrative and set the records straight without having to fear severe consequences such as the loss of their livelihood. Those lacking the money or public standing do not have the

resources to simply withdraw from the conversation when a famous person accuses them of attacking them publicly. They are unlikely to be able to pay the legal costs associated with hiring a lawyer or asking publishers or representatives to defend them the way Adichie did.

Daub's observations that illustrations of Cancel Culture frequently depict it as the opposite of real debate culture and rely on anecdotes that lack context prove to be true for the case of Adichie. She includes emails of two former students in her essay but does not provide screenshots of these people's social media posts in which they allegedly attacked her and incited their followers to use violence. Based on the two described instances and without hearing the other side, Adichie locates a growing culture of fear and the development of a new generation of feminists that opposes difference, incites violence and demands ideological orthodoxy. These findings are in accordance with Butler's and Daub's reflections on how particular fears of destruction, infiltration and loss of power are deliberately redirected and associated with topics that are portrayed as illustrative of how traditional concepts of the family, humanity, life and the state are under attack. It can be argued that these topics are, for example, Cancel Culture or debates revolving around trans rights.

By relying on two anecdotes, Adichie frames her former students as representatives of an entire generation of trans-activist bullies who want those who oppose their opinion to be silenced by their own guilt and fear whereas those feminists who voice transphobic views are portrayed as critical, reasonable and open for debate. This framing falls in line with what Lorde (1981), Clark (2021) and Ahmed (2004, 2016) said about affect and the use and portrayal of anger by marginalised groups. Penny touches upon the subject that people are perhaps not ready to deal with other people's pain and anger that it potentially accompanies. Being called out or being denoted as ignorant evokes feelings of shame. Ross even describes how there is a need to put one's anger aside to hold others accountable in a useful and respectful manner. This observation does not link back to Lorde's (1981) and Kurt's (2023) convictions that anger, or in Kurt's case hate, are essential to ensure progress and even represent a resourceful tool for empowerment.

Moreover, drawing on Ahmed's "economy of affect" concept, it can be argued that Adichie's choice of language contributes to the mobilisation of different fears of destruction. Allegedly, the feminism that has paved the way for women nowadays

is gradually infiltrated by activists that are opportunistic, ungracious and self-regarding. This narrative of a “new” generation of feminists that are trying to disrupt the movement “as we know it” and demand ideological purity lacks a particular referent and can therefore circulate quickly and grow in affect. It can additionally be claimed that through her essay, Adichie portrays communication and sensible debate as the “injured” normative subject. She claims that young people no longer want to and are unable to engage in honest and open debate. This aspect evokes images of Ahmed’s bogeyman. According to Adichie’s reflections, everyone, regardless of how gracious, kind or honestly confused one might be can turn into cancelling targets. Adichie showcases herself as someone who has persistently opened her heart and home to her ex-students who are now refusing to engage in offline conversation with her. Here, it needs to be mentioned that the first person discussed in her essay explicitly asked for an offline conversation which was entirely ignored in Adichie’s text. In this context, it can be argued that the accusation of wanting others to feel guilty is employed yet again as a tool for distraction which ultimately results in not having to engage in the voiced criticisms and potentially act on it or induce change.

The findings provided by the Pew Research Centre (2021) show that the Cancel Culture discourse is one young, well-educated men who spend time on social media are most likely familiar with. Conservative Republicans are described as those with the highest possibility of defining Cancel Culture as censorship or a form of punishment. Norris’ (2023) study, carried out among political scientists studying or working in 102 different countries, focused on their attitudes towards the topics of academic freedom, open debate, freedom of speech and the pressure to be politically correct. These obtained results indicate that there is a left-wing bias in the field of political science. Those scientists who classified themselves as right-wing exposed the greatest likelihood of having experienced Cancel Culture incidents themselves. This is consistent with the results obtained by the Pew Research Centre and equally ties well with the results of my study: It can be assumed that the feminsts included in my research who support gender equality and are completely supportive of trans rights would categorise themselves as left-wing in regards to their political convictions. In accordance with Norris’ results, the feminists featured in my analysis demonstrated more positive attitudes towards social media, the strategy of using call-outs to pursue social justice goals and debate culture in general. They further

underlined its educational benefits. E.g. Humphrey and Butler condemned the media portrayal of division amongst feminists and trans activists and underline existing alliances and collaboration within these overlapping groups. Adichie is the only feminist among those reviewed who provided a detailed account of how she turned into a target of Cancel practices and harshly criticises what she perceives as the evolution of a new generation of fear-mongering feminists who are greedy, selfish and self-absorbed and accept nothing else but the prevailing ideological orthodoxy. In the past, Adichie indicated support for J.K. Rowling's gender critical positions, which reflects an approach that is more likely to be shared by conservative or right-wing commentators.

Other studies linked to Cancel Culture have been carried out but were majorly limited to the field of analysing individual "Cancel incidents" and identifying the Cancelling strategies applied in the respective cases (Ng 2020/Haskell 2021). Additionally, a study conducted by Jonsson (2022) has focused on the effects of Cancel Culture on journalism and identified that also controversial opinions are worth exploring in a world that is increasingly getting more complex. She argued that journalists' fear of being turned into a target of cancel practices is certainly detrimental to public discourse and causes them to self-censor. Unfortunately, she did not provide a clear working definition of Cancel Culture.

When searching for texts dealing with Cancel Culture as it is understood by conservative commentators in the context of the Global South, the results were scarce. The two texts that were ultimately included in this research focus on the reality of trying to push for societal reform in the context of a fundamentalist and patriarchal society. Issues such as a lack of visibility for women in the media sphere, the growing influence of U.S. Evangelical groups and discriminatory anti-LGBTQIA+ laws that put queer people's lives at risk are discussed. Furthermore, their accounts attach importance to the way religious leaders and their discourse fundamentally shapes people's perception of gender and sexuality. African countries such as Uganda or Ghana dedicate enormous legal efforts to erasing members of the LGBTQIA+ community from public life. Instead of examining online debate culture, activists fighting for equality address queer people's basic need for survival and protection as they are facing prosecution. Support groups are stripped of funding and people suspected of promoting homosexuality are at risk of being incarcerated which is likely to have taken a severe toll on activists' possibilities of publicly sharing

their views online. Taking this aspect into consideration, it can be observed that the following results obtained in my analysis are in line with Norris' (2023) suggested modernisation theory: Ghana represents a context that can be classified as deeply conservative and that attaches importance to certain moral values as well as religion. Fixed beliefs about race and gender are perpetuated by the church. Activists defending LGBTQIA+ rights in Ghana express concern that their community is being silenced and hindered from carrying out their work which is consistent with Norris' (2023) congruence theory. Interestingly, feminist commentators that express conservative ideals such as a binary understanding of gender in post-industrial societies express similar fears of being silenced, excluded from the public sphere or replaced by a new generation of ruthless and adamant feminists.

In this context, it can be argued that the consequences for embracing one's sexuality or identity such as having to spend one's life in prison or no longer being allowed to rent a home come closer to the literal meaning of cancelling as opposed to how right-wing or conservative groups have coined the term in debates about free speech.

8.9 Limitations

As mentioned above, a critical discourse analysis does not aim to be objective as it fulfils a political purpose. Some might argue that this form of analysis focuses too much on a linguistic examination of texts instead of equally engaging with its production and reception to further identify socio-cultural implications of particular forms of discourse. Here, it further needs to be kept in mind that an attempt to picture the entirety of a certain discourse is really time-consuming since it ought to document it over long time stretches (Jäger 1999: 188).

Furthermore, as the author of this paper, I am not striving to and am not able to provide an objective and unpolitical account of Cancel Culture framings in feminist discourse. Maria Mies (1984: 12) formulated a range of principles she advises to respect in the field of women's research. I believe that these principles can be applied to this analysis, as adhering to the broader field of gender studies, as well. Mies (ibid.) regards the formerly praised goal of objectivity in relation to one's research as obsolete. Instead, she argues in favour of "bewußte Parteilichkeit", a so-called "double-consciousness", that can be achieved if a researcher develops

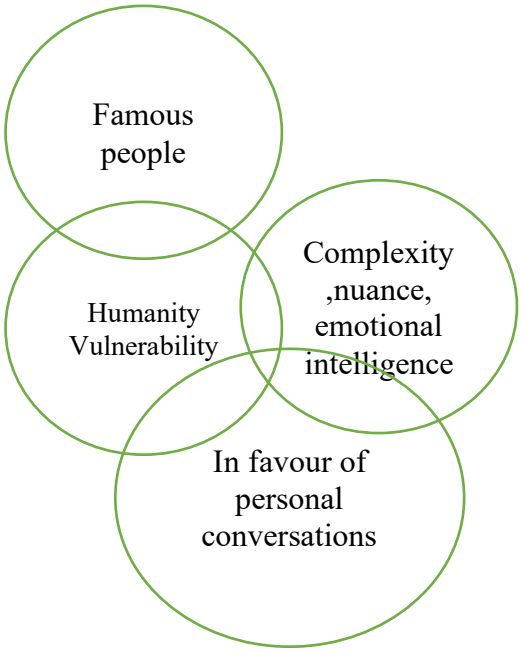
awareness for their own involvement in the examined field. Mies (ibid. 13) advises against engaging in the production of spectator knowledge and suggests the combination of political action and research, which used to be seen as opposites. This goes hand in hand with the aspirations of feminist critical discourse analysis. Fighting against the oppression of trans people and other minorities in a patriarchy means understanding its origins and purposes. Mies (ibid. 13) argues that motivations to change the status quo should be the starting point of feminist research. Accordingly, as a feminist researcher, I was obliged to be aware of my position in the midst of the discourse I am exploring. I argued from the perspective of a white, able-bodied, cis-woman in the global north. I further support the idea of a feminism that is inclusive, intersectional and fosters gender equality and freedom.

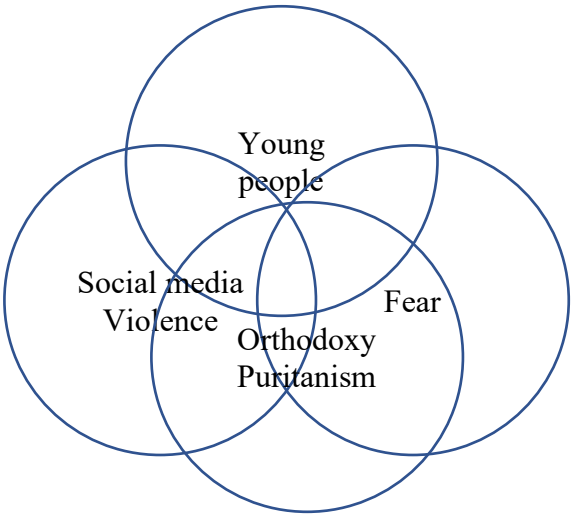
Furthermore, this analysis comes with limitations in terms of generalisability. My number of sample of texts is restricted to eight, hence it does not aim to provide results that reflect all feminists' approach to the topic of Cancel Culture in the context of trans issues debates. This analysis only examines a fragment of the discourse dealing with trans issues and cancelling strategies as it exclusively focuses on the original texts posted by various feminists without following the reactions to the texts or debates they have potentially sparked in the digital or offline sphere.

Additionally, this analysis is limited in terms of the covered time frame as this analysis chose to exclusively include texts that were published after the year 2018. This starting point has been chosen considering that the expression ”Cancel Culture” has only entered public European discourse at that time (Daub 2022: 75).

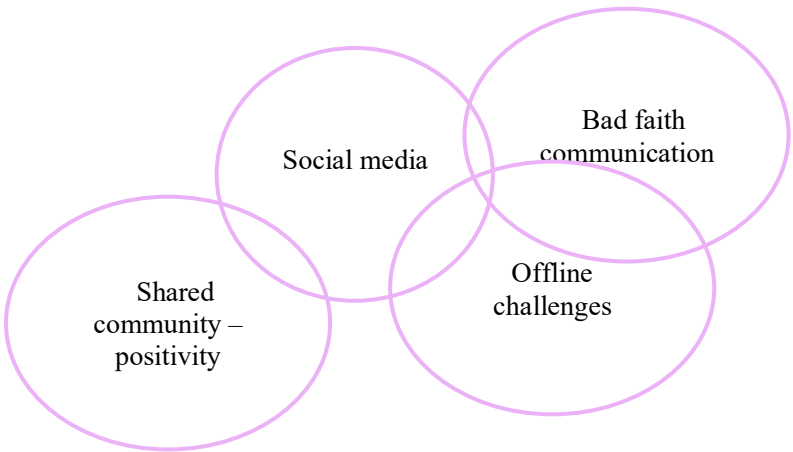
9. Visual overviews

Adichie

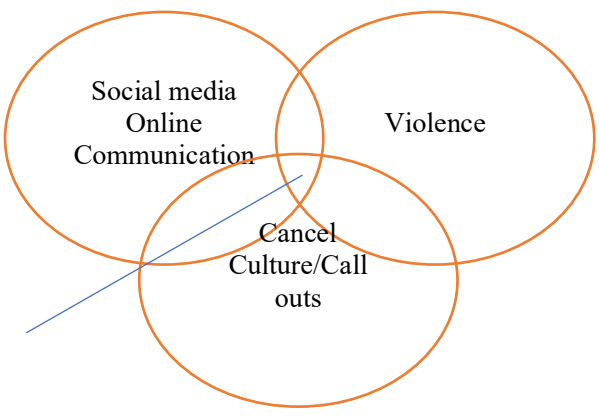


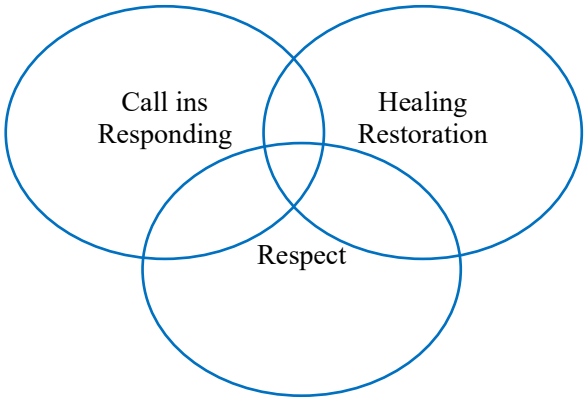


Gay

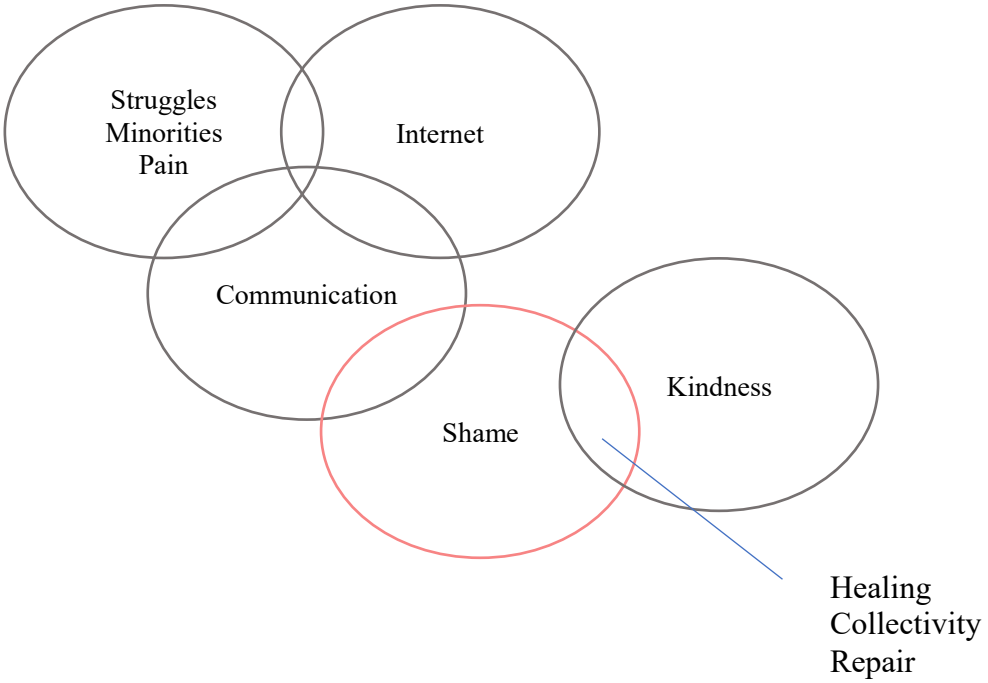


Ross

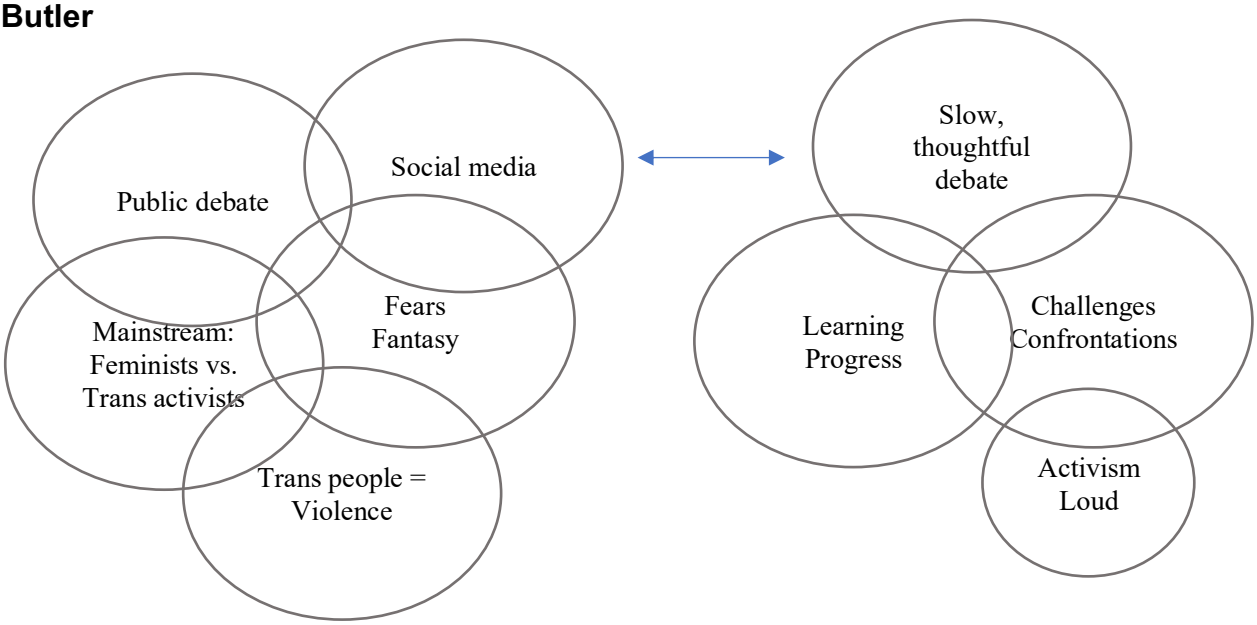




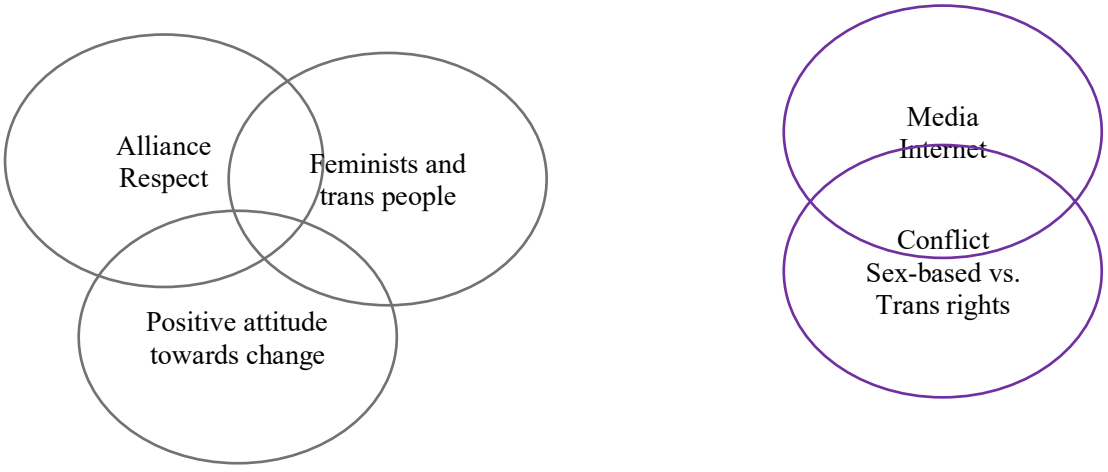
Penny



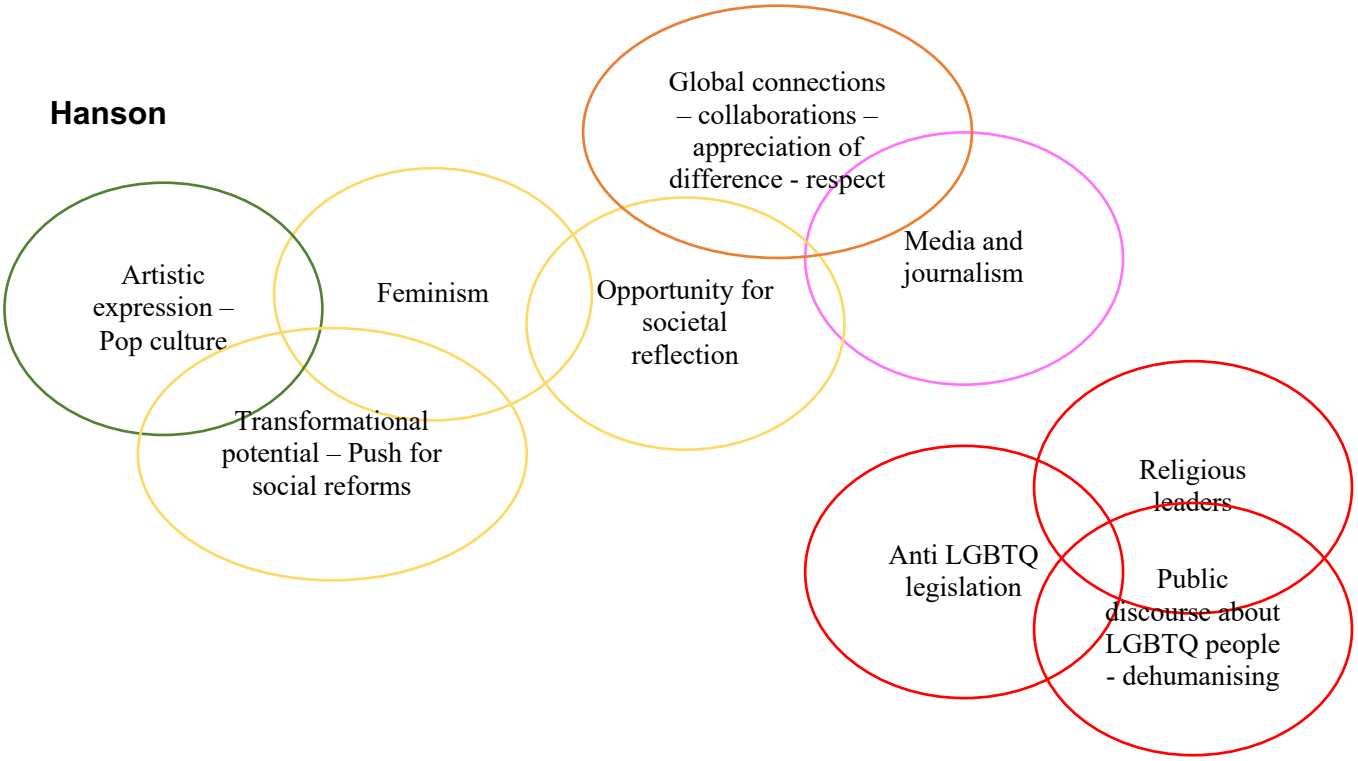
Butler



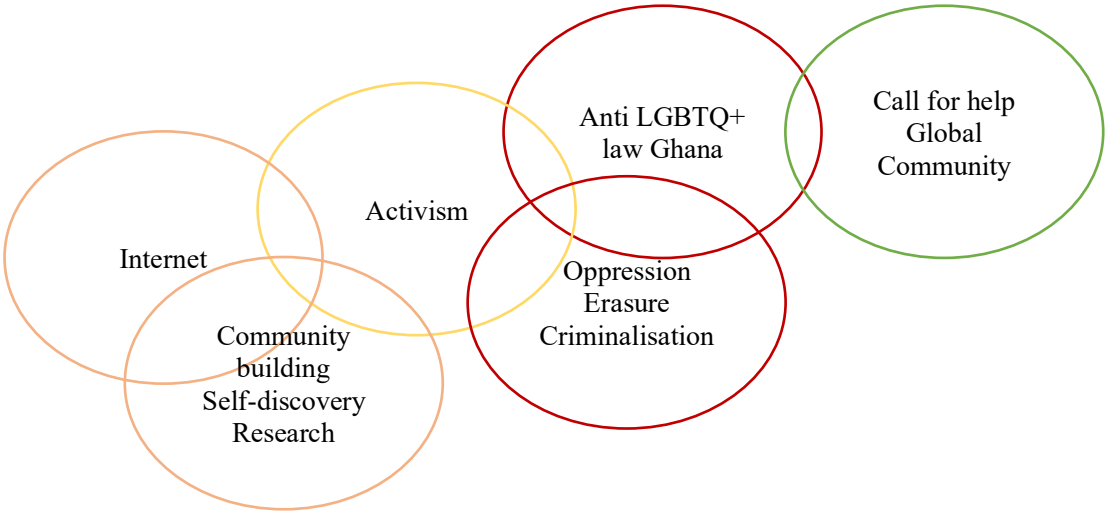
Humphrey



Hanson



Donkor



Conclusion

Collectively, the obtained results are consistent with the reviewed literature depicting the Cancel Culture discourse as one of a moral panic. Strategies that are currently denoted as Cancelling practices have a long history rooted in Black and Queer culture. Digital spaces provided these people with agency and call-outs were originally intended as an in-group monitoring instrument or had a humorous undertone.

Today's panic provoked by an allegedly newly emerging generation of Cancel Culture warriors reflects arguments already employed during the Political Correctness debates that gained traction in the 1990s. The critique associated with Cancel Culture adds a new layer to this recycling of ideas, namely the impact of the Internet and social media platforms in particular. Throughout the past years, these platforms and hashtag activism have become more prominent and led to the conviction of powerful abusers such as Harvey Weinstein, which resulted in critical voices being raised. These critiques revolved around the online public claiming to hold similar powers as a court or the depiction of this form of activism as being lazy and too cowardly. In this context, it can be concluded that those who call out popular or famous individuals in the digital sphere, frequently deal with backlash; the celebrity under attack, however, does not usually find themself in a precarious situation and might even benefit from the increased attention.

This thesis further identified that Cancel Culture debates reflect characteristics of populist discourses in that they divide the public in two opposing groups with a contrasting set of values. In the context of Cancel Culture debates, those who call out allegedly feel superior because of their moral purity. The label "Cancel" seems to be reserved for an assumed homogenous group of young digital natives with progressive values that aim to disrupt the status quo by dominating public discourse with their activism against racism, sexism or transphobia. "Cancelling" is further associated with the umbrella term "gender" which is supposed to evoke negative emotions and serves as a projection screen for various fears and concerns such as the loss of a natural societal order or cultural hegemony. Empirical research included in this thesis has shown that this portrayal of a divided society does not reflect reality.

This thesis further compared literature discussing questions of visibility and established that visibility does not automatically represent emancipation and progress but can also come with greater vulnerability and dangers as it is the case in the context of trans rights. This paper discussed the worsening political climate for trans people which becomes evident in a significant surge in anti-trans legislation and heated debates revolving around self-identification and gender recognition certificates. In adopting a trans-rights activists' perspective, it is revealed that power is not distributed equally in terms of who is allowed to be angry and voice that rage publicly without having to fear severe consequences. Within public discourse, trans activists are repeatedly depicted as disruptive and aggressive; trans-exclusive radical feminists, however, are portrayed as calm, curious and democratic.

Finally, this thesis examined how hate speech is oftentimes protected within a Free Speech discourse that perpetuates the concept of a free marketplace of ideas that supposedly automatically identifies the most beneficial ones. In adopting this approach, existing power dynamics inherent in this seemingly equal marketplace are obscured.

This paper further contains a critical discourse analysis which explored approaches to Cancel Culture in discrimination-critical contexts. It revealed that while the feminist authors included in this thesis' analysis acknowledge the existence of aggressive or toxic behaviors exposed in online spaces, they generally do not condemn accountability practices and also point out the positive potential of online spaces in terms of pursuing social justice goals, educating oneself and being part of a like-minded community. Instead of fostering fear and repeating the talking points of the Media discourse of Cancel Culture, they attach importance to offering perspectives on a way forward and reflect on where the desire to engage in online call-outs potentially comes from. Finally, they focus on the collective efforts of feminism and explain how the feminist movement is weakened due to divisiveness. Only 1 out of 8 reviewed feminists expressed overtly critical views on online spaces and the people who use them and identified the development of a new generation of feminists that demand ideological orthodoxy. She positioned herself outside an allegedly escalating online debate culture that gives rise to emotionally cold individuals. Finally, the analysis depicted that the conceptualisation and acknowledgement of Cancelling differs depending on both the political climate in

which the reviewed texts were published and the political classification of the topics they dealt with.

In conclusion, the review of existing literature on online activism, Cancel Culture and Call-out techniques as well as hate speech reveal that the Cancel Culture discourse is one that tends to talk about people without including multiple perspectives or taking those seriously who voice critique as it is immediately dismissed and delegitimized as identity politics that is not worthy of discussion. At the same time, those who are wary and fearful of Cancel Culture take up large amounts of media coverage and are allowed to present themselves as the reasonable and calm majority that does not give in to extremism and is capable of nuanced, equal debate.

The insights of this paper will be useful in responding to and dismantling arguments that dehumanise trans people and put them at risk of being subjected to discrimination and pushed to the margins of society. Particularly in discrimination-critical contexts, feminists need to reflect on their joint efforts of wanting to establish a more equitable and just society that is based on human rights. It is crucial that feminists follow Humphrey's and Butler's urgent appeals to move one's interdependency at the centre of feminist debate. Feminists need to make a conscious effort to not reproduce existing, misleading and populist Cancel Culture narratives and be complicit in their repetition and thus diffusion. While future feminist communication needs to be characterised by mutual respect and care, there must also be room for critique, which is a prerequisite for the further development of the feminist movement. Feminism is not a closed and rigid project but one that has to embrace change in order to remain successful in the long run.

In future work, investigating the impact of increasingly anti-scientific attitudes on the Cancel Culture discourse might prove important. Daub has already implied that conservative commentators who condone Cancel Culture delegitimise certain theories and fields of research such as identity politics and gender studies. Particularly within the past three years, aggressive attitudes towards scientists researching topics such as climate change, Covid or gender, which seem to be perceived as representative of a certain ideology's set of values, has become evident. Butler's upcoming book dealing with fears linked to the topic of gender is worth exploring from the viewpoint of Cancel Culture narratives. Additionally, I am interested in the aspect that the affective dimension of critique expressed in the

context of identity politics is overemphasised by those who warn against Cancel Culture and present themselves as calm, rational, objective and reasonable individuals; characteristics that are traditionally framed as male. It might be argued that the ascribed emotionality reflects connotations of femininity which is frequently associated with subjectivity. This framing oftentimes leads to the devaluation of particular research fields or debates in general. Further research should certainly take this aspect into consideration when exploring which debates provoke the introduction of Cancel Culture accusations. Finally, the question of how to deal with hate speech towards trans people in the future remains to be answered and continues to be a crucial topic in democratic societies. This thesis addressed the potential dangers that arise when political leaders ferociously defend free speech principles at the cost of marginalised groups which find themselves at the centre of hate speech.

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List of figures

Appendix

Abstract

English version

The digital age gave rise to accountability practices online that take the form of hashtag activism or callouts that were initially employed by people of colour and used to serve as (humorous) in-group control mechanisms. Conservative political movements transformed the original meaning of these strategies and pushed the narrative of a political correctness crisis in the 1990s. These talking points are currently recycled in Cancel Culture discussions that paint the image of a homogenous political left that aims to restrict people’s right to free speech. Yet again, these attempts allegedly originate and are fostered at university campuses and spread through the digital sphere via social media platforms. Even though the Internet enables the participation of marginalized voices in public debate, it increases their visibility and thus exposure to threats and attacks. This thesis takes a closer look at ongoing debates about trans rights, how these are negotiated and whether Cancel Culture accusations are inherent in these. This paper argues that the condemnation and acknowledgement of the existence of Cancel Culture represents a populist discourse and is reflective of a moral panic that is shaped by the invoking of fears of destruction such as losing an alleged status quo that is characterised by patriarchal gender norms or the right to free speech. It further examines Cancel Culture in the realm of performativity processes and how these

evoke feelings of anger, shame or guilt. The portrayal of trans rights activists as aggressive, violent and hence hateful subjects justifies their rejection as part of the feminist movement and increases affect which contributes to the formation of groups and continuously gives rise to fears of destruction. As there is little research on how Cancel Culture is framed in discrimination critical contexts, this thesis entails a Critical Discourse Analysis of eight feminist essays or interviews dealing with online accountability practices and trans rights debates. The analysis revealed that, as opposed to the dominant Cancel Culture Media discourse already examined in existing studies, feminists tend to draw a differentiated picture of online call-outs, consider both their perks and downfalls and link them to offline challenges as well as real fears. Importance is attached to future collaboration among feminists and the need to focus on values including kindness, respect, care in terms of communication. It was further demonstrated that feminists' understanding of cancelling differs depending on the dominant political affiliations in the societal context under examination. The identification of feminist Cancel Culture framings is important to ensure that feminists are not complicit in reproducing populist talking points that weaken the feminist movement and push marginalized groups to the margins of public debate.

German version

Das digitale Zeitalter geht mit der Herausbildung von Rechenschaftsstrategien in der Form von Hashtag-Aktivismus oder sogenannten „Callouts" einher. Jene wurden ursprünglich von PoC eingesetzt und dienten zunächst als (humorvolle) gruppeninterne Kontrollmechanismen. Konservative politische Bewegungen deuteten die ursprüngliche Bedeutung dieser Strategien um und verbreiteten in den 1990er Jahren das Narrativ einer Krise der politischen Korrektheit. Diese Argumente finden derzeit in Cancel Culture-Diskussionen erneut Anwendung. Das Bild einer homogenen politischen linken Bewegung, die das Recht der freien Meinungsäußerung einschränken will, wird gezeichnet. Ebenso wird behauptet, dass diese Bestrebungen auf Universitätscampi entstünden, in jenem Kontext gefördert und sich in der digitalen Sphäre über Social-Media-Plattformen rasch und wirkungsmächtig verbreiten würden. In diesem Zusammenhang lässt sich festhalten, dass das Internet einerseits die Teilhabe marginalisierter Stimmen an der öffentlichen Debatte ermöglicht, andererseits deren Sichtbarkeit und damit die

Gefahr von Drohungen und Angriffen erhöht. Diese Arbeit setzt sich mit den laufenden Debatten rund um die Rechte von transgeschlechtlichen Personen, deren Ausverhandlung und der Frage, ob "Cancel Culture" Vorwürfe in jenen inhärent sind. In dieser Arbeit wird argumentiert, dass die Verurteilung und Anerkennung der Existenz von Cancel Culture einen populistischen Diskurs darstellt und eine moralische Panik widerspiegelt, die durch die Beschwörung von Zerstörungsängsten, wie z. B. dem Verlust eines vermeintlichen Status quo, der durch patriarchale Geschlechternormen oder das Recht auf freie Meinungsäußerung geprägt ist. Darüber hinaus wird der Begriff Cancel Culture im Hinblick auf Performativitätsprozesse und wie jene Gefühle von Wut, Scham oder Schuld hervorrufen untersucht. Die Darstellung von Trans-Rechts-Aktivistinnen als aggressive, gewalttätige und infolgedessen hasserfüllte Subjekte rechtfertigt ihre Ablehnung als Teil der feministischen Bewegung und verstärkt den Affekt, der zur Gruppenbildung beiträgt und wiederholt Ängste vor Zerstörung hervorruft. Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es Darstellungen von Cancel Culture in diskriminierungskritischen Kontexten zu untersuchen. Zu diesem Zweck wurde eine kritische Diskursanalyse von acht feministischen Essays beziehungswiese Interviews, die sich mit Online-Rechenschaftspraktiken und Trans-Rechts-Debatten befassen, durchgeführt. Die Analyse ergibt, dass Feministinnen im Gegensatz zum dominanten, medialen Cancel Culture Diskurs, der bereits in bestehenden Studien untersucht wurde, dazu neigen, ein differenziertes Bild von online Call-outs zu zeichnen, sowohl deren Vor- als auch Nachteile zu betrachten und sie mit Offline-Herausforderungen sowie realen Ängsten zu verknüpfen. Der zukünftigen Zusammenarbeit unter Feministinnen und der Notwendigkeit, sich auf Werte wie Respekt, Wohlwollen und „Care“ in der Kommunikation zu konzentrieren, wird große Bedeutung beigemessen. Darüber ließ sich feststellen, dass das Verständnis und die Definition des Begriffs Cancelling je nach der vorherrschenden politischen Stimmungslage im untersuchten gesellschaftlichen Kontext variieren. Die Identifizierung feministischer Cancel Culture Framings ist unabdingbar, um sicherzustellen, dass Feminist:innen populistischer Argumente welche die feministische Bewegung schwächen und marginalisierte Gruppen an den Rand der öffentlichen Debatte drängen enttarnen anstatt sie zu reproduzieren.

Analysed texts

Text 1

15 Jun IT IS OBSCENE: A TRUE REFLECTION IN THREE PARTS

PART ONE

When you are a public figure, people will write and say false things about you. It comes with the territory. Many of those things you brush aside. Many you ignore. The people close to you advise you that silence is best. And it often is.

Sometimes, though, silence makes a lie begin to take on the shimmer of truth.

In this age of social media, where a story travels the world in minutes, silence sometimes means that other people can hijack your story and soon, their false version becomes the defining story about you.

Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it, as Jonathan Swift wrote.

Take the case of a young woman who attended my Lagos writing workshop some years ago; she stood out because she was bright and interested in feminism.

After the workshop, I welcomed her into my life. I very rarely do this, because my past experiences with young Nigerians left me wary of people who are calculating and insincere and want to use me only as an opportunity. But she was a Bright Young Nigerian Feminist and I thought that was worth making an exception.

She spent time in my Lagos home. We had long conversations. I was support-giver, counsellor, comforter.

Then I gave an interview in March 2017 in which I said that a trans woman is a trans woman, (the larger point of which was to say that we should be able to acknowledge difference while being fully inclusive, that in fact the whole premise of inclusiveness is difference.)

I was told she went on social media and insulted me.

This woman knows me enough to know that I fully support the rights of trans people and all marginalized people. That I have always been fiercely supportive of difference, in general. And that I am a person who reads and thinks and forms my opinions in a carefully considered way.

Of course she could very well have had concerns with the interview. That is fair enough. But I had a personal relationship with her. She could have emailed or

called or texted me. Instead she went on social media to put on a public performance.

I was stunned. I couldn't believe it. But I mostly held myself responsible. My spirit had been slightly stalled, from the beginning, by her. My first sense of unease with her came when she posted a photo taken in my house, at a time when I did not want any photos of my personal life on social media. I asked that she take it down. The second case of unease was her publicizing something I had told her in confidence about another member of the workshop. The most upsetting was when she, without telling me, used my name to apply for an American visa. Above all else was my lingering suspicion that she was a person who chose as friends only those from whom she could benefit. But she was a Bright Young Nigerian Feminist and I allowed that sentiment to over-ride my unease.

After she publicly insulted me, it was clear to me that this kind of noxious person had no business in my life, ever again.

A few months later, she sent this affected, self-regarding email which I ignored.

Friday September 15 2017 at 4.35 AM

Dearest Chimamanda,

Happy birthday. I mean this with all my heart, even though I know I have fallen (removed myself?) from your grace. It would be impossible for me to stop loving you; long before you gave me the possibility of being your friend you were the embodiment of my deepest hopes, and that will never change.

I think of you often, still – stating the obvious. I grieve the loss of our friendship; it is a complicated sadness. I'm sorry that I caused you pain, or to feel like you can no longer trust me. There's so much that I wish could be said.

I pray this birthday is the happiest one yet. I wish you rest and quiet and abiding stability, and of course more of the kind of success that means the most to you.

I hope mothering X is everything you hoped and prayed for and more.

Have a wonderful day today.

Love always.

About a year later, she sent this email, which I also ignored.

Thursday November 29 2018 at 8.42 AM

Dear Chimamanda,

I realise this is long overdue and vastly insufficient, but I'm really sorry. I've spent so much time going back and forth in my head and my email drafts; wondering

whether to write you, how to write you, what to say, all kinds of things. But in the end, this is the thing I realise I need to say.

I'm sorry I disappointed and hurt you by saying things publicly that were sharply critical, unkind and even disrespectful, especially in light of all the backlash and criticism you experience from people who don't know you. I could have acted with more consideration towards you. I should have, especially given the privilege of intimacy that you had offered me. There are many reasons why I chose to behave the way I did, but none of them is an excuse. And I clearly realise now, after many, many months of needless sadness and angst and hurt and actual confusion, that I did not treat you as a friend would—certainly not as someone would to whom you had offered unprecedented access to yourself and your life.

You've meant the world to me since I was barely a teenager. It's been very hard navigating the emotional fallout of the past several months, knowing you were displeased with me but truly not quite understanding why, then deciding I didn't care, then realising that would never be true. I've always cared. But I was too mixed up about the situation to be able to make sense of it, or properly see past my own justifications. I'm sorry it took me so long to grasp how I let you down.

I realise that I don't have room to ask anything of you, but I would be grateful for a chance to say this in person. Still, even if I never get that, I really hope you believe me.

Congratulations on restarting the workshop, and on all the other amazing successes of the past several months. I think of you often; it would be impossible not to. You look so happy in your pictures. I really hope you are well.

All my love,

I hoped never to hear from her again. But she has recently gone on social media to write about how she "refused to kiss my ring," as if I demanded some kind of obeisance from her. She also suggests that there is some dark, shadowy 'more' to tell that she won't tell, with an undertone of "if only you knew the whole story."

It is a manipulative way of lying. By suggesting there is 'more' when you know very well that there isn't, you do sufficient reputational damage while also being able to plead deniability. Innuendo without fact is immoral.

No, there isn't more to the story. It is a simple story – you got close to a famous person, you publicly insulted the famous person to aggrandize yourself, the famous person cut you off, you sent emails and texts that were ignored, and you

then decided to go on social media to peddle falsehoods. It is obscene to tell the world that you refused to kiss a ring when in fact there isn't any ring at all.
I cannot make much of the hostility of strangers who do not know me – fame taints our view of the humanity of famous people. But the truth is that the famous person remains irretrievably human. Fame does not inoculate the famous person from disappointment and depression, fame does not make you any less angered or hurt by the duplicitous nature of people. To be famous is to be assumed to have power, which is true, but in the analysis of fame, people often ignore the vulnerability that comes with fame, and they are unable to see how others who have nothing to lose can lie and connive in order to take advantage of that fame, while not giving a single thought to the feelings and humanity of the famous person.
And when you personally know a famous person, when you have experienced their humanity, when you have benefited from their kindness, and yet you are unable to extend to them the basic grace and respect that even a casual acquaintanceship deserves, then it says something fundamental about you.
And in a deluded way, you will convince yourself that your hypocritical, self-regarding, compassion-free behavior is in fact principled feminism. It isn't. You will wrap your mediocre malice in the false gauziness of ideological purity. But it's still malice. You will tell yourself that being able to parrot the latest American Feminist orthodoxy justifies your hacking at the spirit of a person who had shown you only kindness. You can call your opportunism by any name, but it doesn't make it any less of the ugly opportunism that it is.

PART TWO

When I first read this person's work, which was their application to my writing workshop, I thought the sentences were well-done. I accepted this person. At the workshop, I thought they could have been more respectful of the other participants, perhaps not kept typing dismissively as others' stories were discussed, with an air of being among people below their level. After the workshop, I decided to select the best stories, edit them, pay the writers a fee, and publish them in an e-magazine. The first story I chose was this person's. I wrote a glowing introduction, which the story truly deserved.
They sent this email.

Fri, Aug 7, 2015, 8:20 AM

Thank you so much for that introduction. It means so much to me and I'm going to keep reading it to get through the rest of my stay at Syracuse. I sent it to my mother and she got nervous about the piece because you said 'it disturbs', said she's not sure how she's going to feel when she reads it. But she's also one of those 'let's leave the past in the past' people. My sister approved, which meant a lot because our childhoods were each other's.

All that to say, I'm so grateful you gave me the space to write the short version of this piece, the encouragement to write the longer piece, and now, a platform for it. I definitely have plans to write more about Aba.

Thank you, with all my heart.

PS- I wanted to sign off gratefully + gracefully in Igbo but I said let me not fall my own hand

About a year later, they sent another email to let me know that their novel would be published.

Wed, Jun 8, 2016, 8:20 AM

Greetings!

I hope all's been well with you this past year. Belated congratulations on the baby's arrival, I hope she's being a delight (I'm sure she is), and on the Johns Hopkins honors.

I was thinking about how this time last year, I'd just received the email from you about Farafina and I wanted to reach out with a quick update. I've just accepted an offer for the novel I excerpted as my application and it feels like the workshop was a catalyst for the events that've led me here. So, thank you, for the workshop and your words and the Olisa TV series and listening to me babble on about my story at the hotel. I deeply appreciate all of it and you.

All my best,

Before the novel was published, I spoke of it to some people, to help it get attention. I had not been able to finish reading it. I found the writing beautiful, but the story false-hearted and burdened by bathos. When I spoke of the novel, however, it was the former sentiment that I expressed, never the latter.

After I gave the March 2017 interview in which I said that a trans woman is a trans woman, I was told that this person had insulted me on social media, calling me,

among other things, a murderer. I was deeply upset, because while I did not really know them personally, I felt they knew what I stood for and that I fully supported the rights of trans people, and that I do not wish anybody dead.

Still, I took no action. I ignored the public insult.

When this person's publishers sent me an early copy of their novel, I was surprised to see that my name was included in their cover biography. I had never seen that done in a book before. I didn't like that I had not been asked for permission to use my name, but most of all I thought – why would a person who thinks I'm a murderer want my name so prominently displayed in their biography?

Then I learned that, because my name was in the cover biography, a journalist had called them my "protegee" and they then threw a Twitter tantrum about it, calling it clickbait, viciously disavowing having received any help from me.

I knew this person had called me a murderer, I knew they were actively campaigning to "cancel" me and tweeting about how I should no longer be invited to speak at events. But this I felt I could not ignore.

I sent an email to my representative:

From: Chimamanda Adichie

Date: Wed, Feb 14, 2018 at 2:06 PM

I'm writing about X

She attended my Lagos workshop two years ago and I selected hers as one of a few pieces I published after the workshop.

Apparently I was referred to as her 'mentor' and/or she was referred to as my 'protege,' in some articles, which led to her tweeting about it. Her tweets were forwarded to me by friends. In them, she reacted quite viscerally to my being called her 'mentor' and her being my 'protege.' To be fair, she is not technically my 'protege,' and it is perfectly fine that she feels this way, but her ungracious tone and the ugliness of the energy spent on her tweets surprised me.

I recently received her book and noticed that my name was included in her official book bio. I was stunned. Surely if she is so strongly averse to my being considered a person who has been significant in her career, (which is my understanding of the loose use of protege/mentor) then it is unseemly to make the choice to include my name in her bio. I found it unusual, as I don't think I've seen it done before in a book bio, but I also now find it unacceptably cynical.

It is only reasonable for a person who sees my name as it is used in her bio — 'her work has been selected and edited by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie' — to assume some sort of mentor/protege relationship.

To publicly disavow this with a tone bordering on hostility and at the same time so baldly use my name to sell her book is utterly unacceptable to me.

I'd like you to please reach out to her publishers and ask that my name be removed from her official book bio. I refuse to be used in this way.

Chimamanda

After contacting her publishers, my representative wrote:

They have asked whether your preference would be to remove the Acknowledgment to you in the back of the book also, in future reprints.

I replied:

I don't think that is my decision to take, and so will not answer either way, although it would be ideal if she herself made the decision to do so.

On the subject of how to go about it, I was absolutely determined not to be used by this person, but I was also sensitive to the costs the publisher might incur, as this was not in any way the publisher's fault. Instead of pulping the already printed copies, I asked that the jackets be stripped and rebound. To my representative I wrote:

I'm completely determined that I not be used in this opportunistic and hypocritical way. But I want to make sure to proceed reasonably.

I was assured that my name would be removed and I moved on.

But from time to time, I would be informed of yet another social media post in which this person had attacked me.

This person has created a space in which social media followers have – and this I find unforgiveable – trivialized my parents' death, claiming that the sudden and devastating loss of my parents within months of each other during this pandemic, was 'punishment' for my 'transphobia.'

This person has asked followers to pick up machetes and attack me.

This person began a narrative that I had sabotaged their career, a narrative that has been picked up and repeated by others.

The normal response would be to ignore it all, because this person is seeking attention and publicity to benefit themselves. Claiming that I have sabotaged their career is a lie and this person knows that it is a lie. But if something is repeated

often enough, in this age in which people do not need proof or verification to run with a story, especially a story that has outrage potential, then it can easily begin to seem true.

My addressing this lie will indeed get this person some attention – may they bask in it.

Here is the truth: I was very supportive of this writer. I didn't have to be. I wasn't asked to be. I supported this writer because I believe we need a diverse range of African stories.

Sabotaging a young writer's career is just not my style; I would get no benefit or satisfaction from it. Asking that my name be removed from your biography is not sabotaging your career. It is about protecting my boundaries of what I consider acceptable in civil human behavior.

You publicly call me a murderer AND still feel entitled to benefit from my name? You use my name (without my permission) to sell your book AND then throw an ugly tantrum when someone makes a reference to it?

What kind of monstrous entitlement, what kind of perverse self-absorption, what utter lack of self-awareness, what unheeding heartlessness, what frightening immaturity makes a person act this way?

Besides, a person who genuinely believes me to be a murderer cannot possibly want my name on their book cover, unless of course that person is a rank opportunist.

PART THREE

In certain young people today like these two from my writing workshop, I notice what I find increasingly troubling: a cold-blooded grasping, a hunger to take and take and take, but never give; a massive sense of entitlement; an inability to show gratitude; an ease with dishonesty and pretension and selfishness that is couched in the language of self-care; an expectation always to be helped and rewarded no matter whether deserving or not; language that is slick and sleek but with little emotional intelligence; an astonishing level of self-absorption; an unrealistic expectation of puritanism from others; an over-inflated sense of ability, or of talent where there is any at all; an inability to apologize, truly and fully, without justifications; a passionate performance of virtue that is well executed in the public space of Twitter but not in the intimate space of friendship.

I find it obscene.

There are many social-media-savvy people who are choking on sanctimony and lacking in compassion, who can fluidly pontificate on Twitter about kindness but are unable to actually show kindness. People whose social media lives are case studies in emotional aridity. People for whom friendship, and its expectations of loyalty and compassion and support, no longer matter. People who claim to love literature – the messy stories of our humanity – but are also monomaniacally obsessed with whatever is the prevailing ideological orthodoxy. People who demand that you denounce your friends for flimsy reasons in order to remain a member of the chosen puritan class.

People who ask you to 'educate' yourself while not having actually read any books themselves, while not being able to intelligently defend their own ideological positions, because by 'educate,' they actually mean 'parrot what I say, flatten all nuance, wish away complexity.'

People who do not recognize that what they call a sophisticated take is really a simplistic mix of abstraction and orthodoxy – sophistication in this case being a showing-off of how au fait they are on the current version of ideological orthodoxy.

People who wield the words 'violence' and 'weaponize' like tarnished pitchforks.

People who depend on obfuscation, who have no compassion for anybody genuinely curious or confused. Ask them a question and you are told that the answer is to repeat a mantra. Ask again for clarity and be accused of violence. (How ironic, speaking of violence, that it is one of these two who encouraged Twitter followers to pick up machetes and attack me.)

And so we have a generation of young people on social media so terrified of having the wrong opinions that they have robbed themselves of the opportunity to think and to learn and to grow.

I have spoken to young people who tell me they are terrified to tweet anything, that they read and re-read their tweets because they fear they will be attacked by their own. The assumption of good faith is dead. What matters is not goodness but the appearance of goodness. We are no longer human beings. We are now angels jostling to out-angel one another. God help us. It is obscene.

Text 2

OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

Why People Are So Awful Online

July 17, 2021

By Roxane Gay

Ms. Gay is a contributing Opinion writer. She was the editor, most recently, of “The Selected Works of Audre Lorde.” She is the author of the memoir “Hunger.”

When I joined Twitter 14 years ago, I was living in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, attending graduate school. I lived in a town of around 4,000 people, with few Black people or other people of color, not many queer people and not many writers. Online is where I found a community beyond my graduate school peers. I followed and met other emerging writers, many of whom remain my truest friends. I got to share opinions, join in on memes, celebrate people’s personal joys, process the news with others and partake in the collective effervescence of watching awards shows with thousands of strangers.

Something fundamental has changed since then. I don’t enjoy most social media anymore. I’ve felt this way for a while, but I’m loath to admit it.

Increasingly, I’ve felt that online engagement is fueled by the hopelessness many people feel when we consider the state of the world and the challenges we deal with in our day-to-day lives. Online spaces offer the hopeful fiction of a tangible cause and effect — an injustice answered by an immediate consequence. On Twitter, we can wield a small measure of power, avenge wrongs, punish villains, exalt the pure of heart.

In our quest for this simulacrum of justice, however, we have lost all sense of proportion and scale. We hold in equal contempt a war criminal and a fiction writer who too transparently borrows details from someone else’s life. It’s hard to calibrate how we engage or argue.

In real life, we are fearful Davids staring down seemingly omnipotent Goliaths: a Supreme Court poised to undermine abortion and civil rights; a patch of sea on fire from a gas leak; an incoherent but surprisingly effective attack on teaching children America’s real history; the dismantling of the Voting Rights Act; a man whom dozens of women have accused of sexual assault walking free on a

technicality. At least online, we can tell ourselves that the power imbalances between us flatten. Suddenly, we are all Goliaths in the Valley of Elah.

It makes me uncomfortable to admit that I have some influence and power online, because it feels so foreign or, maybe, unlikely. My online following came slowly, and then all at once. For years, I had a couple hundred followers. Those numbers slowly inched up to a couple thousand. Then I wrote a couple of books, and blinked, and suddenly hundreds of thousands of people were seeing my tweets. Most of them appreciate my work, though they may disagree with my opinions. Some just hate me, as is their right, and they follow me to scavenge for evidence to support or intensify their enmity. Then there are those who harass me for all kinds of reasons — some aspect of my identity or my work or my presence in the world troubles their emotional waters.

After a while, the lines blur, and it's not at all clear what friend or foe look like, or how we as humans should interact in this place. After being on the receiving end of enough aggression, everything starts to feel like an attack. Your skin thins until you have no defenses left. It becomes harder and harder to distinguish good-faith criticism from pettiness or cruelty. It becomes harder to disinvest from pointless arguments that have nothing at all to do with you. An experience that was once charming and fun becomes stressful and largely unpleasant. I don't think I'm alone in feeling this way. We have all become hammers in search of nails.

One person makes a statement. Others take issue with some aspect of that statement. Or they make note of every circumstance the original statement did not account for. Or they misrepresent the original statement and extrapolate it to a broader issue in which they are deeply invested. Or they take a singular instance of something and conflate it with a massive cultural trend. Or they bring up something ridiculous that someone said more than a decade ago as confirmation of … who knows?

Or someone popular gets too close to the sun and suddenly can do nothing right. "Likes" are analyzed obsessively, as if clicking a button on social media is representative of an entire ideology. If a mistake is made, it becomes immediate proof of being beyond redemption. Or, if the person is held mildly accountable for a mistake, a chorus rends her or his garments in distress, decrying the inhumanity of "cancel culture."

Every harm is treated as trauma. Vulnerability and difference are weaponized. People assume the worst intentions. Bad-faith arguments abound, presented with righteous bluster.

And these are the more reasonable online arguments. There is another category entirely of racists, homophobes, transphobes, xenophobes and other bigots who target the subjects of their ire relentlessly and are largely unchecked by the

platforms enabling them. And then, of course, there are the straight-up trolls, gleefully wreaking havoc.

As someone who has been online for a long time, I have seen all kinds of ridiculous arguments and conversations. I have participated in all kinds of ridiculous arguments and conversations. Lately, I've been thinking that what drives so much of the anger and antagonism online is our helplessness offline. Online we want to be good, to do good, but despite these lofty moral aspirations, there is little generosity or patience, let alone human kindness. There is a desperate yearning for emotional safety. There is a desperate hope that if we all become perfect enough and demand the same perfection from others, there will be no more harm or suffering.

It is infuriating. It is also entirely understandable. Some days, as I am reading the news, I feel as if I am drowning. I think most of us do. At least online, we can use our voices and know they can be heard by someone.

It's no wonder that we seek control and justice online. It's no wonder that the tenor of online engagement has devolved so precipitously. It's no wonder that some of us have grown weary of it.

I don't regret the time I've spent on social media. I've met interesting people. I've had real-life adventures instigated by virtual relationships. I've been emboldened to challenge myself and grow as a person and, yes, clap back if you clap first.

But I have more of a life than I once did. I have a wife, a busy career, aging parents and a large family. I have more physical mobility and, in turn, more interest in being active and out in the world. I now spend most of my time with people who are not Very Online. When I talk to them about some weird or frustrating internet conflagration, they tend to look at me as if I am speaking a foreign language from a distant land. And, I suppose, I am.

Text 3

I'm a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic.

There are better ways of doing social justice work.

Aug. 17, 2019

By Loretta Ross

Ms. Ross, an expert on women's issues, racism and human rights, is a founder of the reproductive justice theory.

Today's call-out culture is so seductive, I often have to resist the overwhelming temptation to clap back at people on social media who get on my nerves. Call-outs happen when people publicly shame each other online, at the office, in classrooms or anywhere humans have beef with one another. But I believe there are better ways of doing social justice work.

Recently, someone lied about me on social media and I decided not to reply. "Never wrestle with a pig," as George Bernard Shaw said. "You both get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it." And one of the best ways to make a point is to ignore someone begging for attention. Thanks, Michelle Obama, for this timely lesson; most people who read her book "Becoming" probably missed that she subtly threw shade this way.

Call-outs are often louder and more vicious on the internet, amplified by the "clicktivist" culture that provides anonymity for awful behavior. Even incidents that occur in real life, like Barbeque Becky or Permit Patty, can end up as an admonitory meme on social media. Social media offers new ways to be the same old humans by virally exposing what has always been in our hearts, good or bad.

My experiences with call-outs began in the 1970s as a young black feminist activist. I sharply criticized white women for not understanding women of color. I called them out while trying to explain intersectionality and white supremacy. I rarely questioned whether the way I addressed their white privilege was actually counterproductive. They barely understood what it meant to be white women in the system of white supremacy. Was it realistic to expect them to comprehend the experiences of black women?

Fifty years ago, black activists didn't have the internet, but rather gossip, stubbornness and youthful hubris. We believed we could change the world and that the most powerful people were afraid of us. Efforts like the F.B.I.'s COINTELPRO projects created a lot of discord. Often, the most effective activists

were killed or imprisoned, but it nearly always started with discrediting them through a call-out attack.

I, too, have been called out, usually for a prejudice I had against someone, or for using insensitive language that didn't keep up with rapidly changing conventions. That's part of everyone's learning curve but I still felt hurt, embarrassed and defensive. Fortunately, patient elders helped me grow through my discomfort and appreciate that context, intentions and nuances matter. Colleagues helped me understand that I experienced things through my trauma. There was a difference between what I felt was true and what were facts. This ain't easy and it ain't over — even as an elder now myself.

But I wonder if contemporary social movements have absorbed the most useful lessons from the past about how to hold each other accountable while doing extremely difficult and risky social justice work. Can we avoid individualizing oppression and not use the movement as our personal therapy space? Thus, even as an incest and hate crime survivor, I have to recognize that not every flirtatious man is a potential rapist, nor every racially challenged white person is a Trump supporter.

We're a polarized country, divided by white supremacy, patriarchy, racism against immigrants and increasingly vitriolic ways to disrespect one another. Are we evolving or devolving in our ability to handle conflicts? Frankly, I expect people of all political persuasions to call me out — productively and unproductively — for my critique of this culture. It's not a partisan issue.

The heart of the matter is, there is a much more effective way to build social justice movements. They happen in person, in real life. Of course so many brilliant and effective social justice activists know this already. "People don't understand that organizing isn't going online and cussing people out or going to a protest and calling something out," Patrisse Khan-Cullors, a founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, wrote in "How We Fight White Supremacy,"

For example, when I worked to deprogram incarcerated rapists in the 1970s, I told the story of my own sexual assaults. It opened the floodgates for theirs. They were candid about having raped women, admitted having done it to men or revealed being raped themselves. As part of our work together, they formed Prisoners Against Rape, the country's first anti-sexual assault program led by men.

I believe #MeToo survivors can more effectively address sexual abuse without resorting to the punishment and exile that mirror the prison industrial complex. Nor should we use social media to rush to judgment in a courtroom composed of clicks. If we do, we run into the paradox Audre Lorde warned us about when she said that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

We can build restorative justice processes to hold the stories of the accusers and the accused, and work together to ascertain harm and achieve justice without seeing anyone as disposable people and violating their human rights or right to due process. And if feminists were able to listen to convicted rapists in the 1970s, we can seek innovative and restorative methods for accused people today. That also applies to people fighting white supremacy.

On a mountaintop in rural Tennessee in 1992, a group of women whose partners were in the Ku Klux Klan asked me to provide anti-racist training to help keep their children out of the group. All day they called me a “well-spoken colored girl” and inappropriately asked that I sing Negro spirituals. I naïvely thought at the time that all white people were way beyond those types of insulting anachronisms.

Instead of reacting, I responded. I couldn’t let my hurt feelings sabotage my agenda. I listened to how they joined the white supremacist movement. I told them how I felt when I was 8 and my best friend called me “nigger,” the first time I had heard that word. The women and I made progress. I did not receive reports about further outbreaks of racist violence from that area for my remaining years monitoring hate groups.

These types of experiences cause me to wonder whether today’s call-out culture unifies or splinters social justice work, because it’s not advancing us, either with allies or opponents. Similarly problematic is the “cancel culture,” where people attempt to expunge anyone with whom they do not perfectly agree, rather than remain focused on those who profit from discrimination and injustice.

Call-outs are justified to challenge provocateurs who deliberately hurt others, or for powerful people beyond our reach. Effectively criticizing such people is an important tactic for achieving justice. But most public shaming is horizontal and done by those who believe they have greater integrity or more sophisticated analyses. They become the self-appointed guardians of political purity.

Call-outs make people fearful of being targeted. People avoid meaningful conversations when hypervigilant perfectionists point out apparent mistakes, feeding the cannibalistic maw of the cancel culture. Shaming people for when they “woke up” presupposes rigid political standards for acceptable discourse and enlists others to pile on. Sometimes it’s just ruthless hazing.

We can change this culture. Calling-in is simply a call-out done with love. Some corrections can be made privately. Others will necessarily be public, but done with respect. It is not tone policing, protecting white fragility or covering up abuse. It helps avoid the weaponization of suffering that prevents constructive healing.

Calling-in engages in debates with words and actions of healing and restoration, and without the self-indulgence of drama. And we can make productive choices

about the terms of the debate: Conflicts about coalition-building, supporting candidates or policies are a routine and desirable feature of a pluralistic democracy.

You may never meet a member of the Klan or actively teach incarcerated people, but everyone can sit down with people they don't agree with to work toward solutions to common problems.

In 2017, as a college professor in Massachusetts, I accidentally misgendered a student of mine during a lecture. I froze in shame, expecting to be blasted. Instead, my student said, "That's all right; I misgender myself sometimes." We need more of this kind of grace.

Text 4

Cancelling, Crybullies and Consequences

Being asked to care about other people isn't actually an attack on your human rights.

LAURIE PENNY
18.03.2022

This is a story about social violence, and about shame, and why the world is choking on both. Before we get into it, I'm going to ask you to do something uncomfortable. I'll do it, too.

Ready? Right, then -

I want you to think about a time when you hurt someone. A time when, looking back, you know you behaved badly. Don't tell me what happened. There's no need for explanations or excuses. Right now I just want you to remember how you felt, and how you handled it. Were you guilty? Embarrassed? Maybe a bit angry, too? It's alright. This isn't a test. Nobody likes to hear that they've hurt someone else.

Now, take that feeling, and stash it in a safe place. I promise it can't hurt you. We'll get back to it soon. Meanwhile, I said I'd do this one with you, so here goes:

It was a month ago. I pottering about in the kitchen, chatting to my partner on my headphones, and delivering some extremely useful, entirelh unsolicited advice about some aspect of his life that needed improving. That's when I heard him go quiet. And I realised that what I'd thought were helpful suggestions was actually a barrage of unsolicited critique. I was right, of course, definitely, but right now I can't remember what I was right about or why it mattered.

I do remember the excruciating moment of realising that, in the process of being right, I was also being a gender-non-specific dickhead. To my very favourite person. Who was very far away.

All of that happened in one awful second. What was worse was the minute or so afterwards, when I knew I was being petty and unkind but was too embarrassed to admit it, and the guilt had to go somewhere, so it went into reflexive, private rage. How dare he see me being my worst self? How dare he make me feel guilty? He hadn't said a word, but my stomach sloshed with cold self-loathing, and that had to be his fault, didn't it, because I couldn't handle it being mine.

Moments like this feel like hanging on to the basket of a hot air balloon. Watching the moral high ground disappear below you. Knowing that every second you hold on, you'll have further to fall.

Thankfully, I have read a lot of books about nurturance culture and the revolutionary notion of not being a wanker if you can help it. Because of that, I was quickly able to own what I'd been doing and say sorry, and land with minimal wobbling on the solid ground of being a flawed human trying to love another flawed human.

Whenever I hear people talk about crybullies, about playing the victim, about snowflakes and the woke police, I think of moments like that. Moments when you know you have done something wrong, but it still feels like you're the one under attack.

I think about this whenever I see men confronted with their own sexism, or white people confronted with their own casual racism. When I see cis people, confronted with their own transphobia, rapid-snapping into wild justifications of why what they said wasn't cruel or mean at alll, I come back to that feeling of being suspended between two selves. Dangling from the basket of your own defensive rage, watching dignity disappear below you, wondering if it's still safe to let go.

So many people, right now, seem to be stuck in that same excruciating interval - swinging over the gap between learning that we might, through action or ignorance, be complicit in someone else's suffering, and understanding that we can survive that shame and come back to integrity. It's never nice to be confronted with evidence of your own cruelty, but we need to learn how, and quickly, because right now there's a general crisis in how human beings cope with each other's pain.

And the thing about other people's pain is that there is so much of it, and it's so loud.

Here's how it is. Over the past decade, relentless socioeconomic injustice and environmental disasters have coincided with a permanent change in how human

beings communicate and connect with each other,. The internet makes the suffering of strangers immediately visible. In her iconic essay ‘Regarding The Pain of Others’, Susan Sontag snaps a candid portrait of how cruelty was experienced as collective spectacle at the turn of this century - when mass communication was still largely a few-to-many medium. Images of depravity, of torture and horror, could reach us, but they did not address us as individuals, or speak to us directly, or demand a personal response.

That has changed. Now, professional journalists are no longer required to moderate how much of other people’s pain the public can or ought to tolerate. The people who are hurt can tell you themselves. And they often do. And they’re not always nice about it.

Intimate details of other people’s lives are now immediately, unstoppably, endlessly available in a way that, even a decade ago, most of us couldn’t imagine. We can really, truly, see and hear what other people’s lives are like, and why, and it turns out that some of us really don’t want to know. Some of us would rather not have to listen to other people’s pain, or look at other people’s suffering, especially if we feel we might be implicated.

It is now impossible to literally avoid knowing, for example, about the intimate pain and waste and suffering caused by systemic racism- and that can feel very confronting for white people. Who were previously, until very recently, allowed to plead ignorance. Too many grown adults can’t tell the difference between feeling bad because someone hurt them and feeling bad because they hurt someone else. They can’t handle it. They will do anything to evade that shame: deny, dismiss, destroy.

The root of the word ‘innocent’ is ‘ignorance’- the sort of ignorance that protects you from shame and excuses you from the hard work of repairing harm. And as any student of the Christian Bible can tell you, the opposite of innocence is not guilt, but knowledge. Without knowledge of right and wrong, you cannot feel shame. People with historical privilege are not wrong to feel that the internet has driven us from that Garden of innocence into a frightening new reality where we are expected to care about things our ancestors never had to bother with.

And when you’re accustomed to impunity, accountability can feel a lot like an attack.

For an idiotically long time, I believed that if people only knew how much pain they were causing, they’d change course. I couldn’t understand, even when I was small, why bullies didn’t stop when you were crying or clearly injured -why, instead, it just made them worse. It made them double down. The prospect of being seen doing something cruel sent them into a wild, weird defensive frenzy.

But seeing adults behave the same way, as an adult myself, I've got a better idea of why that happens.

It's about shame.

It's all about shame. It's the panicked, defensive reflex of children raised in cultures that talk loudly about sin and rarely about redemption and weaponise both to produce compliance.

People raised in cultures of shame don't understand that you can do bad things without being a bad person. So if someone makes you feel like a bad person, you've got to go in hard, double down, destroy them.

Shame makes it impossible to challenge systemic harm by making it dangerous to confront people with harm they've done. If we lack a framework for holding people accountable without rejecting their humanity, if any call out can result in the violence of social ostracism, then being identified as a sinner is a legitimately terrifying prospect.

That's why 'cancel culture' is scary.

Believe me, I know. I've been 'cancelled'. I have friends who have been 'cancelled'. The way it's spoken about in the mainstream is wrongheaded and reductive, but there is, as my academic friends like to say, a there there. 'Cancelling' isn't the most urgent social problem of the age, but try telling that to someone in a shame spiral.

Shame tells us that if we hurt another person, we haven't just done a bad thing, we are a bad thing. Shame says that 'good' is a thing you are, not a thing you do, and a single mistake places us beyond redemption. Shame makes it impossible to name harm, let alone repair or prevent it.

This is a massive political problem, for many reasons. Firstly, because most of us were raised in shame cultures where there was never a possibility of being held and supported while we learned how to be responsible for our actions. That means that it is impossible to see other people through the prism of our own frantic self-loathing. I've met so many men who are fully aware that they have treated women badly, but who feel they 'cannot' stop- because they are in a defensive crouch, terrified to begin the work of change by looking at their own behavior. They know they have no framework for healthy remorse. They fear they would not psychologically survive the shame of it.

In exactly the same way, fully grown, educated white people can be reduced to panicked infants by the suggestion that whiteness is a structure of oppression, because what they hear is 'my whiteness makes me a bad person. I should feel shame.'

It's excruciating, that shame. To escape or evade it, we've all seen people deny, dismiss or go on the attack- contort themselves into exhausting logical positions to avoid a basic relational responsibility they're just not ready to handle. It's embarrassing, and it's embarrassing to watch.

And with every petty second you spend clinging to your pride, the ground gets further away, thin air opening up between hard reality and what your ego thinks it needs to survive. And the harder you hold on to the conviction that you've never done anything wrong, the harder it gets to let go.

The idea that people who tell you your foot is on their neck do so for the sole purpose of making you feel bad is the core of the reactionary mode that calls itself 'anti-woke'. It's the load-bearing tentpole of the fuck-your-feelings, don't-play-the-victim, free-speech-means-shut-up-about-race, masks-are-for-pussies-and-pronouns-are-rohypnol self-delusion circus.

Again and again, I have run into otherwise sensible people who truly believe that calling someone else racist, or sexist, or transphobic, is at least as harmful as calling someone else, say, the n-word. People who believe that naming oppression is itself an act of violence. They believe this because that's how it feels to them. They believe this because nobody has ever sat them down and explained that feelings are not facts.

You cannot logic your way around an emotion. Feelings are real, and they are far from objective. I, for example, am much more worried about the potential consequences of accidentally saying something racist than I am about experiencing racial prejudice. Of course I am. I'm white. Which means I'm far more likely to have my ego wounded by an angry reaction to a thoughtless tweet than I am to be physically wounded by the police. That doesn't mean that the former is objectively a lesser social danger, even though it feels that way to me. Because, and please bear with me, because this bears repeating- feelings are not facts.

A child could understand this. Too many adults can't.

Too often, grown adults respond to new knowledge of systemic harm with frantic strategies of shame evasion. The injustice isn't real, and anyway it isn't our fault. These strangers banging on about structural violence are just playing the victim. They're not sincere. They never mentioned it before, and if they did we didn't hear it, and if we did we didn't listen, and if we did we ignored it because change is hard, so where has all this anger come from?

If, for example, you find yourself slightly uncomfortable with the sudden visibility of trans people, or a new expectation to respect a person's chosen pronouns, part of that discomfort might be reasonable fear of censure if you 'get it wrong'- or resentment that you should have to try.

That’s okay. Discomfort is okay. We’re grown ups. We won’t die if we have to feel uncomfortable. What’s not okay is recasting discomfort as some diffuse, malignant external force: it’s not that you have a prejudice, it’s not that you find it difficult to deal with your emotions like a goddamn adult, it’s that other people are refusing your right to speak freely, or to ask questions. That feels better, doesn’t it? It’s a relief to know that you don’t need to change, that they are the censorious avatars of oppression, which makes you a brave truth teller standing up for truth and justice and the American Way. You’re one of the good guys. Thank goodness.

This soothing self-justification coils in on itself. It makes an ouroboros of moral cowardice. Fear of social change is reframed as freedom of expression, and people who challenge harmful behavior or even just factcheck lies are the wicked, neo-Stalinist woke Stasi. Hooray for you, boldly rebelling against the concept of relational responsibility. You’re more or less a folk hero. You should get a medal.

Behind all this rules-lawyering of the social contract is a childish refusal to live in the adult world. A petty rejection of the responsibility of living in an interdependent society, and the desire, instead, to live forever in that soft, innocent space where you are protected not just from harm but from consequences, too.

Nobody’s pretending that consequences are fun. I hate consequences. I also hate doing my taxes, and drinking water, because it tastes like drowning. But I have learned that if I don’t do those things, worse things happen.

Nor am I suggesting that social ostracism is harmless. It can be hugely painful. It‘s a form of violence, and it can devastate. It can kill.

That’s exactly why people in positions of power have used it for years to threaten and silence those who might otherwise demand to be treated differently.

To take just one example: in Hollywood, for many decades, actors and producers who dared to complain about abusive men in positions of power were routinely iced out of the industry as an example to others. But when those same men finally had to face consequences for their behavior, including the public shaming of the #Metoo movement, their pain was suddenly deafening. Their alleged victims, after years of being shamed into swallowing their suffering, found themselves accused of sadism. Ostracism and shaming might be social violence, but that violence is usually invisible, because it is usually practiced by those who have the monopoly on the legitimate use of all the other kinds of violence, too.

I’ve learned a lot about this from the writing of teachers like adrienne maree brown and Nora Samaran, who built the notion of nurturance culture out of long years of experience in anti-racist, anarchist organising in movement. They learned the mechanisms of shame by helping others work through the process of owning the harm they have done, working to repair it and coming back to community.

Samaran, Brown and others point out that social justice movements have used shame- including public shaming- with gratuitous savagery, even in the service of worthy ends. Those who live in fear of one day being ‘cancelled for a tweet’ aren’t wrong to be afraid of that, although they may need to adjust their priorities. Ostracising, humiliating, mercilessly rendering a wrongdoer socially untouchable- these are all social weapons that really are used by pretty much everyone right now. And technology has made it far easier for less powerful people to deploy them against individuals who have caused harm.

Those modalities are not confined to progressives, or to the ‘woke’. In fact, conservatives are experts at what they call cancelling, mob shaming and virtue signalling.

The outrage about ‘cancel culture’ is not about the weapon, it’s about who’s using it. Convention has it that working class people are not allowed to shame the wealthy by describing their depravity; that women make themselves monstrous merely by daring name male violence. Meanwhile, employers, managers, grant committees, commissioners, religious leaders, teachers, politicians and police officers routinely humiliate and ostracise and overlook and violate women and LGBTQ people and disabled people and people of color without the slightest suggestion that doing so is an unconscionable act of cancelling. Rich men can and do shame whoever they like, and if they happen to own a newspaper it can be pretty profitable - but somehow that’s never a cause for outrage. It’s just Tuesday.

The powerful have many other weapons they have other tools at their disposal to protect themselves and create change. They can use policymaking, and the prison system, and the police.But for progressives, many of whom have spent their entire adult lives watching the old and rich and mean dominate electoral politics, shaming and social ostracism have become some of the only effective ways to create meaningful change. And that’s a problem, because when shame is your only tool, everything looks like sin.

I can’t count the number of times I’ve watched people on the left justify treating one another with casual cruelty on the basis that we can’t afford to be kind, or someone will take advantage of us.

I understand where that comes from, and I’d have more time for the argument if more of that violence was directed at the identified enemy, or employed strategically, rather than, as it seems, as a collective act of cathartic self-harm. We lash out at each other when the future is frightening because lashing out makes us feel good when not much else does, and we find ways to justify that later.

It doesn’t help that a lot of people on the left come from marginalised communities, which often means that they have spent their entire lives being told that kindness meant putting up with injustice. That decency demanded that they protect their

abusers from awareness of their own wrongdoing. It's also true that demands for 'kindness' are highly gendered. When women and girls are told to 'be kind', they are too often taught by example that kindness means putting up with disrespect. Too many of us, especially women and men of colour, have spent our lives coddling and placating people we were afraid of, people who made it unsafe to show that fear. We have had to prioritise the comfort of others. We have had to be nice and accommodating, or else.

And we are sick of it. We don't want to have to pay attention to other people's feelings anymore, especially not total strangers who are rude to us on the internet. We are so, so sick of being nice.

But there's a difference between being nice and being kind. Kindness doesn't mean you have to like people, or even forgive them. Kindness does not require anyone to tolerate cruelty. It doesn't mean politeness, or ignoring your own boundaries, or putting other people's needs before your own.

Kindness is difficult, and challenging. It means acknowledging interdependence. It means coming up with a model for resolving conflict that isn't about dominance, or conquest, or violence. It means learning to be wrong, and learning to repair, and making space for other people to do the same.

Think back to that time when you hurt someone. When you wandered away from integrity. How did you find your way back?Was there a bridge to cross back to a place of self-respect, and actual responsibility, and not having to feel angry and shitty about yourself the entire time?

If there was, if someone offered you that grace, if someone showed you that dignified bridge and made it clear why you ought to cross and what would happen otherwise, you'll know how much it matters. You will probably also know that that process is a massive pain in the neck, which is why a lot of people can't be bothered. Being a grown-up is exhausting and embarrassing, and staying innocent is safe and easy, and that's how people end up committing atrocities to protect their own innocence.

Someday, historians will study the public politics of our time. When they do, the mass refusal of basic safety measures in the middle of a pandemic will go down as one of many strange and tragic secretions of toxic individualism. By then, we will have a better idea of just how many people had to watch their parents, their partner, or their child die a frightening, painful death because strangers decided freedom meant never having to care about other people. We will know many hundreds of thousands of human beings drowned on dry land because cowards made an entire movement out of refusing even the most minimal inconvenience that might save a stranger's life.

What those future historians will ask, from the vantage point of a society that somehow saved itself from species collapse, will be: why? Why were we so marinated in shame that we decided the only freedom that mattered was the freedom not to care about other people?

I suspect it's got something to do with the fact that there are almost eight billion of us and we're all going to die, and that would be awful enough by itself without mad oligarchs marching us all over the cliff of climate collapse. Because it's easier to scream at strangers on the internet than to do the hard work of adjusting to a world where human lives really need to have inherent value, even if the humans in question are mean and scared and stupid and annoying.

Because if other people's lives are inherently valuable, that means that their pain matters, and if other people's pain matters, that means we might have to do something about it, and we are already very tired. And we need each other, more than ever, and that's the scariest, most annoying thing of all.

Because the human race isn't something you can actually win. If our frantic, fucked-up excuse for a species is going to survive, we have to remember how to act like one.

We need each other, and that means we can't only care about the people we love and have chosen to associate with and nobody else. We need to care about people we don't know and might not even like very much, and I don't like that any more than you do. If we didn't need each other, if rugged individualism actually existed as anything more than a libertarian wet dream, nobody would care about being cancelled.

Shame works because of what all of us know in our bones. It works because nobody gets through this alone.

Text 5

Judith Butler on the culture wars, JK Rowling and living in "anti-intellectual times"

The philosopher and gender theorist discusses tensions in the feminist movement over trans rights

By Alona Ferber

Thirty years ago, the philosopher Judith Butler now 64 years old, published a book that revolutionised popular perceptions on the subject of gender. "Gender Matters ("Gender trouble'.), the work for which she is best known, introduced the idea of gender as performance and raised questions about how we define the category of 'women' and for whom feminism claims to fight.

Today, 'Gender Trouble' is considered the seminal text in any bibliography of gender studies and its arguments have moved from academia to popular culture. Since 'Gender Trouble' was published, the world has changed beyond recognition. In 2014 Time declared the "transgender point of no return". Butler herself went beyond her previous work, writing extensively on culture and politics. The conflict with the "biological essentialism remains alive, as evidenced by the tensions over trans rights within the feminist movement.

What is Butler's view - who now teaches Comparative Literature at Maxine Elliot in Berkeley - on this debate? Do you see a way to break the deadlock? "The New Statesman published an email exchange on these issues with Judith Butler.

Alona Ferber: In "Question of Gender" you wrote that "contemporary feminist debates about the meanings of gender show a certain sense of difficulty, as if gender indeterminacy could ultimately culminate in the failure of feminism". How do the ideas from that book written 30 years ago help us understand the way the trans rights debate has evolved in culture and politics?

Judith Butler: I would first like to ask whether trans feminists coincide with historical feminists. If you are right to identify the one with the other, then a feminist position that opposes transphobia is a marginal position. But I don't think this is the case. My bet is that most feminists support trans rights and oppose all forms of transphobia. So I find it worrying that suddenly the radical trans feminist position is understood as commonly accepted or even mainstream. I think it is actually a fringe movement trying to speak for the mainstream: it is our responsibility to prevent this from happening.

AF: An example of mainstream public discourse on this issue in the UK is the discussion of gender self-certification, or self-id. In an open letter published in June, JK Rowling expressed concern that self-id would open the doors of bathrooms and changing rooms to any man who believes or feels he is a woman, potentially putting women at risk of violence.

JB: If we look closely at the example you give as "mainstream", we can see that you are working on your imagination which tells us more about the feminist who has such a fear than about any situation that actually exists in trans life. The feminist who holds such a view assumes that the penis defines the person, and that anyone with a penis could identify as a woman for the purpose of entering locker rooms and threatening the women who frequent them. That is, it is assumed that the penis is the threator that any person with a penis that identifies as a woman engages in a deceptive and harmful form of disguise. This is a fervid fantasy fuelled by powerful fears, but it does not describe an actual reality. Trans women are often discriminated against in men's toilets, their modes of self-identification tell what they experience and cannot be interpreted on the basis of fantasies dumped on them. The fact that such fantasies pass as a public topic is in itself a cause for concern.

AF: I want to challenge you on the term 'terf', or radical trans feminist, which some people see as an insult.

JB: I am not aware that the term 'terf' is used as an insult.. I wonder: by what name should we call feminists who claim to want to exclude trans women from women's spaces? If they favour exclusion, why not call them excluders? If they see themselves as belonging to that strand of radical feminism that opposed gender reassignment, why not call them radical feminists? My only regret is that there used to be a radical sexual liberation movement known as radical feminism, but it has sadly turned into a campaign to pathologise trans and gender non-conforming people. My feeling is that we need to renew the feminist commitment to gender equality and gender freedom in order to affirm the complexity of (gender-based) lives as they are currently lived.

AF: There seems to be a consensus among progressives that feminists who side with JK Rowling are on the wrong side of history. Is this fair, or is there some merit to their arguments?

JB: Let's be clear that the debate here is not between feminists and trans activists. There are trans-affirmative feminists, and many trans people are also committed feminists. So a clear problem is representing the issue as if the debate is between feminists and trans people. It isn't. One of the reasons to militate against this position is that trans activism is linked to queer activism and feminist legacies that remain very much alive today. Feminism has always been committed to asserting that the social meanings of what it means to be a man or a woman are not yet established. We tell stories about what it means to be a woman at a certain time and place, and trace the transformation of these categories over time. We depend on a historical idea of gender: this means that we do not yet know all the ways in which it can represent itself and we remain open to new conventions of its social meanings. It would be a disaster for feminism to revert to a strictly biological reading of gender or to relate one's behaviour in the world to a body part. Or to impose scary fantasies, their own anxieties, on trans women.... Whose sense of gender, constant and very real, should be socially and publicly recognised as a simple matter of human dignity. The radical trans feminist position attacks the dignity of trans people.

AF: In "Questione di Genere" you asked yourself if, by trying to represent a particular idea of women, feminists are not participating in the same dynamics of oppression and heteronormativity that they are trying to change. In light of the bitter debate in feminism today, does this reflection still hold true?

JB: The way I remember my position in "Question of Gender" (I wrote it more than 30 years ago), the point was quite different. Firstly, you don't have to be a woman to be a feminist, and we shouldn't confuse the categories. Feminist, non-binary and trans men who are feminists are part of the movement. One has to consider the fact that the fundamental demands of freedom and equality are part of any feminist

political struggle. When laws and social policies represent women, tacit decisions are made about who counts as a woman, and very often assumptions are made about who is a woman. We have seen this in the field of reproductive rights. So the question I was asking then was: do we need a stable idea of women or any gender if we are to advance feminist goals? I posed the question in this way in order to argue that feminists are committed to reflecting on the different, and historically changing, meanings of gender and the ideals of gender freedom. By gender freedom I do not mean that we can all choose our gender. Rather, we can make the political claim to live freely and without fear of discrimination and violence against the genders to which we belong. Many people assigned 'female' at birth have never felt comfortable in those shoes, and those people (myself included) tell us something important about the constraints of traditional gender norms for those many who do not fit into their terms. Feminists know that ambitious women are called 'monstrous', or that non-heterosexual women are pathologised. We fight these false statements because they are false and because they say more about the misogyny of those who make humiliating caricatures than about the complex social differences between women. Women should not get involved in the phobic caricatures with which they have traditionally been humiliated. E by 'women' I mean all those who identify themselves in that way.

AF: How much of the 'toxicity' in this debate can be traced back to the culture wars being fought online?

JB: I think we live in anti-intellectual times and that this is evident throughout politics. The speed of social media allows for vitriolic forms of debate that are not conducive to thoughtful debate. We must cherish the possibility of more relaxed and thoughtful discussions.

AF: Threats of violence and abuse represent the extreme form of these "anti-intellectual times" to an extreme. What do you have to say about the violent or offensive language used online against people like JK Rowling?

JB: I am against online abuse of any kind. I confess to being puzzled by the fact that you've highlighted the abuse against JK Rowling, but don't mention the abuse against trans people and their allies, which occurs online and in presence. I don't agree with JK Rowling's views on trans people, but I don't think she should be subjected to harassment and threats. But let's also remember the threats against trans people in places like Brazil, the harassment of trans people on the streets and at work in places like Poland and Romania, or even here in the United States. So if we want to oppose harassment and threats, as we certainly should, we also need to make sure that we have a general picture of what is happening and where, who is most deeply affected and whether all this is tolerated by those who should be opposing it. I do not accept that threats against some people are tolerable and against others intolerable.

AF: Weren't you one of the signatories of the open letter on "cancel culture" in Harper's this summer: do you share those arguments?

JB: I have mixed feelings about that letter. On the one hand I am an educator and a writer and I believe in slow, thoughtful debate. I learn from being confronted and challenged and accept that I have made some significant mistakes in my public life. If someone were to say that I should not be read or listened to because of these mistakes, well, in my heart I would object, as I do not believe that any mistake made by any person can or should sum up that person. We live in time; we make mistakes, sometimes seriously; and if we are lucky, we change precisely because of interactions that make us see things differently. On the other hand, some of these petitioners have targeted Black Lives Matter as if loud, public opposition to racism is itself uncivilised behaviour. Some of them have opposed legal rights for Palestine. Some may have committed sexual harassment. But others do not want to be challenged on their racism. Democracy requires a confrontation whose tone is not always light. So I am not in favour of neutralising strong political demands for justice from subjugated people. When one has not been heard for decades, the cry for justice is bound to be loud.

AF: This year you published "The power of nonviolence'. Does the idea of 'radical equality' that you discuss in the book have any relevance for the feminist movement?

JB: My point is the suggestion to rethink equality in terms of interdependence. We tend to say that one person should be treated equally to another and we assess whether equality has been achieved by comparing individual cases. But what if the individual - and individualism - is part of the problem? What makes the difference is to understand how to live in a world in which we are fundamentally dependent on others, on institutions, on the Earth, and to realise that this life depends on an organisation that supports the various forms of life. If no one escapes this interdependence, then we are equal in a different sense. We are equally dependent, i.e. equally social and ecological, and this means that we must not think of ourselves only as bounded individuals. If radical trans feminists thought of themselves as sharing the world with trans people, in a common struggle for equality, freedom from violence and social recognition, there would be no more radical trans feminists but feminism would surely survive as a practice of coalition and a vision of solidarity.

AF: You talked about the backlash against "gender ideology" and wrote an essay about it for "New Statesman" in 2019. Do you see any relationship between this backlash and contemporary debates about trans people's rights?

JB: It is painful to see that Trump's position (that gender should be defined by biological sex), and the right-wing evangelical and Catholic effort to eliminate 'gender' from education and public policy coincide with the return to biological

existentialism of radical trans feminists. It is sad that some feminists promote the anti-gender ideological stance of the most reactionary forces in our society.

AF: What do you think would break this impasse in feminism on trans rights? What would lead to a more constructive debate?

JB: I suppose a debate, assuming it is possible, should reconsider how sexual functions are medically determined in relation to the lived and historical reality of gender.

Text 6
One of the most distressing aspects of the hostile narrative is that it sidelines a reality of alliance

Tue 7 Jul 2020 03.24 BST
As a trans woman working in academia, one of the questions I regularly get asked is how I get along with feminist colleagues. When I invariably answer “incredibly well”, I’m often met with a quizzical look.
I can understand why. As trans and gender diversity has become a regular topic of public debate and a favoured target of rightwing attacks, feminist critics have joined the fray.

That has put trans and feminist activists on a seemingly unrelenting path of mutual antagonism. Trans rights have been pitted against sex-based rights for “real” women, with conflict forever spiralling into charge and countercharge of hate speech and silencing, and into bitter social media wars.

Frustratingly, this conflict has become the dominant media story of trans and feminism, especially in a viciously divided UK. And, like post-lockdown carbon emissions, antagonism has now sadly rebounded – this time, via the tweets and blogs of JK Rowling and the ripples of commentary that have followed.

One of the most distressing aspects of this relentless feminism versus trans narrative is that it tells a completely lopsided story. In fact, it sidelines a very different reality of alliance rather than division.

Trans and feminism have certainly had a wobbly relationship over the years, but trans writers have energetically drawn on and contributed to feminist theory, while trans politics has been positively embraced by many feminists. The story here is not one of political conflict, it’s of mutual recognition.

It’s the same reality at the institutional level. Right now, trans and feminist advocates are happily working alongside each other in educational and cultural institutions, health settings, political parties, activist groups, media organisations and elsewhere.

It is little wonder that my own daughters, both young feminists themselves, unreservedly see trans as ally, not enemy. The reasons for this are not hard to fathom. After all, a fundamental tenet of feminism is to end forms of oppression; and the same rule must apply for a trans and gender-diverse minority.

Trans is no fleeting and shallow 'identity choice' and no onslaught against women's rights

What's more, much contemporary feminism rejects the pathologising dogmatism of "gender critical" and "sex-based rights" advocacy that paints trans and gender diversity as effectively delusional.

As both feminist and transfeminist writers have long pointed out, we are not immutably tethered to an innate experience of womanhood or manhood simply by being designated an F or an M at birth.

This is not fantasy; it's based on decades of well-evidenced research. Bodies and their sex characteristics have material reality, a reality that trans people know all too well. But how we make collective sense of biology rests on social and political assumptions that are open to change. Likewise, gender socialisation on the basis of one's assigned sex does not automatically determine our gender sensibility.

None of this disputes theories of women's oppression or seeks to diminish the gendered violence that women of all backgrounds experience. Nor does it suggest that sex and gender are matters of mere whim. It insists that trans and gender-diverse individuals have bodily knowledge and lived experience that either crosses or doesn't fit a man/woman binary.

Trans is no fleeting and shallow "identity choice" and no onslaught against women's rights. It asks us to rethink conventions of sex and gender and to deal generously, not defensively, with change.

This is a process, not a flick of a switch.

The growing recognition of trans as a social reality ushers in both easily solvable and sometimes difficult shifts in the way we institutionally manage sex and gender. Given the history of gender politics, feminism has a stake in this change and feminist voices need to be heard.

But a trans and feminist dialogue can only work through respectful alliance, not divisiveness. It can only be effective through abandoning the dead-end of territory-claiming wars over biology and rights.

This much has long been recognised within more alliance-oriented trans and feminist politics – and it matters on a personal as well as political level.

To return to my starting point, as a trans woman I have found little but warm regard from feminist colleagues, students and friends of all ages. This has been an uplifting experience. But more than this, it provides respectful political ground on

which to mutually live and think through sex and gender. Surely, in a time of pandemic, this is ground to further cultivate.

Text 7
Feminism and Freedom in Ghana: The Ms. Q&A With Nana Akosua Hanson
5/4/2023 by RÉGINE JEAN-CHARLES

Akosua Hanson said she is a “deep believer in the power of pop culture as a transforming tool.” (Courtesy of Nana Akosua Hanson)

I traveled to Ghana, West Africa, in March for a global leadership summit hosted by Northeastern University, where I work. While I had been to Accra multiple times, this was my first time being there during International Women’s Day and Women’s History Month. The timing had me thinking about how feminists are advancing gender justice in Ghana today.

I spoke with Nana Akosua Hanson, feminist activist, journalist and founder of Let’s Talk Consent to learn more about her vision for a feminist future, the importance of art and media, and her activism that is based in Ghana—but is having a truly global impact.

Taken together, Nana Akosua’s comments reminds us that feminism is ultimately, an expansive and inclusive freedom project. Indeed, the idea of feminism as a freedom project is not to be taken lightly in the context of Ghana—which, in 1957 became the first Black African country to gain independence from British colonial rule. The work of building a feminist future that is more just and most invested in communal care is slow and important work that requires multiple approaches. From her local organizing, use of contemporary art and media presence, Nana Akosua Hanson is leading the way to advance feminism and freedom in Ghana.

Régine Michelle Jean-Charles: Tell us more about yourself and the feminist work you are engaged in.

Nana Akosua Hanson: I’m an African feminist who believes deeply in the power of art and artistic expression in changing the world. My feminist work has largely been centered on pan-African, feminist and environmental activism.

In 2016, I launched a sex ed workshop in Accra, dubbed “Let’s Talk Consent,” which sought to end an endemic rape culture by introducing a sex-ed curriculum for students and adults centered in gender and building a resilient consent culture. This later evolved to become Drama Queens, a youth-based artistic activist organization that aimed to use theatre and other art forms for feminist, pan-African and environmentalist activism.

I’m a deep believer in the power of pop culture as a transforming tool. Thus, in my work as a television and radio presenter, I aim to bring an African feminist

perspective to the mainstream with news, commentary and analysis of popular culture and social issues.

I am also the creator of the award-winning graphic novel series, Moongirls, which follows the adventures of four women superheroes fighting for an Africa free from the violence of patriarchal systems, rape culture, corruption, environmental destruction, neo-colonialism, etc. Moongirls was created to contribute to creating a more diverse palette of pop culture that people consume.
Founded in 2016 by Nana Akosua Hanson, Drama Queens is a young feminist organization working to create a culture of consent in Ghana. (Courtesy of Drama Queens)

Jean-Charles: I really love this campaign to initiate conversations about consent, which also reminds me of the work of A Long Walk Home, whose “Got Consent?” campaign similarly helped to reframe how we think about sexual violence by urging us to focus on power and consent and underscored sexual violence as a feminist issue.

Can you tell us more about your own feminist evolution/awakening/coming into consciousness?

Akosua Hanson: I think my earliest memory of a sort of feminist coming-into-consciousness was in the literature of African feminist icon and Ghanaian literary legend, Prof. Ama Ata Aidoo. The literature of Ama Ata Aidoo—who was a poet, playwright, novelist and feminist activist—raised my consciousness to finding freedom, defining it for myself and living courageously in my freedom, in spite of a violent and patriarchal society that dictated otherwise.

When I entered adulthood, particularly the workforce, the harsh realities of an endemic system of violent patriarchy really hit home. My freedom is hinged on the freedom of all women in society. Sexual violence became the very first feminist issue that pulled me to start my activism and to use my art to push cultural change.
When I entered adulthood, particularly the workforce, the harsh realities of an endemic system of violent patriarchy really hit home.

Jean-Charles: In your work as a journalist, you have steadfastly taken on topics related to gender justice—from gender-based violence to the pay gap for women.

How do you think media and journalism help to advance feminist causes?

Akosua Hanson: Media and journalism are avenues by which feminist causes can be mainstreamed, brought into the public arena to raise awareness, to bring up for public discourse, to push for change, and to envision freer societies as a collective.

The media is a crucial public forum by which society views itself, examines itself, discusses itself. We must have diverse voices in the public arena to ensure a truly democratic and free society. And those voices must include women's voices in the diversity of our stories. It is through the media the social invisibilization of women in the public and private arenas takes place.

So it is important to me to claim space in my journalism, on radio and on TV to advance feminist causes and stem the tide of the public erasure of women's stories and realities, to draw public attention to violence against women, to serve as a fact-checker in a misogyny-biased arena, and to challenge sexist ideology which is mainstreamed in Ghanaian media. Most importantly, media and journalism can be used to push for social reform.

Jean-Charles: According to one newspaper, you are among the women "leading a feminist revolution in Ghana." What does this mean to you?

Akosua Hanson: Frankly, it's a big title I can't claim. The work I do is as part of a movement of African feminists and artistic activists all over the African continent and in the diaspora. But I do recognize this as a sign that the impact of the movement in Ghana is being felt. This gives me hope that the dream of a Ghana with better, freer, kinder societies will come to reality.

Jean-Charles: How did you spend your International Women's Day?

Akosua Hanson: On IWD day, I was co-organizing the launch of the Women in Motion Film Festival, a joint initiative between Alliance Française Accra, the Goethe-Institut Accra, and the U.S. embassy in Accra that sought to celebrate film made by, for and about women as part of the International Women's Day festival. This was a week-long festival held in different locations in Accra and featured a diverse range of films from Ghana, France and Germany, from narrative films, documentaries, short films, animation, avant-garde, to experimental film. It was a success!
Public discourse around gender and sexuality has been framed by religious leaders who preach a religious patriarchy where women's existence is hinged on men, and LGBT+ people are dehumanized.
People take part in the Women's March in front of the U.S. embassy in Accra on Jan. 21, 2017. Protest rallies were held in over 30 countries around the world in solidarity with the U.S. march in defense of press freedom, women's and human rights following the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th president of U.S. (Cristina Aldehuela / AFP via Getty Images)

Jean-Charles: In your view, what are the most pressing issues facing feminists in Ghana?

Akosua Hanson: The rising viciousness of Ghanaian homophobia, headlined by the anti-LGBT+ bill currently in consideration in parliament, is a pressing feminist issue.

Ghana has always been a very religious country—Christianity being the largest religion, with 71.3 percent of the population being a member of various Christian denominations. This has meant that public discourse around gender and sexuality has been framed by religious leaders who preach a religious patriarchy where women's existence is hinged on men, and LGBT+ people are dehumanized.

The insidiousness of this, coupled with a growing hunger of religious leaders to infiltrate the political and legislative space, has culminated in the introduction of an anti-LGBT bill to parliament, which seeks to criminalize LGBT+ existence and all forms of advocacy for the rights and dignity of Ghanaian LGBT+ persons. Pushed by the same anti-LGBT forces with links to far-right U.S. evangelical movements, we see a similar moves in countries like Kenya and Uganda. Uganda's parliament has just passed a similar bill criminalizing LGBT+ existence and even imposing [the] death penalty for some offenses.

Ghana's bill would criminalize even sympathy and proposes potentially a range of human rights violations that, if passed, would institute state-sanctioned violence and terrorism against the LGBT+ community in all spheres of life.

This is a very urgent feminist issue on all levels which requires a critical engagement with discourses of religion, culture and tradition in Ghana.

Jean-Charles: In light of what we have seen [with] the increase of U.S. tourism to Ghana and some of the problems that accompany it, how can Black feminists from other parts of the world practice solidarity in ethical and meaningful ways with feminists, women, girls and nonbinary people in Ghana?

Akosua Hanson: By moving from the fluff and superficial, to having real conversations with each other, connecting our shared struggles and increasing the spheres of our activism.

For instance, the issue of the anti-LGBT+ bill in Ghana is connected to global religious movements and Black feminist solidarity in the face of this is even more crucial. Solidarity also looks like fostering and sustaining strong collaborations and building together freer, kinder systems. However, to do this ethically and meaningfully, this has to be in the spirit of mutual respect with honest and open discussion of difference and similarity; of care and mutual support.
Attendess of the Northeastern Global Leadership Summit at the Kempinski Hotel in Accra, Ghana. (Alyssa Stone / Northeastern University)

Jean-Charles: Please share more about some of your current projects and where you see your work going in the future.

Akosua Hanson: Moongirls is my latest creative project. This is an adult graphic novel series that follows the adventures of four women superheroes with varying superpowers who are fighting a philosophical and physical war for an Africa free from the violence of patriarchy, religious intolerance, corruption and environmental destruction. This year, we launched the third season of Moongirls. We're calling this the Moongirls Origin Stories and it delves deep into pre-colonial African societies and African folklore and mythology. Read all chapters at moongirls.live and drop us a word in the "Chapter Afterthoughts" section!

Text 8
Why Ghana's LGBTIQ community needs your help

Ghana's proposed new anti-gay law has led to attacks on the country's LGBTQI community. This needs to stop

The past year has sent shockwaves through Ghana's LGBTIQ community.

This is my assessment as a Ghanaian who identifies as a gay man, and as the director of LGBT+ Rights Ghana, the organisation that opened a community centre for gay, lesbian, transgender and other queer Ghanaians in the country's capital, Accra, early last year.

Soon after, amid an onslaught of outrage and moral panic from the media, religious leaders and other anti-LGBTIQ groups, our centre was quickly shut down. But that was just the start.

The past year has witnessed a continuous scapegoating of LGBTQ people, especially by politicians wanting to distract from the wider issues that affect every Ghanaian, such as the rapidly weakening national currency, public sector corruption, and an abusive and abused court and police system – all of which are spurring protest movements like #FixTheCountry.

There has also been the rise in fundamentalism and the work in Ghana of US evangelicals, who seek to cement their control over the Ghanaian populace. I'm talking about groups such as the World Congress of Family and Family Watch International, organisations that have been described as "hate groups" by the Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights organisation in the US.

Pushing their singular ideology of what family is supposed to be and how people are supposed to live, these groups are exporting hate to African countries. In the eyes of their members, Africa is a new breeding ground for their ideology, which has been rejected or resisted in the US and other Western countries.

In Ghana, a group called the National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values, is pushing a bill that would proscribe LGBTIQ activity. The legislation seeks a three- to five-year prison sentence for those identifying as gay, and a six- to ten-year sentence for anything considered as promoting LGBTIQ rights. It wants to promote so-called ‘conversion therapy’ and hands parents of intersex children the legal right to subject them to so-called ‘corrective surgery’.

We've also seen an increase in rhetoric that incites Ghanaians and sensationalises LGBTIQ issues. We have leaders in government, opposition, religious groups and the media pushing sensationalism and negative misinformation and disinformation to the Ghanaian masses. This has placed LGBTIQ Ghanaians under constant physical, verbal and emotional attacks on every level, including from their own families and communities.

With impunity, the police have taken to arresting LGBTIQ persons, or people who are perceived to be LGBTIQ. Last year, 21 people were arrested for attending a paralegal LGBTIQ rights training workshop in Ho, in the Volta region. Another 22 people were arrested in eastern Ghana, because they were said to be celebrating a lesbian wedding. There have been numerous individual attacks on various community members who are known or perceived to be LGBTIQ persons. People have been kicked out of their homes or rented spaces and left homeless as a result of their perceived sexual orientation and gender identity.

And, of course, there is the draconian bill targeting LGBTIQ persons, their families and allies, as well as other struggles like feminism, free speech and expression. Using sensationalist slurs such as ‘LGBTQQIAAPP+’, common among internet trolls on the ultra-conservative side of Western cultural wars, the bill attempts to push falsehoods that LGBTIQ people are a threat to Ghanaian society and should be imprisoned for five years or undergo conversion therapy.

Because most of my early life involved the Church, it led to an often lonely struggle, one that I never shared with anyone

I've lived all my life in Ghana. I was born in Accra and lived my first 20 years here, before moving to northern Ghana, where I lived for about five years before returning south. Though coming out to my Christian family and coming to confidently identify as a gay man has been a struggle, I have not personally experienced a reaction to my sexuality as extreme as the one we are currently seeing in public life.

As someone who grew up in a Christian family, religion shaped much of my life. Long before I had any understanding of what it means to be an LGBTIQ person, there was condemnation coming at me from the Church and constant reminders about LGBTIQ people being sent to hell. Because most of my early life involved the Church, it led to an often lonely struggle, one that I never shared with anyone.

It was in my twenties , while at university in Tamale, northern Ghana, that I confronted my sexuality. Through online research, I gained an understanding of what it means to be gay. I came to understand the dynamics and complexity that exists within sexuality and gender, which helped me to reconcile how I feel and what the Church had been telling me.

Ghana was once more tolerant of non-heteronormative behaviour, but rounds of colonisation changed that

I was studying educational development, which taught me about community-building and citizen participation. That helped me to figure out where I would start in rallying the community to advocate for change or participate in causing this change.

It also made me promise myself that other queer Ghanaians would have more in their lives than just demonization and rejection from religious circles.

Then, in 2016, my brother outed me to our family. Before that, I had been looking for the opportunity to actually come out. I felt that my family and friendship groups already knew about my sexuality and I had imagined many scenarios that could lead to me being outed.

So, when my brother outed me, I said, “Yes, I am gay, and I’ve been gay from from birth. It’s just that I couldn't really find the opportunity to say it. But now that I’m being outed, I'm also taking the opportunity to tell everyone.” I don’t think my family was really ready to have that conversation. It became a hush-hush situation. Nobody talked about it and nobody asked me about it.

In this present moment, the onus falls on Ghanaians to be better

Two years later, I started a cyber-activism blog to help community members to make their own informed decisions. LGBT+ Rights was initially just me on Facebook. My activism was initially very broad. I spoke on general issues of concern to children, women, LGBTIQ people.

I had a lot of religious people, from my church days, on Facebook because, while I have been non-religious since 2017, I remain part of religious circles in a social sense. Whenever I was bold enough to really talk about LGBTIQ issues, some of them would ask, “Are you gay?”, and I said, “Yes, I’m gay.” I challenged them on these platforms but it hasn’t taken away the fact that I'm human to them. In my school groups, the issue came up too. Again, I challenged their opinions.

We are now at a point where most people in my life know about my sexuality but don’t bring it up in conversation. Some are careful not to make homophobic comments in my presence. And I continue to take my place in my social groups

because I am a colleague, former student or church member, just like everybody else.

I appreciate the need to talk about these issues and I know that people learn and evolve to be more tolerant. But, in this present moment, the onus falls on Ghanaians to be better. Ghanaians in all spheres of life – politics, religion, media, families, communities, private and public sectors – need to be better. If they want to talk about LGBTIQ issues, they should give LGBTIQ people the opportunity to speak and direct the conversation around themselves. Why listen only to homophobes and detractors?

It would be a tragedy if Ghana passes a bill that restricts our ability to embrace one another – ideologically or physically

Internationally, people need to understand that Ghana's LGBTIQ community is very fragile right now. Fragile in the sense that we don't have either the human or financial resources to fight against the opposition that is thrown at us. Yet, this bill, in its current, or any other form, cannot pass. If passed, it will give legitimacy to the abuses that the community is currently experiencing, while silencing the complaints we have always had: that we are continuously discriminated against and attacked with impunity by state and non-state actors.

Ghana's LGBTIQ community needs your expertise, human and financial resources to support us right now. The international community needs to call out Ghana over the introduction of this draconian bill. Ghana is part of the UN and other bilateral and multilateral treaties and arrangements that stand for non-discrimination. It needs to treat all its citizens as equals. And that includes people like me.