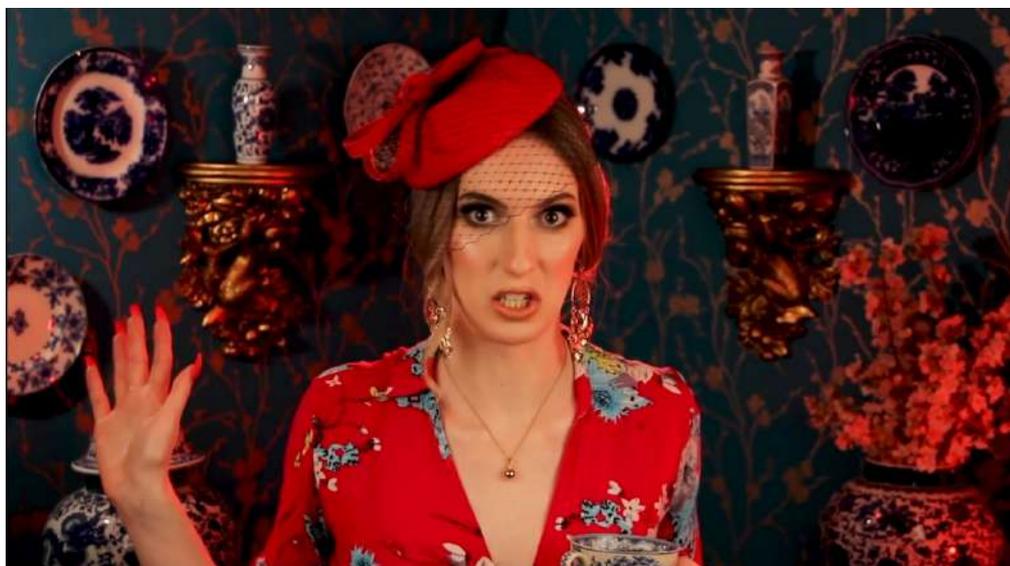


“A hate movement hiding behind a bunch of pseudo-feminist platitudes”: Response to ContraPoints



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Yesterday, Natalie Wynn (ContraPoints) posted a [new video](#)[1] to YouTube titled ‘Gender Critical’. As usual, it’s funny and beautifully produced, and she does a great job of digging into the topic. But as in her [last video](#)[2] on this topic, she gives the impression of being more charitable than she actually is to her opponent. In what follows, a brief summary for those who haven’t watched, and then a few responses.

Wynn concedes some points that mainstream activists don’t, and it’s refreshing to hear this. These include: that ‘TERF’ is derogatory; that at least some trans women have male privilege; that some non-trans women find gender critical feminism appealing because they’ve had traumatic experiences with men; that trans people (feeling besieged) do tend to stick together and repeat mantras; that she herself used to be a man; that it would indeed be better if our genitals at birth didn’t determine our life prospects; that trans women should stand with non-trans women on issues like period poverty and reproductive rights.

But she does a few things that are pretty annoying, too, like *literally* demonize (in costume form) the ‘TERF’ character; have the ‘TERF’ character voice the concerns non-trans women have about gender ideology allowing males into women-only spaces and ‘foisting penises on lesbians’ but never actually answer either of these concerns; have the ‘TERF’ character ask ‘why can’t you just be a feminine man?’ but not answer this question; report asking for stories from non-trans women on Twitter who used to be gender critical and are now trans activists, rather than also asking non-trans women who used to be trans activists and are now gender critical in order to get a balanced picture; engage with anonymous comments from Reddit rather than any serious radical feminist scholarship (as Brian Leiter has [already noted](#)[3]); and, finally, throw all charity out the window at the end of the video and argue that all gender critical feminists are simply motivated by *disgust for trans women*.

Wynn engages with eight points that gender critical feminists make. These are:

- 1) Trans ideology relies on poor gender metaphysics
- 2) Trans women reinforce gender stereotypes
- 3) Trans women should be working to abolish gender
- 4) Trans women have male privilege
- 5) Trans women experienced male socialization
- 6) Trans women have not experienced reproductive oppression
- 7) Trans ideology erases female vocabulary
- 8) 'TERF' is a slur

I'll take these in turn, so feel free to skip through to the ones you're interested in. If you're not interested in any of them, skip to the end to hear about Wynn's claim that gender critical feminism is really nothing but base transphobia...

Gender metaphysics. Gender critical feminists (GCFs from now on) say there's no such thing as being a woman trapped in a man's body or vice versa. Wynn agrees, and says this is a metaphor to convey to the public feelings that are pretty hard to put into words. So far so good; but if being trans is just about having certain feelings (which the gender identity view basically concedes) there's a reasonable question to be asked about why these feelings should be sufficient to category membership (i.e., why a male person's having such feelings should be enough to make him a woman).

Gender stereotypes. GCFs say that trans women reinforce gender stereotypes, in the way that they present (e.g. many tend to present in excessively feminine ways). Wynn doesn't deny this, but explains that trans women are using an accepted cultural language to signal that they are what they in fact feel themselves to be, and to avoid being misgendered, which will totally ruin their day. This makes perfect sense, and I agree that GCFs should go easy on this point. Our problem is not (and should not be) with male people presenting as stereotypically feminine, our problem is with male people claiming to be women, regardless of how they present.

Abolish gender. GCFs are generally gender abolitionists. We think that gender is a set of norms and expectations that are applied to female people (and a different set of norms and expectations that are applied to male people). We want to abolish those norms and expectations, because we think that everyone, regardless of their sex, should be free to do and be whatever they want. We say that trans women, instead of working with us to abolish gender, are reinforcing it. They could express themselves exactly as they want to in a way that would advance the gender abolitionist aim, by doing so *and insisting that they're still men*. But they don't, they insist that their doing so makes them women (or allows them to be read as the women they feel themselves to be; see prior paragraph). Wynn's response is that abolition of something as systematic as 'gender' is obviously too much to put on the shoulders of one trans woman, and that in any case gender abolitionism is hopelessly utopian (she has a lot of fun making this point, and takes the brave step of appearing without makeup to make her point). She says "denying trans people their gender identity because 'abolish gender' is kind of like denying citizenship to immigrants because 'abolish borders'". Her point being that we can have a utopia in mind without being stupid enough to hurt the very people the utopia would help, before we get to it.

This is a fair point, but as is fairly common in the debate between trans activists and gender critical feminists, this entirely takes the trans perspective (rather than e.g. working for a balance of concerns between all interested parties). Wynn also asks why GCFs aren't saying this to powerful and influential non-trans women who uphold harmful gender norms, like Kim Kardashian, commenting "it's almost

like when they say ‘abolish gender’ what they really mean is ‘abolish trans people’. It’s almost like this is a hate movement hiding behind a bunch of pseudo-feminist platitudes”. *Ouch*.

GCFs want the utopia because *so many* people are harmed by gender norms and expectations, especially all gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (because heterosexuality is a gender expectation); all gender non-conforming people, including butch women, effeminate men, and androgynous people; all trans people; and actually all *conforming* people too (because they may only conform as a result of policing). Saying that we shouldn’t try to abolish gender and should focus on liberating trans people within the binary system we’ve currently got looks pretty unjustified, unless there’s very good reason to think that we can’t liberate everyone. There seems to be sufficient reason not to put this project on the shoulders of someone who is suffering from severe and debilitating dysphoria, but there’s no reason not to put it on the shoulders of people for whom the desire to transition is not nearly so weighty. Those people, at least, can reasonably be asked to contribute to the project that is more liberatory for more people, by presenting however they like *without denying that they are male or men*.

Male privilege. GCFs say that trans women have male privilege, and that this is relevant to ‘the woman question’. Wynn replies that trans women are treated as ‘its’ in public, and being treated as a woman is actually a step up. The problem with this reply is that trans women can get male privilege from their gender socialization *before* they transition, regardless of how they are treated during and after they transition, and this might make a big difference to how their lives go. There are all sorts of people in the world – not just trans people – who are treated badly in virtue of having marginalized social status in at least one respect, and yet who still have male privilege. Privilege is not all-things-considered, it’s relative to a specific feature. (For example, I have white privilege, even though I am a woman and a lesbian. It would be crazy to try to argue that I don’t *because* I am a woman and a lesbian. But that is exactly what Wynn seems to be arguing when it comes to trans women and male privilege). (If you happen to be interested, I have written about class privilege [here](#)[4] and race privilege [here](#)[5]).

Male socialization. Related to the last point, GCFs say that trans women have benefited from male socialization before they transitioned, and again take this to be relevant to ‘the woman question’. Wynn agrees that this is at least partially right, saying that her own upbringing has more in common with non-trans men’s than with non-trans women’s. She says it’s odd that within trans discourse it’s accepted that trans men know what it’s like to be women, given their experiences, but it’s not accepted that trans women know what it’s like to be men (there’s a narrative that they *were always women*).

Wynn herself doesn’t agree with this, and doesn’t mind saying that she used to be a man, and is now a woman. But she still wants to say that socialization continues throughout one’s life, so when one starts passing as a woman there will be new experiences had in common with women, and that we should also take the age of a trans woman’s transition into account, because if she transitions in childhood like [Kim Petris](#)[6] then she’ll have a largely female socialization, and if she transitions at age 65 like [Caitlyn Jenner](#)[7] then she’ll have a largely male socialization. Wynn agrees that ‘anyone who wants to argue that male privilege hasn’t shaped her [Jenner’s] perspective doesn’t have a leg to stand on’. But she says that trans women may identify as trans or feminine long before they actually transition, and so may internalize negative social messaging about femininity (meaning, they may not have a straightforward male socialization).

Wynn makes some interesting points in this section, including diagnosing some of the resistance of GCFs to trans women as grounded in an idea of ‘stolen valour’, that a required feature of being a woman is having experienced oppression. And she addresses *this* by saying there’s plenty of oppression involved in being trans. This makes the same mistake as above in the discussion of male privilege – having experienced oppression of different kinds is enough to give two groups a reason to be allies, but it’s not enough to justify treating the two groups together as one. We need more than both having experienced oppression of some kind or other to agree that trans women and non-trans women are members of the same category.

This section of the video is actually pretty concessive to GCF claims, and it's frustrating that more isn't done with it. Given that many trans women may experience little or no female socialization (given that many transition late, and many do not pass), what are the implications this has for e.g. female-only spaces? Perhaps for those spaces that are primarily rationalized by respite from male-socialized behaviours, like women's rooms on university campuses, this could be a reason not to include trans women. The sometimes very significant differences between trans women and non-trans women are acknowledged here, but no social or political implications are tracked.

Reproductive oppression. GCFs say that being a woman involves certain things that trans women lack knowledge or understanding of, including period shame, unwanted pregnancies, the need for abortion rights, the pain of childbirth, and so on. Wynn agrees that trans women should be good allies to non-trans women when it comes to these issues (which is great, and again refreshingly non-standard given my experience with trans activists). But she also claims that no individual woman experiences all of those oppressive aspects of womanhood, and that all women understand their womanhood differently, including some who experience it as not oppressive at all.

Although she doesn't say so explicitly, this is obviously supposed to be a reason to accommodate trans women who have *none* of these experiences or concerns. But this is odd; GCFs can give a coherent story about female people's historical oppression and what it would take to bring them liberation, and this tracks biological lines. It is a well-justified category and it includes these reproductive issues as central. The category 'people who strongly feel that they are women *and* female people' is an *ad hoc* category. Trans activists owe more of an argument for why this should be any unified category at all, and simply saying that 'women are varied' is not sufficient, because all those women have something in common, namely their being female.

Erasing female vocabulary. GCFs worry that trans ideology is erasing words that women need to talk about their experiences and their oppression. Wynn's response is similar to [this response](#)[8] that came out recently in *Aeon*, namely that inclusive language is important for trans men rather than being erasing of women, and that it's not an attempt to control private language (how we describe ourselves) but rather how to phrase things in law and in medical institutions to ensure maximal coverage.

At this point in the video, Wynn cuts to the "TERF" demon who complains "trans activists are invading feminist spaces and telling women we can't discuss our own bodies". Unfortunately, she responds only by saying what *she* doesn't mind (talk however you like!), rather than taking the opportunity to address the sometimes terrible behaviour of trans activists who actually do police this language even in private conversations. (One notorious case that has been circulating on Twitter and Facebook lately involves a woman with cervical cancer being told not to talk about it with a trans woman friend because it's 'triggering', given that the trans woman herself doesn't have a cervix and so *couldn't get cervical cancer*).

'TERF' is a slur. GCFs insist that '[TERF](#) is a slur'[9] and that it shouldn't be used by opponents. Wynn replies that it's certainly pejorative/derogatory, but it's not a slur because it's deserved. (Can rape/abuse/death threats, and lesbophobia – see [here](#)[10] and [here](#)[11] – really be *deserved*?). Wynn says that the term 'gender critical', which GCFs ask to be used instead of "TERF", is a euphemism. Indeed, she goes (much) further, and says that the euphemism is "perfectly analogous to the phrase 'race realist' which was invented by racists wanting a more flattering and respectable description of their beliefs". She refuses to become an accomplice in our (apparent) scheme to 'legitimize bigotry'. And she gives evidence of some of our side's use of words in ways she considers disrespectful, like calling sex reassignment surgery or double mastectomies 'mutilation', or referring to trans women as 'trans-identified males' (TIMs) or trans men as 'trans-identified females' (TIFs). Wynn then proceeds to use comments from Reddit in order to prove just how terrible we are, when she could have chosen a more credible opponent from throughout second wave feminism, or indeed from the popular writings of any of the new wave of GCFs (Rebecca Reilly-Cooper, Kathleen Stock, Sophie Allen, Jane Clare Jones, Rosa Freedman, Rosemary Auchmuty, Emily Vicendese, me...).

Some of us do use these words, but it's not, as Wynn asserts, "obviously with the intent of mockery and misgendering". Rather, it's because, given that we are gender abolitionists (see the section above on this) we want a world in which no one feels – or as few people as possible feel – uncomfortable about their bodies, so no one (or as few people as possible) have surgeries. To us, these *are*, at least sometimes, mutilations, because they are surgeries that cause pain and destroy perfectly healthy body parts, in the service of an ideology about gender. We make exactly the same arguments against the commercial plastic surgery industry. We think it's horrible that *anyone* feels the need to change their bodies and faces to fit social expectations.

Furthermore, we use 'TIM' and 'TIF' not to misgender (or mock), but because we make a sex/gender distinction and think that 'woman' and 'man' are sex terms (note that man/male and woman/female are used interchangeably throughout law and social life). If we maintain this distinction then we speak incorrectly when we say 'trans woman', for on our view of what it takes to be a woman, one must be a female person who is subject to a particular set of sexist expectations. It shouldn't need saying, but we actually don't set out to make life more difficult for trans people. We simply have a consistent and coherent feminist theory that we want to be able to apply, and as a large, marginalized group we ought to be able to do that without constant accusations of transphobia. Which takes us to...

Gender critical feminists, nay, 'TERFS', are at bottom just transphobes who dress up their disgust in fancy ways. From about 27.54 in the video things veer wildly off the rails and into conspiracy theories about how all GCFs are really just driven by disgust for trans women. Wynn claims that we're not happy with trans women being feminine and we're not happy with them being masculine so *really* we're just not happy with them *even being*. We're bigots and "there's just no reasoning a transphobe out of bigotry". *Sigh*. (Reminds me of the ending of [that piece last year](#)[12] by so-called trans-inclusive feminist philosophers...)

The problem is, of course, that if we were disgusted by trans women, one might think we'd be similarly disgusted by effeminate gay men, or by drag queens, or even just by men from the 1980s. But we're not. We're not *disgusted* by anything, we're *opposed* to male people claiming to literally be female (or women), and in particular, to the attempt by trans activists to erase sex and replace sex-based rights with the utterly amorphous concept of gender identity. All of this rhetoric about disgust and transphobia is just a further attempt to demonize gender critical feminist women, all while pretending to seriously engage with and address their concerns. But while Wynn does take on a few of our concerns, all the more important stuff is left to the side. Why *can't* trans women just be feminine men? Why can't sex and gender identity be protected *separately* and in ways that do not conflict? What has Wynn actually said that gives us reason to think trans women and non-trans women are members of the same category of person (the category that is the constituency of feminism, and the class of persons whose historical oppression still needs to be mitigated), rather than people who have many good reasons to be *allies*? What about women's sports, and what about the rampant lesbophobia that trans activism seems to push...?

Maybe these can be subjects for the next video...

Links:

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpTPuoGjQsI&feature=youtu.be>

[2] This video has since been made private. The old link was: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQPWI7cEJGs&feature=youtu.be>

[3] <https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2019/03/contrapoints-natalie-wynne-purports-to-take-on-gender-critical-feminism.html>

[4] <https://philpapers.org/rec/LAWOCP>

[5] <https://philpapers.org/rec/DUNORP>

[6] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDJXR1wXofA&feature=youtu.be>

[7] <https://www.buzzfeed.com/kristinharris/caitlyn-jenner-the-power-of-the-woman-hasnt-been-unleashed>

[8] <https://aeon.co/essays/why-trans-inclusive-language-is-no-threat-to-cis-women>

[9] <https://philpapers.org/rec/ALLOAA-3>

[10] https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipOM9J_ZIrYtiMagVRr_jhagMR-XP59TBsjFLwNlcS13iUT4ovqKRN9zttevr0PmA?key=NmJuV1AyRnVSU3dOS2VObVhLSmluNUkxRjRBSk9R

[11] <https://terfisaslur.com/>

[12] <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4090-i-m-not-transphobic-but-a-feminist-case-against-the-feminist-case-against-trans-inclusivity>