THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF TRANSPHOBIC FEMINISM: A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF AN ANTI-TRANS FORUM

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Intro

The 2020s have seen a dramatic rise in legal (Jones, 2024) and physical assaults (Brightman et al., 2024) on trans and gender non-conforming (TGN) communities, with the 2025 election of Donal Trump signaling an increasingly grim future (Holzman, 2024; Lang, 2025; Saric, 2025). To help understand how online transphobia is produced and routinized this paper outlines an on-going study of the ostensibly feminist, anti-trans forum Ovarit (https://ovarit.com/) from a black feminist perspective (The Combahee River Collective, 1977). It broadly asks what affects, discourses, and desires are produced through the socio-technical relations infrastructured on the forum Ovarit? The study combines a walkthrough (Light et al., 2018) of the site, followed by a digital ethnography (Caliandro, 2017). The site Ovarit is chosen given its unique position as one of the only, and by the far the most popular, forum created by and for anti-trans feminists. It gives a concentrated look into 'gender-critical' thought and practice in motion.

Field Site

Ovarit's origins are traceable to r/GenderCritical, and other anti-trans forums hosted on the platform Reddit, which were banned as part of a crackdown on hate speech in 2020. Immediately following the ban, a core group of r/GenderCritical users began building the web forum Ovarit (Tiffany, 2020). This site, along with various other online forums such as Mumsnet's (https://www.mumsnet.com) Feminism: Sex and Gender board, serve as the primary touchpoints for online anti-trans feminist discourse (Berg & Schmalzer, 2024).

Background

The ideological underpinnings of what is now known as trans exclusionary radical feminism (TERF), rebranded to 'Gender Critical' (Thurlow, 2024), can be found within second wave inter-feminists disputes on the movement's inclusion of trans-women during the late 1960s and 1970s. Janice Raymond's 1979 *The Transsexual Empire* typifies this position (Stryker, 2017)*,* arguing that trans people, "rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves" (Raymond, 1979, p.104) and in doing so threaten to violate and destroy the category of women. Raymond thus concludes, "that the problem of transsexualism would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence" (ibid, p. 178). Though often more muted than Raymond's rhetoric, mainstream anti-trans feminists' language mirrors the underlying ideas: Trans people's existence threatens to make women extinct or illegitimate, and thus the existence of trans people must be annihilated (Schotten, 2022).

This study relies on the work of black feminists (The Combahee River Collective, 1977) who built a theoretical apparatus attentive to the ways normative gendered expressions are built atop racial exclusion. The Combahee River Collective specifically point out that, "As black women [they] find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic" (ibid, p. 367). In rejecting biological determinism, they emphasize that gender can only be analyzed through a simultaneous examination of race and class. This approach will be mirrored in the on-going ethnography.

This study adopts an infrastructural lens in approaching the social and material aspects of the forum relationally (Star, 1999). Within this framework infrastructure is seen to emerge through interactions between human and non-human actors in a historically contingent context. These relations form a durable edifice in which affects (Bosworth, 2023), discourses, and desires (Larkin, 2013) are stored and produced. How Ovarit users' structure and are structured by the material infrastructure of the forum will be a key avenue of inquiry.

Method

To generate a clear picture of the material and ideological structure of Ovarit we conducted a walkthrough analysis informed by the work of Light et al (2018). Account creation on Ovarit is invite only, though viewing the site is open to the public. Given the ideological position of the users, and the authors positionality as a queer non-binary person, entering the community through subversion was not attempted. As such the research position adopted was that of a 'lurker' (Murthy, 2008), engaging through hidden and non-intrusive practices. The pages and links available on the site were viewed and detailed notes were taken of Ovarit's design and official discourses.

The subsequent digital ethnography (Caliandro, 2017) will be conducted in a similar fashion with the author assuming the role of a non-participatory lurker. Drawing from Winter and Lavis' proposal, the ethnography will center 'listening' as its central mode of engagement with the forum (Winter & Lavis, 2020). Listening in a digital environment entail paying close attention to the polyphonic ways users express themselves and actively places posts and comments within their broader context. Concretely, this involves daily interactions with the site ranging between 20-40 minutes. The front page

and top five posts, including their comments, of the past 24 hours will be screenshotted. Additionally, the first page of the daily featured circle, a rotating list which highlights one forum each day, will be screenshotted. Afterwards, the researcher will more deeply engage with the featured posts in the featured subforum, while taking detailed field notes (Emerson et al., 2011).

Preliminary Findings

Ovarit contains a total of 36 subforums, called "circles", covering a wide range of subjects from "Gardening" to "WomensHistory". However, the most popular and active circle by far is "GenderCritical", which is described as a place to "Discuss gender and Transgender ideology/politics from a critical, feminist perspective" through text posts and news articles. The forum is suffused with transphobia, systematically misgendering trans people and referring to them with the acronymic slurs TIM (Trans Identified Male) and TIF (Trans Identified Female). Much of the content involves linking to news articles of trans individuals allegedly committing crimes or violating social taboos, with a heavy focus is placed on trans women's presence in bathrooms or changing rooms. Anecdotes from users where trans people are perceived to engage in hostile or taboo behavior also feature heavily.

These types of posts form the core day to day activity on Ovarit. The sheer volume and repetition of trans-antagonistic posting creates a self-justifying and all-encompassing ideological lens, where trans existence in public or private poses an existential threat to cis-women. Echoing Raymond's *Transsexual Empire* (1979), trans people are portrayed as perverts who violate women's bodies and spaces. Trans identity is reduced to fetish, and fetishistic practices themselves are attacked as degenerate and harmful. These antagonistic posts are all framed in progressive and woman centric language, where the denigration of TGN expressions are transformed into an exultation of women.

Proposed Contributions

Following Berg & Schmalzer's recent call to, "explore and address how [Gender Critical] users are behaviorally conditioned towards extremism" (2024, p.3), the upcoming multi- month ethnography asks: How do anti-trans feminists materialize and routinize their historically contested ideological perspective within an online forum? It specifically places anti-trans feminism within historical debates over who counts as a 'woman', with particular attention to the contributions of black feminist (Combahee River Collective, 1977) and trans of color writers (Ellison et al., 2017). Through this it extends the work of scholars investigating how bigotry is reproduced in online spaces (Benjamin, 2019; Forberg, 2022; Massanari, 2015; Noble, 2018; Zahn & Lünenborg, 2024) and adds a material infrastructural dimension to ongoing discussions around anti-trans feminists rhetorical and ideological practices (Amery, 2023; Amery & Mondon, 2024; Kosse, 2025; Graff, 2022).

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