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“Parasitically Occupying Bodies”: Exploring Toxicifying Securitization in Anti-Trans and Genocidal Ideologies

LEAH OWEN 

What is the “internal logic” of extreme anti-minority ideologies? While phenomena such as dehumanization are widely recognized as playing an important role in legitimating mass violence, recent scholarship invites us to consider the impact of “toxification” and other securitizing and threat-framing discourses in motivating “defensive” action against minority groups. Using such a framework, this essay investigates anti-trans discourses that advocate for action against a supposed “trans epidemic”. It finds that notions of infiltration, corruption, and intimate danger – associated with “toxifying” genocidal discourse – are likewise core to anti-trans ideological formations, with many distinctive elements in common. Where the two differ, however, is in their links with material security politics – genocidal toxification readily aligns with more “traditional” national security politics, something that has not occurred with anti-trans discourse. The essay concludes by identifying the practical and theoretical lessons that trans and genocide studies have for each other, as well as a future research agenda.

INTRODUCTION

How do anti-trans ideologies “work” – and what do they “want”? When writers like Raymond (1994) discuss ‘morally mandating [trans identity] out of existence’ (178), consider laws to prevent its “procreation” (180), and confront the society that “spawned” it (185), comparisons with genocidal language are obvious. Raymond clearly wants to stop or eliminate transness – but what does that mean? What are the practical implications of such beliefs?

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In this paper, I explore these questions by employing recent insights in genocide studies, such as “toxification” (Neilsen 2015) and “radicalised security politics” (Leader Maynard 2022). These concepts encourage us to explore the “logics” of threat, danger, and violent “defensive” action in detail. Through such a comparison, I highlight key points of similarity and difference between anti-trans and genocidal ideologies. While not entirely alike, there are clear parallels in how both address perceived “threats”. I conclude by considering the practical and theoretical implications of such comparisons for both fields of study.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Not all prejudices are the same. Young-Bruehl (1996), in her *Anatomy of Prejudices*, makes this “critique of pure overgeneralization,” suggesting different negative group sentiments – antisemitism, racism, homophobia, classism and so on – operate in very different ways. This is not just the superficial recognition that each has its own history, material impacts, and socio-political basis, but something more deep-seated: that different prejudices hold distinctive hostilities toward target groups, based on their internal logics, and suggest different discriminatory actions accordingly. Those seeking to oppose such prejudices, she suggests, must understand them better to build a more effective response (547).

Young-Bruehl touches on trans issues, observing that “heterosexual transvestites, homosexual cross-dressers, and transsexuals arouse different anxieties [from each other, and from homophobia more broadly] ... but these have been little explored” (151). Thus, rather than seeing transphobia as “misogyny or homophobia with some additional elements,” we should consider its specific “logics” and practical implications. When we encounter assertions that trans people “parasitically occupy the bodies of the oppressed” (Gander 2018), enact “insidious and grotesque ... grooming process[es]” (Pullman 2021a), or demand that children be “sacrificed” to “appease” them (Turner 2017), Young-Bruehl’s work encourages us to think about what, *specifically*, these ideological statements do.

In doing so, Young-Bruehl prefigures a similar move in the study of genocide and ethnic conflict. Dehumanization – stigmatizing comparisons between the target group and non-human entities, making violence easier against them – is widely recognized, but, as Neilsen (2015) observes, such discourses contribute “nothing to the perception of killing a certain group being a necessity” and do not contain an “imperative to kill.” Calling enemy targets “packages” may make it easier to countenance violence

against them, reducing human moral obligations to them, but there is no essential moral duty to destroy packages. The same is not true if the enemy is akin to cancer, a poisonous serpent lurking in the home, or a typhus-bearing louse – a lethally threatening internal force that needs to be excised in its entirety. She characterizes these discourses, that portray the enemy as a non-human contagion or threat, as a distinct phenomenon – “toxification.”

Similar ideas can be found in the work of Savage (2013). He distinguishes “legitimizing” dehumanization (which paints its targets as less worthy of moral consideration) from “motivational” dehumanization (that encourages disgust and “defensive” action). If legitimizing prejudice explains “why it was acceptable to” enact large-scale violence (156), motivational dehumanization and prejudice explains “why we had to” do it. Some prejudices are “legitimizing,” seeing their targets as lowly, acceptable to mistreat or neglect. This might have serious implications, as moral inhibitions against direct or structural violence against targets are weakened. Savage points out that there needs to be something more to motivate *exterminatory* violence, however.

These two sets of observations about the nature of prejudices both enjoin their audiences to consider the internal logics of anti-minority discourses, and both identify a distinctive dynamic of “defensive” prejudice. They employ securitization – the discursive construction of an enemy as posing “an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion” (Balzacq 2010, 3), requiring an extreme response. Both, ultimately, are about *threat*; by investigating them together, we can better understand how they function.

Before beginning, two disclaimers are necessary.

I *do not* argue that modern-day anti-trans discourse is genocidal incitement, or that there is an imminent threat of violent extermination against trans people as a category (that is to say, violence similar to the Holocaust or Rwandan Genocide). Read this paper not as an urgent warning of imminent danger, but as an identification of worrying underlying resemblances, and a recognition of key points of difference.

I also recognize my positionality as a white nonbinary trans woman with class privilege, living and working in the United Kingdom. While the UK is notorious as a source of anti-trans ideology (Lewis 2019; John 2021), transphobic violence varies by country, and takes a range of direct and systemic forms, many of which I am not subject to, or am shielded from. Others – a gender variant refugee navigating difficult choices during asylum applications (Saleh 2020), a trans child at risk of being separated from their parents on spurious “child abuse” grounds (Levin 2022), a black trans woman facing multiple vectors of violence and oppression in the US prison system (McDonald 2017), or a Mexican trans woman killed as part of a pattern of transfemicide (Valencia and Zhuravleva 2019) – might take

could comfort from my characterization of violence against trans people as not organized, exterminatory, and categorical, or disagree entirely. In addition, I recognize the limitations of attempts to overly generalize concerns about violence against trans people worldwide (Nay 2019).

Nonetheless, I argue that examining anti-trans ideological projects and their political use of threat discourses is valuable. It might contribute to resistance against *everyday* non-exterminatory (but still intense, especially against already marginalized groups) violence, and provide warning of violence becoming categorical.

TOXIFICATION AND GENOCIDE

Toxifying genocidal incitement often identifies the enemy as “a toxic presence that must be cauterized and destroyed” (Neilsen 2015, 88–89). In its use of “loathsome” (Savage 2006, 29), “nightmarish” (23), and “horr[ify]ing” imagery, it does more than simply attach negative attributes to its targets. Key to this strategy is not just the imagery of harmful forces, but the *type* of threat evoked.

This is clearly demonstrated by well-known examples of genocidal rhetoric: tuberculosis bacteria in Nazi Germany (Chapoutot 2014, 92, 96), poisonous snakes in Hutu power rhetoric in Rwanda (Tirrell 2012, 176), or corrupting genetic material in the Republika Srpska (Sells 2002, 58). The specific details vary across different cases, but there are clear elements in common. Discourses did not depict an obvious, direct threat – enemies were not bears, lions, or dragons – but rather, a sneaky, contagious, insidious one. They infiltrated their way into intimate spaces, such as the local community, the home, or even human bodies, especially of children and other vulnerable or naïve populations (e.g. Hiemer 1940).

Leader Maynard suggests that this threat-framing can give rise to a form of “radicalized security politics.” By portraying (non-threatening) “civilians [as] insidious ... intolerable toxic threats requiring elimination,” it was possible “to sincerely persuade elites, rank and file agents, and public constituents” (Leader Maynard 2022, 105–6) of the “rational” need to enact mass violence against civilians and neighbors, characterizing them as a material threat and strategically valid target where they otherwise would not be.

This “strategic” side to toxification can be found across many genocides. For Nazis, antisemitic images of Jews could be linked to “Judeo-Bolshevism” and Germany’s geopolitical rivals (especially the USSR). Hutu power propagandists claimed that just as Tutsi “cockroaches”

infiltrated the home, so too did they serve as a fifth column secreted within Rwandan society. Čolović outlines how emotive Bosnian Serb discourses of the “penetration” of the wounded “Serbian national organism” could transition to a more strategic targeting of foreign enclaves and divisions in the Republika Srpska (Čolović 2002, 35). Several writers, like Suny (2004) and Ross (2014), come to similar conclusions about the mutually supporting relationship between emotions (especially fear and hatred) and “material” concerns.

In short, I suggest that discourses of toxification can become particularly dangerous when they align with more material “security issues.” All toxification is about danger, but, when combined with ideas of an urgent material or existential threat, both became more powerful. Accordingly, the following aspects seem to be key to mobilizing support for categorical, exterminatory violence:

1. The *nature* of the threat – invasive, corrupting, infectious.
2. The *location* of the threat – within one’s own valued spaces and boundaries, especially within one’s home or body.
3. The *targets* of the threat – the body, or vulnerable and naïve groups.
4. The necessary *response* to the threat – audiences needed to expel or destroy the target, often with great *urgency*, due to supposed tactical or strategic concerns about an imminent existential danger.

TOXIFICATION AND TRANSPHOBIA

While trans people have often been targeted as part of broader campaigns of violence, concerted efforts to violently eliminate trans people *as a category* are rare. As Brown observes, anti-trans movements may be “not so much going after trans people themselves, as going after the things that allow trans people to exist” (Brown 2022a). This differs considerably from the kind of exterminationist politics observed above. Why, then, might a concept from genocide studies be relevant here?

I focus on transphobia as a broader set of ideas about threat, danger, and the need for “defense,” while recognizing that other writers have focused on other aspects, such as culture wars (Cammaerts 2022), sexism (Serano 2007; Riggs 2014), and racism (Krell 2017). Given the limited space, I only provide a snapshot of this ideology and the policies arising from it, largely in the UK and USA.

Conservative religious movements offer specific condemnations of transness as a threat. Case, for example, discusses Catholic opposition to “gender ideology” (a broad concept encompassing the construction of gender roles as well as trans issues). She quotes Pope Benedict XVI, who likened the impact of gender ideology to “the nature of man and woman” to invasive loggers in the rainforest, bringing about “the self-destruction of man himself, and hence the destruction of God’s own work” (Case 2011, 811–812). While Francis I may support trans people as individuals (Case 2019, 651), he compared “gender theory” to nuclear conflict, Nazism, and “Herods that destroy, that plot designs of death, that disfigure the face of man and woman, destroying creation” (649). Individual tolerance notwithstanding, this shows a clear toxifying approach, portraying transness as an existentially threatening, child-murdering, mutilating, and despoiling presence.

Non-Catholic conservative movements offer similar perspectives. The Eagle Forum, a paleoconservative lobbying group, warned of “a transgender flood ... coming to our schools” to “sacrifice girls’ bodies” (Pullman 2021b). Commentary for the Heritage Foundation, a major conservative think-tank, suggested that the “permeat[ion]” of “insidious” ideologies of “woke gender” allowed the “mutilation” of children and the “undo[ing of] the family” (Kao 2021).

Nominally politically distinct – but often ideologically (Fitzsimmons 2019), and intellectually (Eagle Forum 2021, 24–26) adjacent – are anti-trans movements that claim a feminist opposition to transness. Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire* is a classic example of this, arguing that “all transsexuals rape women’s bodies” and violate women’s spaces through their “deceptive” entry to them (Raymond 1994, 104). Shrier’s *Irreversible Damage* (2020) repeatedly refers to youth transition as an “epidemic,” “craze,” or “virus” (while claiming that these are “technical,” not pejorative, terms [45]), and raises the specter of child abuse, suggesting that “the trans craze [is] seducing our daughters.” Gill-Peterson (2021) argues that Shrier’s arguments are carefully laid out “not to oppose themselves in an outright eradicator sense to trans life,” but are often taken up by more extreme groups, “laundering extremism” to the far right (as seen in the Eagle Forum brief cited above). Even so, there is clear use of toxifying ideas about transness as an infiltrating, contagious, corrupting threat to vulnerable girls, seducing and leading them astray through drugs and surgery.

The implications of this were voiced by journalist Helen Joyce, who argued that society needed to “reduc[e] or kee[p] down the number of trans people who transition ... the few[er] of those people there are, the better.” This, her interviewer suggested, was not “heartless,” but

compassionately (Staniland 2022) motivated by a desire “to try to limit the [broader social] harm” they both caused and suffered (Joyce 2022). Even so, such a reduction still represents a ‘defensive’ measure against a supposed source of threat.

In short, this framing of trans people closely follows the first three of the four aspects of toxification described above:

1. the **nature** of the threat (invasive, infectious, existential);
2. its **location** (protected spaces like schools and families, as well as victims’ bodies);
3. its **targets** (vulnerable people, often women and children).

While there is some urgency in **responding** to this “epidemic,” however, it lacks the obvious overlap with national security concerns.

What is the material impact of this ideology? The “trans-as-toxified threat” framing has had violent impacts – threats against gender-non-conforming people as “pedophiles” (Dodds 2022), the incorporation of transphobia into far-right movements like QAnon (Leveille 2021), or mutilations during murders of trans people as “generative assaults on the transgender body” to dissuade the reproduction of trans identity (Brown 2022b). Mainstream policy agendas, however, seldom clearly designate trans people as a threatening group who must be exterminated. Instead, activists and policymakers focus on attacking the social, legal, and institutional infrastructure that trans people depend on to exist *as trans people*.

I highlight two domains where this has occurred – in short, “healthcare,” and “existence in public.”

In the USA, 15 states (with 13 more pending) have passed measures limiting or banning access to trans-affirming healthcare for children (Conron et al. 2022). These bills claim to protect them from ghoulish or monstrous treatment, “sav[ing] adolescents from experimentation” (State of Arkansas 2021), or “protect[ing] minors from mutilation and sterilization” (State of Colorado 2020). In South Dakota, Fred Deutsch, sponsor of the since-defeated Vulnerable Child Protection Act, likened trans-affirming healthcare to Nazi doctors like Josef Mengele – “I’ve had family killed in Auschwitz, and I’ve seen the pictures of the bizarre medical experiments. I don’t want that to happen to our kids. And that’s what’s going on right now” (Dubnow 2020). In February 2022, in Texas, Governor Greg Abbott (2022) instructed child protective services to investigate gender-affirming healthcare for minors as abuse. Such efforts do not merely restrict access to trans healthcare, but also castigate it as a toxified, invasive threat.

Anti-trans healthcare is not limited to “defense” against transness, but also goes on the “attack” – as Rivera and Pardo put it, different forms

of “conversion therapy” aim to “extinguish atypical gender behaviors” among young people – a policy with highly negative impacts on victims (Rivera and Pardo 2022, 51–63; Jones, Power, and Jones 2022). In the UK, the government has specifically excluded anti-trans conversion therapy from a planned ban on LGB conversion therapy (Gallagher and Parry 2022).

Alongside healthcare-based attacks, anti-trans politics often also seeks to restrict the presence of trans people in public life. This is evident in attempts to limit trans people – especially trans women – from “single-sex spaces,” such as bathrooms and changing rooms. Given the intimate and personal nature of bathrooms, increased sensitivity to threats might be understandable (albeit debatably well-founded [Hasenbush, Flores, and Herman 2018]), but numerous writers note how such policies are often primarily aimed at marginalizing trans people (Patel 2017; Murib 2019). Tellingly for a “toxification”-based understanding of transphobia, one quantitative study by Vanaman and Chapman (2015) found that “despite the prevalence of harm rhetoric among those who support bathroom restrictions, opinions are probably more strongly driven by moral concerns rooted in disgust than by concerns about possible harm.” While bathroom-centric arguments are obvious examples of attempts to restrict trans existence in public spaces, other examples would also fit into this category, such as restrictions on teaching about trans and LGB issues (Smith 2022), or Trump-era anti-trans directives (such as a military service ban, and a draft memo to “define transgender out of existence”; Case highlights how both were linked to anti-“gender ideology” politics Case [2019, 639]).

Taken together, these illustrate examples of anti-trans policy. There is, however, no campaign of anti-trans categorical, direct, exterminatory violence in the UK or USA, possibly corresponding to the lack of immediacy, urgency, and existential threat across much anti-trans discourse, no matter how harmful or monstrous it may portray trans people as. Instead, this *partially* toxifying discourse seems associated with a broader, lower-intensity, structural set of actions to “reduc[e] or kee[p] down the number of trans people” or remove them *as trans people* from society altogether. This eradication does not involve extermination, but broader cultural/legal/social action – something rendered especially possible by the fact that trans people can be kept in, or returned to, “the closet.”

IMPLICATIONS

This paper has identified key points of similarity and difference between anti-trans and genocidal toxifying discourse. What can these

two disciplines – trans and genocide studies – learn from such encounters?

For genocide studies, it offers a possible case study of toxification below the level of genocidal conflict. Anti-trans ideologies identify trans people as an insidious threat to vulnerable communities, inspiring moral panics against them. Something is missing, however, that prevents these from escalating into extreme securitized responses to an “existential threat.” I suggest this may largely be the difficulties involved in unifying “dehumanizing anti-trans” and “national security discourses” in ways typically seen in genocidal violence. As such, anti-trans politics could be useful for the examination of “negative” (or “partial”) cases of genocidal threat-framing, as Straus’ (2015) approach encourages.

For trans studies, the notion that “dehumanizing anti-trans” and “national security” discourses are difficult to unify, meaning that certain forms of genocidal violence are unlikely, is cold comfort. It does little to address individual/stochastic lethal violence, or mass deaths from diseases of despair, or indeed non-lethal but still misery-inducing forms of marginalization, oppression, and discrimination, exacerbated by intersections with race, class, and disability-based factors.

Nonetheless, I suggest that this approach can be useful for trans studies.

First, it suggests immediate priorities for many trans struggles. If attempts to “reduce or remove” trans populations are likely to occur via social invisibilization, stigma, removal of support, and discouraging transition, then it makes sense to focus on these everyday material harms, rather than devote all attention to a theoretical future of “being rounded up in camps.” I do not dismiss these possibilities – anti-trans ideology has consolidated rapidly, and might further radicalize – but suggest that paying attention to the *form* of anti-trans prejudice and ideology encourages more “everyday” material socioeconomic solidarity and action.

Secondly, it suggests circumstances under which such categorical anti-trans violence *might* become more likely. Successful issue-linking of anti-trans ideology and national security politics – in other words, toxifying full securitization – should be a cause for significant concern and counter-mobilization.

Threat-framing “defensive” violence, that portrays trans people as a threat to the material security or moral wellbeing of the nation, might be a warning sign. In Nazi Germany, “transvestites” were targeted because of their supposed threat to natalist or nationalistic ideals. They were grouped with “enemies of positive population growth” (Grau and Schoppmann 2012, 108), and risked “the life or death of a people; world power or insignificance” (Himmler, quoted in Chapoutot 2018, 230). Stigmatization of trans

people – especially trans people of color – as a moral or criminal threat may not lead to systematic exterminatory violence, but has served as grounds for use of mass arrests of Brazilian *travestis* (Mitchell 2016), a nucleus for fascist organizing and violence during the Argentine “Dirty War” (Rizki 2020), or the creation of “exclusionary spaces, zones of ‘zero tolerance,’ and prostitution-free zone[s]” described by Edelman (2011) in the US.

Securitizing imagery presenting trans identity as an infiltrating foreign force might also be an early warning sign. White nationalist movements already link trans people to supposed conspiracies of Jewish billionaires (Lorber and Greenesmith 2021), while, as Nuñez-Mietz notes, securitization of LGBT “foreign infiltration” and “moral terrorism” is deployed in Hungary and Russia (Nuñez-Mietz 2019). If arguments around “trans people as pathogen-like subversive tools of malign outsiders” were to gain state-level influence, this might be a sign of incipient toxification, and cause for alarm.

This paper has only been able to sketch a limited introduction to the overlap of trans and genocide studies, highlighting some of the lessons they have for each other. More detailed research could offer more systematic evaluation of the material impacts of anti-trans politics and widen the scope beyond the largely Anglocentric nature of this brief study.

To conclude, genocidal ideologies often describe a toxic, contagious, invasive threat, and tie this to urgent “radicalized security politics,” to “justify” mass violence. Anti-trans ideology bears distinct similarities with this process, but, at present, typically lacks the “urgency” that allows genocidal ideology to marshal violent state, security, military, or paramilitary forces. Instead, the “partial” securitization of trans populations has given rise to an environment in which the removal or reduction of trans populations is pursued via socioeconomic, medical, and institutional means. Thus, scrutinizing the specific “logics” of prejudice can help better understand them and formulate a response.

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