

# Decolonizing Trans/Gender Studies?

## *Teaching Gender, Race, and Sexuality in Times of the Rise of the Global Right*

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**Abstract** In this article, the author argues that a decolonial perspective on gender means conceptualizing it as always already trans. The object of investigation is gender as a category and gender studies as a field of knowledge. To discuss what decolonizing trans/gender studies in Europe could mean, the author aims to bring different strands together that have been held apart so far: resistance against global attacks on gender studies, resistance against transphobic feminism, and the “decolonising the curriculum” movement in the United Kingdom. A critical focus on Eurocentric knowledge and truth claims means to define Europe as a complex set of geopolitical, historical, and epistemological processes and not just as a neutral location. At British universities, a mostly student-led movement has started to emerge that fights for decolonizing higher education. This movement is inspired by transnational student movements like Rhodes/Fees Must Fall in South Africa and calls for challenging racist, colonialist, nationalist, and neoliberal paradigms in knowledge production by addressing both issues of epistemology and access to higher education. Applying central political claims of the “decolonising the curriculum” movement, the author explores potentials and challenges of the task of decolonizing trans/gender studies in Europe and the global North. The author’s intervention opens up a discussion on how to conceptualize knowledge on transgender with a central focus on decolonial and transnational perspectives.

**Keywords** teaching trans/gender studies, decolonising the curriculum, feminist/lesbian transphobia, critical race theory, gender ideology, antigender

**I**n this article, I argue that a decolonial perspective on gender means conceptualizing the category of gender as always already trans. My object of investigation is gender as a category and gender studies as a field of knowledge. This article discusses a range of material, from media representations to academic debates and activist interventions. To carve out what decolonizing trans/gender studies in Europe could mean, I aim to bring different strands together that have been held apart so far: resistance against global attacks on gender studies,

resistance against transphobic feminism, and the “decolonising the curriculum”<sup>1</sup> movement in the United Kingdom.

Part 1 revisits global anti-gender attacks in the context of the rise of the far right from a decolonial and trans perspective—“trans”<sup>2</sup> as in both transgender and transnational. Bringing an explicitly transgender-focused perspective to the debate, I analyze attacks on trans people and gender studies by transphobic feminists who call themselves “gender-critical” or “radical feminist” and show how transphobic feminists are aligned with masculinist anti-gender and far-right anti-immigration rhetoric. Moreover, acknowledging the role (binary and heteronormative) gender plays in right-wing discourses, I argue that European/Western gender studies needs to address questions of Eurocentrism, colonialism, and racism in order to investigate their own understanding of gender as a category (Méndez 2015). As I will show, this leads to locating gender studies as part of the epistemological project of decolonizing academic knowledge production.

In the second part of the article, I bring these thoughts together with the “decolonising the curriculum” movement in the United Kingdom. At British universities, a mostly student-led movement has started to emerge that fights for decolonizing higher education. This intervention gets transnational inspiration from the Rhodes/Fees Must Fall student movement in South Africa (Xaba 2017; Khan 2017) and calls for challenging racist, colonialist, nationalist, and neoliberal paradigms in knowledge production by addressing both issues of epistemology and access to higher education. The movement, however, has mostly been distorted in media representations as misguided identity politics. Applying central political claims of decolonising the curriculum, I explore potentials and challenges of the task of decolonizing trans/gender studies in Europe and the global North. With this, my intervention opens up a discussion on how to conceptualize knowledge on transgender with a central focus on decolonial and transnational perspectives. Furthermore, I see the attacks on the decolonising movement as part of global attacks on emancipatory fields of knowledge production like gender studies and queer- and transfeminist scholarship. In this vein I suggest that meaningful resistance against anti-gender argumentations needs to adopt a decolonial perspective.

While my analysis focuses on the UK, many of the claims of this article are relevant for European gender studies and the conceptualization of trans/gender in the global North. As *TSQ* is a US-based journal, my intervention also contributes to making transgender studies in and from locations that are “not the US”<sup>3</sup> into generalist knowledge production. Whereas my approach stresses the importance of going beyond US-centric scholarship,<sup>4</sup> it is important to keep in mind that intervening in US scholarly dominance and methodological nationalism from a European perspective cannot mean recentering Europe or mourning its peripheral state in comparison to the United States. In addition, I argue that to

decolonize scholarship and teaching it is not enough to refer back to antiracist knowledge productions from the global North that intervene in the racialized premises of Western nation-states. This undertaking is crucial for teaching trans/gender studies in Europe and in the global North, but at the same time, transnational knowledge productions, especially from the global South, need to be part of a decolonized curriculum.

I work in gender studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and I understand myself to be a critical Europeanist who investigates how the understanding of what Europe even is is constituted by migrations and diasporas. At the beginning of each course, I point out that it is important to position Europe as an object of study, especially at a school in the heart of a nostalgic European empire that in some cases sees “Africa, Asia, and the Middle East” (it is the School of “Oriental and African” Studies after all) as its object and raw material. Gurminder Bhambra (2009: 2) underlines how a focus on Europe from a postcolonial perspective can do the work of deconstructing Eurocentrism. Ideally, Europe is analyzed as the product of transnational and global processes and not seen as a neutral location. Applied to the teaching of European trans/gender studies, this claim encourages us to look at the potentials and pitfalls of trans/gender conceptualizations through both Western antiracist interventions and knowledge productions from the global South.

### **Part 1: Overlaps of Anti-gender and Transphobic Gender-Critical Rhetoric**

In recent years, right-wing discourse globally has targeted gender studies, feminism, and LGBT rights, using *anti-gender* and *anti-genderism* and accusing their targets of “gender ideology” or “genderism.” The term *gender ideology* especially assumes that gender studies and queer, trans, and feminist movements produce an ideology that attacks and opposes the majority of the population, while heterosexuality and a stable gender binary are seen as unideological and natural (Corrêa 2018; Corrêa, Paternotte, and Kuhar 2018; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Grzebalska, Kováts, and Petó 2017; Bracke and Paternotte 2016; Hark and Villa 2015). The landscape of gender studies bashing is complex. Religious and nationalist agents like the Pope or Brazil’s far-right president, respectively, play a part alongside religious, conservative, and far-right publics opposing gay marriage, feminism, and women’s rights. They reaffirm the importance of assuming and perpetuating a stable sex/gender alignment with often overlapping but sometimes competing argumentations on gender as a concept: it is demonized as feminist or antifeminist, as colonizing or as postcolonial deconstruction gone too far, as unscientific or as a secular attack on the traditional family, as misguided identity politics or as destroying proper natural identities. Often, emancipatory analyses of power relations that are rooted in the fields of postcolonial, queer/trans/

feminist studies and antifascist traditions of thought get appropriated and used in twisted ways. Feminists are called “feminazis,” and attackers often see their “freedom” jeopardized or construct themselves as the people’s voice against elitist gender studies/feminist dictatorship (Bracke and Paternotte 2016). Repetitive claims that can be found in supranational anti-gender argumentations are frequently tied to religion or nationalisms and insist on traditional family values and a natural sex/gender alignment. Separating gender from sex, so the story goes, and indeed “inventing” gender as a flexible concept, endangers the “truth” of the body and biology and, with this, puts the unquestionably heterosexual family and the nation in danger. Some see gender studies as a pedophilic sexualization of children, as an attempt to steal “natural” and biologically determined identities from men and women, and as either unscientific or blasphemy. Anti-gender voices often construct themselves as the marginal or the oppressed and vulnerable.<sup>5</sup>

As Elzbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff (2018: 800) assert, in debates that are framed as antiestablishment resistance, the concept of gender gets equated with neoliberalism. Meanwhile, Sarah Bracke and David Paternotte (2016: 148) note that the Catholic church associates *gender ideology* with “ISIS” and constructs itself with reference to its Latin American pope as a postcolonial church for the people that promotes religious freedom. What is important to pin down here is that some strands of feminism join the anti-gender choir led by the Catholic church, populist politicians, and right-wing or conservative publics, which complicates the question of the relationship between gender studies and feminism (Bracke and Paternotte 2016; Garbagnoli 2016).

In the following, I will show that to effectively understand attacks on gender studies and feminism, we need to draw connections to transphobic attacks on trans people in the name of feminism that accuse gender and gender studies of harming “women.” At the same time, we need to tackle racist and migratist discourses that often accompany these argumentations.<sup>6</sup>

### *Lesbian/Feminist Transphobia*

As a concrete example, I turn to recent incidents of lesbian/feminist transphobia in the UK, to point out that this phenomenon uses the same vocabulary and logics as right-wing anti-gender argumentation. While the latter openly attacks feminists and queer people (and within this lesbians), some lesbians and feminists eagerly use the same strategy to attack trans people, queer and trans theory, and—a sign that the fight is epistemological—poststructuralism. Moreover, as I argue, we are witnessing an overlap between transphobic positions and misogyny, racism, and migratism, a simplistic focus on sexual violence, and a rewriting of feminism as a single-issue-project (Tudor 2019). Let me be clear in outlining the tensions and paradoxes here: we are dealing with anti-gender attacks that target

gender studies and feminists, and at the same time we are confronted with transphobic attacks that target gender studies and trans people in the name of feminism. The latter explicitly thinks of itself as gender-critical feminism. This means that feminist transphobia can be seen as a specific conjuncture of anti-genderism.

To highlight these connections, I discuss a concrete topos of feminist transphobic argumentation that at the moment is very much at the center of public debate in the UK: the construction of trans people in general and trans women in particular as sexual predators. For example, on May 8, 2018, Channel 4 hosted a live debate on national TV called “Genderquake,” which gave room to voices that demonize the intended reform to the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) in the UK. If successful, the reform would legally intervene in existing restrictive regulations, help stop pathologizing trans people, and take away the pressure of having to provide evidence of our gendered identities. The transphobic argumentation, however, understands the reform as fostering sexual violence. Self-declared feminist panelists on “Genderquake” accused the reform of making it possible for “men” to pretend they were women to commit sexual violence in women’s spaces. The speakers who reproduced these ideas were cheered on by members of the audience who shouted “penis” whenever a trans woman on the panel spoke. This expression of feminist essentialism in the gross form of transphobia amounts to a widespread discourse with academic and public dimensions. For example, a similar view was expressed a few months earlier at SOAS, my place of work, on the union e-mail list, a traditionally leftist organ. On March 8, 2018, under the heading “Happy Women’s Day,” one of the e-mails, written by a colleague not personally known to me, stated that a reformed GRA in the UK should rather be labeled the “sexual predator’s charter” because it would allow men to self-identify as women and enter women-only spaces to commit sexual violence and harassment. The argument is based on a form of transphobia that Talia Bettcher (2013: 235) calls “the basic denial of authenticity,” “whereby trans women are identified as ‘really men.’”

A prominent lesbian-feminist example that explicitly combines transphobia with attacks on gender studies is Sheila Jeffreys’s (2014) book *Gender Hurts*. Written as a polemic rant, she claims that both trans people and gender studies scholars should be faulted for reproducing essentialist concepts of gender. This accusation is utterly problematic, of course, given the fact that Jeffreys’s approach relies on “sex” as a biological, eternal, and universal category—which is the cornerstone of essentialism.<sup>7</sup> Gender studies, queer theory, and post-structuralism, in Jeffreys’s view, are responsible for all sorts of attacks on feminism: they have “overwhelmed” feminism (36), have made gender into a “moveable feast” (5), have “assaulted” feminism, and have always been in opposition to

lesbian feminism (41). Jeffreys mourns the disappearance of the category lesbian, which she thinks has been given up by young women in favor of genderqueer, and blames gender studies for this phenomenon as some sort of brainwashing program to strip lesbians of their stable female, lesbian identity (47). Temporality is interesting here. Jeffreys makes this claim as if there ever was the kind of feminism she longs for without queers (versus lesbian), trans people, trans women, and genderqueer people. There never was—the vocabulary might have changed, and media debates might have made transgender more publicly recognized, which enables more people to identify and name themselves as such and makes (certain) trans people more visible and therefore potentially more “attackable” and vulnerable (Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton 2017; Malatino 2016).

Similarly, in the United States in January 2019, a group of radical feminists appeared at a panel titled “The Inequality of the Equality Act: Concerns from the Left” at an event hosted by the Heritage Foundation—a conservative, right-wing think tank that has a long history of lobbying against LGBTQ rights, feminism, and immigration and advocates against gender theory (Yenor 2017). The foundation proclaims on its website that the sex/gender distinction is a “cultural war” that can be traced back to second wave feminism, and which interrupts the “confidence in the very idea of man and woman” and destroys the family. Antifeminist, queer- and transphobic rhetoric come together with an overall focus on anti-immigration, one of the key concerns of the foundation. Scott Yenor, a right-wing political scientist, states on the website, “Transgender theories are part of the feminist goal of a sexual revolution that eliminates the proprietary family and celebrates non-monogamous sexual experiences.”<sup>8</sup>

At the panel itself, self-proclaimed leftist feminists participated in an event organized by an openly antifeminist, anti-immigration think tank, endorsing its right-wing politics and emptying the word *left* of its meaning. Feminist transphobia is not a phenomenon exclusive to the UK, as the long history of TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) attacks on trans people and especially trans women in the United States shows.<sup>9</sup> The UK debate both informs and is informed by US-based feminist transphobia. However, it becomes clear that in both contexts, transphobic feminists and far-right/religious argumentations are concerned with the alignment of sex/gender. Transphobic feminists not only copy the language of the far right but are also part of far-right discourse.

#### *The Investment in a Stable Sex/Gender Alignment*

As a response to lesbian/feminist transphobia, Sandy Stone (1987) explains attacks on trans women as “morality tales and origin myths about telling the ‘truth’ of gender.” Reproducing similar ideas about the “truth” of the sexed body, a recent post in the UK-based group Mayday4Women (n.d.) claims, “Transgenderism is

currently one of the biggest threats to feminism in the UK.” This supposedly radical feminist rhetoric overlaps with religious anti-gender rants, like those uttered by, for example, the Pope or the Spanish cardinal Cañizares Llovera, who sees gender ideology as “the biggest threat to humanity” (Giménez 2016). Most of these transphobic and anti-gender-studies incidents unite in attacking Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2007), in which Butler questions a fixed subject of feminism and critically investigates *women* as an absolute and essential category. With this, Butler shows that sex has always been gender: rather than a social role attached on top of a natural body, it is conventionalizations of gender that make sex appear to be a given, stable category. This insight, perhaps unsurprisingly, still seems to be so radical that it is not only the biggest threat to humanity for the Catholic church but also the biggest threat to feminism for some feminists. While the “threat to humanity” position ties ideas of humanness back to the binary oppositions of Western modernity, the latter position, ironically, ties feminism as well to the very same cementation of binary oppositions. With this in mind, I argue that to seriously analyze global antifeminist attacks on gender studies, we need to extend the focus to the explicitly feminist attacks on trans people and on trans- and queer-feminist knowledge productions.

Using a simplistic understanding of sexual violence to legitimize feminist transphobia is not a new phenomenon (for a more detailed discussion, see Tudor 2019). The strategy of accusing trans people of sexual violence echoes a discourse that externalizes sexual violence as taking place somewhere else, outside the West, or that is ascribed to migrants, Black and Brown persons, or Muslims—all of whom are constructed as the eternal migrants who can never belong in the Western nation-state (see Haritaworn 2012; El-Tayeb 2012; Tudor 2018). With this ascription, sexual violence gets displaced to an elsewhere; and the imagined “here,” in this case white heterosexuality (or some forms of homonormative sexuality) built on sex/gender alignment, becomes the pure place free of sexual violence that needs borders in order to be protected from the phantasmatic outside. What to do with this apparent certainty expressed by some of “knowing” the perpetrator of sexual violence? Trans women. Trans men. Gender-nonconforming people.<sup>10</sup> Migrant men. Muslim men. Black men. The recurring topos of externalizing sexual violence and ascribing it to the pervert other is shared in transphobic, Islamophobic, migratist, and racist debates. It is the idea that sexual violence takes place somewhere else and will be invited in through migration and weak border controls—and trans/gender studies, LGBT rights, and legislation. This allows for a displaced debate on sexual violence in lieu of addressing it in the realm of the normative of gender and nation, where it actually regularly happens without the need of importing it from the outside.

What is also important to note about these externalizations of sexual violence is that they come in what I call complex cross-fadings, in ever-shifting

shapes that require shifting forms of resistance. For example, Islamophobic ideas of Muslim men as the sexual perpetrators can come in the form of homo- or transnationalism (Puar 2007; Tudor 2017)—in the name of “protecting” vulnerable queer and trans people from queer- and transphobia imported from the phantasmatic outside the nation. Similarly, in transphobic narratives, it is vulnerable women or lesbians that need to be protected from trans people. While right-wing anti-gender polemics, in the style of Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, attack feminist, trans, and queer people alike and explicitly deny the existence of sexual violence against women (Prandini Assis and Ogando 2018), self-proclaimed gender-critical feminists use simplistic understandings of sexual violence as the main argument of their transphobia.

As a further example of the twisted argumentations in the anti-gender debates, some strands of anti-gender in the global South and Eastern Europe see gender studies, feminism, and LGBT rights as a colonizing import from the West, as, for example, Kapyka Kaoma (2016) points out. Very often this idea is perpetuated by the Catholic church and the Pope. Bracke and Paternotte (2016: 150) show that “this postcolonial discourse positions the Global South in general, and Africa in particular, as a location where family relations are both more ‘authentic’ and more in line with Catholic doctrine.” While they open up important points, Bracke and Paternotte do not fully elaborate on the implications of the use of *postcolonial* here. We need to be clear that the Catholic church appropriates the term *postcolonial*. In fact, Catholic officials suggest that the modern binary heteronormative sex/gender system that was imported through colonialism, as many approaches show (e.g., Lugones 2007), is an “authentic” non-Western one. Christian missionaries and international right-wing Christian money flows (Kaoma 2012) play an important role in stabilizing the colonial sex/gender/sexuality nexus in the global South. Therefore, it is more than hypocritical to claim the postcolonial position as inherent to the Catholic church. It is certainly important to join Kaoma in criticizing this simplistic Christian propaganda, but how can a decolonized gender studies project avoid falling into the trap of understanding gender as a (neo)colonial category solely as a call for a return to an imagined precolonial gender-free or nonhomophobic authenticity? As Rahul Rao (2014: 180) points out, liberal studies like Kaoma’s (2012) offer “a valuable corrective to the neo-Orientalist view of an essential and irredeemable ‘African homophobia’” while at the same time problematically construct both African clergy and publics as operated by Western remote control without the capacity for their own agendas beyond (neo)colonial power.

I argue that it is the investment in a stable sex/gender alignment that all these examples have in common (see also Hemmings 2021). More precisely, I have sought to unpack and bring into connection different agents that see



a deconstructed gender concept as a threat. What seem to be contradictions in their discourses is in fact is deeply related. With these interconnections in mind, in the next subsection I will investigate what a postcolonial/decolonial understanding of gender might entail and the ways it destabilizes the very category of gender and therefore bears the potential of transing it. Finally, I discuss what “decolonizing trans/gender studies” could mean in practice.

## **Part 2: Decolonizing the Curriculum**

### *Student Activism*

Decolonizing higher education is not only a question of representation but also a broader project that looks at issues of representation, access, and epistemology alike (Bhambra, Nişancıoğlu, and Gebrial 2018; Decolonising SOAS Working Group 2018; Sabaratnam 2019). Challenging the traditional curriculum is an intellectual project that changes the way we think of knowledge production, concepts, and history, and it will have an impact on student demographics and the composition of the classroom. Especially the student-led interventions across the UK (for example at SOAS, Cambridge, and Goldsmiths)<sup>11</sup> and transnationally are often radically intersectional (Olufemi 2015; Xaba 2017; Khan 2017). In many cases they are founded and sustained by women/queer/trans of color, migratized, and working-class students who point out the complex overlaps of racism and migratism with other power relations and connect epistemology and representation with questions of access/nonaccess to higher education. In relation to the South African movement, Khadija Khan (2017: 114) remarks that “black queer womxn and nonbinary people are creating both epistemological and material possibilities for expanding liberation.”

A lot of the UK media representation on the decolonising the curriculum movement is hostile.<sup>12</sup> Not only the right-wing press, but also many liberals are outraged and accuse the movement of essentialism, antimale, antiwhite, and anti-Western resentments, and even racism. Knowledge, as the argument goes, is neutral and gets deneutralized and reracialized through the decolonising movement. It is actually the white English people who are the colonized, and the imposition of decolonizing is the actual colonialism. To scholars who are used to anti-gender argumentations and this type of gaslighting, these accusations will seem very familiar. However, academics like Meera Sabaratnam (2019), who is a vocal representative in the theorizing of the decolonising the curriculum movement, have partly gained access to mainstream media platforms to advocate for the cause. As I want to stress, it is mainly the students whose interventions assure and maintain the radical character of decolonising the curriculum. Radical Residency, a SOAS student group, squatted in an empty building of the British Museum, only a few blocks away from SOAS, and converted it temporally into a

social center in 2018, during the UK-wide lecturers' strike over pensions. They not only supported their striking teachers with actions and information campaigns on campus (and suffered extended verbal and physical abuse from both faculty members and fellow students for their activism), but also raised broader questions of knowledge production and radical democracy, and of the connections between discrimination, dispossession, and resistance (Radical Residency n.d.). Unsurprisingly, the students who stuck their necks out were confronted with racist, misogynist, and homophobic harassment and online violence. The attacks are of a similar viciousness as the anti-gender attacks, and, as I want to stress, the students and academics who are involved in the decolonising movement are not not-gender studies scholars either. These students bring their amazing politics and knowledge productions to the classroom, and they take queer- and trans-feminist tools from the classroom back to their activisms and knowledge productions. Radical Residency points out that accepting the status quo of a racist, sexist, migratist, classist, ableist, queer- and transphobic higher education system is deeply entrenched with the histories that allow the British Museum to represent stolen goods as neutral objects and to detach their stories from the violence of colonial conquest (Radical Residency 2018). And this is connected to the theories and epistemologies, the stories told at universities that normalize these violent pasts and presents. It is these narratives that the decolonising movement wants to see changed, deconstructed, questioned, and transformed. Importantly, the student activism makes clear that decolonizing does not overlap with nationalist respectability projects—it is not a global Britain we should be fighting for; it is about tearing down nationalist, colonialist, and imperialist paradigms.

#### *Teaching Trans/Gender Studies in Europe/the Global North*

What happens to the category of gender, to the question what gender even is—and with this, what transing gender could be—if we take seriously the commitment to decolonize higher education and to challenge the Eurocentric/white canon? This endeavor can indeed be challenging in terms of how to teach new or relatively less cited work, how to translate concepts and terms, and how to engage with the traveling/nontraveling of theories. Zethu Matebeni and Thabo Msibi (2015) remind us of the difficulty of transnationalizing terms and the variability of the dominant meaning that is attached to them—it is not a coincidence that terms like *queer* and *trans*, with their US-centric history, are seen to be universal, while other terms from non-US, non-Western, non-English-language communities are seen as specific. Therefore, when teaching transnational gender studies, there is no easy way out when trying to find a common language of solidarity, affinity, and critical positionality. This is why Nivedita Menon (2009) analyzes gender as a contested concept that needs to be dramatically deconstructed every

time we use it, and Howard Chiang (2012: 10) remarks that the “most radical approach to developing something that we might want to call Chinese transgender studies is perhaps by leaving behind Western-derived meanings of gender altogether.”

These challenges to gender as a category change knowledge paradigms and open up various ways of transing. I argue that decolonial understandings of gender actually make it hard to think of gender studies as not already trans—*trans-ing* gender, *trans-national*, and in *trans-lation*. At the same time, this points toward understanding the relation of cisgender to transgender as a much more complex one than a simplistic binary approach that does not take into account racialization and transnational translation of concepts. Investigating the role of racialization for the emergence of gender makes clear that colonial ideas of gender rely on the fact of having a gender, being one of two genders, as necessary for being recognized as human (Spillers 1987). Eva Hayward and Che Gossett (2017: 18) read Hortense Spillers as an account on “how blackness is trans/gender trouble.” With this in mind, it becomes evident that to trans gender, to go beyond gender, if you already have a gender or are a gender, is different than transing gender from a position of contested gender, un-gender. This also shows the importance of gender in global discussions and why seemingly differently positioned figures like transphobic feminists, the Pope, conservative publics, or neo-Nazis are invested in stabilizing and holding on to normative gender. But it also means something for theorizing transgender. Building on Spillers, C. Riley Snorton (2017) carves out how trans identity, the fungibility of gender, has a racial history. He questions traditions of thought that hold transness and blackness (and sex, gender, and race) apart and asks, “What pasts have been submerged and discarded to solidify—or, more precisely indemnify—a set of procedures that would render blackness and transness as distinct categories of social valuation?” (7).

Many feminist, queer, trans, and critical race approaches make clear that the concept of sex/gender is a colonial one (e.g., Carby [1982] 1997; Lugones 2007; Méndez 2015; Snorton 2017). This means we cannot even understand what gender is if we do not investigate the ways in which it is constructed through racialization. Feminist and queer knowledge production on diasporas, like, for example, Michelle Wright’s (2004), points out that Black male efforts to introduce blackness into modernity often reproduce normative gender, male privilege, and heterosexuality within the process. Snorton (2017: 12) refers to Christina Sharpe’s approach to tell a different story of “Black modernity” in which “black gender is . . . open to manipulation and rearrangement.” Xhercis Méndez and Yomaira Figueroa’s (2019: 71) point out that “to dismiss the critique of patriarchy out of hand as ‘Western,’” leaves no room for addressing sexism and homo- and transphobia within diasporic communities.

The same is true for many decolonial nation-building processes in the global South. One example in terms of a heteronormative and masculinist decolonial knowledge production is Frantz Fanon. Rao (2014: 183) points out that Fanon associates homosexuality with whiteness and underlines that this problematically turns nonwhite queers in the global South into the objects of the decolonial nation-state. “Having experienced colonialism as emasculation,” Rao explains, widespread consequences are nationalist attempts to “recuperate a putatively lost African male virility through violence against” women and queer people. The violent gender and sexuality norms rooted in Western colonialism cannot be equated with those working in decolonial nationalism, and a decolonized curriculum that addresses both also needs to find ways to teach their different histories and meanings. “Challenging Fanon” is therefore what Xaba (2017:96) suggests in order to push back against the erasure of “radical Black feminists, queers and student activists living with disabilities” in the dominant, masculinist representation of the Rhodes/Fees Must Fall movement. Queer and transfeminist scholars like Zethu Matebeni (2013), B Camminga (2019), Stella Nyanzi (2013), and Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003) intervene in the idea of precolonial, gender-free (and with this sexism-, homophobia-, and transphobia-free) utopia, and at the same time point out the ways in which Western concepts of gender, rights, and development are problematic and reproduce colonial hierarchies. It becomes evident that the violence of Western colonization and the violence of the decolonial nation-state are not equivalent or symmetrical. When it comes to analyzing these complexities, Rao’s (2014: 196) knowledge production makes us sit with the contradictions and refuses simplistic answers that either romanticize or demonize the global South while trying to deconstruct the “locations of homophobia.”

How can dominant Western ways of doing trans/gender studies be criticized and interrupted? Or, in other words, how can gender, queer, and trans studies teachers and scholars based in the global North make sure that their scholarship does not hurt? Too often, Western(-based) scholarship and teaching still is a methodologically nationalist, monolithic field ignorant of racism that engages in wanting to “save” women, queer, or trans people elsewhere or randomly appropriates or romanticizes knowledge productions from the global South or marginalized contexts. Moreover, how can we prevent the decolonising movement from becoming the neoliberal academia’s next buzzword, emptied of any critical content (Tuck and Yang 2012; Mehta 2019)?<sup>13</sup> And what to do with the already beginning tendency of institutions trying to make “decolonising the curriculum” into a brand to attract student-consumers? I see the endeavor of decolonizing higher education as a necessarily multilayered and collective process that pays attention to gaps, complex contradictions, and differently positioned complexities. In my view, any decolonization must bridge diaspora approaches

with approaches from the global South, connect indigenous studies with migration studies, and question the paradigm of the nation-state. Moreover, feminist, queer, and trans perspectives and their deconstructions of gender and sexuality are crucial for decolonizing epistemologies and spaces.

Any inclusion of new knowledge production—be it queer or trans or challenging the Western canon or all of this—depends on putting a lot of work into reading and getting familiar with the field. All these approaches make the claim that one cannot pick and single out knowledge productions and place them as add-ons to one’s curriculum, but one needs to become familiar with an entire field and the complex discussions and contradictory approaches within it. To avoid what Diana Courvant (2011), Kate Drabinski (2011), and Hil Malatino (2015) call a “special guest approach” in relation to trans inclusion into the women’s studies canon, a decolonized, transnational, and trans-/queer-feminist gender studies curriculum ideally challenges paradigms of knowledge production. However, the challenge, especially for scholars positioned in critical European studies and privileged by whiteness (like me), is how to find these knowledge productions and how to actually use them in ways that are not appropriating. Madina Tlostanova (2017: 28) suggests looking at decolonial art to rethink the “body-political” and “geo-political” in order to prevent “Western theory always taking the default position.” It is not enough to assign that one text that is the easiest to get a hold of and make it into the authentic example (Tuck and Yang 2012). For example, Bakare-Yusuf (2003) points out the ways Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí’s (1997) claim that the “Yorubas don’t do gender” is based on heteronormative assumptions on social reality and its relation to language. Yet it is still only Oyèwùmí’s approach that ends up on the syllabi in order to introduce *the* “authentic” African position. Furthermore, following Awino Okech (2018), it is important to assign African feminist knowledge production not only for teaching focused on Africa but also as generalist expertise in gender and queer studies.

### Conclusion

This article does not only aim to point out that there is no thinking about the question what gender is without investigating the role of racism, colonialism, and nationalism for the emergence of gender. It also provides an important argument for decolonizing the curriculum: we need to decolonize trans/gender studies if we want to begin to learn to understand what their subject even is. Moreover, gender studies and queer- and transfeminist approaches can give the decolonising movement an important theoretical foundation.

I suggest—maybe a bit provocatively—to understand decolonized gender studies as always already trans. The concept of trans, as I use it here, refuses a fixed meaning and centers decolonial, critical race, and transnational approaches. As I have argued, a transnational critical perspective on gender, feminist transphobia,

and attacks on gender studies leads to the question of how to decolonize Western/European gender studies within the broader project of decolonizing higher education. However, as colonization and the knowledge productions derived through it have existed for centuries, it would be naïve to think that decolonizing can be achieved swiftly through the voluntary acts of a few scholars. Decolonizing trans/gender studies is necessarily a collective process that cannot be done individually. It also means to link attacks on gender studies with attacks on broader movements like the decolonising movement and transnational feminist, anti-fascist, antiracist, antinationalist, and anticolonial struggles. In line with many of the above-cited approaches that analyze attacks on gender studies, I think it is important to understand the phenomenon as connected to the global rise of the far right. However, it becomes clear that we also urgently need to pay attention to feminist anti-gender argumentations—or to put it the other way round, pay attention to the way in which some feminisms are racist, oppressive, and right-wing (even if they claim not to be). In this article, I suggested that thinking these strands together calls for a change of paradigms in queer/trans/feminist pedagogies and epistemologies and a commitment to understanding gender studies as already being trans in multiple ways. Transing, going beyond a category, deconstructing a category (Tudor 2017), can do the work of creating solidarity while challenging borders and boundaries (with respect to the nation and migration). Moreover, trans-gender calls for trans-nation—for fiercely antinationalist, anticolonial politics and knowledge productions. Both the endeavors of countering anti-gender attacks and decolonizing trans/gender studies require ongoing deconstructions of the category of gender and analyses that see trans/gender as defined through racialization, post/colonial geopolitics, transnational movements, and translation.

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## Notes

1. I use the British spelling “decolonising” when referring to the UK movement.
2. *Trans* is used both in relation to transgender and with a broader signification. See Chen 2012: 137; Bey 2017: 284; and Tudor 2017.
3. I am borrowing the formulation “not the US” from Eliza Steinbock (2019).
4. *TSQ* special issues that tackle US centrism are, for example, Aizura et al. (2014), “Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary,” and Garriga-López et al. (2019), “Trans Studies en las Américas.”
5. See also Koivunen, Kyrölä, and Ryberg 2018, who discuss the phenomenon of the privileged claiming and appropriating the language of marginalization within their theorization of the politics of vulnerability.
6. *Migratist* is a term to name migration-based discrimination. *Migratism* is the power relation that ascribes migration to certain people, constructs them as strangers, as not belonging to the Western nation-state (Tudor 2018).
7. See Awkward-Rich 2017; Stryker and Bettcher 2016; and Tudor 2019 for interventions.
8. Yenor gets the connection between feminism and trans politics better than the transphobic feminists. What if the worst conservative/right-wing nightmare is true, and transgender theories are a feminist project to eliminate the heterosexist proprietary family; undo, question, and change the categories of men and women; and celebrate desire and pleasure and tear down racist nationalisms?
9. See, for example, Koyama’s (2006) and Stone’s (1987) critique of feminist transphobia in the United States.
10. Alex Sharpe (2018) analyzes cases in the UK in which trans men/gender-nonconforming masculine-representing subjects were prosecuted as sexual predators for failing to tell the “truth” about their gender history. Looking at these cases, it becomes clear that recent feminist transphobic incidents in the UK are backed up by this legal discourse that sees the failure to reveal one’s gender history to sexual partners as always already sexual violence.
11. See, for example, Radical Residency n.d.; Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action n.d.; and Cambridge Decolonisation Network n.d.
12. As is evident in these titles: “The ‘Decolonise the Curriculum’ Movement Re-racialises Knowledge” (Williams 2017) and “They Kant Be Serious” (Petre 2017). In relation to media representation on Rhodes Must Fall, see Xaba 2017: 100. See also Kyrölä 2018: 44.
13. The danger of absorbing and depoliticizing antiracist approaches has also been identified in the European take on intersectionality; see, for example, Lewis 2013.

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