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## Against Abolition

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### Abstract

Analytic metaphysics of gender has taken an ameliorative turn towards ethical and political questions regarding what our concept of gender *ought to be* and how gendered society *should be structured*. *Abolitionism* about gender, which claims that we ought to mandate gender out of existence, has therefore seen renewed interest. I consider three arguments for abolitionism from radically different perspectives: Haslanger’s simple argument, Escalante’s gender nihilism, and Okin’s argument from ideal theory. I argue that none of the above manage to establish the desirability of abolitionism and that we should be wary of the abolitionist position, as it imperils trans lives.

**Keywords:** trans theory, feminist philosophy, social philosophy, political philosophy, metaphysics of gender, social ontology

### 1. Gender Abolitionism

Abolitionism about gender has a venerable history within both feminist and trans thought. Thinkers in these traditions of a revolutionary bent suggest that we ought to get rid of gender. What would getting rid of gender look like? It depends which theorist one asks. For some feminists coming out of the radical tradition, gender is a hierarchical system of domination, with women defined as the oppressed group in that structure and men as the dominant group.<sup>2</sup> Thus the elimination of gender is achieved simply by the destruction of the hierarchical system that constitutes genders. For others, not least those like Donna Haraway and some in the queer tradition, the elimination of gender is to be achieved by undermining and destabilising the supposed binary of man/woman. Without a clear distinction

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Jennifer Saul, Steve Makin, Sally Haslanger, Emma Bolton, Rosa Vince, Robbie Morgan, Stephanie Kapusta, Nadia Mehdi, Lewis Brooks, Kayleigh Doherty, Will Hornett, Jacqueline Davies, audiences at the universities of Sheffield, Oxford, and Birmingham, and public audiences around Sheffield for all of their helpful comments on the issues raised in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Monique Wittig (2017) and Shulamith Firestone (1971)

between the two categories, one might think, the idea of gender becomes superfluous and might wither away in a world of androgyny. However, regardless of whether such programs could be successful, or indeed if they are plausible at all, I suggest that we first ought to ask whether the abolition of gender is *desirable*.<sup>3</sup> Abolitionism is an ameliorative position, and thus we ought to ask whether or not it serves our moral and political purposes first and foremost. If we judge that it does not, as I shall argue, then questions as to its feasibility never arise.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Haslanger's Simple Argument

Why might one be an abolitionist about gender? Sally Haslanger provides us with a simple argument. Suppose that the categories *man* and *woman* are understood, as Haslanger suggests, in the following way:

*S is a woman* iff<sub>df</sub> S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction.

*S is a man* iff<sub>df</sub> S is systematically privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male's biological role in reproduction. (Haslanger 2012, 230)

On such an account, gender is a constitutively constructed by a particular hierarchical societal structure based on presumed sex. One cannot make reference to one's gender without also making reference to one's position in that structure, for one's gender is simply that position in the structure. To be a woman on this account is to be systematically subordinated because of the way one is observed or imagined to be by others. In this sense there is a conceptual, or analytic link

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will only address *complete* abolitionism about gender—the complete elimination of all genders from society. Positions that attempt to undermine the political significance of gender in one way or another, whilst maintaining the existence of gender categories for identification or other uses, are, to my mind, mislabelled when called abolitionist. For instance, the Xenofeminist movement argues for "abolitionism" in the form of the *proliferation* of gender categories (Hester 2018)! I take it that the reader will sympathise with me in suggesting that xenofeminists and others like them are not abolitionists proper.

<sup>4</sup> For a powerful argument to suggest that gender abolitionism (in its gender nihilist form) is simply infeasible, see Williams (2016).

between gender and subordination. The argument for the abolition of gender, then, is quite simple:

- 1a. We ought to eliminate oppression/subordination/injustice.
- 1b. Being a woman is, by definition, to be subordinated/oppresed/subject to an injustice/harmed.
- 1c. Thus we ought to eliminate the category *woman*.<sup>5</sup>
- 1d. Getting rid of the category *woman* requires abolishing gender in its entirety.
- 1e. Thus we ought to eliminate gender.

Premise 1a seems eminently plausible, whilst 1b is just the relevant aspect of Haslanger's definition of woman.<sup>6</sup> Premise 1d seems a little more tendentious, but just to make it seem somewhat plausible for the moment, when thinking of gender as a hierarchy, note that it seems hard to see how the privileged class (man) could exist without a subordinated class (woman). Given that, at least on the Haslangerian account set out thus far in this chapter, all there is to gender are those two categories, then by eliminating both men and women, we eliminate gender. The inference from 1a and 1b to 1c is fairly simple—if being a member of the category woman is itself an injustice,<sup>7</sup> a kind of oppression or subordination, then we ought to eliminate it. Similarly, the inference from 1c and 1d to 1e is a simple application of necessary means to an end reasoning. Thus gender—insofar as it defines genders in a hierarchical system of domination—ought to be abolished.

Mari Mikkola has criticised this argument by, in effect, rejecting 1b:

Abolitionist accounts take womanhood to be *by definition* tied to oppression so that it is not possible to be a woman and not be (in some sense) oppressed. Re-evaluative accounts do not take being a woman per se to be oppressive. Instead, they recognize that our social circumstances create environments where women are viewed and treated in ways that

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<sup>5</sup> Obviously this ought not to be read as “getting rid of the people who are currently in the social position defined by the category *woman*” but rather as “getting rid of the social position defined by the category woman.”

<sup>6</sup> I also included oppression, being subject to an injustice, as I suspect that the success of the argument does not turn on the particular kind of wrong that is conceptually connected to being a woman. We will later see a version of the argument that will attempt to make a conceptual link between gender and harms.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account of what we might call “ontic injustices,” injustices in virtue of being treated as a member of a given category, see Jenkins (2016)

disadvantage them—perhaps by associating with women some traits and using this association to ground unjust social arrangements. It is possible to be a woman and yet not be oppressed, provided that we have successfully altered how women are viewed and treated. So, on the former view, gender justice would dismantle unjust social hierarchies, thus doing away with women and men; on the latter, gender justice would dismantle such hierarchies while retaining women and men without (say) the earlier oppressive association in place. (Mikkola 2016, 125)

Suppose that one does not think that *woman* is analytically connected to oppression, *contra* 1b; if so, then as Mikkola rightly points out, the motivation for abolitionism disappears.<sup>8</sup> Why might one doubt that woman is conceptually connected to subordination or oppression? One might simply suggest that it is conceptually possible for women to *not* be oppressed on the basis of their gender. Thus 1b need not, therefore, be endorsed. The person committed to 1a, but not wishing to endorse 1b, ought to strive for a society where this possible case of womanhood free from oppression or subordination is actualised.

How ought we to determine the status of 1b? Mikkola turns to anecdotal evidence of students who say that the conception of gender it suggests is quite alien to them. They tell her “time and again that the abolitionist strategy aims to eradicate something that seemingly need not be eradicated. As they see it, ‘the feminist revolution’ **need** not do away with gender, and *being* a woman or a man is not primarily the problem—the real problem is how people are viewed and treated” (Mikkola 2016, 125–126). However, as Haslanger (2012) and Jennifer Saul (2006) have argued, simply because a gender concept is unintuitive, it does not necessarily mean that the concept is not the one (if indeed there is a only single concept) which is operative, or that the societal structure (if indeed there is only a single structure) that it picks out is not in operation.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in response to the kind of cases that Mikkola’s students raise, the Haslangerian abolitionist can simply bite the bullet and insist that putative examples of women who are not oppressed or subordinated on the basis of their gender are not women. Interestingly then, we seem to be at something of an impasse—for every example purporting to show that *woman* is not conceptually connected to subordination, the abolitionist will simply bite the bullet

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<sup>8</sup> As she rightly notes, one can still think that women are oppressed on the basis of gender in our society (indeed all current and past societies) given this rejection. It is merely that being a woman need not entail oppression or subordination.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that there are no problems from counterintuitiveness in the area here—see Saul (2006, 133).

and argue that such examples are not women, no matter how counterintuitive that bullet-biting case is. The status of 1b, therefore, seems vexed.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, I wish to sidestep this question for the moment by suggesting, following Haslanger in a slightly different turn in her thought, that *even if* the current conception of gender, or structure of society, were one that analytically linked oppression with the concept or category of woman, nonetheless, we might make gender and genders anew in a way that does not have that conceptual connection (Haslanger 2012, 244–245).<sup>11</sup> We might, as it were, perform *conceptual engineering*—editing our concepts (and our society in line with these new concepts) in order to better suit our purposes.<sup>12</sup> Thus we might think that even if gender, understood hierarchically, with an analytic link between *woman* and oppression ought to be abolished, this does not entail that gender should be abolished entirely. Instead, there lies the opportunity to change gender, according to our various aims and purposes. We could (re)make gender in a way as to not be analytically linked to oppression.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Gender Nihilism

However, we should not so quickly reject abolitionism. Alyson Escalante’s work, despite coming out of a very different tradition, provides the abolitionist with a powerful response to the conceptual engineering move. Escalante produces a *gender nihilist* position on gender. The gender nihilist endorses a view of gender that has some similarities to the Haslangerian view sketched above:

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<sup>10</sup> I admit that I find such a strategy unpalatable. As Saul (2006, 133) remarks, we have the ability to use gender terminology relatively competently, and it seems odd to think that the operative concepts of gender are so incredibly alien to our manifest concepts as to allow huge amounts of bullet biting of this sort.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Haslanger is quite tentative in her suggestion that the concepts she puts forward as a part of her project are actually operative in society.

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent survey of this new area of philosophical inquiry, see Cappelen (forthcoming). There are also parallels to Glasgow’s (2006) *Racial Reconstruction* here.

<sup>13</sup> As noted above in footnote 3, one *might* think of this as a form of abolitionism. After all, as a reviewer has pointed out, (if the Haslangerian description of society is right) this is abolishing our current referent for our concept of gender. However, given that we are then replacing it with new genders via conceptual engineering and political work, it is not a form of *complete* abolitionism, which I have been focusing on in this paper.

The gender nihilist says “I am a woman” and means that they are located within a certain position in a matrix of power which constitutes them as such. (Escalante 2016)

Whilst the gender nihilist view of gender does not insist on merely two genders arranged hierarchically, but rather a number of different genders linked by differing power relations, it does insist that power, and therefore harms, are conceptually linked to the existence of gender categories. The gender nihilist thus recommends the rejection of gender categories entirely. Escalante also has a response to my suggestion that we need only (re)make gender differently, in order to escape the conceptual link to oppression:

All we do when we expand gender categories is to create new more nuanced channels through which power can operate. We do not liberate ourselves; we ensnare ourselves in countless and even more nuanced and powerful norms. Each one a new chain. (Escalante 2016)

In conceptually linking gender categories to *power*, rather than oppression, injustice, or subordination, Escalante makes it much more difficult to imagine the category absent that feature. Whilst it seems relatively easy to imagine a case of a woman who, by chance, is not oppressed on the basis of her gender, it seems much harder to imagine a case of a woman free from the effects of power with respect to her gender. Indeed, what would the category *woman* look like, were it not linked to power in some way?

However, I suggest that this argument moves a little quickly from the link between gender categories and power to the link between power and harm, and therefore entails a conceptual link between the existence of gender categories and harm. Take the following passage:

To use this terminology is not hyperbolic; the violence of gender cannot be overestimated. Each trans woman murdered, each intersex infant coercively operated on, each queer kid thrown onto the streets is a victim of gender. The deviance from the norm is always punished. Even though gender has accounted for deviation, it still punishes it. Expansions of norms is an expansion of deviance; it is an expansion of ways we can fall outside a discursive ideal. Infinite gender identities create infinite new spaces of deviation which will be violently punished. Gender must punish deviance, thus gender must go. (Escalante 2016)

Whilst Escalante is correct to emphasise the violence experienced by those who deviate from gender norms, note that the world need not be this way. Let us grant for the moment that power is conceptually connected to gender and that power inevitably generates norms of behaviour. Even so, there's nothing to suggest that violent punishment necessarily follows from deviation from the norm. We can imagine a society where trans women are not murdered, intersex children are not coercively operated on, and queer children are not thrown out onto the streets. Indeed, is that not precisely what we ought to be fighting for?

Alternatively, another response we might also suggest is that the proliferation of gender categories does in fact create more and more space for acceptable behaviour. That is, that Escalante is wrong to suggest that infinite gender identities create infinite new spaces of deviation. Rather, they widen out the space of permissible behaviour. Imagine a society wherein a radical pluralism about gender categories was adopted, such that new genders were adopted all of the time, to the desires of the individual members of the society. Suppose one were in a “deviant space” according to the gender concepts of that society, excluded and disapproved of because one did not fit into any of the current concepts. It seems that one could merely innovate, create a new category that did include you, in order to no longer exist in a “deviant space.” This itself does not decrease the number of acceptable ways to exist in society but rather increases them. Of course, in societies that do not operate under this kind of radical gender pluralism, where new gender concepts are readily accepted by the society as a whole, there are going to be practical questions about making one's new concept widely accepted. However, I suggest that this is not an obstacle to increasing the acceptable ways to exist in society that stems from the proliferation of gender categories; rather, it is an obstacle that stems from obstacles to that proliferation.

This is not to say that a personal rejection of gender is illegitimate. An individual's rejection of gendered life as a personal identification—whether they identify as agender, otherwise, or not at all—is, I suggest, a perfectly reasonable response. Nonetheless, I suggest that arguing for society-wide abolition of gender is misguided. Escalante comes to a very similar conclusion in her later addendum to the anti-manifesto, drawing on the work of Maria Lugones, where she writes that “this piece was not meant to tell anyone how to think about gender, it was the result of a collective analysis by a specific group of people which came to conclusions that allowed us to understand our lives. If you don't like that understanding, feel free to discard it. I do not ask or demand you agree with me” (Escalante 2015).

#### **4. Transgender Identities and Abolitionism**

I have argued that one need not endorse abolitionism, even if one thinks that gender is conceptually linked to oppression, or indeed harm. Are there, on the other



hand, positive reasons to reject abolitionism? I suggest that one of our moral-political purposes ought to be to maintain the existence of gender, in order to do justice to trans people's gender identifications. Again, the argument is simple:

- 2a. The abolition of the category *woman* in a society entails that one cannot identify as a woman in that society.
- 2b. Trans women identify as women (and trans women in future societies will continue to identify as women).
- 2c. If one cannot identify as a woman in a society, then trans women are wrong to identify as women in that society.
- 2d. Thus a society in which the category *woman* is abolished misgenders trans people.
- 2e. Thus we ought not seek the abolition of the category *woman*.<sup>14</sup>

I take it that 2a and 2b are obvious, and that 2c straightforwardly follows from them.<sup>15</sup> Stephanie Kapusta defines misgendering trans women as follows:

I take misgendering to mean something broader than simply the use of male pronouns, or of designations associated with being male or with masculinity in referring to transgender women. Here, the notion includes the use of gender terms that exclude transgender women from the category *woman*, or that hierarchize that category in a way that marginalizes transgender women. (Kapusta 2016, 502)

Premise 2d uses the notion of misgendering as *excluding from the category*. Quite simply, the thought is that, given that in a genderless society there is no category *woman*, trans women are excluded from membership of that category. Misgendering, as Kapusta has argued, and is widely accepted, is a wrong, thus I take it that 2e follows naturally from 2d. We ought to conclude, therefore, that gender abolitionists risk a transphobic conclusion that we should not endorse.

A note of clarification: the language of "exclusion," whilst being a useful heuristic for distinguishing this kind of misgendering from that associated with hierarchies within categories, is unfortunately apt for giving rise to confusions. One might, for instance, think that it is odd to talk of being excluded from a category where that category does not exist, as is the case in our argument against

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<sup>14</sup> I take it that this argument runs no matter which gender category is substituted in for *woman* here.

<sup>15</sup> One might deny 2b by denying the claim that trans women will continue to identify as women in future societies—we will return to this question section 5.

abolitionism. However, not only do I think that a clearer formulation can be given, I suggest that this clearer formulation allows for the analysis of another case of misgendering which we would like to capture. This clearer formulation is quite simple: X is misgendered<sub>exclusionary</sub> iff X sincerely identifies as a member of a gender category Y, but some party treats X as not being a member of that Y. This analysis of misgendering does not presuppose the existence of a gender category from which one is excluded, thus avoiding the potential confusion that arises with respect to the language of exclusion. Moreover this analysis is not ad hoc—paradigmatic cases of misgendering are the cases of a nonbinary people who sincerely identify as a gender other than man or woman, but who live in a society with a binary gender system, and who are treated not as nonbinary but as either a man or a woman. Here we need an analysis of misgendering that allows that the category “from which they are being excluded” does not exist.<sup>16</sup>

What ultimately matters is the harms that are done in denying that a trans woman is a woman, that a trans man is a man, that a nonbinary person is nonbinary and so on. These wrongs (Kapusta lists psychological, moral, and political) do not presuppose that the category a person identifies as a member of exists. Indeed, given what Kapusta says about one of the moral wrongs of misgendering, we may think that the abolition of the category even deepens some of the wrongs of misgendering:

Transgender persons are denied the discursive resources to participate in furthering society's understanding of their own gender and—I would add—of gender more generally. . . . This harm may be tied to an imposed, “authoritative” interpretation of the subject's experience that constitutes her social identity. At the very least, it contributes to robbing transgender women of the power to express their own senses of self, and of the opportunity to develop a language and conceptual resources that articulate those senses of self. (2016, 504–505)

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<sup>16</sup> We might also think about Dembroff’s notion of ontological oppression here, specifically its second formulation: “The structures and practices within a social context can unjustly fail to recognize or construct certain kinds” (Dembroff, forthcoming, 5). We might think that just as when nonbinary people face ontological oppression due to the failure of actual societies to recognize or construct appropriate gender kinds for those nonbinary people, trans men and women face ontological oppression in a society that abolishes gender (see, for another way of thinking about this issue, Jenkins [2016]).

Lacking the category in its entirety, the hermeneutical injustice of misgendering is therefore worsened! In short, that the category fails to exist is no obstacle to misgendering occurring, and indeed, may even make the worry more pressing.

There is a slightly different version of the argument that we might also make:

- 3a. The abolition of the category *woman* in a society entails that the society and those who advocate for it see identifying as a woman in that society as undesirable.
- 3b. Trans women identify as women, and for many it is an extremely important part of their identities.
- 3c. If one seeks a society in which identifying as a woman is undesirable, then one seeks a society in which it is undesirable for trans women to have an extremely important part of their identities.
- 3d. If one seeks a society in which it is undesirable for trans women to have an extremely important part of their identities, then one seeks a society in which trans women are unwelcome.
- 3e. We should not seek a society in which trans women are unwelcome.
- 3f. Thus we ought not seek the abolition of the category *woman*.<sup>17</sup>

Premise 3a here is fairly simple—the underlying thought is that the abolitionist thinks that gender is an undesirable feature of the social world and that identifying as a member of a gender category is therefore undesirable.<sup>18</sup> Premises 3b and 3c meanwhile seem fairly plausible assumptions to make. Premise 3d is motivated by the thought that if one is asked to give up an important and valued part of one's identity for entry into some space, one is going to feel unwelcome in that space. I take it that no serious member of this debate will deny 3e. Not only does a society that is unwelcoming to trans women seem morally objectionable, even advocating for that society as a part of a feminist movement seems to suggest that trans

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<sup>17</sup> Again, I take it that this argument runs no matter which gender category is substituted in for *woman* here.

<sup>18</sup> After all, getting rid of gender means getting rid of it at both the personal and the structural level (if such a distinction is possible). I'm not sure I can make sense of an abolitionist (in the strong, *complete* sense I have been talking about throughout this paper) who desires that we get rid of gender completely but still thinks that individual gender identifications are desirable, or at least not undesirable. Of course, one might suggest maintaining gender identity without gender as class or structure (see Jenkins 2016), but of course, whilst this abolishes one aspect of gender, it is no longer gender abolitionist in the sense of this paper.

women are not welcome in that movement. It seems, therefore, that we should not be abolitionists about gender.

### 5. A Note on Eschatological Considerations

I can imagine a reader who, upon reading the above, suggests that its anti-abolitionist conclusion is all very well, but that nonetheless, the ideal society is one that is free of gender. Take, for instance, Susan Moller Okin's position. Okin, working in the "ideal theory" tradition, suggests that society, in its ultimate just state, would not be one that included gender. She writes:

Gender, with its ascriptive designation of positions and expectations of behaviour in accordance with the inborn characteristic of sex, could no longer form a legitimate part of the social structure, whether inside or outside the family. (Okin 1989, 103)

Suppose that one thought that we ought to try to make society in such a way as to match the ideal state set forward by ideal theory, and following Okin, one thought that the ideal state is one that lacks gender. It seems that in such a situation, one ought to adopt a certain kind of abolitionism about gender. Note, however, that this need not be an immediate abolitionism about gender—one might, like Okin, seek to "minimize" gender whilst recognising it currently, in order to protect those whose lives are made vulnerable by gender, before eventually moving to a genderless society (Okin 1989, chapter 8).<sup>19</sup> However, for this version of abolitionism to be attractive, not only do we have to be persuaded of the relevancy of ideal theory for political action, but we also have to be persuaded by arguments to suggest that the ideal state lacks gender.

Here the ideal-theory abolitionist faces a dilemma: a genderless society entails either a failure to do justice to trans people's gender self-identifications or

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<sup>19</sup> It has been suggested to me by helpful audiences at the Universities of Sheffield and Oxford that Okin herself may not have been committed to *complete* abolition of gender (see footnote 3 above). Instead, we might interpret her as happy with the maintenance of "genders" in society so long as they do not have significance for the distribution of goods and rights. Returning to questions covered in sections 2 and 3 above, it is an interesting question as to whether these would still count as genders at all on Okin's understanding of gender, given that her understanding of gender seems to conceptually link genders to particular distributions of goods and rights. If this is so, then so much the worse for complete abolitionists looking to rely on ideal theory for support of their position, as she would have been fine with the appropriately engineered "genders" at stake in this debate.

the absence of (non-agender) trans people in that society.<sup>20</sup> Neither of these conclusions is desirable and together make it look as if an ideal society ought not to be abolitionist. Why might a genderless society fail to respect trans people's identifications? We have already seen an argument to this effect—2a–2e. Trans people in a society where gender has been abolished will (aside from agender people) be misgendered, their identifications rendered moot. One might suggest that the ideal theory abolitionist might avoid this worry by denying 2b:

2b. Trans women identify as women (and trans women in future societies will continue to identify as women).

They might deny 2b by claiming that in their ideal future society, trans women (for example) no longer identify as women. However, this spikes them on the other horn of the dilemma. After all, denying 2b on these grounds looks a lot like denying that there are trans women in one's ideal state—after all, if trans women are those people who were not assigned female at birth but who identify as women, then in a society where no one identifies as women, there are no trans women. This will also hold for other trans people, aside from agender people. Therefore, save for agender people, it looks like trans people need to be eliminated from society in order for the abolitionist position to be saved.

One might, perhaps innocently, ask what the problem with the absence of trans people from society is—what's so bad about this horn of the dilemma? Why should we be worried about the elimination of (non-agender) trans people? Well, for one, there are potentially violent implications here, methods of elimination which are enacted upon trans people around the world on an everyday basis, though I take it that anyone who has followed this paper beyond its first page will automatically reject those. What might a nonviolent elimination of gender and trans identities look like? How on earth could one reach a society where trans people no longer identify as member of genders, and do so happily? If such a society is even possible, it seems like getting there is going to be extremely difficult, and no abolitionist has provided even the beginnings of a story as to how we might get there.

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<sup>20</sup> It would also entail either the failure to respect cis people's identifications or the absence of cis people from that society. I focus on trans people for two reasons: first, they find themselves in the most vulnerable position with respect to gender, and second, I myself am trans and wish to foreground trans people's concerns in debates over gender, where we have often been either ignored, fetishised, or demonised.

## 6. Colonialism

There are additional concerns here specific to advocating for abolition from within a colonial context. What should we think about the racist colonial implications of a (we ought to note, mostly white) abolitionist movement mandating, for example, two-spirit identities out of existence?<sup>21</sup> There is a history of violence at work here that must be reckoned with. Those that colonists called “berdache” suffered and continue to suffer from the effects of colonisation. Scott Morgensen here describes merely one such act of brutal violence:

Early colonists recurrently exacted a terrorizing sovereign right of death in order to educate Native people in the new colonial moral order. While interpreting Peter Martyr's account of Vasco Nunez de Balboa's 1513 expedition in Panama, Jonathan Goldberg notes that Balboa's victorious arrival after battle at the house of the Indigenous king was framed by his condemnation and elimination of what he perceived to be gender and sexual transgression. On reportedly finding the king's brother and about forty other men dressed in women's apparel or living in sexual relationships, Balboa threw them out to be eaten alive by his dogs. (Morgensen 2011, 64–65)

As Gary Bowen succinctly put it, native people “have been murdered, burned, beaten, hanged, imprisoned, flogged, stripped, humiliated, and otherwise forced into compliance with the dominant standards of sexuality or exterminated when they resisted” (quoted in Feinberg 2016, 64–65). Gender and sexual “deviance” that was found by the colonists was (and is) like much of native cultures, subject to a program of extermination. This has occurred in innumerable ways—not least in the white schools where native children were educated and deprived of their culture in such a way as to “kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (Pratt 1973). This attempted destruction of native culture meant that much history and knowledge was lost, including knowledge of various identities that the colonists grouped under the term “berdache.” This label itself represents the imposition of colonial conceptions (both heteronormative and queer) on a wide variety of native identities, an imposition which has widely rejected by Native peoples (Morgensen 2011). This history of violence and imposition must be considered carefully when

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<sup>21</sup> Worries about the coloniality of her thought have plagued Okin throughout her career, including her implicit assumption that “West-is-best,” as Alison Jaggar (2005, 69) nicely puts it. I take it that a Western thinker positing an ideal society and using that society as a standard by which to judge the moral status of others’ societies does not merely run the risk of being myopic but also runs the risk of performing a colonial and racist act.

theorising gender—especially when one takes one’s theorising, as the likes of Okin do, to be universally applicable. This history (and present) of colonialism should raise warning flags, and the abolitionist must, if we are to find their vision of a feminist utopia plausible, provide a vision of gender abolition that does not merely reinscribe this kind of colonial violence.

Finally, even if one could tell a story that avoids these morally problematic conclusions whilst endorsing abolitionism, a story about some far-flung future society which is radically different from our own, then very well; but personally my concerns are more pragmatic than ideal. Such an ideal society might be worth striving for—but not knowing what that society looks like, or how to get there, and sceptical of such a society’s possibility and especially its desirability, I choose to work under the assumption that we should be more concerned with a pragmatic or real theory that improves our actual society in meaningful ways. A movement that, in our current society, seeks to abolish gender is one that fails to do justice to trans people’s identifications. We are already in a desperate political situation where the US government is seeking to undermine trans rights domestically (Opfer 2018) and internationally (Borger 2018). In the UK, hate crimes against trans people have spiked (Duffy 2018), and a moral panic alongside a government consultation on the gender recognition act is occurring (Barker 2017). Seeking abolition in our current political landscape is a recipe for trans deaths. Abolitionism is thus not a political program that I am interested in, nor one that I think is worth developing in our current political moment.

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