

The State We're In

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The Funambulist, 62, Nov/Dec 2025, pp. 38-45.

Accepted Manuscript, Summer 2025.

Transphobia, usually in the form of transmisogyny, has been a steady feature of the UK's media landscape, and the strongest ideological export product. Now, driven by funds from a fantasy writer, the imaginations of reactionary women, and some gay men, have wangled themselves into a ruling of the UK's Supreme Court. In a mind-bogglingly contrived argumentation from 3 judges, it seems that "biological" sex (the administrative one assigned at birth - based on a hasty visual inspection of a baby's genitals) is "real" because "women can get pregnant." Sex is now made to function as a protected characteristic under equality law, rather than the more social aspect of "gender". In the UK there's a huge tension between the State with its institutions, such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the government, some sports federations, and people who protest the ruling. The latter are in a right state and are not only trans people, their lovers, friends, but a large constellation of union organisers, neighbours, and other indignant folk who flock together and show up to protests and are refusing to throw trans people under the bus.

Days after the ruling, trans people rushed onto the streets, with 30.000 people gathering in Parliament Square in London. Trans people, queers, gays, lesbians, straight people - people came together to express their outrage at this misogynist and transphobic ruling. The renewed rush of trans organising by trans collectives, unions, organisations, and NGOs makes itself felt, heard, and seen. Meanwhile, in meetings, where trans people gather and share amongst themselves, young trans people talk about living in their bedrooms and not getting out. (Even if one of the loudest protest groups is Trans Kids Deserve Better.) The suffocating social atmosphere constrains our lives. At the same time, trans allies find it "inappropriate" to hold transphobic (usually transmisogynist) academics *personally* to account. But why? It's a solid way to change things – let people know what they do, and don't allow people to hide behind their institutional positions. At the same time, my partner learns at group therapy to think through the problem that both saviours and perpetrators think of themselves as 'objective' and 'neutral' – even 'good' - and that there are many links between these two groups. Those of us who are figuring out how this influences them are left unheard and frustrated. Seemingly we are walking into a thickening cloud of heteronormative non-comprehension. Is that the state we're in?

On the streets, we make people aware of plans that the British Transport Police wants to strip search people on the basis of assumed gender. Our atmosphere as a group of protesters is good, and there's performances and people are in awe and enjoy the spectacle. This is the state we're in.

For the British Transport Police this means, of course, that male police officers get a pass to harass trans femmes, any femmes, really, women (trans and non-trans), and any intersex person (who are always overlooked). The people on the streets react in horror, tourists ask incredulously "do you do that here", especially when the link is made that children are strip-searched in schools. State-violence is state-violence. This is the State we're in.

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Between the streets, our apartments and the group chats, in person and on our phones, we emphasize community safety as a conscious, everyday practice. We travel together, checking that our friends and fam made it home safe; we pool taxi funds from the door receipts of public events, pile-in three in the back of our tiny cars during and after the days of race riots, dropping each person to their door; we encourage attending the gender clinic with a friend as 'back up'; we set up martial arts skill shares; and go to the bathroom as a crew, like it's high school (in fact it might be). We encourage practices of having people alongside you to affirm your reality, your corporeality; to witness, when it occurs, violence or harm or neglect.

These practices of care are a refusal to allow the organs of a racist, ableist, transphobic state, and its extra-legal 'authorization' of harassment, to undermine our ways of being in the world. The state that we're in understands that isolation is a means of, and to, control. Separability – a contemporary manifestation of the colonial divide and rule, is essential to maintain the order of the day. As we discuss in *Trans Femme Futures: Abolitionist Ethics for Transfeminist Worlds*, "when one pits the individual against the institution, the individual loses." To stay standing within one while maintaining one's difference is a challenge, given the tokenistic terms upon which you have likely been included into the institution in the first place. To be separated, or isolated, leaves one vulnerable in the everyday and in institutional contexts, to unrealistically face the world alone in the fantasy of the individual that enables exploitation and burnout.

The socialities of solidarity and support we assemble may counter the conditions of medical negligence, slow death, and institutional violence. Trans communities have long known how to support each other to access transition-related healthcare — despite the policing of the

gender clinics with their waiting lists of 1.5 to 10 years, and the 'exceptionalisation' of transness that reduces our access to medical resources readily available to non-trans folks – from hormone-based medication, blood tests, affirmative surgeries. Trans practices refuse to get stuck in the waiting line, or to get stuck in the state that neoliberal racial capitalist authoritarianism has prescribed for us. Stuck in a State that promotes organised abandonment and hostile environments.

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In the UK an atmosphere is actively being shaped through a form of AstroTERF activism where upper middle class and rich white women are claiming to speak in the name of “all girls and women”. Trans people are confronted with the stale trope that “they make people ‘unsafe’”, which Tourmaline reminds us of, is what the content of laws was in the 50/60s in the US - as if we are finding ourselves in an illegal remake of *Back to the Future*.¹ The very presence of trans folk (and it used to be queers too) is again enough to shift the vibe. The State that we're in, is so normatively misogynist, that those arguments are viewed with considerable interest by those at the top of society - they sit so well with the existing class structures, where people have to know their place. In contrast, on the streets, people are outraged, don't mind trans people, and lots of older women are enraged because they recognise this shit from back in the day, which is the same day as today.

So, what's going on in the UK? The unenthusiastically elected, neoliberal Labour government is failing to restart the floundering economy, and thus needs a distraction - trans people and migrants are again the chosen scapegoats, as they have been for a decade. This scapegoating also aids the distraction from the actual sources of sexual harassment and violence – which are all too often sons, exes, partners and uncles participating in a scale of violence that has a strong chance to leave women dead. Last year, the count was two a week. Women, meanwhile, are enthusiastic participants in the harassment of minorities, not just trans folk. Norms need transgressing (for change) and guarding (for stability), and upper middle class women are definitely after the latter, as we argue in *Trans Femme Futures*.

Sometimes, when I'm a bit affected by the current situation, I open the papers simply to read little descriptions that state trans women are faster, stronger, better – even the chess federation has banned trans women, indeed the life of the mind is said to be more muscled. Being depicted as modern-day Valkyries, whose court photographer should rightly have

¹ It's a debate whether the baddy, called Biff Tannen, in *Back to the Future Part 2* (the movie from the year that the Wall against Fascism fell) is modelled on Trump (complete with orange hair), or whether Trump modelled himself on Biff.

been Alexander Rodchenko, rather than Nan Golding, is, however, not really heartening; reactionary misogyny never is. The self-victimisation of some women gets centre stage, while the roar of feminists is curated out of the responses, which makes it all the worse.

The pressure on trans provides a space to anchor anger of the *unregulated*. Anger about chaos leads to an investment in hierarchy, purity, and punishment. Conversations on trans in the mainstream media, courts, and institutions rely on hypothetical scenarios where women are victims of social power gone unchecked, that often offer the only outcome: more prohibition (no trans people here) and more restriction (the criminalisation of solidarity, and of providing support in medicine). Articles in the media, discussions on TV, policy papers, and the Supreme Court Ruling rely on imaginary examples about trans people to flog a set of policies and create an atmosphere of “concerns”, which is a stand-in term for suspicion and projection of bias. These scenarios stage an entrance for the “all-knowing” petit-bourgeois narrator whose act it is to demand rules, which protects the moral environment of people deemed “at risk”, which are usually *white women*, who are “innocent” and “in need of protection”.

The real spectacle of imaginary and superior trans femmes and women (which is the source of their assumed violence) depicted by self-victimising women detracts from dealing with actual violence of misogyny that is omnipresent. The embarrassment of the present violence is that it emerges from people known to each other. With the hypothetical violence depicted in one-way scenarios comes a real-life call on strengthened hierarchy provided by patriarchs to provide safety, rather than acknowledging that it is those very hierarchies that are the cause of violence. Safety is also said to come from sameness (women are safe together), providing a training ground for a politics of majoritarian purity finding its way into expressions of xenophobia and nationalism. The idea that sameness leads to safety incentivises people to undertake surveillance (as encouraged with ‘see it, say it, sorted’, the omni-present slogan of the British Transport Police), because vigilance is a multi-tool that can be applied to many different situations.

These paranoid anxieties enshrine a petit bourgeois, contracted imagination, where there is a space that is “safe” if only everybody would just behave well. Transphobia directly leads to an increase in misogyny, as it involves women policing women – with an added suspicion of sexuality as such. It detracts queers from talking about sex [also in education], and even from doing it in public. The resultant claustrophobia might also drive more men into the manosphere, of which transphobic misogyny is a part.

The moral panic we are in proposes a view of people where there are agents of chaos (trans, people of colour, migrants) and other people who are bulwarks of stability (themselves: the moral middle management of Student Services, civil servants, registry offices, HR, marketing) who are making claims about what order looks like and what is tolerable. The minimisation of agency and possibility of experimentation, in conjunction with a contracted imagination and reinforced hierarchy, leads to self-serving policies, processes and laws, where decisions about events, structures and harassment are made by people out of view, who feel comfortable in their shrunken moral landscapes built from hypotheticals.

In this way, the anxieties around transness function as a gateway-drug that closes the door to an expanded imagination. Led by thought-experiments that suggest prohibition is the way to safety, curiosity is curbed and expansive ideas are stifled, instead of shifting one's senses to more elaborate forms of world-making. This politics of purity firms up one's morality against infringement and relies on the simplistic reprieve of 'us and them' thinking. Which fits so well with the nationalist agenda of the already-tired Starmer government.

I offer this imagery to inform a durational strategy emerging from community engagement, rather than legal or union challenges to laws or policy. Rights might protect (some of) us (for a while) but they won't set us free, and anyway need engagement to come to life. The acute problem is the fascist imaginary that emerges from the banality of omnipresent petit bourgeois thinking. Working on the wider imaginaries about environments, supports moving out of single-issue activism and building solidarities – if this mind-set naturalises, they'll be coming for everyone.

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Indeed, violence is the order of the day – to distract from the UK's flatlining economy, one among most of neoliberal Europe. Cuts to disability benefits and welfare are balanced with investment in the arms industry and the military. 'Human rights' are out, "war-fighting readiness" is in; business as usual is now supplying weapons to nations enacting genocide.² The New Labour Management does Military Keynesianism, reaffirming the centrality of the arms trade, defense and war to the social and economic order; what grows are fires and floods, carbon emissions and death tolls, land theft and mass displacements upon the legacies of empire – Palestine was of course occupied by Britain, enabling the foundation of a zionist state. The affective economy of fear – Putin in the East, terrorists in the Middle

² Keir Starmer, speech at BAE Systems in Glasgow, at a factory directly connected to the supply of military equipment to Israel, 2 June 2025.

East, migrants in your neighbourhood, trans people in your changing room, means that policing is needed at every front. Violence is an essential aspect of state control, and the first six months of 2025 have seen a spike in deaths in police custody,³ and hard repression of domestic protest and resistance.

The politics and practices that counter this affective economy of fear is abolition feminism – a feminism that refuses prisons, borders, walls, state violence; and that is *logically* inclusive, working to dismantle the apparatus of control while undermining its function, including the enforcement of sex.

Naturally, the strategic scapegoating of transphobic, conservative feminisms aids the distraction from institutional violences – as Aviah Day and Shanice McBean argue in *Abolition Revolution*, such targeted harassment pivots away from critiques of systematic violence. As we discussed above, transphobic feminisms pose hypothetical situations – in which cissexist women have an encounter with a trans person that makes them feel uncomfortable – and appeal for legal recourse to ‘secure’ these spaces where such encounters may take place, from the bathroom to the boardroom. The appeal to the state for protection entails giving consent to be policed – for policing, by officers, but also by each other, is the means through which, in this case, protection is harnessed. Such transphobic feminisms hence situate themselves as part of the institutions that have historically been bastions of transphobia, racism, homophobia, ableism and of course sexism – be that be that British Law, police, establishment newspapers, or the military. Moreover, the appeals to the protection are dependent on the active erasure of transphobic violence, from quotidian abuse and public harassment to femicides, including institutional violence and neglect from the gender clinic to the prison. The existence of violence against trans people is denied and studies on it discounted (or the very existence of trans people is categorically denied), as other supposed forms of violence are foregrounded – the subject of whom, in this imaginary, is women, always assigned female at birth, threatened by difference ‘embodied’ by trans people (or trans thoughts or trans healthcare). The discomfort of a majoritarian group is centred, claiming their vulnerability and innocence, in their appeal for protection amid their fear of the scapegoated. The denial of transphobia means that it can be enacted without reprimand, for one cannot be accountable for a form of violence that one doesn’t recognise as existing. Furthermore, the denial of violence and the legal protection of norms opens the field for more human rights violations, in a material and economic context that affected the

³ See reporting by INQUEST - who states a 16% rise of death in prisons and mental health hospitals. The rise in deaths is largely the result of carceral politics with long sentences leading to overcrowding, drugs, and the violent culture of policing.

mass deaths from disability benefit cuts, COVID-19, and the Grenfell Tower fire (all of which disproportionately impacted black people and brown people, and poor people).

Conversely, abolition feminisms have been built through coming together in grief and resistance, politicising our experience of violence and emphasising the role of the state --- especially police officers, immigration enforcement, and prison guards — in directly perpetrating harm, abuse and death, while unpacking the structural, systemic, institutional and interpersonal forms of anti-blackness, racism, ableism, sexism, whorephobia and transphobia that motivates such actions. Our practices of community safety are rooted in the histories of Black, Asian, queer, trans, and sex worker communities, understanding their legacies across decades and generations. They are born out of a deep engagement with problems of violence, closely linked to social, economic, material and institutional struggles. While this includes personal experiences of harm and loss, or experiences of those we are in relation with, or who we are ‘in community’ with, ie. in a direct or imaginative network with, who we may or may not know. Understanding violence in this manner requires an openness to learning and recognition of forms of harm as experienced across our differences, and this openness has the potential to tend towards solidarity and transformation. Solidarity and transformation require agency in action (not limited to knowledge of oppression and harm, ‘understanding it’), alongside an affective capability to acknowledge the emotive closures of the status quo – including the shutting of empathy to those scapegoated or ‘Othered’ and thus the acceptance of violence against them. Community safety depends on such affective recognition of harm – it builds upon it, coalescing collectives around activities of resistance and intervention, working to reduce the conditions of harm.

If abolition works to build worlds that reach beyond the boundaries of our neoliberal lives, it is important to feminist analytics and worlding to recognise the deep relationships between transphobic and transmisogynist violence, and violence against gender non-conforming people, to forms of sexism and misogyny. That it is up to all of us to practice transfeminism, not just trans and non-binary people — to recognise, refuse and undo the violence that assures the gender binary. This may be key in interlinking collectives and communities through difference and solidarity, while proposing and connecting through coalitional struggle – be that through community safety, healthcare and abortion access, reproductive justice, liberatory harm reduction, workers’ rights, climate justice, anti-imperialism and our refusal of consent to policing. Solidarity and liberation in these movements can start with direct, concrete, interpersonal support in our everyday lives, learning through practices that we’ve so much to teach each other.