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An Imaginative Geography of Linear Gender: Bathrooms, Locker Rooms, and Cis
Vulnerability

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Abstract:

The wave of anti-trans bathroom bills since 2015 has raised awareness of the importance of bathroom politics for trans people. Long before this, feminist scholars have argued that bodies and spaces are simultaneously forced into a gender binary through the regulation of gender-segregated spaces, such as bathrooms. In this article, I offer a trans feminist reading

of the media events and rhetoric of the Christian right opposing trans access. I analyse the opposition of the Christian right towards trans access to gender-segregated spaces as an imaginative geography of linear gender. As I argue, the Christian right builds an imaginative geography of a threatened, white 'cis America' through rhetorical devices. Vulnerability attached with micro-level spaces across USA, is evoked through the figure of the child, "women and children", and the predator. Through these rhetorical devices, bodies and spaces are imagined simultaneously. These figures work as powerful "stopping devices" (Ahmed 2006) for anyone bending the straight line of linear gender. These stopping devices can mobilize cis bodies around a defense of a conservative gender order, legitimize a "protective" control over cis girls and women, make living in the social world even harder for trans people, all the while envisioning an exclusionary 'America'.

The increasing visibility of trans people, and the legal and administrative success of trans movements, together with the loss of the battle against equal marriage, have sparked a change of focus in the US Christian right's political and legal efforts that has impacted Republican politics. Groups such as the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) and the American Family Association (AFA) are attacking trans people and their rights through efforts such as anti-trans bathroom bills and public campaigns against trans access to (semi)public spaces.

While the focus on trans people by the Christian right is greater than ever, the conservative alarm around trans people and bathroom access is not wholly new. In the 1970s, Phyllis Schlafly and her organization STOP ERA used the perceived threat of unisex bathrooms to oppose the Equal Rights Amendment (Machalow 2020: 7).¹ After 2012 – ‘the year the marriage equality movement first won at the ballot box’ – conservatives started successfully convincing voters to repeal anti-discrimination protections through enticing fears about trans access (George 2019: 556-558). In recent years, conservatives have introduced actual ‘bathroom bills’, designed by the Christian Right, as well as advocating discriminatory anti-trans policies in line with these bills. In this article, I address the Christian right rhetoric and affective media tactics the Christian right uses to promote these bills and policies.

Christian right groups defend anti-trans laws and policies by positioning themselves as defenders of the ‘security’ of ‘women and children’ against the imagined threat of trans bodies, and of trans women’s bodies in particular. As the perceived threat posed by trans bodies lacks any evidence, I analyze this seemingly paradoxical state of affairs through the concept of an *imaginative geography of linear gender* that joins together the notions of imaginative geography (Puar 2007; Said 1978) and linear gender (Ahmed 2006; Bremer 2011: 40–42). Imaginative geography refers to an imaginative yet performative vision of space and belonging. Linear gender conceptualizes both the division of bodies into two mutually exclusive categories, and doing these genders along a normative ‘cis’ line through

both time and space: acting in ways, which are perceived to be in alignment with the assignment of sex/gender at birth, and continuing to do so without bending the line. I use the concept of a straightening devices - which double as stopping devices - from Sara Ahmed (2006: 92; 96), to address the way various material-semiotic apparatuses – like bills, signs on doors, or policies – can force people to follow the normative cis line, or stop people from existing in public spaces. I argue that even rhetorical devices like figures of the Child, ‘women and children’, and the ‘predator’ act as straightening/stopping devices. These rhetorical figures are tools for constructing an imaginative geography of linear gender – in which ‘America’ is a geography of purely cis spaces threatened by wrong bodies in wrong spaces.

I consider the Christian right here as a network of organizations sharing similar worldview, rhetoric, and affective figures that is internationally networked and even connected to Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) campaigns (Ciobanu 2018; Parke 2016; Barthélemy 2017; Stoeckl 2020). I examine the rhetoric and online media events of the ADF and the AFA. I have chosen these two organizations for the following reasons. ADF (est. 1993) is the most influential Christian right organization in terms of affecting law (Eckholm 2014, n.pag., see also Brown 2002, 25), and is considered to be behind the blueprint for the anti-trans bathroom bills across the country. AFA (est 1977) acts as a Christian right petition machine (Southern Poverty Law Centers website, n.d., n.pag.), and organized the Boycott Targett campaign against trans access to bathrooms and locker rooms, gaining wide media attention and over a million signatories. While the main modes of action of these two organizations are different, as the other focuses on legal action, and the other on organizing petitions, both organizations are essentially rhetorical machineries. I attend to examples of Christian right affective rhetoric and media acts on moments, when these organizations have organized to oppose trans access, to counter policies and acts which are trans inclusive, and

tried to influence both public opinion and laws and policies. I attend to the rhetoric of trans access to bathrooms and locker rooms by analyzing a letter to school districts, blog material, and an online boycott campaign against Target's policy allowing for trans access.

The first moment I analyse sets the scene: the letter to the school districts and a blog post by the ADF's founder Alan Sears. At that time, the Obama government's Department of Education had issued guidelines on interpreting 'sex discrimination' in the federal civil rights law Title IX (which bans sex discrimination in all educational programs, which receive federal funding), as including discrimination based on trans status. ADF lobbied against this trans-inclusive stance on Title IX and the policies complying with it. The second moment I address starts with North Carolina's anti-trans bathroom bill. The controversial North Carolina bill politicized trans access to space even more publicly, and spurred actions such as the Department of Justice's suing of North Carolina, boycotts of North Carolina, trans-friendly policies by private enterprises, and pushback against them. To address this, I analyse AFA's Boycott Target web site and ADF's blog material.

A Note on Positionality

Why would a white non-binary scholar from a Nordic country analyse US Christian right rhetoric? Through its global connections, the Christian right acts as a part of global right wing 'family values' and 'anti-gender' mobilization. The ADF, for example, through its international sister organization ADF International, has supported a lawsuit of a Christian right MP in Finland, where I live. The Christian right also has rhetorical and other connections to UK TERFS, who for their part, influence TERF discourse transnationally.² Ethno-nationalists, joining the anti-gender bandwagon, borrow targets and rhetoric from the global Christian right. For the reasons mentioned above – on top of solidarity - the anti-trans

rhetoric of the US Christian right has implications for trans rights politics even beyond the US and needs to be taken seriously by opponents of illiberal movements everywhere.

Geographies of Linear Gender

My analysis contributes to an academic discussion on the politics of trans and gender-non-conforming people's access to gender-segregated spaces (Browne 2004; Doan 2010; Cavanaugh 2010; Bender-Baird 2016). Others have discussed the issue of binary division of space and the recent efforts of the Christian right to limit trans access to public spaces (Schildt & Westbrook 2015; Kafer 2016; McLaughlin 2017; Patel 2017; Stone 2018; Spencer 2019; Blumell et al. 2019; Murib 2020). However, the ways in which the contemporary Christian right offers an imaginative geography of 'cis America'³ in positioning trans access as a threat has not been adequately addressed. I conceptualise this rhetoric through the notion of *imaginative geography of linear gender*.

Linear gender, according to Signe Bremer (2011; 2013), involves both the division of bodies into two mutually exclusive categories, and living and doing genders according to normative paths in time and space. Sara Ahmed (2006) has theorized life trajectories with regard to the 'lines' of heteronormativity, while Bremer (2011) emphasizes the *cisnormative* linearity of life trajectories as the norm imposed on trans (and cis) people. Ahmed (2006:16), inspired by Butler (1990), theorizes heteronormativity as performative. The heteronormative lines are created through 'repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken' (Ahmed 2006: 16). The same can be applied to cisnormativity. The requirement of being 'in line' with others is central to this idea—the norm exists through repeated acts of 'being followed' (Ahmed 2006: 16). Following the cis line means acting in a perceived alignment with what was assigned at birth throughout one's lifeline. In the notion of an imaginative

geography of linear gender, I connect this analysis to the concept of imaginative geographies, as introduced by Edward Said (1978) and developed by Jasbir Puar (2007: 39). Imaginative geographies are both imaginative and performative understandings of space (Puar 2007: 39). They are also publicly mediated and affectively shared visions of belonging and un-belonging; of proper and improper bodies and trajectories. As I argue, the Christian right's imaginative geography of a threatened cis America is built from imaginative accounts of micro-level semi-public spaces (bathrooms and locker rooms) as ones of threat and vulnerability.

Following Ahmed, 'straightening devices' double as 'stopping devices' (Ahmed 2006: 92; 96). Such devices—signs on toilet doors, bills, policies, or rhetorical devices—affect people's lives, force them to follow the cis line, or stop them from entering spaces. I consider here the affective figures used by the Christian right in its anti-trans campaigns as rhetorical stopping devices. I address the ways the figures of the 'Child,' the girlified woman, and the predator have been utilized in efforts to mobilize people against trans people in defence of the norm of linear gender. I also consider how the rhetoric of vulnerability when attached to certain bodies and spaces works as a stopping device. Together with the concept of imaginative gender of linear gender, stopping/straightening device works as a methodological tool in my analysis.

Defending linear gender

All the straightening devices I address involve the notion of vulnerability attached to cis bodies, spaces, institutions, and psyches presented as being under threat by trans bodies. I start with schools and the most vulnerable figures imaginable: 'the children.' In 2015, the ADF emailed school districts throughout the US, lobbying for policies against trans access,

stating: ‘We seek to reaffirm the commonsense proposition that compelling students to share restrooms and locker rooms with members of the opposite sex violates their right to bodily privacy’ (Sharp, Tedesco & Gray 2015: 1). The common sense they refer to is their view of gender – as ‘sex’, as defined at birth based on genitals. The ADF uses the term ‘sex’ throughout, defined as ‘the biological condition of being male or female as determined at birth based on physical differences, or, when necessary, at the chromosomal level’ (Sharp, Tedesco & Gray 2015: 8).⁴ The ADF’s letter exemplifies the norm of binary *and linear* gender, explicitly framing gender as a ‘condition’ defined by the shape of one’s genitals at birth. It seeks to ‘reaffirm the common sense’ of this view of gender as linear: as seamlessly arising from the seemingly natural categorization at birth, and following a lifeline that does not deviate from its assigned side of the binary. The ADF states that its view on gender is ‘common sense,’ yet it requires a lot of defending through bills, policies, and public acts: it appears that the supposedly secure straight, cis line is volatile and must be supported through straightening devices.

The ADF’s letter quoted above centres on the vulnerability of children, seen as threatened by trans inclusive policies undermining both ‘religious freedom’ and ‘modesty’ (Sharp, Tedesco & Gray 2015: 4). Vulnerability is imagined as animated by semi-public spaces where it is possible to encounter different bodies. Spaces are imagined simultaneously with bodies and encounters. The ADF explains that letting students into facilities where they can theoretically see body parts of the ‘opposite sex’ would deprive parents of the right to decide how to educate their children on ‘sensitive matters’ and to sex educate—or not—in the way they deem fit. The ‘safety risk’ to ‘bodily privacy’ mentioned by the ADF implies a threat of sexual violence or harassment. However, through a rhetorical leap, this perceived risk of violation of children’s physical or psychological boundaries, becomes a perceived risk to parents’ means of restricting or denying the sexuality of their children, and especially that

of girls. The bodies of trans youth become symbols of exposure to sex and knowledge about sex. Bodies bending or crossing the lines of gender are seen as a threat to the children imagined as at risk of an uncontrollable future – a future that might not be in line with the ‘modest’ one hoped for them by their religious parents.

In the ADF’s blog, Alan Sears expresses concern about the vulnerability involved in bathroom use (Sears 2015, n.pag.). This concern expands to the vulnerability of schools as both physical spaces and as institutions that could face legal action for violating trans students’ rights.⁵ *Spaces* organized around linear gender are then presented as vulnerable, while the vulnerability of children becomes linked to imaginative sexualized geographies of bathrooms. Sears first refers to vulnerability as having to do with ‘legal pressure from those determined to draw youngsters into the so-called Sexual Revolution’, associating trans people’s bathroom use with trespasses against the ‘limits on sexual license,’ yet without specifying whether this involves the limits of conservative sexual mores or those of consent (Sears 2015, n.pag.). These two transgressive risks are blended together and attached to trans bodies. For Sears, trans inclusive policies threaten other students with ‘invasions of bodily privacy’ and ‘psychological trauma’ (Sears 2015, n.pag.). School bathrooms under trans inclusive policies are imagined as geographies where children are at great risk of becoming sexualized, sexually violated, or traumatized. Straightening/stopping devices must be used to keep them in line within linear gender. This will guarantee protection of the purely cis spaces with are presented as vulnerable and threatened by trans bodies imagined as a sexual danger.

These gender-conservative texts operationalize the *figure of the child* as a symbol of innocence and vulnerability (Kincaid 1998; Edelman 2003). The child, as the epitome of both fragility and malleability, is the centre of intense cultural worry (Castañeda 2002), yet also sexualized through the very focus on its sexual innocence and ignorance (Kincaid 1998).

Nobody wants a child to grow up in ways perceived as wrong, as this puts the future of ‘us’ –

the nation, or even humanity – at stake (Edelman 2003: 11–13, 21). The child’s path could become less linear in terms of gender, less predictable, less in line with what parents or other adults would like to know in advance. This malleability attached to the figure of the child entails a sense of both possibility and threat. Jules Gill-Peterson (2018) has argued, that in USA, after the invention of gender, the malleability of gender attached with childhood has been attached with *white* children. As Grace McLaughlin points out, in campaigns against trans access, innocence is seen as a characteristic of the *cis* children that the proposed policies are promised to protect (McLaughlin 2017: 5). Through the cultural adultification of Black children, grown out of racist histories of understanding childhood, innocence is culturally attached specifically to white children (Epstein, Blake & Gonzalez 2017), similarly to malleability. The worry about the pure straight lines of innocent children in space and time is thus attached to white children, presumed to be *cis*. The school spaces which the Christian right aims to protect are experienced by Black girls as spaces of ‘status quo connecting perfection and whiteness’ (Carter Andrews et al. 2019: 2563). As school bathrooms and locker rooms are imagined by the Cristian right as spaces of innocence threatened, this innocence of school spaces is tied with straight lines of both gender and race.

What happens to trans children when the figure of the child and its path to future is defended? Trans children and youth encounter ‘stopping devices’ (Ahmed 2006: 139-140) that may block their path symbolically, socially and materially. They can be stopped from queuing to the bathroom of their choosing, from taking part in school activities, or from attending school altogether. As Bremer (2011: 43), elaborating on Ahmed’s (2006: 160) theorization of lines and bodies perceived as ‘disorienting’ shows, the path that does not follow a straight line – or, as I would put it, *cis* line – may be stopped. All trans people are in a sense ‘non-linear’ in not following the normative *cis* line: trans paths either go from one ‘side’ to another, and/or trespass binary lines in more complex ways, perhaps blurring the

lines or appearing ‘disorienting’ to others (Ahmed 2006: 135, 160). People who are not trans can also bend the lines of gender, or not be ‘in line’ with the path of normative gender. Trans people, however, are the focus of efforts to realign them with the cis line, or to efface them in instances such as the bathroom bills and battles over Title IX. Stopping the path of trans children and youth takes the form of securing the path of cis kids—keeping the threatening transgressive bodies at bay means securing a heteronormative future of religious modesty and continued parental control. In hiding actual trans children from view, the figure of the child is a key device for presenting trans people as unworthy of compassion. Of course, what is in fact vulnerable is the cis line controlling bodies, especially the bodies of girls, cis and trans alike. For Black and people of colour following the line of white femininity, or ‘being perfect and white’ at school is impossible (Carter Andrews et al. 2019). For trans feminine people of colour, who do not follow the straight line of linear gender, they might be stopped for bending lines of both race and gender.

‘Women and children’

This section examines the rhetorical stopping devices ‘women and children’ and the figure of the child in the ‘post-HB2’ moment. The law polarized public opinion, evoked boycotting of North Carolina, and inspired social media campaigns such as #Occupotty and #Wejustneedtopee. It also inspired a Target corporate policy allowing trans people to use bathrooms befitting their gender. The announcement was countered with an AFA social media campaign calling for people to boycott Target ‘allowing men into women’s restrooms’ – a pledge eventually signed by over 1.5 million people. This campaign included and resulted in provocative media actions from the Christian right.

The pledge was short:

‘I Pledge to Boycott Target Stores

Target’s store policy *endangers women and children* by allowing men to frequent women’s facilities.

Until Target *makes the safety of women and children a priority*, I will shop elsewhere.’

(American Family Association, n.d., n.pag.) (emphasis added)

The campaign once again figured cis women and children as threatened bodies in need of protection from either Target or the Christian right: ‘with enough pressure, pro-family advocates can stop this insanity *before more women and children become victims*’ (American Family Association, n.d., n.pag.). There is a sense of urgency to the pledge: *if* these shopping spaces around America are kept open to trans bodies, ‘women and children’ *will* become victims. The pledge portrays an imaginative geography of an ‘America’ of threatened purely cis shopping spaces. The affective immediacy of threat posed by ‘men’ and ‘insanity’ helped the boycott to induce quick reactions in the form of signatures, signals of disapproval and moral outrage (Paasonen 2015; Papacharissi 2002). The safe line to the future for ‘women and children’ is purportedly secured if enough people are moved to act on their behalf (Wanzo 2008: 118). Signing signifies alignment with both moral outrage and the cis line as the only viable, sane, and safe path of life.

Through the figure of ‘women and children’ cis women are presented as vulnerable and in need of protection, similarly to children—by cis men, or by other parties void of vulnerability themselves (Schilt & Westbrook 2015: 27). This lumping together of women and children in the figuration ‘womenandchildren’ in the context of US culture wars was discussed already in 1993 by Leanne Katz (1993: 20, footnote 35) as a means of advancing censorship of things considered pornographic, including sex education (Katz 1993: 18-20). The vulnerability attached to ‘womenandchildren’ is thus an old straightening device, which

can be used to keep in line the very people who are supposed to be protected (Schilt & Westbrook 2015: 31; Blumell, Huemmer and Sternadori 2019). It is also used as a stopping device for others.

As Carol Mason (2019: 666) points out, the vulnerability attached to women by the Christian right is in fact vulnerability attached to ‘white women and girls.’ I contend that the ‘universal category’ (Mason 2019: 666) deployed here, i.e., ‘women and children’ is implicitly white. Vulnerability or ‘victimhood’ is culturally attached to white women—so much so, that it is possible to talk of ‘victimhood itself as a cultural capital’ (Chow 2002: 179). This figure of the vulnerable white cis woman is ‘capitalized’ by various parties, such as the Christian right and white feminism unwilling to confront its own dominant position in racialized power relations (Mason 2019: 666; Chow 2002: 179). The vulnerability attached to specifically white *cis* women by both TERFs and the Christian right is similarly used as a resource in the battles over gender, and these groups are similarly unwilling to confront the relative position of white cis women in relation to cisnormativity. This vulnerability strongly attached to white women and girls is also a tool for imagining an ‘America’ comprising of threatened spaces, such as shopping centres in need of protection from the bodies perceived as intruders.

The Figure of the Predator

On the 9 May 2016, the Obama administration’s Department of Justice announced it would sue the state of North Carolina over the anti-trans law, spurring instant reactions from the Christian Right. These included an ADF blog post titled ‘DOJ Is Concerned with Your Civil Bathroom Rights... If You Identify As the Opposite Sex’ (Gottry 2016, n.pag.), that utilizes

the figure of the predator (juxtaposed with the vulnerable cis woman) as a rhetorical stopping device for trans people.

To argue that trans access endangers ‘women’, ‘women and girls,’ and female survivors of sexual abuse, the blogger uses an imaginary story of ‘Jack’ and ‘Jill’ where ‘Jack is a male but his subjective gender identity is female’ (Gottry 2016, n.pag.). Vehemently named ‘Jack’ to emphasize her lack of credibility as female, this trans character is ‘empowered to use a bathroom or locker room with women,’ if the DOJ gets its way (Gottry 2016, n.pag.). In contrast, getting HB2 cancelled ‘would spare Jack from the discomfort of sharing a bathroom with (other) biological males.’ (Gottry 2016, n.pag.) Introducing another fictitious character, the post introduces ‘Jill’ who ‘is a female’ and whose ‘subjective (and actual) gender identity is female.’ (Gottry 2016, n.pag.) The contradiction is clear: Jill is allowed an ‘actual’ gender identity perceived as aligning with reality whereas Jack’s identity is merely subjective. The post states that ‘Jill should be empowered to use a bathroom with women’—but, in the worldview presented in the text, ‘Jill no longer has this option because her bathroom now contains Jack, a biological male.’ (Gottry 2016, n.pag.) Excluding Jack from the category of women, the post establishes its argument against trans access in its definition terms. ‘Empowering’ anyone who bends the cis line is presented as disempowering those who follow it. ‘Empowering’ to enter women’s bathrooms is represented as something that the US DoJ wrongly allows to a trans woman and as something that the DoJ takes away from the figure of the vulnerable cis woman. ‘Civil Bathroom Rights’ mentioned in the title of the post, imply that entering a bathroom is a right which should be allowed for those for truly belong, in other words, who follow the cis line.

There is an imagined zero-sum game of gendered (civil) rights: what Jack, as a trans woman, gets, is what Jill loses, namely the right to be among women. For cis women like Jill, this right translates as privacy and safety. Although ADF views HB2 as providing ‘privacy

and safety of all citizens,' Jack's safety as citizen is not seen as being at risk: in fact Jack is not seen as deserving of protection but rather as risk to 'women and girls.' The post then proposes: 'Imagine Jack doesn't subjectively identify as a female' but merely sees trans inclusive policies as 'an opportunity for him to enter a woman's restroom or locker room.' (Gottry 2016, n.pag.) Here Jack becomes a predator 'claiming a particular gender identity' to access 'women and girls'. There is an easy slippage from inviting the reader to imagine 'Jack' as a trans woman whose gender is represented as unreal, to enticing the reader to imagine Jack as a malevolent deceiver who uses this 'subjective' identity as a means of accessing 'intimate settings' with 'the vulnerable'.

The predator is a rhetorical stopping device used to block trans access and to guard linear gender in the imaginative geography of cis bathrooms and locker rooms. Trans women have culturally been attached to what Talia Bettcher (2007; 2014) calls the deceiver trope used for legitimizing violence against trans women. One form of violence which Bettcher (2014: 392) discusses is reality enforcement. Reality enforcement is a specific form of violence which trans people encounter, based on the view that the presented (or perceived) gender of a person is a sign which points to the form of their genitals (Bettcher, 2007, 2014; author 2018). According to this understanding of gender, trans people are deceivers. Moreover, this view is 'moral' in the sense, that even trans people who have changed their genitals to 'match' their perceived gender are perceived as deceivers, since within cisnormative culture, the form of genitals one was born with is considered to tell the truth about a person's true gender.⁶ The prevalence of the deceiver trope and the unrealness associated with trans people make it possible to attach the figure of the predator to trans women. Trans women and girls are not included in the 'women and children' evoked over and over again in these campaigns. Through the implicit whiteness of 'women and children', trans feminine people of colour are especially excluded from this figuration. Trans women

are attached to a deceiving figure from which the cis bathrooms across ‘America’ are to be defended. The figure of the predator works as a stopping device for actual trans bodies, whose safety is no concern for the Christian right. Exclusion against trans people, and trans feminine people specifically, is legitimized through the figure of the predator/deceiver.

Citizenship and belonging within the imagined geography of linear gender is presented as the true right of some – the imagined authentic purely cis bodies – and not others: the suspicious bodies of those who ‘claim’ an identity as well as access to public and semi-public spaces across USA. The Christian right imaginative geography of linear gender – of cis America – is a geography of threatened spaces, and the threat is at once access of the wrong bodies, and granting civil rights to these bodies - considered intruders.

Whiteness in Need of Protection

The AFA’s Boycott Target campaign did not settle for textual references to children. Their website features a large photograph of a white child, aged approximately eight, coded as a girl, dressed in pink, sitting in a chair and looking into the distance, with untidy long hair and a worried expression. The virtual poster includes a Target logo, the text, ‘Men don’t belong in women’s restrooms and changing areas’ and the campaign hashtag #BoycottTarget (American Family Association n.d., n.pag). One could imagine the child being worried about ‘men’ in ‘women’s restrooms and changing areas,’ or being upset after encountering a body of a ‘man’ in the wrong space. The idea of a trans girl looking like the girl pictured may not have crossed the minds of the campaigners, since the trans bodies in segregated space of gendered belonging are imagined as adult. The campaign page does not mention trans girls—not even by misgendering them as boys. It simply juxtaposes children—coded as white, cis and female—and adult men. In being concerned with trans women’s bodies imagined as

‘male,’ the AFA does not concern itself with the bathroom access of trans men, or transmasculine people, or let alone nonbinary trans people.

The whiteness of the child pictured is not coincidental, given how the discourse of family values in the US has been centrally concerned with white children and families (Frank 2014: 357). Since it is the future of the white child that is at stake, children of colour do not usually get to stand for ‘our children’ in media panics and legislative efforts for child protection. Nor are boys, either cis or trans, imagined as threatened, vulnerable ‘ideal citizens’ (Wanzo 2008: 100, 118; Berlant 1997). The white imagined children, to whom ‘weakness sticks’ are seen as ‘deserving’ a future (Renfro 2018: 570; Bond Stockton, 2009). The way the ‘child’ is imagined as white and cis means that the women and girls who are trans and POC are doubly negated as women and girls, as victims, or as the ones to be protected within the imaginative geography of the Christian right. They are subsumed into a threat to innocence and a secure future and can be *left out* of protections for ‘women and children,’ out of citizenship even, criminalized, or stopped from having a future at all. It therefore does not come as a surprise that the AFA expresses its support for harsher criminalization of people who have entered the country ‘illegally’ (American Family association 2020, n.pag.). The trans women who are left to die in ICE detention centres face most harshly this allocation of life to be protected and life considered expendable—what Spencer (2019) has called biopolitics of trans disposability.

Trans feminine people of colour are also stopped on the streets of USA simply for being trans. The cultural attachment of Black and trans feminine people of colour with sex work, together with police profiling practices, results in the phenomenon of ‘walking while trans’, a phenomenon which especially targets black and POC trans feminine people (Carpenter & Marshall 2017: 13; 15). The cultural attachment of trans feminine people of colour with sex work and sexualization further makes them seem unworthy of compassion in

a culture where victimhood and vulnerability are attached to white femininity which is perceived as innocent (author 2018). The ‘walking while trans’ phenomenon shows that black and POC trans feminine people do not receive protection from US police – rather, they face further harassment and violence from law enforcement (Carpenter & Marshall 2017: 15-16). If they end up in prison, they often face violence from both other incarcerated people, the prison staff, and the system itself, including forcing them to follow the line of binary and linear gender to a prison which corresponds with the gender they were assigned at birth (Carpenter & Marshall 2017: 10). Trans feminine people of colour are made uniquely vulnerable by both systemic racism and the systematic enforcement of linear and binary gender. This concrete vulnerability is veiled by figures of vulnerability and imaginative geographies of cis vulnerability. Within the imaginative geography of linear gender, the micro-level spaces of ‘America’, ‘women’s restrooms and changing areas,’ are imagined as spaces in need of protection, and the figure attached with these vulnerable spaces – the girl child – is imagined as white. In this sense, the malls, restrooms and changing areas of ‘America’ are spaces of cis whiteness in need of protection, within the imaginative geography of the Christian right.

Protecting a White Cis ‘America’

I have argued that the Christian right rhetorically constructs an imaginative geography of linear gender through its anti-trans rhetoric and affective media events. This imaginative geography of linear gender is created through material-semiotic tools, which include bills, signs on doors, and letters to districts, as well as figures. The figures of the predator, figure of the Child and ‘women and children’ are devices for performatively envisioning a cis ‘America’. Through these tools, spaces and bodies are imagined at once. Out of imaginative

accounts of vulnerable micro-level spaces which threaten to become traumatic, sexualized, spaces of ruined cis purity, grows and account of ‘America’ threatened by bodies which bend the cis line. This cis America is threatened by granting civil rights to these non-linear bodies.

Figuring trans bodies as threat and cis bodies as under threat builds on and sustains the imaginative geography of linear gender. Gender-segregated spaces are imagined through the figure of the predator as ones of risk: as risks to innocence, the future, and the white cis girl child. This figure feeds affective intensity connected to trans access to space, enabling calls to action, and aiming to mobilize defensive cis bodies ‘across America’. The presumably vulnerable ‘women’ and ‘children’ in all this are white by default, and their perceived fragility legitimizes ‘protective’ control over their bodies. Through the figure of the predator, both cis and trans children are kept in their respective places.

Shopping spaces, restrooms and locker rooms across ‘America’ are performatively imagined as spaces of whiteness to be protected. A threatened white cis ‘America’ is evoked by imagining micro-scale spaces of locker-rooms, bathrooms and Targets as ones where ‘stranger danger’ looms. It is a vision of the USA where white ‘women and children’ must be defended from threatening bodies that pose a danger to the future as it is imagined and embodied in its ideal citizens: innocent white cis girls and women whose assumed vulnerability makes arguments against threatening ‘others’ seem non-political. Vulnerability attached to specifically white cis women by Christian right as well as TERFs, is a rhetorical tool used by groups unwilling to confront the position of white cis women in relation to the norm of linear gender. Citizenship and belonging are presented as the true right of imagined authentic, purely cis bodies, and threat to these ideal citizens is attached to wrong bodies, presented as trespassing spaces of linear gender, and perceived as claiming an identity. Allowing civil rights to these bodies presented as unbelonging to the spaces of the United States is presented as robbing rights and safety from those who truly belong.

The imaginative accounts of spaces and bodies by the Christian right are performative; they have effects on the concrete bodies and spaces. The imagined trans bodies, as well as the imagined spaces devoid of trans bodies, affect the experience of having a trans body and the possibilities of living and navigating the social world as a trans person. The imagined vulnerability of white cis bodies legitimizes measures that can make it impossible for trans people to exist in public spaces (Murib 2020). This is even more so for people who are perceived as bending the cis line in more ways than one. Black or POC trans feminine people excluded from the implicitly white ideal citizenship are doubly impossible as idealized victims. They are not seen as vulnerable bodies in need of protection within the imaginative geography of the Christian right and are not presented as worthy of compassion. The defended 'America' is white and cis, defended from anything seen as bending the lines of gender and race.

Similar imaginative geographies are being evoked globally by conservative and ethno-nationalist politicians, many of whom are networked with the US Christian right (via ADF International, for example) and draw inspiration and resources from it (Stryker 2018; Ciobanu 2018). Internationally, TERFs working against trans inclusion in women's spaces also make use of very similar imaginative geography as the Christian Right (National Records of Scotland Web Archive 2018; Pearce 2019). As fears against anything other than the imagined unified 'us' are mobilized and utilized in the context of national populist politics, the imaginative cis geographies offered by TERFs and the Christian right alike can gain wider popularity and mobilize people against trans rights in support of anti-democratic forces.

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¹ Then from the early 2000's, conservatives started using the imagined threat associated with trans people in gender-segregated bathrooms to curb anti-discrimination laws that included sexual orientation and gender identity and with protections for public accommodations – though these conservative efforts were first unsuccessful (George 2019, 581).

² This can be seen for example in the Parliament discussion over the new trans law in Finland in October 2022. Two Cristian Democrat MP:s used the rhetoric rehearsed internationally by TERF:s and Christian Right alike, focusing on perceived threats to 'women' and 'girls', in a manner which is new in Finnish public discussions but well-rehearsed internationally.

³ I take the term 'America' from the Christian right rhetorics addressed. I came to think of the importance of 'America' for Christian right, when watching the anti-trans campaign film 'The Unintended Victims of Bathroom Bills and Locker Room Policies' which was shared on the ADF's YouTube channel (Alliance Defending Freedom 2016), and which included the text: 'Across America, new laws and policies make women's restrooms and locker rooms available to men'.

⁴ This view is mirrored in anti-trans bathroom bills around the country (Perceland 2015, n.pag.), and the Republican party followed this line of argumentation in opposing the Obama administration's instruction to count discrimination based on trans status as discrimination prohibited by Title IX, arguing that giving trans students access to gender-segregated locker rooms and restrooms is an 'infringement upon the majority of students' Constitutional rights' (Republican National Committee 2016).

⁵ This vulnerability attached with schools as institutions is ironic, since spaces of education are in fact spaces where 'systemic genderism' or as I would put it, cisnormativity, prevails, and 'microaggressions specifically enacted on trans* people' are common (Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn & Woodford 2017, 313).

⁶ I have previously drawn from Bettcher's work in theorizing how tropes of un-reality attached with trans people legitimize violence against trans people and delegitimize trans feminine people as victims (author 2018).