

## Referentialism and Discursive Parallels between US “Alt-Right” and “Gender-Critical” Conspiracism

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the role of language ideology in the argumentation of both “alt-right” and “gender-critical” discourses about gender. While positioning themselves on different sides of the left-right political spectrum, both groups make use of referentialist language ideologies to establish themselves as authorities over language. Referentialism is a type of tautological reasoning that posits language and dictionary-style definitions as the final arbiter of reality (e.g., “A woman is an adult human female; if it is an adult human female, it must be a woman”). This article contributes to a broader understanding of how language ideology functions as a powerful rhetorical tool in the fight against anti-gender movements.*

**Keywords:** transphobia, referentialism, language ideologies, conspiracy theory, gender critical, TERF, anti-gender

This article explores trans-exclusionary and alt-right discursive alignments, with particular focus on the weaponization of *referentialist* language ideologies as a means to establish authority over the meaning of “gender.” For the purposes of this article, I define referentialism as a logical-positivist assertion that meaning in language does/should lie in what an expression denotes, and that the material world does/should conform to denotative practice. Stated simply, referentialism is a tautological belief that the world is already presorted into natural categories that are picked out by language, and that linguistic boundaries denote essential and unalienable differences between entities in the world (see Hyslop-Margison and Naseem 2007). In this article, I argue that anti-trans and alt-right/far-right actors weaponize referentialism both to mediate anxieties about racial and gender ambiguities and to assert epistemic authority through appeals to commonly held prescriptive language ideologies. The data collection and analysis for this article are drawn from (*digital*) *discourse analysis*, a flexible approach that draws attention to *texts* (collections of language that have internal coherence and perform social actions), *contexts* (the conditions in which texts are produced and perceived), *practices* (recognizable sequences of actions), and *power/ideology* (the use of texts to assert or deny social power, and to “create certain ‘versions of reality’” (Jones, Chik, and Hafner 2017). In section 2, I describe terminologies and anxieties within anti-trans

and alt-right communities, as well as their histories; section 3 discusses referentialism in connection to political psychological studies of cognitive closure; section 4 forms the discussion and conclusion.

### **A Brief Overview of “Gender-Critical” and “Alt-Right” Terminology and History**

In this article, I use terms including “anti-trans,” “gender-critical,” and “alt-right,” which are all politically laden and contested expressions. I have chosen to use “anti-trans” as a catchall for TERF (“trans-exclusionary radical feminist”) and “gender-critical” actors. Similarly, I use “far right” to refer to broader trends of radical conservative politics, and “alt-right” to refer to the specific online subculture defined below. There is scholarly debate about the legitimizing function of using in-group terms (cf. Heller and McElhinny 2017), but “gender-critical” and “alt-right” index a level of ideologies and practices that cannot be attributed to broader “anti-trans” or far-right movements. In this section, I outline brief histories of these movements.

The term TERF, or “trans-exclusionary radical feminist,” was coined by pro-trans radical feminists. It is credited to Viv Smythe, a cisgender heterosexual radical feminist blogger (though Smythe herself credits trans-inclusion advocate Lisa Harney). Smythe used TERF to distance her radical feminist politics from self-described radical feminists who “marginalise trans women at actual risk from regularly documented abuse/violence in favour of protecting hypothetical cis women from purely hypothetical abuse/violence from trans women,” which she found “horribly unethical as well as repellently callous” (Smythe 2008, 2018). The expression spread from Smythe’s blog to other feminist blogs and platforms where it has both been embraced as a self-identification and used as an insult. Indeed, “TERF” has been labeled a slur, or derogatory, by numerous press outlets and style guides (M. Goldberg 2014; Vasquez 2016; Ring 2023). Over time, “gender-critical” or “gender-critical feminism” have become the preferred monikers for this group. In her mapping of this linguistic shift, scholar Claire Thurlow argues that “TERF” better represents trans-exclusionary views in radical feminist politics of the 1970s and 1980s, while “gender-critical” represents a contemporary “pro-woman” reframing of trans exclusion (Thurlow 2024). It is critical to note here that gender-criticals also present themselves publicly as left-leaning political actors (and, in fact, as better leftists than trans-inclusion activists) (Wheeler 2024). The term “gender-critical,” suggesting a level of nuanced critique around gender, lends a veneer of leftist sensibility to what is otherwise a directed hate campaign toward transgender people (and most egregiously toward transgender women). Many transgender writers and cisgender allies have noted the alliances between transphobic “feminist” and misogynist far-right groups (Evang 2022; Klee 2021; LeMaster 2023; Lewis and Seresin 2022; Libby 2022; Lofton 2022; Wang 2019a, 2019b).

“Alt-right” is an umbrella term for numerous overlapping online communities that endorse radical right-wing politics. Described by scholars as “atomized, amorphous, predominantly online, and mostly anonymous” (Hawley 2017, 3), the alt-right follows

decades of white supremacist organizing in the United States and western Europe. While the movement overlaps with and has garnered support from similar movements across the globe, the alt-right is predominantly US-oriented and is notorious for its anonymity. Emerging from 4chan troll culture, the alt-right rose to prominence during the 2016 US presidential election, reached its height, and lost prominence as its positions and tactics integrated into pro-Trump Republican practices (Thompson and Hawley 2021). Alt-right discourses promote pseudoscientific racist talking points such as “race/sex realism,” a perspective that one’s racial and sex assignment suits one to specific complementary social roles (Saini 2019). This is also the basis of far-right opposition to the existence of queer and transgender people—those who are viewed as consciously rejecting the far-right moral imperative of heterosexual reproduction (Burnett and Richardson 2021). Alt-right subgroups may differ in terms of specific foci or goals but share white identity as a core interest. The less radical factions of the alt-right call for an end to “politically correct” language and immigration as well as acceptance for white identity politics in the mainstream. The more radical factions, which include neo-Nazis, advocate for global race war and the establishment of a whites-only nation. There is considerable debate across all factions regarding the terminology that should be used for self-identification.

Similarly to “TERF” and “gender-critical”, the term “alt-right” is not a neutral descriptor and should be used with caution. In the article “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” Breitbart writers Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos argue that the alt-right is merely acting out youthful rebellion against the politically correct norms of yesteryear:

Just as the kids of the 60s shocked their parents with promiscuity, long hair and rock’n’roll, so too do the alt-right’s young meme brigades shock older generations with outrageous caricatures, from the Jewish “Shlomo Shekelburg” to “Remove Kebab,” an internet in-joke about the Bosnian genocide. . . . Are they actually bigots? No more than death metal devotees in the 80s were actually Satanists. For them, it’s simply a means to fluster their grandparents. (Bokhari and Yiannopoulos 2016)

In this view, the “alt-right” is framed as transgressive, fun, and edgy; racism and genocide are reduced to tools in a humorous repertoire, rather than examples of human cruelty. In response, journalists and scholars have argued that using this term minimizes and legitimizes far-right positions while obscuring their white supremacist, antisemitic, and misogynist politics as mere “humor.” In this view, uncritical circulation of their preferred terminology unintentionally endorses their legitimacy as a group (Stead 2016; Heller and McElhinny 2017). I agree with this, especially when it comes to media coverage of such groups. It is crucial to highlight the intrinsically violent politics of white supremacy in discussing the alt-right, as they present a real threat to public safety.

At the same time, my interest in the alt-right is due to its particular role in online political discourse and the practices that distinguish it from other far-right and white supremacist movements, namely, its weaponization of anonymous internet spaces and use of memes to spread white supremacist ideas. I use “alt-right” in this article because I consider the movement a specific articulation (or set of articulations) of a broader far-right movement. Their politics and end goals align, but the alt-right has had a distinct influence on US right-wing self-stylization in the era of Donald Trump (Thompson and Hawley, 2021). As with “gender-critical,” I have used quotation marks around “alt-right” in this section to indicate that it was an in-group identifier at the time of my data collection, and to visually mark it as a contested expression. I use “far-right” to index the broader movements of conservative, nationalist, and authoritarian politics globally.

### *Histories*

The intellectual history of transphobia within US- and UK-based feminist movements traces back to 1970s radical feminist circles, who argued that it is the very nature of “maleness” (essentialized to people who have penises) to oppress and exploit “female-sexed bodies” (people who have vulvae/uteri). Sheila Jeffreys (2022, 13) calls this theory “penile imperialism,” defined as “a regime in which men are assumed to have a ‘sex right’ of access to the bodies of women and girls which is delineated by sexologists, protected by governments and the law, and reproduced in culture.” This viewpoint explicitly “conflate[s] bodies with gender so that the penis [becomes] a symbol of patriarchy, male socialization, and unwanted heterosexuality” (Earles 2019). Transgender women and transfeminine people, rather than allies in rejecting maleness, are figured as emblems of patriarchal desire to take over female bodies (Raymond 1979), while transgender men and transmasculine people are presented as naive victims of “gender ideology” (Shrier 2020; Borba 2022; Baran 2023; Tebaldi and Baran 2023).

In recent years, trans-exclusionary feminisms have relabeled themselves as “gender-critical” movements to signal opposition to this “ideology” while seeking to reify sex as the primary axis of women’s oppression. Although these groups present themselves as feminists and as generally aligned with progressive social movements, their open participation in misogynist and homophobic political projects suggests that the “feminist” title is merely a rhetorical strategy to gain cultural cachet and legitimacy as defenders of women (Alexander 2023; Billard 2023; LeMaster 2023). In a more nuanced perspective, Thurlow (2024) sees the discursive shift from “TERF” to “gender-critical” as a response to changing theory and understanding of the world. From the 1970s to the present day there has been a boom of scholarship challenging the notion of what a woman “is.” Thurlow (2024, 968–69) writes that notions of social “gender” and biological “sex” have been challenged by both critical theory and advances in biological science: “research on the interplay between sex and gender, the biological and the social, the suggested discursive nature of both, poses questions about the tenability of maintaining a stark separation between the concepts of gender and sex.” The “gender-critical” rebrand

was formed in the wake of this shift, discursively downplaying the anti-trans nature of their politics in favor of a “pro-woman” position. Thurlow (2024, 967) argues that this shift has given the gender critical movement a veneer of “reasonableness,” despite their refusal to deeply engage with non-essentialist theories of sex and gender. One superficially reasonable position claimed by the gender-critical movement is the rebrand of sex essentialism as “gender realism”—a perspective that assumes that all women/females share a characteristic/feature/experience that fundamentally and irrevocably differentiate them from men/males (Mikkola, 2024). The framing of “realism” parallels the “race/sex realism” (i.e., belief in the innate biological inferiority of women and nonwhites) pushed by white supremacist movements such as the alt-right, forecasting their inevitable political alliance.

### *The Gender-Critical and Far-Right Anti-Trans Alliance*

Despite self-descriptors of feminism and antiracism, the gender-critical movement has shown itself to be comfortable aligning with the far right in a shared effort to eliminate transgender existence. In *The Transsexual Empire*, Janice Raymond (1979, 178) stated that “transsexualism itself is a deeply moral question rather than a medical-technical answer. I contend that the problem of transsexualism would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence.” In 2014, in response to feminist criticism comparing her writing to genocidal rhetoric, Raymond argued on her personal blog that she did not advocate for the physical eradication of transgender people but instead the elimination of “the medical and social systems that support transsexualism and the reasons why in a gender-defined society, persons find it necessary to change their bodies” (Raymond 2014). Although Raymond forwards an argument in favor of a society structured outside the confines of gender, her reasoning is still genocidal: there is no functional difference between eliminating trans people and eliminating the conditions that make transgender existence possible. Furthermore, given high rates of self-harm and suicide among transgender people unable to access medical care (Clements-Nolle, Marx, and Katz 2006; Green et al. 2022; Progovac et al. 2021), Raymond’s amended argument still meets the United Nations criteria for genocide: causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a group, and deliberately inflicting on it conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part (United Nations Convention).

Raymond’s moral mandate aligns with that of the US far right; not only has she personally contributed to right-wing administrations, but her writings have been taken up by anti-LGBTQ Christian groups to provide a putatively “feminist” face to religious bigotry (Michaelson 2016; Parke 2016; Vasquez 2016). Since 2015, the ACLU and Trans Legislation Tracker have noted that attacks on LGBTQ people (and transgender people specifically) have escalated dramatically. As of summer 2024, there were 339 anti-trans bills actively being proposed throughout the US (Branstetter 2023; Trans Legislation Tracker 2024). Gender-critical figureheads have been instrumental in this process, which has been documented extensively by transgender and trans-allied

journalists and bloggers. Burns (2019) for instance describes the alliance between the US-based gender-critical group Women's Liberation Front (WoLF) and the first Trump administration. In recent years, WoLF has advocated for "sex-based" dress codes and for banning trans women from women's homeless shelters. In an amicus brief for the US Supreme Court case *R. G. & G. R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC and Aimee Stevens*, WoLF submitted the following:

Legally redefining "female" as anyone who claims to be female results in the erasure of female people as a class. If, as a matter of law, anyone can be a woman, then no one is a woman, and sex-based protections in the law have no meaning whatsoever. (R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC 2019, 2)

The power of an allegiance between the gender-criticals and the alt-right is also known in far-right circles. In an article titled "The TERFS to Dissident Right Pipeline," posted to the alt-right journal *Radix*, author Kat S. (2020) explicitly states that TERF understandings of sex and gender form a "natural" pathway to white supremacist "race realism":

Once these dangers [of physical, sexual, and economic exploitation of women] were somewhat mitigated in the West, we see a shift from a genuine women's liberation movement into the mid-to-late 20th-century Jewish-led feminist theory. . . . Male violence is of unique interest when arguing the risks involved in allowing men into spaces where women are vulnerable, and one of the first steps in accepting the reality of male violence is actually viewing the statistics regarding male-on-female violence. Viewing the publicly available data with a critical eye reveals a truth known to anyone on the dissident right. It doesn't take any thinking woman long to see exactly which men are committing violent crime and the majority of partner violence, and race realism is a natural next step.

In this excerpt, Kat S. employs a common right-wing narrative concerning women's rights—that "genuine" (white) women's liberation was the fight for suffrage and the right to work, and that the dawn of critical poststructuralist theory ("Jewish-led feminist theory") has destroyed conceptual boundaries protecting women from men. This argument, which pejoratively calls critical theory "cultural Marxism," posits a conspiracy among the Jewish intellectual elite to use academia and media to spread progressive ideals, with the end goal of undermining white Christian influence in the West (R. Goldberg 2001; Finlayson 2021). The author argues here that the antidote to this brainwashing is to emphasize the "truth" of gendered violence—that it is statistically (and thus "naturally") inevitable that men will always harm and oppress women. The author continues to suggest that if TERFs accept this logic, then "race realism" is the

logical next step. Central to this narrative is an assumption that statistics directly reflect “reality” without the need for historical or sociological context.

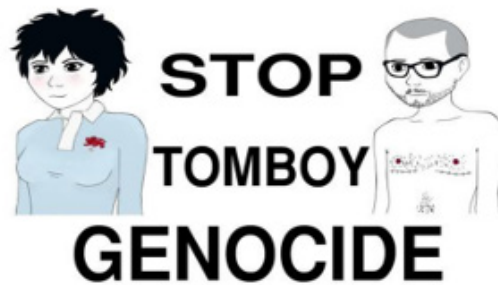
With these “natural” parallels, combined with a refusal to engage with any nonessentialist explanatory theories of gender, both gender-critical and alt-right groups have turned to antisemitic conspiracism for answers. Thus far, little attention has been paid to the circulation of conspiracy theories within anti-gender movements, including TERF and gender-critical groups; yet, like the alt-right and broader far right, anti-gender movements exhibit a strong strain of eliminationist anxieties and significant conceptual overlap with white genocide conspiracies. Most relevant to this discussion are the “New World Order” and “white genocide” conspiracy theories. New World Order conspiracies posit that there exists a secretive global elite, most frequently presented as Jews, that seeks to replace existing nation-states with a totalitarian one-world government. White supremacists also use the acronym ZOG, or “Zionist Occupied Government,” reflecting the belief that Jews control the government, financial sectors, and entertainment industries in the United States (Anti-Defamation League 2023). Interrelated with this conspiracy is “white genocide,” which claims that this omnipotent global cabal indirectly seeks to exterminate the white race by promoting nonwhite immigration, racial miscegenation, abortion, and progressive social movements for civil rights (Barkun 2003; Berlet and Lyons 2000; R. Goldberg 2001; Kelly 2017; Perry 2004; Wilson 2018). The white genocide conspiracy was popularized by David Lane, a neo-Nazi who coined two versions of the now infamous white nationalist slogan “The 14 Words” (Michael 2009):

- 1) We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children,
- 2) Because the beauty of the White Aryan woman must not perish from the earth.

While the core of alt-right politics tends to underscore race, alt-righters have long circulated the idea that transgender existence, in and of itself, represents another arm of white genocide.

An example of these shared anxieties can be found in the “tomboy extinction” meme, which posits that masculine heterosexual girls (“tomboys”) are being coerced into gender transition. Prominent gender-critical and anti-transgender activists have claimed that the existence of transness will lead to the demise of cisgender women. For instance, the LGB Alliance, a British anti-transgender group, has claimed that lesbians are facing “extinction” by pressure to identify as trans men (Thompson 2022; Tominey 2020). Anxieties about “tomboy genocide” also appeared on the now defunct subreddit /r/fightfemaleerasure (figure 1). Lynne Stahl, a researcher of tomboyism and a lesbian, describes the prevalence of “extinction phobia” in anti-trans circles. She writes:

Extinction anxieties have long fueled nationalist, fascist and white-supremacist movements and often beget eugenicist agendas. Indeed, tomboyism as we know it arose in concert with eugenics. Fears about potential White extinction in the United States proliferated in the second half of the 19th century amid emancipation and waves of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe as well as Eastern Asia, as scholar Michelle Abate observes. Child-rearing manuals began advocating for exercise and comfortable clothing, instead of the restrictive and harmful corsets then common, as means of making White girls fit to produce healthy White offspring. The degree to which some girls embraced these empowering options, however, prompted a backlash associating tomboyism and homosexuality. (Stahl 2021)



**Figure 1.** Stop Tomboy Genocide.<sup>1</sup>

Schotten (2022, 335), following Stahl, characterizes extinction phobia as “existential beleaguerment narratives that cast political opponents as threats to survival, describing these opponents in objectified and dehumanizing terms that characterize them as innately threatening, evil, or ‘savage.’” Schotten calls this line of thought “predation TERFism” and identifies it as a strain of reactionary politics.

Extinction phobias are reactionary because they are ideological: they obscure the actual functioning of power by reversing hierarchy’s material realities. In other words, rather than recognize their own power or position of superiority in relation to the political enemy they identify, exponents of extinction phobias instead insist on their own marginalization and victimization, instrumentalizing claims of oppression in order to wield them against their actually marginalized

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<sup>1</sup> Originally posted to Reddit on July 9, 2021, by user “carnalhag.” See [https://www.reddit.com/r/FightFemaleErasure/comments/ogu18u/tomboy\\_genocide/](https://www.reddit.com/r/FightFemaleErasure/comments/ogu18u/tomboy_genocide/). The thread is defunct but is accessible at <https://archive.is/lxRpN> (accessed January 13, 2025).

political opponents, whom they objectify and dehumanize as innately threatening. (2022, 335)

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In one of the more incendiary claims made in *The Transsexual Empire*, Raymond (1979) links transgender health care to the medical atrocities perpetrated by Nazi doctors against Jewish prisoners. In this section, she writes that medical services for trans people (i.e., “the transsexual empire”) are “science at the service of a patriarchal ideology of sex-role conformity in the same way that breeding for blond hair and blue eyes become a so-called science of Nordic racial conformity” (149). Raymond also argues that trans health care represents a form of eugenics perpetuated not through care for transgender individuals but through scientists’ immoral desire for knowledge. In this view, trans health care is “unnecessary surgery, performed in part because of the ‘objective’ knowledge that it offers to researchers and technicians on a subject that is not knowable from other sources” (150). This claim, in which transgender people are framed as emotionally and financially exploited by scientists and pharmaceutical corporations, has also been taken up by anti-trans, pro-QAnon conspiracists such as the far-right US politician Marjorie Taylor-Green (Gill-Peterson 2021; Levesque 2021).

Another example of the “tomboy extinction” theme, pictured below, was retrieved from 8chan in July 2020. The image, which has been shared widely across social media platforms, depicts a girl in a straitjacket labelled “Gen Z Tomboys.” She has a device attached to her head labeled “Tomboy Indoctrination Machine” and is drawn drooling with spiral eyes, indicating that she is under hypnosis. She says, “I understand I’m not a cute girl, I’m gay or FTM [female-to-male].” Meanwhile, a hooded figure with a cube for a head labeled “Global Homo” (a reference to New World Order conspiracies) holds her shoulder with a lizard-like clawed hand.<sup>2</sup> A man labeled “Tomboy Respecters” stands on the other side of a glass viewing panel and cries as the object of his affection is brainwashed into queerness or transness (figure 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Conspiracy theorist David Icke famously argues that the world is run by a cabal of shapeshifting reptilian aliens, propelling humanity toward a fascist New World Order. This conspiracy often overlaps with white nationalist notions of “Zionist Occupied Government” and beliefs about the inability of Ashkenazi Jewish people to “pass” as white (Daniels 2016).



**Figure 2.** Tomboy Indoctrination Machine comic.<sup>3</sup>

While the comic was initially observed on 8chan, I found that it had been circulated into more mainstream platforms, including Newgrounds and Instagram—an illustration of how alt-right discourses fluidly relay from group-internal platforms into public “normie” discourse (Gal 2019). Commenters from these other platforms, which have no direct connection to 8chan or the alt-right, expressed anger and violence regarding the “indoctrination” of tomboys. The comments, of which a small unedited selection is shown in examples 1–6 below, illustrate the mixture of serious discourse and memeified language typical of alt-right communities. Commenters from Newgrounds imply positive affiliation with Nazism (1–2), lament supposed predation of tomboys by LGBTQ groups (3), and reference the desire to punish or commit acts of violence against the “perpetrators” of “tomboy genocide” (4–6, figure 3).

- 1) The villains won WW2
- 2) The west made a mistake with the side it chose to be on
- 3) Yeah.. it's really sad to see so many good quality turn into these monsters when stuff like lgbt etc comes to their lives.
- 4) Anyone who tries to create more gays should be deemed a terrorist.
- 5) who must I kill to stop this from happening
- 6) Tomboy Genocide Tomboy Genocide

<sup>3</sup> Originally posted by anonymous to 8chan on July 12, 2020. The archived post is available at: <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/267601317/#267625239>, (accessed January 13, 2025).



**Figure 3.** Are you a bad enough dude to rescue the tomboys?<sup>4</sup>

The image and the text in figure 3 illustrate “memeification.” The “Are you a bad enough dude” meme is based on the 1988 video game *Bad Dudes*, which follows two street-fighting “bad dudes” as they attempt to rescue the US president from kidnapping (Knowyourmeme 2009). The meme typically presents a problem, and then asks the reader, “Are you a bad enough dude to [resolve X problem]?” I provide this example to highlight how memes are a vector for violent discourse—the implication is that the reader will fight transgender people and “liberals” to rescue victimized tomboys—while mitigating the message through humor (see Billig 2001, 2005; see Kosse 2022 for discussion of the functions of humor in white supremacist spaces). Although the meme is presented semi-humorously, it also serves as a vector to spread violent sentiment in a plausibly deniable format. The memeified framing of this comic, and the responses to it, are typical of what is found on other platforms.

On an Instagram account where the comic was posted, commenters in this exchange explicitly link “tomboy extinction” to Jews (and thus to New World Order exterminationist conspiracies):

A: The tomboy to lesbian revolution and it’s [*sic*] consequences have been a disaster for the human race

B: Birth control created lesbians

A: the creator of birth control was an Austrian Jew. So logically the allied victory in World War 2 is responsible to [*sic*] the tomboy extinction

<sup>4</sup> Knowyourmeme (website), accessed January 13, 2025, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/are-you-a-bad-enough-dude/photos>.

This interaction begins with another instance of memeification, which shifts into a sincere interchange referencing New World Order / ZOG / white genocide conspiracies (Askanius 2021). In line 1, interlocutor A remixes the first line of ecoterrorist Ted Kaczynski's Unabomber manifesto: "The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race." Kaczynski's writings are popular in alt-right circles, and several white nationalist terrorists have referenced his work in their own manifestos as justification for violent murder (Christ 2021; Farrell-Molloy and Macklin 2022).

Like the Newgrounds commenters, the Instagram commenters explicitly tie "tomboy extinction" to allied victory in World War II and implicitly to white genocide—suggesting that Jews invented birth control and queerness as part of a larger attempt to undermine white populations. Claims of Jewish conspiracy also abound in "transhumanism" discourse among the far right and among gender-critical groups; transhumanism typically refers to a position promoting the use of technology to improve (and transcend) human capacities. Prominent US-based conspiracy theorist Alex Jones has claimed repeatedly that the push to advance technology is a front for the New World Order to establish a global government:

It's all global government—accept nanotech. Accept wirehead. Accept interfaces, everything's fine. . . . All of our modern technologies—created by eugenicists. Or farmed out by scientists owned by scientists owned by eugenicists robber barons. The entire society, the whole technotronic plan; robotics, future not needing us, phasing out humanity, all of this, a hellish future, while they've been poisoning us and dumbing us down, so we can't resist their takeover, and then saying we deserve it because all we want to do is watch *Dancing with the Stars*. (quoted in Istvan 2014)

Here, Jones emphatically argues that a putative all-powerful group of people seeks to control average Americans by deliberately "poisoning" and "dumbing [them] down," tricking them into blindly serving the group's agenda.

Anti-trans figures have pushed a similar argument, claiming that the emergence of transgender identities is the direct result of transhumanist (Jewish) engineering for the purpose of social control. For instance, gender-critical activist Jennifer Bilek wrote a 2018 article for the online conservative magazine *The Federalist*, claiming that transness is a Big Pharma plot, a "manufactured medical issue with a civil rights frame" engineered by billionaire transhumanists attempting to hook children into "a never-ending saga of body-related consumerism" (Bilek 2018). Helen Joyce, an Irish journalist and a prominent voice of the online gender-critical community, made the same claim in her 2021 book, *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality*, which contains a passage accusing three billionaires (of whom two were Jewish, including conspiratorial favorite George Soros) of funding "transactivism." She also uses antisemitic dog-whistles such as "global

agenda.” She has publicly expressed explicitly eugenic and genocidal attitudes toward trans people. In a recorded discussion with Helen Staniland (another gender-critical figure), Joyce stated that “decision-makers” must “limit harm” by

reducing or keeping down the number of people who transition. That’s for two reasons: one of them is that every one of those people is a person who’s been damaged. But the second one is every one of those people is basically, you know, a huge problem to a sane world. (cited in Kelleher 2022)

To fight this perceived existential threat, both far-right and gender-critical movements have identified language as a vector of social control. In the following section, I discuss how far-right anxieties about gender and social change integrate in the ideological realm of *referentialism*.

### **Cognitive Closure and Referentialism**

Historians, sociologists, and psychologists have documented that conservative ideologies, regardless of self-labeling, consistently involve fear and resistance to change, hierarchical worldviews, adherence to social norms, punishment of deviants, and a broad desire for order and stability (Michaelson and Reimer 2022). Decades of social and political psychology research note that, across time and across cultural contexts, conservatism highly correlates with a need for *cognitive closure* (Amodio et al. 2007; Carney et al. 2008; Cristofaro et al. 2019; Eidelman et al. 2012; Jost et al. 2003; Sterling, Jost, and Bonneau 2020). Cognitive closure refers to the motivation to quickly formulate and maintain a clear opinion on an issue, rather than accepting confusion and ambiguity (Kruglanski et al. 2010).

Hall (2014), drawing from Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of *liquid modernity*, observes that the current period of globalization has given rise to *hypersubjectivity*—an intensification of self-awareness and anxiety around self-presentation and perception by others. Bauman (2000, 2) uses the properties of liquids to characterize the contemporary era:

What all these features of fluids amount to, in simple language, is that liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape. Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time. While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance, of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but “for a moment.” In a sense, solids cancel time; for liquids, on the contrary, it is mostly time that matters. When describing solids,

one may ignore time altogether; in describing fluids, to leave time out of account would be a grievous mistake. Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture.

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Cognitive closure demands conceptual solidity, but liquidity (by its nature) evades closure. If we are in a state of fluidity, as Bauman suggests, then no closure can be promised; if this is so, what semiotic resources are available to discursively *produce* closure? I argue that one possibility is to focus on language as an arbiter of reality. Research has found connections between linguistic forms and cognitive closure, both on the level of language production and in the form of increased metalinguistic discourse concerning the role of language in defining reality. Scholars of political psychology have noted that conservative and reactionary politicians tend to favor nouns and nominal constructions over verbs and verbal constructions. This follows other research indicating that conservatives are prone to understanding the world through simple entities (represented by nouns) rather than complex and dynamic processes; nouns elicit clearer and more definite perceptions of reality compared to other lexical classes (Bures 2021; Carnaghi et al. 2008; Cichočka et al. 2016; Graf et al. 2013). With this in mind, it is not shocking that gender-critical and far-right discourses converge on nouns (e.g., *woman*) and emphasize that linguistic boundaries (e.g., *male*, *female*, *woman*, *man*) must directly index some immutable Platonic essence that substantiates “true” reality. Nor is it surprising that they oppose social constructivist theories that highlight the contextualized and performative nature of human identity and interaction. While positioning themselves against social constructivism, alt-righters nonetheless show a keen interest in how to manipulate public discourse—how can we discursively seal the liquidity of gender into a linguistic jar, so that it can never shift again?

One goal of alt-right organizing is to push racist, sexist, and antisemitic discourse into “acceptable” public discourse, often weaponizing notions of free speech and “viewpoint diversity” to do so.<sup>5</sup> In my own data, alt-righters frequently discuss the importance of shifting the Overton window and the role of language in self-presentation. The Overton window, named for American policy analyst Joseph Overton, refers to the range of policies acceptable to the political mainstream at a given time (Mackinac Center, n.d.). This concept has been extended by alt-righters to include not just which policies but which ideas are permissible to express in front of “normies.”

In the same way, gender-criticals construct transgender people and allies as trying to change semantics to fit their worldview. Progressives are accused of “mangl[ing] language to the point of meaninglessness” (see the “adult human chicken” example below). Trying to gain epistemic authority regarding a definitional account of “woman”

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5 See Owen Jones (@owenjonesjourno), Twitter, June 3, 2022, 4:45 a.m., <https://twitter.com/OwenJones84/status/1532659649606045696>.

(and a weaponized referentialist perspective on language) becomes a convenient point of access to the culture war. In this section, I have suggested a psychosocial model to explain why and how alt-righters and gender-criticals have centered language in anti-trans organizing. There is a broad correlation between reactionary political ideologies and a desire for conceptual simplicity, which is reflected in the social psychology research as a tendency to prefer conceptually stable linguistic forms (nouns) over more fluid and dynamic linguistic constructions. It is not surprising, then, to note that a major component of anti-trans discourse concerns the definitional boundaries of words like “woman” or “man.”

### **Behold—An “Adult Human Chicken”: Referentialism Weaponized**

*Referentialism* is the philosophical position that the meaning of a word must be explained in terms of what it stands for, that is, its referent. The mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell famously wrote:

A term is, in fact, possessed of all the properties commonly assigned to substances or substantives. Every term, to begin with, is a logical subject: it is, for example, the subject of the proposition that itself is one. Again every term is immutable and indestructible. What a term is, it is, and no change can be conceived in it which would not destroy its identity and make it another term. (Russell 1903)

The most straightforward form of referentialism simply identifies the meaning of a term with the object denoted (Schroeder 2006). The tendency to conflate real-world dynamic entities with feature-based definitional accounts is, quite literally, ancient. Contemporary struggles over language and meaning call to mind this riposte by the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes the Cynic to Plato:

Plato had defined Man as an animal, biped and featherless, and was applauded. Diogenes plucked a fowl and brought it into the lecture-room with the words, “Here is Plato’s man.” In consequence of which there was added to the definition [by Plato], “having broad nails.” (Diogenes 1972, 40)

Throughout written history, people have debated the relationship between linguistic representations and meaning. Plato famously articulated his Theory of Ideas (also called Platonic realism), which suggests that any given object or quality has a mode of being (a higher-order essence called the Idea) that is more “real” and “true” than its real-world instantiations, forming the essential basis of reality. Ideas are constructed as perfect and unchanging representations; in this view, “reality” is not the summation of observable phenomena but an imperfect reflection of the universal Ideas knowable only through language. Concepts or terms seem to point to this immutable essence, just as they name

the many lower-order instances in our world that fall under the Idea (Plato 1997). Platonic realism lives on in folk theories of language in the form of referentialism, which extends into contemporary discussions about gender.

Both gender-critical and far-right actors have rallied around the question, “What is a woman?” While this line of inquiry has interested scholars of gender for decades, this superficially innocent question attempts to consolidate the expansive phenomenon of gender under a universal and essentializing definition: an “adult human female.” The expression “adult human female” was popularized by Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull, also known as “Posie Parker,” a prominent anti-transgender activist based in the UK who designed a dictionary-inspired graphic stating as much (figure 4).



**Figure 4.** A large poster stating anti-transgender activists’ essentializing definition of “woman.”<sup>6</sup>

In an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation, Keen-Minshull claimed that she erected the poster in Liverpool in response to the mayor’s voicing support for transgender communities. She said she wanted to “start a conversation about women’s rights,” expressing concern that the word “woman” was “being appropriated to mean anything” (BBC News 2018). Keen-Minshull’s “Let Women Speak” website states on its front page:

We are a global constituency of women. We focus specifically on the word “woman,” and other female language that clearly defines us, and our rights. The purpose of our campaign is to raise funds in order to promote the fight back against this global assault of women.

Throughout the legal framework of women’s sex based rights and protections we use the word “woman.” It is essential that this word is retained to mean “adult human female” only. Without this word all

<sup>6</sup> “Woman Billboard Removed after Transphobia Row,” *BBC*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-45650462>.

of our rights and protections are lost. Our rights were never created for our “gender” but our sex.<sup>7</sup>

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Likewise, self-described “theocratic fascist” and far-right social media personality Matt Walsh made the question the central theme of a documentary, creatively titled *What Is a Woman?* The documentary, criticized by LGBTQ activists and medical scientists alike as scientifically inaccurate and propagandistic, features Walsh asking interviewees the titular question. While Walsh includes interviews with pro-transgender subjects, their relatively complex answers around gender are framed as ridiculous in comparison with the simple, essentialist definition “adult human female” (Eckert and Gorski 2022; Rook 2022). The rhetorical simplicity of the question is reflected in an oft-memed tweet posted by a TERF-aligned Twitter account in October 2021, wherein the user defines “hen” (the poultry animal) as an “adult human chicken”:

The word “Woman” means adult human female. Like “hen” means adult human chicken. You may want to mangle language to the point of meaninglessness, the rest of us aren’t playing.<sup>8</sup>

Here, the poster, “TracyTerfirapter,” attempts to appeal to a Keen-Minshull definition of “woman” as “adult human female.” She contrasts her “meaningful” feature-based semantics (+ adult, +human, +female) with the “meaningless” language games she attributes to her pro-trans interlocutors, using a similar pattern to describe a hen; while she means to write “adult chicken female,” she writes “adult human chicken” instead. The absurd image of an adult human chicken, combined with the authoritative tone around language, makes for an amusing conceptual fumble. While certainly unintentional, it reveals how referentialist worldviews provide safety at the cost of understanding.

As with other belief systems that posit a universal truth that sits outside the realm of human understanding, referentialism is tautological: referentialist arguments state that a word reflects its referent, and that a referent “exists” because there is a term for it. By attempting to claim ownership of words like *man* or *woman*, fully insisting that these expressions only have one meaning (“biological sex”), gender-critical and far-right collaborators rhetorically preclude transness from any sort of real instantiation: anyone whose body transgresses the Platonic and predestined norms of “sex” is understood as a degenerate aberration from “nature” rather than reflecting biological and social diversity. Among those who advance this view, linguistic norms that legitimate transgender identities (using someone’s preferred name and pronouns, for example) are coercive gateways to the erasure of “gender normals” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). In an essay

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7 Quoted from the home page of Let Women Speak, available at: <https://www.letwomenspeak.org> (accessed January 10, 2025).

8 TracyTerfirapter (@didoreth), Twitter, October 20, 2021, 21:52, <https://twitter.com/didoreth/status/1450927815298277383> (accessed July 15, 2024).

originally posted on the gender-critical online hub Mumsnet and circulated throughout online gender-critical circles, the author compares the use of gender-appropriate pronouns to Rohypnol, a sedative often used by date rapists:

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I refuse to use female pronouns for anyone male. Because pronouns are like Rohypnol. One of the biggest obstacles to halting the stampede over women's rights is pronoun and preferred name "courtesy." People severely underestimate the psychological impact to themselves, and to others, of compliance. . . . [Pronouns] dull your defences. They change your inhibitions. They're meant to. You've had a lifetime's experience learning to be alert to "him" and relax to "her." For good reason. This instinctive response keeps you safe. It's not even a conscious thing. It's like your hairs standing on end. Your subconscious brain is helping you not get eaten by the sabre tooth tiger that your eyes haven't noticed yet. . . . I want to be alert. I want others to be alert. I want people to see the real picture, and I want those instinctive reactions that we feel when something is wrong, to be un-blunted, un-dulled by this cheap but effective psychological trick. I feel like I owe this to myself, and I absolutely owe it to other women. (Kerr 2019)

By framing pronoun use as similar to being deceived into ingesting date rape drugs, the author underscores the role of language in the recognition of (or refusal to recognize) the legitimacy of a person's gender identity.

Another semiotic strategy involves orthographic conventions, where the presence or absence of a space between trans and (wo)man is interpreted as significant. When we parse written information, "trans(gender) woman" and "transwoman" read as structurally different linguistic forms. In English writing, a space indicates a phrasal boundary; in the case of "trans woman," *trans* acts as a modifier for the word *woman*, and we know this because there is a space between the two words. When *trans* or *transgender* is used as a modifier in this way, it marks out a subcategory within the category of "woman" (e.g., black woman, disabled woman, bisexual woman, etc.). When written without a space, "trans" and "woman" are linguistically constituted as a single category, "transwoman," often constructed in a binary against the unmarked word "woman" by both alt-righters and gender-criticals. The basic premise of anti-transgender attitudes is that trans people occupy a separate, counterfeit gendered space from "biological" men and women. In alt-right and gender-critical discourses, trans people do not actually "exist"—they are framed as members of one of two nature-ordained gender categories by necessity. These categories are presumed to lay the foundation for one's disposition and role in the natural-social hierarchy. Consequently, people who believe they are transgender either 1) need to accept being a gender-nonconforming male/female (the stance taken up by gender-criticals, who often position themselves as leftists or left-leaning moderates);

or 2) need to be forcibly corrected to their natural gender/sex role (the stance taken up by alt-righters and Christofascists like Matt Walsh). These stances are not mutually exclusive, as they share the same end goal: undermining the conceptual legitimacy of transgender people in order to legally erase their ability to exist safely and authentically.

### **Discussion: Why Referentialism Is Effective, and Why Referentialism Fails**

While clearly a powerful rhetorical tool, referentialism simply fails to encapsulate observable reality, and it mischaracterizes how human minds process language and meaning. Appeals to referentialism provide both epistemic authority and epistemic security. By appealing to dictionary definitions as though they reflect empirical reality, actors position themselves as having knowledge of and control over language (Gal 2019, 2021); because it is circular by nature, much like essentialist accounts of social life, referentialism reaffirms its own authoritative condition in a self-justifying, binarist, and hierarchical worldview. Yet, to scholars of language and the social world, it is clear that the semiotic mode of language can never encapsulate reality. An attempt to police definitional boundaries around “manhood” or “womanhood” does not change the fact that trans people can and do present felicitous gender performances. It is simply a fact that there are trans people who uncontroversially “pass” (Garfinkel 1967). While there are certainly contexts in which an individual’s genitalia are relevant—as in medical contexts—the status of one’s genitalia are generally irrelevant to the day-to-day activities of most people. Furthermore, human perception of gender simply does not operate in the essentialist manner forwarded by alt-right and gender-critical figures. As decades of research into language and gender has shown, we perceive the *effects* of gender but not the *cause* (Butler 1990). We presume someone to have certain genitalia because we perceive a felicitous cisgender gender performance (Kitzinger 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987, 2009). Gender is also contextualized and localized in manifold ways, across various axes of identity and experience. There is no one way to “be” a gendered subject in the global context (Calder 2021; Calder and King 2022; Eckert 1989, 2019; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2007).

As with alt-right and white supremacist groups, gender-critical understandings of gender are grounded in whiteness, particularly the notion that cisgender white women exemplify the qualities of “true” womanhood, and that they are uniquely valuable and must be protected from predatory men (especially nonwhite men) (Alexander 2023; Aniagolu 2010; Armstrong 2021; Hamad 2020; Kosse 2022; LeMaster 2023; Schuller 2021). This victim narrative around white women is best highlighted by exterminationist discourses. On the putatively “liberal” end of this narrative spectrum, espoused by public figures like author J. K. Rowling, the discourse around transness is framed in relation to homophobia—society is homophobic, therefore gay people prefer to transition their gender in order to be heterosexual.

On the far-right, conspiracist end, pro-transgender discourse presents a global conspiracy to eliminate or replace cisgender women (and therefore indirectly contribute

to lower white birth rates). Fighting threats to cisgender white women and protecting their ability to produce white children forms the moral mandate encapsulated by the neo-Nazi “14 Words,” a set of slogans that have motivated countless acts of violence. Here I want to draw attention to the second set of 14 Words:

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- 1) We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children,
- 2) **Because the beauty of the White Aryan woman must not perish from the earth.**

Protection of white womanhood depends on strict delineation and maintenance of human difference, a reasoning that runs counter to the current scientific consensus regarding genetics, sex, gender, race, and ethnicity (Serano 2022). Referentialist framings of language, then, allow actors to confuse linguistic representations for lived realities; they are a discursive misrecognition that appears intellectual in nature and compensates for a lack of factual support for essentialist claims about sex and gender (Barrett and Hall 2024). Regardless of any belief one may hold, it is evident that debates about linguistic boundaries around sex and gender constitute an attempt to find an authoritative, socially acceptable way to deny trans people legitimacy and the right to self-determination. Gender-critical and alt-right notions of “sex realism” are insubstantial and unsound without larger claims to metaphysical higher orders, whether that be theological notions or Platonic ideas of nature. Sex realism is based purely on the idea that possession of penises is akin to the “one drop rule,” analogous to white supremacist ideas about racial essentialism, where penises are the cause and weapon of male dominance rather than male dominance being the elaboration of the historical subordination and exploitation of women. If such claims were true, and power, fame, acceptance, and opportunity were granted to everyone born with a penis, we would expect to see widespread societal benefits for trans women. These benefits have not materialized, and instead we see political oppression and scapegoating. We see the Pope condemning “faggotry” in the Vatican during a transnational reactionary wave espousing “anti-gender ideology” (Borba 2022; Baran 2023; Factora 2024). We see limited and conditional acceptance from a minority of the population—acceptance that alt-right and gender-critical groups seek to eliminate at all costs. If feminist academics are to address the escalating rhetorical and physical violence toward transgender populations, we must consider how language ideologies like referentialism are weaponized as part of this process.

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