

# HARD TIMES



## Gender in Britain - The Long Road to Equality

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## EDITORIAL

# Gender in Britain - The Long Road to Equality

**G**ENDER has in recent years very much moved to the centre of cultural and human rights debates, almost surpassing but also intersecting with issues of race. The #MeToo debate, starting in the US in 2017 and eagerly taken up in Britain and other European countries, has made people realise that, despite theoretically achieved gender equality, not only in the world of film and the media but in many areas of working life as well as in their families and private lives women are still frequently victims of sexual harassment and attacks. At the same time the public attention in the western world to the problems of the trans minority has been heightened thanks to the growing output of autobiographies, novels, poetry, films and art by an increasing number of impressively creative trans people. So the state of gender equality in Britain had become a challenging topic to investigate for *Hard Times*, and 2018 was the obvious year to start our research: it was the centenary of women's suffrage in the UK.

**T**he UK was not the only European nation to give the suffrage to women at that particular moment of time:

Germany did the same as well as several other European countries, followed by the US in 1920. It was mainly in recognition of their efforts during World War I, less as a result of their passionate campaigning in the pre-war years, that women were finally trusted to judge and decide in democratic elections. The moment was not especially early, but others – to be just – acted much later: in Switzerland, who would believe it, women got the vote only in 1971, in Saudi Arabia – less surprisingly and only hesitantly – in 2011. The trust of the British male MPs in their female compatriots did not reach very far in 1918: the Representation of the People Act, passed on 6 February, granted the suffrage only to women over 30 who met minimum property qualifications, thus excluding 60% of the female population. It took another ten years until the voting right was extended to all women on equal terms as men, including the age limit of 21. Nevertheless the first step to women's equality as citizens was celebrated in 2018 not only by the Fawcett Society and other women's organisations, but with innumerable events by public institutions all over the UK, including

major exhibitions in the Museum of London and the London School of Economics as well as special events in the Tate Gallery, the British Library, etc.



Suffragette memorabilia for sale in the Museum of London. © Photo: Anke Bartels

Despite these many instances of public remembering, most of the aims of this first wave of feminism were largely forgotten in the following decades. The backlash after both World Wars once again turned the majority of middle-class women into housewives, while working-class women mainly worked in the low-paid jobs considered suitable for them. It was only in the late 1960s (and here the Dagenham Women's Strike of 1968 marks another important anniversary to be celebrated in 2018) that an emerging women's liberation movement began

to articulate specific demands for a different society. In the revolutionary atmosphere of the time (inspired by the civil rights movement in the US, the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations, the Prague Spring and students' protests in many countries as well as the emergence of a permissive counter-culture – which, however, did all not include women on their agenda or kept them at the sidelines) the second wave of the feminist movement in England was born. Feminists' demands for equality in all kinds of political and social sectors were first articulated at a famous meeting in Ruskin College in 1970. Astonishingly enough, many of these demands still seem very familiar and timely to us. This second wave with the famous slogan "The Personal is Political" was anything but a homogeneous movement: radical, liberal and socialist branches flourished. Still, black women were not included in a way that took account of their special difficulties, which led to the emergence of a specific black feminism. This then paved the way for what was later called intersectionality, an instrument of analysis that has become increasingly popular since the beginning of the 21st century.

Despite all best efforts feminism became subject to yet another backlash in the late 1980s, which was fuelled by a conservative turn in Britain and the US. Just as it had happened to their sisters at the beginning of the

20th century, their ideals were largely forgotten while they were reduced to “bra burners” in collective memory with feminism itself becoming the f\*- word, the “thing” that could and should not be spoken about. Sadly, in a not uncommon generational reaction, young women took achieved progress for granted and trusted their “girlie power” to realise their personal wishes, not realising how much they fell victim to commercial interests.

Judith Butler and other third-wave feminists finally put the importance



© Photo: Michael Alves (<https://www.pexels.com/de-de/foto/draussen-erwachsener-fashion-festival-2313961/>)

of gender back on the agenda, but in a new way. The notion of the performativity of gender along with a

critique of the heteronormative matrix revolutionised the way we now think of gendered and sexual identities. The field of feminism also opened up to further theoretical variations, e.g. to identity politics and a perspective that was strong on multivocality and a nuanced analysis which takes specific contexts and histories into account while avoiding homogenising and essentialising moves.

Yet have the continued discussions of unjust gender relations led to women's equality in all areas of civil life? Far from it, as a glance at the most important areas will show. First of all, take a look at their financial situation. By law everybody has the same educational and professional chances, but women often do not achieve comparable careers and thus have to cope with a lower income than men. Though almost half of the working population (46%) is female, women still earn 21% less than men. This is partly because more of them work part-time (as single mothers or taking the bigger share of family duties), but also because they tend to be employed in lower paid jobs than men, especially in the five “Cs”; caring, cleaning, cashiering, catering, clerical work. Low pay translates into lower pensions, and the benefit cuts administered by the Conservative austerity policy have additionally worked havoc: thus female pensioners and single mothers are the social groups that run the greatest poverty risk. It is true, at the

other end of the social scale a growing number of women make it into top jobs, but far fewer than men: they take only 35% of leading administrative positions, 22% of university chairs, 22% of managerial posts in listed companies. In the creative industries the chances seem more even: since the 18th century there have been a great number of successful women novelists, and some female poets have reached fame in recent decades with two of them having achieved the highest honours: Carol Ann Duffy was appointed as Poet Laureate and Jackie Kay as Scots Makar. But in areas which require larger investments and team organisation like film, the theatre, big musical events, women are rarely to be found in influential positions as dramatists, directors, film makers. Also in the art market men still have the better chances.

And what about the political sphere? The picture is equally unbalanced. Though women won the passive voting right along with the active one, the number of female MPs has risen only slowly, to a maximum of 32% after the last election in 2017, and few have gained ministerial responsibility. The two female Prime Ministers, obviously not interested in feminist policy, both have appointed fewer female ministers (Thatcher none, May four out of 22) than Tony Blair, who worked with six. Labour has done more over the years to promote women so that at present 45%

of Labour's seats are held by women comparing to 21 % of Conservative seats. In the House of Lords, where women have been allowed to sit only since the Life Peerages Act of 1958, today they make up about 25% of the members. Even on the level of local politics women are still underrepresented: only 34% of the local authority councillors are female.

Yet despite the remaining inequalities gender roles have changed a lot to the benefit of women in the last hundred years. Not only have women in general become less house-bound, more financially independent and self-determined, changes in sexual morals and the availability of birth control have also had profound effects on women's lives and self-perception, but also on men's. Men, who additionally have had to cope with the loss of many traditional jobs through the structural change in the economy, have reacted with insecurity, and it has become much disputed what defines masculinity.



© Gay Pride. Photo: nancydowd (<https://pixabay.com/de/photos/stolz-lgbt-flagge-regenbogen-828056/>)

Women are not the only section of society who have had to fight for equality. Not only migrants, but people whose sexual orientation or identity deviates from the hetero-sexual norm have suffered from discrimination and even persecution. While lesbianism has never been officially forbidden (because the authorities refused to admit its existence), male homosexuality was considered a criminal offence from 1533 to the 1960s and until 1861 was even punishable by death. The case of Oscar Wilde is a heartbreaking example of the damage the legal situation could work in a man's life. Since then reform societies and individuals worked for change, many writers among them, until the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 decriminalised male homosexuality (six years before the Federal Republic of Germany!). Today gay sexual orientation is legally recognised as part of a person's personality and accepted by the majority of the population. In 2005 civil partnerships were introduced, which in many areas gave equal rights to same-sex couples, in 2014 the same-sex marriage followed. The right to adoption was already granted in 2002. Yet despite such legal progress, increased acceptance by the cis population, even celebrated in the worlds of film, fashion and popular culture and admired by mass audiences in the public spectacles of the Guy Pride Parades, homosexuals are still not safe from discrimination and attacks by a

hostile and unteachable minority, and the percentage of registered hate crimes is high. Especially young people among a heterosexual majority in school and youth groups may have a difficult time.

The same is true of trans people, who number between 200,000 and 500,000, equalling 0.3 to 0.75 % of the population. Many prefer to keep their sexual identity private or practice cross-dressing, but some desire surgical reassignment. The Gender Recognition Act of 2005 grants everybody who truly wishes it to have a sex-change treatment on the National Health Service, and the numbers are steadily rising: 143 operations were registered in 2009, 172 in 2014. The Equality Acts of 2007 and 2010 guarantee legal protection, but one in five persons in 2017 had experienced acts of verbal or physical aggression, mostly committed by young people on young people, and a majority of 87% of such hate crimes remains unsolved. Many trans people also experience discrimination in daily life, in restaurants, faith services, by social services and in their search for housing or jobs. Despite the hype in the cultural scene and the media, the life of a trans-person is not easy, particularly not for the young.

The contributions to our issue of *Hard Times* have addressed many – though, of course, not all – aspects of the afore-mentioned issues of the current gender relations in Britain. A

gap we regret is that there is no article dealing with issues of the second and third wave of feminism in some detail, but are pleased with the wide range of topics that have been covered. We want to thank all our contributors for their wonderful cooperation and are particularly grateful for the permissions to reprint three original texts by two poets and a well-known novelist as well as to reproduce a number of artworks and film stills. Special thanks go to Irmgard Maassen for recruiting Christine Müller, Jennifer Henke and Katalina Kopka to our writing team.



Remembering the Suffragettes © Photo: Anke Bartels

In our first section, “Remembering Feminist History”, we try to establish a feminist genealogy, aiming to show how this history and its aftermath still concern us and are reflected upon today. **Anke Bartels** discusses how

the suffragettes successfully reclaimed spaces that had been closed to them analysing the example of the graphic novel *Sally Heathcote, Suffragette* (2014), which ultimately takes the legacy of these women to the present. **Christine Müller** discusses the role of women in the natural sciences. While this specific history already started to be rewritten some fifty years ago, challenging this still male domain is in need of continued interventions to fight gender stereotypes and encourage girls and women to enter this field. We close this section with an excerpt from **Bernardine Evaristo**’s wonderful revisionist historical verse novel *The Emperor’s Babe*, one of her charming fictional reconstructions of black European history and a celebration of black women’s power.

The following section “Current Gender Discussions” takes us to the present, starting with **Bernardine Evaristo**’s views on gender, sexuality, feminism, sexuality and race in an interview conducted by **Ingrid von Rosenberg**. With the Windrush scandal fresh in mind, Evaristo comes to the conclusion that we are by no means as far as we like to think we are with regard to a truly open society. Masculinity is the topic of **Wieland Schwanebeck**’s article: he shows vividly how it is constructed in the editing room with collages playing an important role in the reproduction or subversion of male gender stereotypes.

Theories of Political Masculinities were the topic of a summer school at the University of Koblenz-Landau. **Thomas Gurke** and **Kathleen Stark** emphasise the participants' focus on an international as well as intersectional approach to masculinities in various fields. The final two contributions in this section focus on concerns of queer and trans people. **Rainer Emig**, in a brilliant and provocative essay, questions whether the always more inclusive legal framework is indeed an unmixed blessing for the LGBTIQ+ community. He suspects that legal equality, though hopefully leading to more social acceptance, also furthers the appropriation of once exclusively gay meeting places and events, important for the gay community's identity, by market forces. He also points to the possible dangers of an increasingly fragmented identity politics for the cohesion of society. This section fittingly ends with **Jay Hulme's** poem "I Am a Man", which impressively expresses the pain of a sensitive young trans person when, despite guaranteed legal protection, he is confronted with the hostile reactions of still too many people.

“Women's Realities Today” takes a look at the economic and political obstacles women are currently confronted with, appreciating their resilience in adverse circumstances and celebrating their success. **Kirsten Forkert** shows not only how austerity politics in

the UK hit women the hardest but also how traditional gender roles and heteronormativity underpin austerity rhetoric, which is reflected in the court case of *Monroe vs. Hopkins*. The next two contributions address the problems of marginalised women. While **Sabrina Mahfouz's** beautiful poems give a voice to women working in the sex industry, **Fanny and Sophie Rotino** focus on the fate of women and LGBTIQ+ refugees in the UK, who find themselves in a highly precarious situation despite the Human Rights Act of 1998 applying in Britain. In the cultural sector, we focus on theatre and the arts. **Gabriele Griffin** shows the impact of Black and Asian playwrights on the British theatre scene with plays discussing a wide variety of issues from transracial adoptions to political activism. The position of black women artists is the focus of Ingrid von Rosenberg's contribution. She shows four examples of successful careers, climaxing in Lubaina Himid's winning the Turner Prize in 2017, yet asks whether this recognition of individuals really means that black British women artists in general now have the same chances in the art scene as their white female counterparts or some star male black colleagues. Finally, we turn to another dire reality women have to face today, the politics of abortion in Ireland. As **Jennifer Henke** shows, the bodies of pregnant Irish women (and not only of these) continue to serve as

political battlegrounds despite some tentative attempts to change not only the laws regarding abortion but also to induce wide-spread social acceptance.

In our last section, “(The State of) Feminism Today”, we return to the political arena. **Georgia Christinidis** deplores a severe backlash for feminism, making out as one of the main causes an emerging populism. In contrast to this somewhat gloomy view, **Katalina Kopka** diagnoses a lively contemporary feminist activism, which makes uninhibited use of all types of social media and is now increasingly called a fourth wave of feminism. Finally, in the last contribution, **Annette Pankratz** turns to an artistic representation of current feminism: she analyses the first season of *Fleabag*, the very popular as well as prize-winning TV sitcom, which takes feminist ideas into the 21st century but with an ironic twist – thus perhaps paving the way again for notions of postfeminism.

Still, we would like to end this Editorial on a hopeful note because despite the obstacles that demands for gender equality have encountered over the decades and despite the numerous ways that backlashes have been staged, the voices of the various movements fighting against oppressive structures have never been completely silenced for long and have always managed to induce important changes.

*Anke Bartels and Ingrid von Rosenberg*

# “They Laughed at Danger”<sup>1</sup>

## Reclaiming Space in *Sally Heathcote, Suffragette*

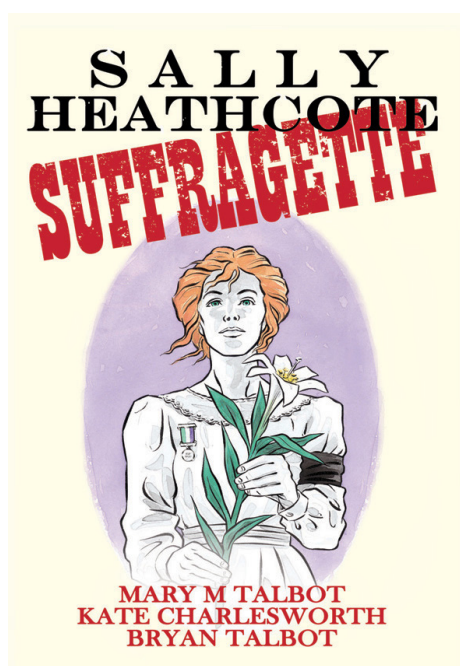
Anke Bartels

(University of Potsdam)

In the UK, 2018 saw not only the centenary of the end of the First World War but also that of finally granting the vote to women. The Museum of London staged a special exhibition, an abundance of academic books and articles like Jane Robinson’s *Hearts and Minds* (2018) were published, magazines from *The Big Issue* to *Time Out London* ran feature articles, the film “Suffragette” told their story from a working-class woman’s point of view

and the courageous fighters for suffrage also made it into a graphic novel, *Sally Heathcote, Suffragette* (2014) by Mary M. Talbot (text), Kate Charlesworth (illustrations) and Bryan Talbot (lettering, detailed layouts), significantly also told from a lower class perspective.

While issues of class, militancy and gender identities have received ample attention, an aspect neglected in most reassessments of the suffrage movement is their success in reclaiming public space, a notion which lends itself ideally to the graphic novel as the interplay between words and images makes it a very powerful medium for re-visualising events from the historical archive. After a short overview of the history of the suffrage movement, which forms the backdrop to *Sally Heathcote: Suffragette*, I will discuss the various ways in which suffragettes broke out of their spatial confinement and how this is represented in the graphic novel.



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## Women's Suffrage in Context

While it sounds grand to proclaim that women won the vote a hundred years ago, this information does not tell the whole story. First of all, as already mentioned in our editorial, it was only women over 30 who had property and not all women, who could take part in elections in 1918. The right to vote on the same terms as men only followed a decade later in 1928 with the Equal Franchise Act. And, secondly, while this is celebrated as a unique British achievement hardly ever alluding to a global framework, Britain was, in fact, quite late in including women in the electorate at all. The first country ever to enfranchise all women was New Zealand as early as 1893 (including Maori women), followed by Australia in 1902 (but here only white women were allowed to vote) and Finland in 1906 (cf. for more details Mukherjee 2018, 72-83). It is also conveniently forgotten that Britain was still an Empire at the end of the First World War with the fight for voting rights also being on the agenda of various colonised countries (often together with the struggle for independence). Finally, when talking about the centenary of voting rights for women in 2018, it should also be taken into account that the vote was far from the only demand women put forward. In fact, the so-called suffragists and suffragettes are part of the first wave of a

much more inclusive feminist movement.

## A Very Short History of the British Suffrage Movement

But the campaign for women's rights had started even earlier than that. Already in the 17th century female authors like Judith Drake and Mary Astell had demanded a better education for women, and towards the end of the 18th century writers like Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft already went much further in their claims. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft famously declared in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* that women were just as rational as men and, as a consequence, were worthy of being given an equal education, trusted with equal occupations and granted equal citizenship. Her ideas are a direct response to Enlightenment philosophers, whose campaigns for equality and freedom only included white men. Sadly, Wollstonecraft died early in 1796, and around 1800, triggered by fear of the excesses of the French Revolution, a general rollback set in, among other things cementing traditional gender roles. Thus, in the 19th century women in Britain still did not have many rights or opportunities to live a life not dominated by men, be it in the form of fathers, husbands or sons. They were not supposed to get proper schooling, let alone enter universities, and while working-class women had to supplement the meagre wages of their husbands

by working in factories or as domestic servants for even lower wages than their male counterparts, middle-class women were reduced to become “angels in the house” and thus mostly relegated to the “private sphere”. Ideologically they were supposed to personify the morality of the family, in practical terms their range of activities was restricted to organising the household and being mothers, which spelt into a severe limitation of their access to public space.

Taking these conditions into account, it comes as no surprise that the idea to demand the vote came from middle-class women. But it was not just that. They also asked for wide-reaching reforms to end women’s economic, social and political subordination. In order to achieve their aims, non-militant suffragists first sought the support of men sympathetic to their cause who were supposed to present their various petitions for the enfranchisement of middle-class women in parliament. In 1868 Millicent Fawcett founded the NUWSS, the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, as an umbrella organisation for the various suffrage societies that had sprung up all over the country. Out of frustration with not getting any further where their demands were concerned, in 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst finally initiated the much smaller WSPU, the Women’s Social and Political Union, with the aim

of getting women enfranchised even if this meant to break with the ideal of the well-behaved female by employing, among other means, militant tactics. These ideas “were born of despair after years of patient constitutionalism” (Rowbotham 1977, 84) and represented a new way of campaigning.

The militant tactics employed by the WSPU included women chaining themselves to railings, hackling at meetings or smashing windows but after 1912, when the violence escalated, arson and small bombs also became part of their repertoire. The suffragettes were convinced that only “Deeds Not Words”, the famous slogan of the WSPU, could convince the government to grant women the right to vote. Their actions were by no means without risk: in 1913, the movement had its first martyr when Emily Wilding Davison threw herself under the King’s horse at the Epsom Derby.

While the government was initially at a loss of how to deal with these women, who also dared to go on hunger strikes to be regarded as political prisoners when they were sentenced to time in jail, they soon came up with the Prisoner’s (Temporary Discharge for Illness) Act, the notorious Cat and Mouse Act (1913). This bill stipulated that women were set free from prison when they became too weak after refusing to eat and being force-fed, only to be jailed again once they had regained their strength.

But the suffragettes were not deterred and continued their militant campaign.

The impasse between government and suffragettes might have gone on for much longer if the First World War had not interrupted domestic affairs. The war deeply affected the movement for female suffrage as it divided both, the NUWSS and the WSPU, with regard to the attitudes of their individual members concerning the appropriate reaction to the war. While leading figures like Sylvia Pankhurst, who was a pacifist, did not join the “war effort”, others like Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst dedicated themselves to service at the home front. As we have seen, some women were granted the right to vote after the war had ended, and Constance Markievicz became the first woman to be elected to the House of Commons.

### **Reclaiming Political and Public Space**

Interestingly enough, it is mainly the campaigns of the WSPU that have become part of collective memory when remembering the fight for female voting rights. The tactics employed by militant suffragettes (as opposed to the NUWSS’s peaceful suffragists) certainly contributed to exploding gender stereotypes. But what is also significant with regard to the militant actions as well as the numerous marches staged by the suffrage unions is the “spatiality of resistance” (Mitchell 2000, 201) with women

appearing in public places which they had formerly been discouraged to enter.

Don Mitchell has shown how women have often been limited in following their political and social aims by a restriction of the spaces open to them (cf. Mitchell 2000, 200f.). Women at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century were still suffering from the notion of separate spheres and especially middle-class women were likely to cause a scandal when they were seen at places not deemed suitable for them. These limitations on the accessibility of space work so well because all kinds of spatial confinements are made to seem natural by discourse and have been normalised. But the suffragettes did not accept these restrictions any longer and actively embarked on a reclamation of political and social spaces which seemed to belong by unspoken consent to the male domain. In the course of their campaigns, they not only changed the everyday lived space of their homes but, even more importantly, became visible in an unprecedented way in political spaces like the Parliament building (whose Ladies Gallery was soon closed to women) but also public spaces like Trafalgar Square or Hyde Park, which were meaningfully chosen as starting points for the suffragettes’ marches, an early example of reclaiming the streets.

## Graphic Novels and the Representation of Space

As already mentioned, graphic novels with their juxtaposition of words and images lend themselves very well to explorations of space. In this respect, they differ markedly from the time-dominated kind of story-telling employed by novels as the graphic novel's "most visible medium-specific feature is the importance given to space (as a dimension of world-making), a notably undervalued aspect in traditional narratology" (Baetens & Frey 2015, 167).

*Sally Heathcote, Suffragette* is no exception in this respect as it does not only visualise different spaces but also sets them in opposition to each other to show the differences brought about by the suffragettes. The graphic novel follows the eponymous fictional character of Sally, a housemaid, whom we first encounter as an old woman in the confined space of a bedroom in Park Place Nursing Home in Hackney. The point in time in this first panel is given as "Autumn 1969" (and this is not chosen randomly as 1969 marks the year when the voting age in the UK was lowered to 18). Sally is asleep, but in the foreground of the opening splash panel all kinds of colourful suffragette paraphernalia like medals and banners are cleverly depicted. Thus, the opening page already signals the principles of handling colour for the whole work: while panels are generally

rendered in sepia tones of black and white, the WSPU's colours of green, white and violet (short for "Give Women the Vote") are cleverly used in certain panels throughout the novel to highlight their importance while they seem to take on a life of their own. Already on this very first page the suffragettes' bright colours stand out against the bleak surroundings.

While we follow Sally Heathcote's development from maid via militant suffragette to pacifist, her memories are set in a wider context. Thus, the graphic novel is divided into three parts which focus on the history of the WSPU until July 1916 alongside Sally's story and her involvement in the movement. Sally is easily recognisable throughout the whole novel because her hair is always rendered in ginger (next to the green, white and violet of the suffragettes nearly the only colour that is used). While mostly drawn in grids with small and bigger panels used in juxtaposition, at intervals there are splash panels to highlight the importance of specific events or to establish public and private spaces important for the character's development. Throughout, various source materials like cartoons from *Punch*, newspaper cuttings or actual posters, badges and banners are used and cleverly reworked to give the graphic novel a realistic touch (the historical background to all these objects is explained in the comprehensive appendix which

also includes a timeline). While there are quite a number of panels actually set in domestic or office settings, it is striking that many show women in public spaces like Hyde Park or Trafalgar Square, which grant them a high degree of visibility: their marches and militant actions symbolise the suffragettes' resistance to the dogma of female public invisibility and restriction to the private sphere.

### **Confined Spaces: Household and Home**

Talbot, Charlesworth and Talbot fruitfully use Sally's story to highlight the importance of space by

At the beginning of the graphic novel, we meet Sally when she is still a maid in the Pankhurst household in Manchester. Despite this being a progressive household (Emmeline Pankhurst "saved" her from the workhouse), Sally's early perspective is that of a mere bystander when famous supporters of women's suffrage meet in the Pankhurst home. Sally is not invited to become part of the movement nor is she regarded as a person in her own right. The lack of her employer's concern becomes clearly visible when she is left to her own devices on the Pankhursts' move to London in 1907. Sally has to look for a new position and 'home',



Suffragettes Marching and Reclaiming Public Space. © Reproduced with kind permission of the authors.

also exploring its opposite: confinement. Especially for domestic servants and maids normalised restrictions were an unquestioned part of their everyday lives. It was a decisive factor of their predicament that they were subject to a complete lack of private space as they were dependent on their employers for housing and had to adhere to the rules if they did not want to end up on the streets.

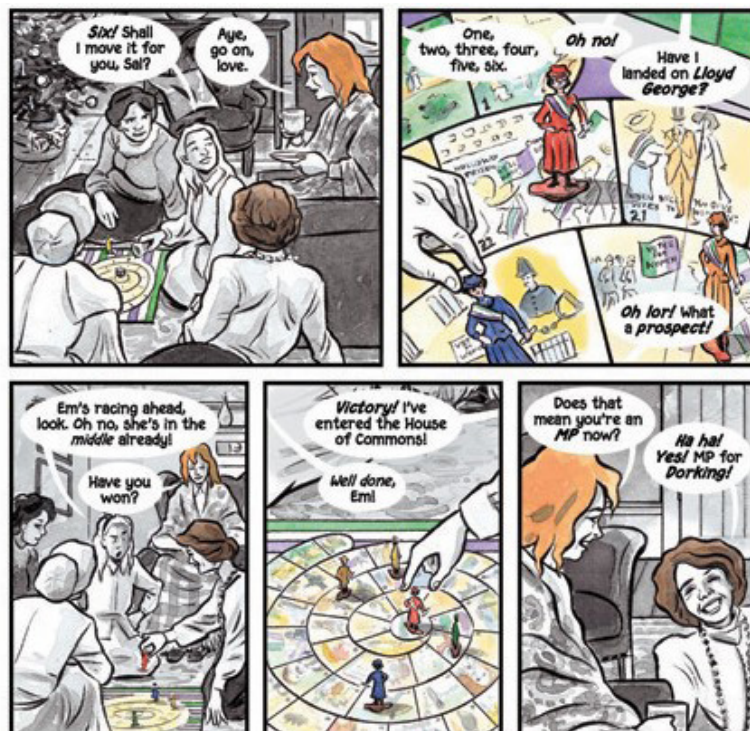
which she finds in the household of socialist MP Victor Grayson.

Here, Sally's reduction to a mere domestic position as opposed to being an individual becomes even worse. Her "big ideas" (Talbot et al. 2014, 32) about women's suffrage are not appreciated by the other servants while she is invisible for Grayson. Additionally,

in stark contrast to the reclamation of space by the suffragettes depicted later, Sally's new home turns out to not only confine her but also becomes a scene of domestic violence when she is subject to sexual assault by a male servant. When Sally fights back, it is her who is sacked as this is deemed unruly behaviour in a woman. It is only at this point that Sally decides to look for a better life in London as the urban space of the city seems to hold promises for her being finally able to subvert her former class-based gender role. Sally's story also serves as a strong reminder that the voices of marginalised women, be they workers or maids, have been largely forgotten and silenced as there were only few being able to write their memoirs or publish their diaries after the vote had been won.

The profound changes brought about by women fighting for their rights are not least visible in the new private spaces they carved out for themselves. This is also true for Sally's altered living conditions in London. Finally, she has a room to call her own and despite her having to work hard to make a living, the panels showing her in her room are dominated by sunny yellows, the same colour scheme used later on when she falls in love with Arthur, one of the male working-class supporters of the WSPU.

Next to these conventional living arrangements, the graphic novel also explores alternative forms of refashioning the private sphere. Thus the convalescence home in Holmwood, where hunger striking suffragettes go after their release from prison,



Creating New Forms of Communality. © Reproduced with kind permission of the authors.

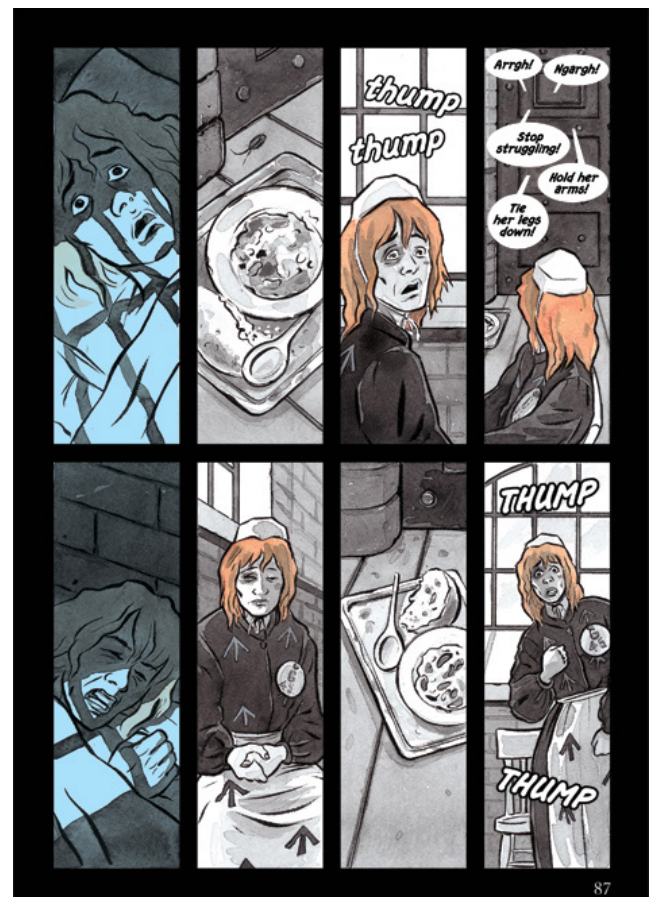
differs markedly from the home as a space of everyday confinement. In the quiet of the country, the women embark on reading and playing board games like Pank-a-Squith, one of the many branded articles the WSPU developed for their followers, while embracing new forms of communality.

### **Public Spaces: Office and City**

This spirit of communality also distinguishes the WSPU's headquarters in London, a semi-official space which is important for preparing all kinds of suffragette activities. The resulting women's rallies and meetings pay tribute to the fact that the suffragettes reclaim the public and political spheres formerly closed to women which finds not only an expression in their hackling at political meetings and their marches but also in their new-found mobility which has them travelling to other parts of the country.

To emphasise the broad base of the movement, the second part, "The March of the Women", features an opening splash panel depicting all the important suffragists and suffragettes of the time, while also showing the movement in full swing by concentrating on Sally and many other activists busy preparing banners for small as well as big marches attended by several suffrage societies. In this context, a special emphasis is placed on the notorious

"Black Friday" of 1910 and its aftermath. Like so many suffragettes, Sally ends up in prison after the Black Friday skirmishes with the police on Parliament Square. This is effectively represented in the graphic novel as the chaos of the Black Friday events is echoed in a panel structure leaving the ordered grid with Sally's individual experiences rendered in a sickly yellow as if everything happening to her were a bad dream. The ordered grid is restored with a twist only when Sally has to go to jail. The graphic novel highlights her ensuing confinement as well as her despair and the torture of being force-fed by translating these events into panels that mirror the bars of a prison cell while the pages all feature



Sally in Prison. © Reproduced with kind permission of the authors.

black borders to put emphasis on the harrowing experience that the convicted women had to go through, especially if they were not from the middle class.

The resultant intensifying suffragist militancy somehow liberates the women from their earlier gender roles, but this comes at a high price. Thus, Emily Davison's death in 1913 is related on a page of speechless, orderly panels bordered in black and partly consisting of newspaper cuttings. Sally, meanwhile, has also left the legal path by joining the YHB (Young Hot Bloods), the most militant arm of the WSPU, and is shown to take part in the arson attack on David Lloyd George's house. The panels depicting this act are drawn in dark blues and yellows to take up the notion of the bad dream again but also to highlight the importance of this event for Sally who comes to understand her own strength while also being doubtful about the costs of this kind of militancy.

The situation changes drastically with the outbreak of the First World War. It is introduced here in the form of re-workings of well-known war posters which show women keeping home and hearth safe while urging their menfolk to join the war. Interestingly enough, the graphic novel does not tell the story of how the women actually got the vote in 1918 but stops in 1916. At this moment, Sally wakes up in the nursing home, and it is 1969 again.

Sally's daughter, who is significantly called Sylvia, and her granddaughter, who has ginger hair like the young Sally herself, visit her in the nursing home. The panels include a wider variety of colours to announce that we have arrived in a different decade altogether. But the



Re-workings of WW1 Posters. © Reproduced

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ending is a far cry from asserting that everything is well now because Sally's granddaughter says that despite having turned 18 she cannot be bothered to vote (Talbot et al. 2014, 164). This puts Sally's hard-won achievements into question (also reflected by the third part ending in a confined space, while the two others showed Sally reclaiming public spaces for herself) and alludes to the fact that the women's movement had to be born anew in the late 1960s as all the early triumphs of the first wave seem to have been forgotten. The very last splash panel makes these triumphs visible again as it allows us one more glimpse at various suffragette memorabilia.

*Sally Heathcote, Suffragette* is not only a celebration of women's resilience and their readiness to confront danger

in order to achieve changes resulting in a more just society but also a reminder that younger generations of women tend to forget those females who fought before them. While the second wave of the feminist movement continued to conquer public spaces with their “Reclaim the Night” marches in the 1970s and 80s, today feminists still fight for safe spaces, digitally as well as in the real world. It seems as if there is still a long way to go before women will have finally reclaimed political, social and public spaces on equal terms with men despite having been able to exercise their right to vote for the last 100 years.

#### Endnotes

1 This quote from Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, who, together with her husband Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, was also an ardent supporter of the feminist cause and an editor of the WSPU’s first journal “Votes for Women”, is part of the epigraph of *Sally Heathcote, Suffragette* and taken from her autobiography (cf. Talbot et al. iii and 168).

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# *Hidden No More*

## On- and Offline Rewritings of the History of Women in Science

Christine Müller

*(University of Bremen)*

While names like Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, or Stephen Hawking have a familiar ring to us, most conversations about women in the history of science begin and end with Marie Curie. In 2014, a survey conducted by the British grassroots movement *ScienceGrrrl* showed that, indeed, the general public's awareness of women's contributions to science is limited. Over half of the UK population, the study revealed, suffers from the so-called 'Curie Syndrome', the inability to name more than one female scientist (Onwurah 2014). Undoubtedly, Marie Curie (1867-1934), winner of two Nobel Prizes, who was born in Poland but lived in France, deserves to be celebrated as one of the greatest scientists in history. Still, the popular impression that she was the only notable woman in the history of science is not only problematic because it paints a false picture of history, but because it preserves a masculine image of science. Indeed, even in the 21st century,

femininity and science still seem concepts at odds with one another. The belief that only men can be and always have been scientists, and that science requires a set of masculine characteristics, constitutes one of the most persistent barriers to girls' and women's entry to, and careers in 'STEM', i.e. science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Rediscovering the history of women in science is one way of fighting against this gender bias. While feminist scholars began to rewrite science history from a female perspective some fifty years ago, their academic efforts have more recently been accompanied by various cultural interventions, which, in different media but with similar aims, seek to change the still common perception of the history of science as a parade of great men.

### **Women and STEM in the UK**

Despite decades of affirmative action, women continue to be underrepresented in STEM education,

training, and employment in almost every region of the world (Unesco Institute for Statistics 2018). The United Kingdom is no exception, as figures from WISE, a campaign in the UK that promotes women in STEM, prove. While equal numbers of boys and girls take STEM subjects at the *General Certificate of Secondary Education* (GCSE), female participation begins to decline thereafter, most dramatically at the age of 16, with only 18% continuing to take a STEM subject at A-Level (WISE Campaign 2017a). In 2017, only 24% of STEM graduates (WISE Campaign 2017b) and only 8% of STEM apprentices (WISE Campaign 2018) in the UK were female. In the same year, women made up only 23% of those in core STEM occupations and 24% of those working in core STEM industries (WISE Campaign 2017c). There is only one British woman among the nineteen female scientists who have hitherto won the Nobel Prize: Dorothy C. Hodgkin (1910-1994), who became Nobel Laureate in 1964 for her development of protein crystallography and the discovery of the structures of vitamin B12 and penicillin. And even in 2018, over seventy years after first opening its doors to women, the world's oldest scientific society, the Royal Society in London, is still far from gender equal with only one in twelve fellows being female. (Fyfe and Mørk Røstvik)

## Stereotypes and the Gender Gap in STEM

Identifying the reasons for STEM's gender gap and developing strategies to attract and retain girls and women have been the focus of much research and activism in recent decades. Cultural concepts of gender roles are often cited as one of the biggest roadblocks to girls' and women's interest in STEM. While in 2018, the BBC reported that more children than ever before now draw a woman when asked to draw a scientist (Halton), the stereotypical image of the brainy male researcher – presumably with beard, glasses, and a white lab coat – is still very much alive and kicking and continues to influence the public understanding of STEM. Though today girls are told that they can be whatever they want, gender stereotypes influence not only their self-concepts but also their treatment within schools and the workplace. British Nobel-winning biochemist Tim Hunt's chauvinist remarks about women only distracting men in the lab, which led to a public outcry in 2015 (Ratcliffe), is a prominent example of how gender stereotypes still lead to sexism in science.

## Opposing Gender Stereotypes by Rewriting the History of Science

Rewriting the history of science from a female perspective to counter the age-old belief that women simply cannot

and never could compete with men in science is one way of going against gender bias in STEM. With the revival of the feminist movement in the second half of the twentieth century, the history of women in science has become a thriving field of study in academia. For more than fifty years now, feminist scholars have been drawing attention to the accomplishments, barriers, and conflicts of women in science throughout the centuries. As Dr Claire Jones, historian of science at the University of Kent, points out: “Although we must be careful not to overestimate how women were historically active in science, it is important to remember those women scientists who did contribute and the barriers they overcame to participate. This is one strand in tackling the continuing tension between femininity and science, providing female role models, and increasing women’s participation across all scientific disciplines” (Jones). Yet, revising the male-dominated and male-authored history of science is a project no longer solely undertaken within academia. In recent years, online activists and creative artists have been joining in, adding the little-known or forgotten stories of female scientists to our historical memory. While this is indeed a transnational phenomenon, British women are essential, both as creators and protagonists, to these on- and offline rewritings of the history of women in science.

## Writing the History of Women in Science Online - One Wikipedia-Entry a Day

Providing girls and women with positive role models by spreading the word about their outstanding contributions to STEM is the goal of Dr Jessica Wade, a British physicist at Imperial College London and a prize-winning advocate for women in science.

Frustrated with measures to increase female interest and participation in STEM, such as the European Commission’s much criticized pseudo-pop video *Science: It’s a girl thing!*, in which three supermodels in lab coats, high heels, and safety goggles study the



Dr Jessica Wade

© Dr Jessica Wade, Imperial College

chemical composition of lipstick and nail polish, Wade started her own initiatives to win girls and women for STEM.

(Devlin) Writing one biographical entry per day about a notable woman scientist on the free online-encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* is her latest project. Since the beginning of 2018, Wade has researched, written, uploaded, and tweeted (@jesswade) feminist Wiki-entries of hundreds of women, both contemporary and historical, focusing on her subjects' professional accomplishments and not their personal relationships: "[...] despite their best intentions, many campaigns to highlight women scientists can be reductionist, cynical and boring - celebrating a woman's gender rather than her achievements. Discovering a fantastic woman scientist as you were reading up on a new experimental technique or research area on *Wikipedia* is much more compelling than finding her separated from her expertise in a page of 'the Top 50 women you should know'" (Wade and Zaringhalam). By getting the stories of female scientists online, Wade fights not only for the recognition of women's scientific contributions and a change in the still persistently masculine colouring of STEM, but also against gender imbalance within the encyclopaedia itself, where only 17% of biographies are those of women and only 16% of editors female. (Wade and Zaringhalam)

Adding the stories of women in STEM to *Wikipedia*, Wade follows other fourth-wave feminists for whom the internet has emerged

as an important space of activism. In 2016, the American editor and medical student Emily Temple-Wood received the *Wikipedian of the Year Award* for her WikiProject *Women in Science*, which aims at increasing the quantity and quality of historical women scientists' biographies on *Wikipedia*: "By writing these and other women back into online accounts of science history, we hope to combat systemic biases that lead to the underrepresentation of women scientists on *Wikipedia*, in public discourse and in science itself", Temple-Wood points out. Wade and Temple-Wood reach out to a whole new generation of women and men whom they provide with easily accessible and well-researched biographies of women in STEM in order to revise the masculine image of science.

### **Offline Rewritings of the History of Science: Female Scientists on the Page, Stage, and Screen**

The fight for the recognition of women's scientific contributions also continues offline. The innumerable biographies, history books, and academic papers that have been published by feminist scholars have most recently been joined by a surge of literary and filmic rewritings of the history of women in science. The Oscar-nominated Hollywood production *Hidden Figures* (2016) about three African-American women employees at NASA – Mary Jackson (1921-2005), Katherine Johnson

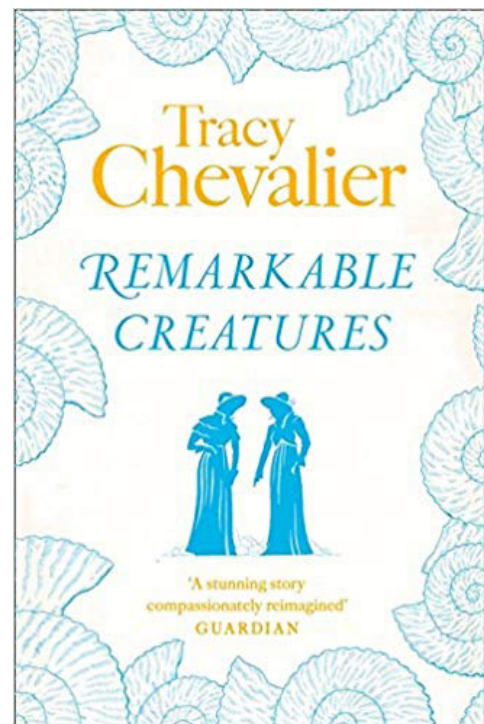
(1918- ), and Dorothy Vaughan (1910-2008) – whose scientific expertise helped John Glenn in 1962 to be the first man in space to circle the Earth, is probably the best-known example of popularising the issue. Despite problematic ‘white saviour’-moments, which clearly undermine the film’s feminist potential, the biopic’s celebration of strong, ambitious, and intelligent women, who against the odds of gender, race, and class become outstanding mathematicians and engineers, has raised awareness of the masculine bias in both science and historiography. Yet, the US-focus of the film should not distract from the fact that British artists and British women scientists also figure prominently in recent rewriting projects.

In her 2009-novel *Remarkable Creatures* bestselling US American author Tracy Chevalier, who has been living in the UK for over thirty years, combines biographical fact with fictional imagination to recount the early life of the English palaeontologist Mary Anning (1799-1847), who was recently numbered by The Royal Society among the “most influential women in British science history”. In spite of being female, working-class, and without any formal education, Anning impressed the scientific community of her time with her ‘eye’ for fossils, discovering – among other rarities - the first complete skeletons of the *ichthyosaurs* and *plesiosaurs*. For



Tracy Chevalier

© Tracy Chevalier



Book Cover *Remarkable Creatures* (2009)

© The Borough Press

her fictional revisiting of Anning’s spectacular fossil findings, which fuelled 19th century debates about the prehistory of the Earth and the origins

of life, Chevalier chose to focus on her collaboration with Elizabeth Philpot (1780-1857), another British fossilist. Despite differences in age and class, Philpot functions as Anning's mentor and advocate in this female bildungsroman. As first-person narrators, the two protagonists take turns in recounting Anning's life story, in which she moves from a minor fossil hunter and dealer to "the greatest fossilist the world ever knew" (Torrens 1995), to quote historian Hugh Torrens. The biographical novel highlights women's scientific abilities and achievements without omitting the obstacles put in the way of early 19th century women, who overstepped social boundaries, by a misogynist, patriarchal society and scientific community. The novel's feminist agenda is not only visible in the centrality it attributes to women's concerns, experiences, and perspectives, but in its celebration of sisterhood as an important way of female survival in the male-dominated world of science. Chevalier weakens the feminist potential of her novel, however, when she uses her poetic license for the inclusion of an entirely fictional romantic subplot. While an unfulfilled love interest is made to figure as an important step in the fictional Anning's development, the rift that the romance causes in the empowering friendship between the two female protagonists seems rather counterproductive to this otherwise feminist portrait of strong,

ambitious, and talented women in the history of science. Thus Chevalier steps into the trap Wade in her Wikipedia entries explicitly tries to avoid: highlighting the romantic encounters in the narration of women's lives rather than their scientific achievements.

Another British female scientist has captured the interest of a bestselling author: American writer Jennifer Chiaverini has found one of her latest protagonists in the English mathematician and pioneer of computer science Ada Lovelace (1815-1852), who is best known for her work on Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine. *Enchantress of Numbers* (2017), a title bestowed upon Lovelace by Babbage himself, is written as a fictional autobiography, in which the scientist recounts key moments in her emotional and intellectual development.



Mary Anning with her dog Tray and the Golden Cap outcrop in the background, Natural History Museum, London, painted before 1842, credited to 'Mr Grey'

Providing its readership with a meticulous portrait of 19th century British society and gender roles, this Neo-Victorian novel chronicles Ada's rising passion for science, which is carefully cultivated by a mother eager to suppress her daughter's artistic heritage – Ada was, after all, the only legitimate child of one of Britain's greatest poets, Lord Byron.



Jennifer Chiaverini

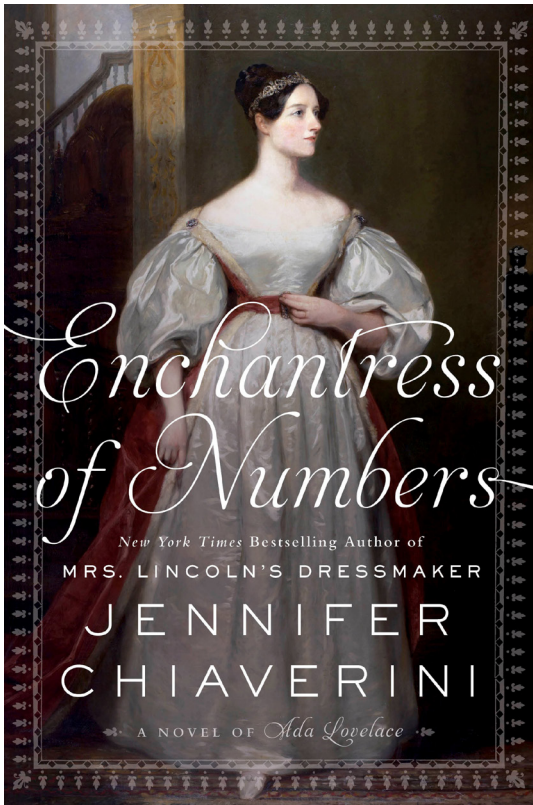
© Michael Chiaverini

While *Enchantress of Numbers* does not exclude the historical figure's experiences of marriage and motherhood, it is not the love for her husband or children but her passion for mathematics that dominates the protagonist's life story. Indeed, it is not an eligible young gentleman that makes the heroine swoon at a dinner party, but the leading British mathematician of the day, Mary Somerville (1780-1872), Lovelace's role model and mentor. Portraying her enormous talent for mathematics and her eventual collaboration with inventor Charles Babbage, the novel does not fail

to expose the difficulties and restrictions a Victorian upper-class woman like Lovelace had to deal with when venturing into the male-dominated world of science. The fictional memoirs' emphasis on discourses that frame femininity and math as a contradiction make Lovelace's struggle against traditional gender roles and masculinist concepts of science undoubtedly relevant for a 21st century readership.

### Double-dealing around the double helix

British women scientists are also now entering the theatre stage. American dramatist Anna Ziegler's critically-acclaimed and prize-winning one-act play *Photograph 51* tells the story of the race for the discovery of the structure of DNA, focussing on British crystallographer Rosalind Franklin's (1920-1958) often forgotten role in it. First staged in the US, the play attracted enormous attention when it premiered in London's West End in 2015, with Hollywood actress Nicole Kidman in the leading role. While the drama indeed puts Franklin's story centre stage, it is not the female scientist but a chorus consisting of her male colleagues that leads the audience through her story. The fictionalised characters of Francis Crick, James Watson, and Maurice Wilkins, who in real life received the Nobel Prize for discovering the DNA double helix structure in 1962 (four years after

Book Cover *Enchantress of Numbers* (2017)

©Dutton

Franklin's untimely death), are given the chance to retrospectively set the record straight and to 'publicly' acknowledge Franklin's role in their fame and fortune.

Given the historical facts, however, the play is more a critique of sexism in academia than an empowering portrayal of a woman's success story. While the biographical drama does not fail to portray Franklin as a brilliant and passionate scientist, it concentrates on revealing her male colleagues' misogynist attitudes and behaviours, which generate endless experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and disregard for Franklin. Indeed, the play suggests that it was Franklin's personality, above all her unwillingness to cooperate,

which prevented her final triumph in the discovery of 'the secret of life', and contributed to the men's scientific betrayal when they appropriated her photo 51, which proved the DNA double helix structure. Yet, sympathy clearly lies with Franklin, who in the end leaves the stage not only professionally defeated but terminally ill: Ziegler indeed stretches historical fact to have Crick's and Watson's scientific breakthrough coincide with her protagonist's cancer diagnosis, a rather melodramatic touch that ennobles this depiction of gender discrimination in the lab by framing it as a tragedy. *Photograph 51* is a timely piece that highlights a woman's scientific achievements while raising awareness for academic sexism and gender bias in recognising female contributions to science.

The attention that creative artists and online activists are beginning to pay to the lives and accomplishments of female scientists is undoubtedly a positive development, supporting activities to raise the numbers of women in STEM. Stories of women's scientific achievements which allow movie- and theatregoers, historical fiction readers, and *Wikipedia* users to empathise with strong female role models are vital in challenging the public perception of science as a masculine pursuit. While this alone is certainly not sufficient to fix STEM's gender gap, it does justify hopes that these on- and offline rewritings of

the history of women in science may help to improve our chances to eventually overcome the ‘Curie Syndrome’.

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# “MY LEGIONARIUS”

from the Novel

*The Emperor's Babe* (2001)

by

Bernadine Evaristo

## Introduction

by Ingrid von Rosenberg

*The Emperor's Babe* was Bernardine Evaristo's second novel, written in verse like her first one, *Lara* (first edition 1997, an extended version 2009). Yet like all her work, *The Emperor's Babe* is unique, very different from its predecessor and from the books to follow: Evaristo loves to experiment with form, language and historical periods, yet always concentrating on the fate of black people in a western context. Was *Lara*, a semi-autobiographical story, set in the London of the 1970s with parts of the pre-history reaching as far back as 1835 and taking place in Africa, Ireland, Germany and Brazil, *The Emperor's Babe* is a revisionist historical novel set in an imagined Roman Londinum. Told in a sophisticated mixture of modern English and kitchen Latin, the text is sometimes hilarious, sometimes very touching. Evaristo's Roman Empire is a state where black people are citizens, can follow a trade or even become emperors, though, needless to say, many habits and circumstances are very reminiscent of present-day British society. The young heroine Zuleika is the daughter of a black green grocer in Londinum, who sells her at a very tender age to a rich Roman merchant, a fat habitual rapist with a second family in Rome. She entertains herself during her husband's absences with female friends and dabbles with poetry until one day she meets Emperor Septimus Severus, an African according to historiography and black in Evaristo's version. A great love story develops, which, sadly, ends with the death of both. The following passage presents the first sexy love scene between them, his soldiering and military leadership offering a fitting metaphorical field to denote the power battle between the lovers.



Reproduced with kind permission of Bernardine Evaristo.

## MY LEGIONARIUS

I like you two ways  
either take off you crown of laurels  
drop your purple robes  
to the floor  
and come to me naked  
as a man

or dress up.

- ZULEIKA

Real soldiers wear tunics and armour,  
my emperor does without.

Stands before me, metal bands  
tied with leather straps

over a bull's chest, iron wings  
protect shoulders from flying sabres.

I finger your second skin,  
My lord, cold, polished, my reflection

cut into strips; your tawny trunks perfumed

with juniper oil,

hard with squeezing the damp flanks  
of stallions, dagger gripped

for my forging.  
Are you ready for war, soldier?

A centurion's crested helmet and visor,  
Curve of dramatic bristle.

Like an equus,  
you roll your head, lightly brush

my inner thighs, leaving a trail of goose  
bumps, and giggles,

then trace the tip of your sword  
down the centre

of my torso. Dare I breathe?  
Let your route

map a thin red line?  
Silver goblets of burgundy vino by my bedside,

to toast the theatre of war,  
*Close your eyes*, you command, a freezing

blade on my flamed cheek, hand around my neck.  
I am your hostage.

I am dying. I am dying of your dulcet conquest.  
You make my temples drip into my ears,

whisper obscenities,  
plant blue and purple flowers

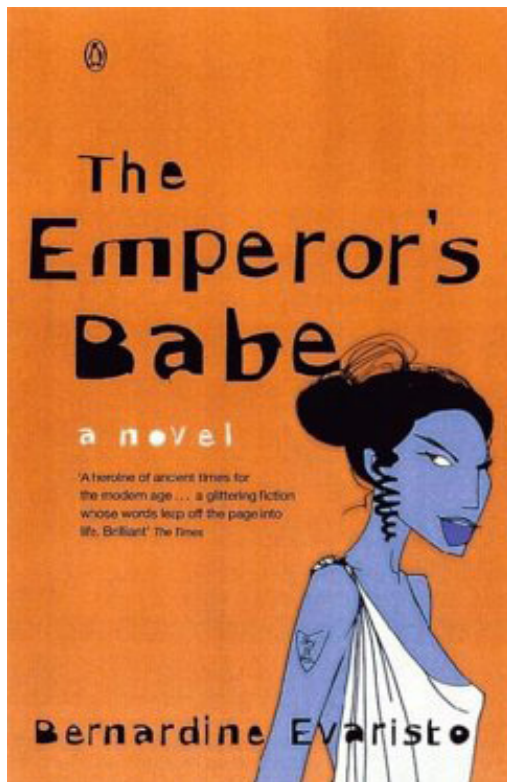
on my barren landscape;  
here,

besiege me,  
battery-ram my fortified gateway,  
  
you archer, stone-slinger, trumpeter,  
give to me, futuo me,  
  
futuo me, my actor-emperor,  
I hold  
  
the pumping cheeks that rule the world,  
I do. Ditch the empire  
  
on your back,  
Septimus,  
  
it is crushing my carriage,  
the weight of a soldier trained to march  
  
thirty kilometres a day,  
marching for centuries over roads  
  
made with crushed skulls, legions  
forming an impregnable walking  
  
tortoiseshell,  
on the battlefield, on  
  
your back,  
making the whole world Roman.  
  
Vidi, Vici, Veni.  
Take off your victory.  
  
I am vanquished already, I can't fight you,  
You stab me to death, again and again,  
  
Stab me to death, soldier.

# Interview with Poet-Novelist Bernardine Evaristo

on Gender, Sexuality, Feminism,  
Masculinity and Race

Ingrid von Rosenberg  
(*TU Dresden*)



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Bernardine Evaristo is one of the most inventive and by now highly respected British novelists, especially admired for her unusual command of a great variety of language registers and her refreshingly humorous approach to serious topics. As a young woman she was one of the black and Asian British writers who

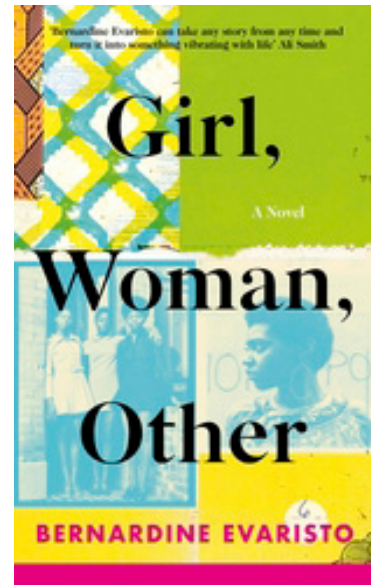
appeared on the literary scene in the mid-1990s with a bang, immediately winning the interest and acclaim of the media, the reading public and the critics (other successful newcomers were e.g. Diran Adebayo, Andrea Levy, Courttia Newland and Joanna Traynor). Evaristo was born in 1959 in Woolwich, south east London, as the fourth of eight children to an English mother and a Nigerian father. To date she has published eight books including one novella and has won several prestigious prizes. Central themes of her work have been the search of women and men for identity in a hybrid society as well as the fanciful re-writing of black history in an affirmative way. Having begun her career as a poet, Evaristo has continued to use verse in her fiction. *Lara* (1997), her first novel, is a novel-in-verse and so is her second novel *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), while her later fiction mixes verse with prose or is fully written in prose. The announcements of her new novel *Girl*,

*Woman, Other* (coming out in May 2019), an ambitious project, make curious: twelve “mainly black British female protagonists” appear, whose lives – in her own words – “intersect in an experimental form I call ‘fusion fiction’”. Excitingly, the book has recently been selected for the Booker Prize 2019 longlist.

I have known Bernardine Evaristo for quite a while, meeting her at readings and conferences, and have followed her writing career with growing admiration. When we met again at a conference on “Writing Gender: Sexuality, Feminism and Masculinity”, which she chaired, in November 2018, I was very pleased that she was willing to answer in writing some questions I had concerning her attitude to gender and race. Her answer arrived on 13th July 2018 via e-mail.

**Ingrid von Rosenberg (IR):** *You have - expertly - chaired the British Council seminar in Berlin on “Writing Gender: Sexuality, Feminism and Masculinity” in January 2018. What made you accept the chair - have you developed a special interest in the topic?*

**Bernardine Evaristo (BE):** My interest in those issues goes back to the eighties when I co-founded Theatre of Black Women, Britain’s first such company to focus on creating theatre by and for black women. I came of age as a feminist and theatre maker while still at drama school and it has informed my



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creative practice ever since, although that hasn’t meant that my books are directly to be seen as ‘feminist’. I think that art and people have a complexity and messiness that defies our own political persuasions. I can’t crowbar my gender politics into their lives because it will expose a feminist agenda. For example, *Mr Loverman* was directly addressing the issue of older black male homosexuality, but my protagonist Barrington isn’t a New Man, a reconstructed male, in fact he’s quite anti-feminist in a reactionary dinosaurish way. This is true to the character I created, a man of his time, generation and origins. As I write my characters into being they cannot be my puppets or mouthpieces for my politics. However, my politics informs my work at a deeper, less obvious level, where it needs to remain. Writing about the African diaspora is a political act in a society where so few of these books are published.

However, having said all of the above, my next book, *Girl, Woman, Other* (Penguin Random House, coming out in May 2019) is one where I've created twelve mainly black British female protagonists whose lives intersect in an experimental form I call 'fusion fiction'. It's very much a contemporary novel for our times and the issues of gender, sexuality, masculinity etc. have been uppermost in my mind for many years as I've been writing it, so when I was asked to chair the Berlin Seminar for a second year (the first year I chose the topic of Diversity), it seemed natural to zoom in on what these issues might mean for writers.

**IR:** *Your work from Lara to Blonde Roots seems to me to circle around two main issues: one is the - very fanciful, often humorous - re-writing of black British history in an affirmative sense, breaking away from the dominant narrative of black people as victims; the other is female empowerment despite the double oppression by racial marginalisation and male dominance. In all these works you have created strong heroines who succeed in asserting themselves, even though Zuleika pays with her life. Hello Mum and Mr Loverman have male heroes – has your interest shifted from black history and black women's position to a wider treatment of gender?*

**BE:** *Hello Mum* was an examination of the

masculinity of a teenage boy, as it was in an older Caribbean male in *Mr Loverman*. But I think all of these topics (black history, women, black women) continue to run throughout all of my works; they are intersected, going back to the female lives in *Lara*, both black and white. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the women are a manifestation of multiple female experiences and stories. Aged from nineteen to ninety-four, they come from an array of cultural and mixed-racial backgrounds, classes, British locations, professions, sexualities and one of them becomes trans. Some of them are feminists, others are not. I write strong but flawed female characters (and male), but they have to be imperfect beings in an imperfect world. In a sense, I am in a conversation with my characters, who speak to me as much as vice versa. I love losing myself in their worlds and getting under their skin.

**IR:** *Barry, the hero of Mr Loverman, is gay; Jerome in Hello Mum is a vulnerable boy; and you mentioned that your next novel will deal with a transgender person. Do you feel that- considering their social position - these minorities have a lot in common with women? Why not create a 'cis'man' as a central figure??*

**BE:** Jerome, Barrington and Stanley in *Soul Tourists* are all cis male because they identify with the gender role they were born into. Jerome

and Stanley are heterosexual, Barry is not.

**IR:** *You are a master of language, sociolects and dialects, using all kinds of registers with ease. Did you find it difficult to imagine and express the thoughts and feelings of a gay man? Why is he cast as a comic character and his marriage, which obviously frustrated both partners immensely, treated as a comedy?*

**BE:** I beg to differ, my treatment of Barry's marriage to Carmel is tragic-comic. On the one hand you have Barry's perspective on their toxic relationship, expressed through his often comedic disdain for his wife, and on the other hand you have Carmel's parallel narrative where we see that her unhappy marriage has traumatised her for over fifty years. Even Barry's position is tragic because he hasn't felt able to come out as a gay man since he first knew he was sixty years ago. He has led a life in hiding, of not being his true self to anyone except Morris, so he too has suffered as a result of his deception. I also question that there is something wrong with finding humour in tragedy. As they say, humour is a serious business, and in *Mr Loverman* I use it as a means to explore and stay true to character, to tease out the uncomfortable reality of the marriage from Barry's point of view, and to expose the absurdity of human behaviour. I'm the kind of writer who needs to be irreverent, who wants to puncture the po-facedness of some of the humourless literature

out there and who also uses humour to reveal the contradictions inherent in who people consider themselves to be and who they actually are, and how they present themselves to others.

**IR:** *Do you think that the interest in gender varieties and their belonging is generally growing in the literary field, overshadowing questions of race?*

**BE:** On the one hand the explosion of hundreds of gender identities into the mainstream is a new phenomenon *on this scale*, but commensurately the conversation around race is also enjoying a renaissance, which is what happens when we witness some of the extremes of racism that need to be challenged and counteracted; and in the social media age, when voices speak to each other away from the usual brokering of the mainstream media, across the barriers of time zones, countries and cultures, we see grass roots movements developing in a way that simply wasn't possible before. For those of us interested in gender and race, we experience it as a complex, intertwined and dynamic network of ideas and positions that must grow together.

**IR:** *How much importance do you ascribe to sex in your works? What significance does it have alongside other themes?*

**BE:** Sex features in most of books. I believe it to be a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human and without it we would not exist. (Irony alert.) I'm always surprised when writers avoid writing it. I enjoy writing sex from my characters' perspectives - it involves a deeper expression of who they are and often represents not only their subconscious selves, but it can be a way to explore other issues. Barry and Morris have sex as 74 year old gay Caribbean men, which was an imaginative challenge for me. Carmel, Barry's wife has sex in her office which involves the imagery of stationery, something I had a lot of fun with, and while it is supposed to be comic, it's also supposed to be erotic. The eponymous Lara has light S&M sex, which was an exploration of the power relationship between her and her Nigerian lover and was a psychological echo of her father's use of corporal punishment; while her mother, Ellen, has a graphically-realised sex with Taiwo in the same novel, which is a way to deepen the intimacy of their love as a just-married couple. When Zuleika, 1800 years ago in Roman London, is forced to have sex with her husband on her wedding night, she is eleven and he is 33. It's essentially rape and a source of great emotional and physical pain to her, and it's rich in imagery with references to classical mythology including the myth of Persephone. When she first has sex with Emperor Septimius Severus,

I am exploring not only male-female power relations (she's 18, he's in his 40s) but also relating it to the Roman Empire upon which the British Empire was modelled. Later in the novel she rides him, 'teasing' him, 'taming' him and it represents a shift in their power dynamic.

**IR:** *Do you think that the esteem for black writers and artists has recently grown in Britain, as the awarding of the Turner to Lubaina Himid and the appointment of Jackie Kay to the national poet of Scotland, the Scots Makar, seem to indicate?*

**BE:** These moments are always wonderful to celebrate and do indicate a more open society. Both women were part of the 80s movement of black artists to which I belonged - and it's amazing to think that all these years later this kind of shift can happen. We certainly never imagined it back then when black women artists were so marginalised. However, individual successes do not mean that others are also being let in, it does not mark generational success and I think we have a long way to go before the playing field has been levelled. Right now in the UK, in July 2018, we're dealing with both the *Windrush* deportation debacle, which suggests that we haven't moved on as much as we like to think, and developments in publishing where more writers of colour are being published or in the pipeline, than for a very long time. As always, time

is the great marker of permanent success.  
Let's see where we are in ten years' time.

**IR:** *Thank you so much for your enlightening and thought-provoking answers. And thank you too for the generous permission to reprint a passage from The Emperor's Babe, you spoke about: the first sexy lovers' meeting between Zuleika and her Roman Emperor.*

# The Making of a Man in British Films

## How Masculinity is Constructed in the Editing Room

Wieland Schwanebeck

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### Introduction

In order to define what distinguishes cinema as an art-form, one probably thinks of the elementary techniques that are at its disposal: the mobile camera that records images, the combination of image and sound, and, of course, the cut, which arranges individual shots to build a sequence over time. Some theorists go so far as to say that editing is the soul of cinema and that it is in the editing room that a film is truly created. This means that the creative control of the director should extend all the way into the editing room. In fact, some of the most celebrated *auteurs* working in cinema today (like Alfonso Cuarón, a multiple Oscar winner and one of today's most inventive mainstream directors) edit their films themselves, while others are known to collaborate extensively with their editors. Either way, the characteristic syntax of their story-telling

often only comes together in the editing room, where the film finds its rhythm: think of the precisely choreographed fight sequences in the films of Matthew Vaughn or Guy Ritchie, or the way in which Danny Boyle will pace his scenes according to the music he has chosen.

But editing was not always the undisputed essence of cinematic storytelling, particularly not in Great Britain, which for many years failed to catch up with the international competition and thus earned a horrid reputation in the early 20th century. Critics would later quip that the British were genetically unable to produce great cinema, with François Truffaut going so far as to say that the terms 'cinema' and 'Britain' were incompatible, something that he blamed on stereotypical signifiers of Britishness like "the English countryside, the subdued way of life", and "the weather" (Truffaut 124). When

it came to exploring the possibilities of the medium in the early decades of the 20th century, some British filmmakers in fact were content to record theatre performances and otherwise left it to the Americans to conquer the British market.

The British discussion surrounding the cinema and especially the benefits of editing was frequently dominated by high-minded intellectuals who felt blasé about what they saw as yet another Vaudeville attraction for the labouring classes, and who thought that anyone seeking a career in the world of the Keystone cops and Mickey Mouse was a sell-out, not an artist. The same intellectuals continued to compare cinema unfavourably to the theatre and were opposed to the very idea of editing. Sergei Eisenstein, for one, remembers that the first montage experiments came under fire for allegedly destroying the very idea of man by reducing him to a fragmented appearance. Looking back at the early days of filmmaking, Eisenstein remembers that too many filmmakers insisted on presenting man “only in *long* uncut dramatic scenes” (59). In 1926, the year after Eisenstein’s groundbreaking film *Battleship Potemkin* premiered in Moscow, English film critic Iris Barry took the nation’s filmmakers to task over this issue, accusing them of “using the screen as though it were a stage with exits left and right” (qtd. in Barr 11); on a similar note, the producer

Michael Balcon later commented that early British filmmakers were “mentally ‘stagebound’” (qtd. in Ryall 69).

Not only British cinema has come very far since that time, and few people today would voice the idea that editing destroys *man* (neither in the universal nor in the gendered sense). Quite the contrary, the history of cinema suggests that montage techniques have often contributed to the *making* of a man on screen – in fact, what is the famous Kuleshov experiment if not the first successful demonstration that editing, rather than performance, is the most effective tool when it comes to displaying male emotion on screen? Lev Kuleshov, a contemporary of Eisenstein, famously placed the same image of a man looking straight ahead next to a series of other images (a plate of soup, a dead child, a beautiful woman), each time asking his audience to rate the actor’s performance. In each case, the audience confirmed that the actor had shown the appropriate reaction, and they interpreted his blank expression as hunger, mourning, and sexual desire, depending on the respective context (fig. 1).

On the basis of the Kuleshov experiment, filmmakers would argue that editing (rather than the performance itself) was the key to conveying emotion and to trigger audience responses. In a wider sense, editing, and montage sequences in



The Kuleshov effect

particular, are instrumental when it comes to constructing masculinity on screen.

### **What He Needs Is a Montage**

One of the most well-known uses of editing in narrative cinema is the training or sports montage that occurs in war and mercenary films, the sports film, or the adventure film. I am using the term montage *not* synonymously with editing here, though this is done in some textbook introductions to film studies. Unlike the very general concept of editing (meaning the assembly of

individual shots into a sequence), montage is more specifically a sequence that condenses a longer event into a short time span, usually without words. It is a somewhat controversial technique, because it runs the risk of alienating the viewer, deviating (as it does) from the rest of the film in terms of pacing and continuity. A montage amounts to cinema saying, “Look! I’m cinema!”, and this contradicts the traditional paradigm of Hollywood-style narrative editing, which tries to be as invisible and unobtrusive as possible in order to immerse the viewers in the story. Karel

Reisz, one of the pioneers of the British New Wave and the director of films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), strongly warns against montage in his own introduction to film editing. He argues that montage disrupts the cinematic "harmony of form and content" by drawing attention to itself (Reisz & Millar 122). But this has not stopped montage from becoming a popular staple in male-dominated film genres that rely on a certain notion of muscular, monolithic masculinity.

Such montages depict the customary build-up of masculinity, as the hero prepares for the climactic battle and gets into shape, often to the sound of an emotionally charged, rousing theme tune. *Rocky* (1976), Sylvester Stallone's quintessential underdog tale, was an important film in that respect, providing a template that genre films (not just *Rocky's* very own sequels, all of which feature increasingly iconic and campy training montages) would continue to riff on for years. Montage sequences in the tradition of *Rocky* are used to restore or even produce a particular type of normative masculinity within the confines of narrative cinema, speeding up a strenuous, time-consuming process. Moreover, they draw attention to the spectacular sight of the muscular male body while at the same time having to keep homoerotic subtexts at bay, at

least in mainstream genre films. After all, the sports training derives much of its pleasure from an extended look at aestheticized male torsos. Laura Mulvey famously wrote about the 'male gaze' that is at work in classic Hollywood filmmaking, and its essential set-up is potentially threatened when a male (rather than a female) body is objectified, which means that the training montage constantly has to *work* (in the most literal sense of the word) against the stain of effeminacy. It does so by subjecting the protagonist(s) to hard labour and suffering. As sweating male bodies are seen to endure all kinds of exertion and, in some cases, outright martyrdom, the viewer gets to witness how isolated (and, in some cases, disenfranchised) men are transformed into resilient fighting machines and outright alpha-males. The montage frequently plays out as a non-verbal event that both fragments the body (so that the viewers do not indulge in too much uninterrupted gazing at particular anatomic details) and, paradoxically, makes it *whole* at the same time. This is because montage is always more than just the sum of its parts and conveys an overall impression to the viewers, even if this means manipulating them. To quote a famous example, the audience is convinced that they *see* Janet Leigh's body be mutilated in the shower montage in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) but in fact, the knife never really touches the body. In the case of

the training montage, they come away thinking that they have witnessed the hard work necessary to build masculinity up from scratch, even though they have actually only been shown a small excerpt from the actual training regime with a few token beads of sweat. It is also worth stressing that the use of montage in the context of ‘making men’ highlights that masculinity is not naturally given but must be achieved by way of a strenuous labour process, one that cinema continues to accelerate and manipulate at will.

It might be because of British cinema’s belated discovery of the cut that training montages do not feature as often as in American genre cinema, but this does not mean they are completely absent from it. The training montage

(*Skyfall*, 2012), and it is also an integral part of the ‘male underdog’ comedy, which is brimming with intersectional and culture-specific themes. *The Full Monty* (1997) is a case in point: a hit comedy about six unemployed men from Sheffield who decide to put on a striptease show, the film has its protagonists try to come to terms with self-consciousness, homophobia, and male anxiety in the face of what Mulvey calls “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (62), usually thought of as a female anxiety. *The Full Monty*’s training montages dedicate as much time to dancing as to male-bonding rites like playing football or tussling, and it is much to the film’s credit that it does not succumb to homophobic bouts of ‘gay panic’ in these scenes but pokes gentle fun at them. In one training scene, the



The Full Monty © Fox Searchlight Pictures/20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox

has a place in the James Bond universe when 007 has to be resurrected from the dead and struggles to regain his stamina

guys calm down their male *angst* by pretending that they are merely acting out “the Arsenal offside trap” on stage, which

makes it okay to “wave our arms around like a fairy” and to perform their carefully choreographed dance moves (fig. 2)

Satirical uses of the training montage have been around for much longer than this, of course. In Woody Allen’s satirical comedies of the early 1970s, like *Bananas* (1971) or *Love and Death* (1974), frail anti-heroes fail at military training, particularly when it comes to handling phallic weapons – the gun falls apart, and the sabre gets stuck in the sheath. Mel Brooks’s Robin Hood spoof (*Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, 1993) has the protagonist call out to his merry men to “grab [their] uniform and equipment and prepare for the training sequence”, while *Team America: World Police* (2004), a send-up of the mercenary film made by the creators of *South Park*, features a song called “Montage” that directly comments on the protagonist’s predicament: “The hours approaching to give it your best, / And you’ve got to reach your prime. / That’s when you need to put yourself to the test / And show us a passage of time. / We’re gonna need a montage!”

In order to demonstrate how the training montage not only constructs masculinity but also contributes to the masculinisation of formulaic movie narratives, I would like to discuss *The Wild Geese* (1978), one of the most iconic British mercenary films.

## A Celebration of Group Strength: The Wild Geese

Sylvester Stallone’s *Rocky* franchise had heralded the return of the sports film in the United States; his subsequent *Rambo* franchise, on the other hand, popularised ‘men on a mission’ narratives in the United States again in a series of films that attempted to address the Vietnam trauma. Mercenary films of this sort had already returned to European cinemas with a string of hits in the spirit of *The Dirty Dozen* (1967). British producer Euan Lloyd, who specialised in these, would cast renowned, aging British actors who had proven their box-office credentials in the previous decades, and send them on various suicide missions all over the globe. The most well-known and successful of these was *The Wild Geese*, an African-set adventure starring Richard Burton, Richard Harris, and Roger Moore. The history of British ‘courage under fire’ pictures certainly does not start with *The Wild Geese* – nostalgic tales of British military excellence were extremely popular during World War II and afterwards; look no further than *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) or *The Guns of Navarone* (1961). Yet *The Wild Geese* was instrumental in updating the format for the hard-boiled 1980s, merging its tropes with the trademark vigilantism and body-count that would attract a younger audience.

*The Wild Geese* sees a group of retired British soldiers recruited for one final mission, in order to extract an African politician from prison in the fictional country of Zembala. The Geese's ultra-masculine Colonel Faulkner (played by Richard Burton with trademark gravelly machismo) leads them into what looks like an easy job, but the group is betrayed by their employer, a shady banker, with the result that only a handful of them survive. Though often dismissed for its (neo-)colonial politics and its borderline-fascist disregard for human life, the mercenary film is at the same time characterised by a pronounced scepticism regarding ideology and traditional master narratives of political thought, and *The Wild Geese* is no exception. This is why the growing disillusionment of the mercenaries co-exists with their nostalgic yearning for the 'good old days' of fighting for an allegedly justified cause and British camaraderie. Most mercenary films emblemise this attitude in a customary 'Band of Brothers' moment in the of *Henry V*'s St. Crispin's Day speech, with the team leader urging his men to exhibit courage when the odds appear are stacked against them.<sup>1</sup> In *The Wild Geese*, such a moment occurs halfway through the film when Faulkner promises to take care of the "fifty good men" whose "lives are my responsibility", but his final speech is much more disillusioned and cynical. Effectively, it is a monologue that rejects the idea of

speechifying (delivered by one of the great Shakespearean actors of the 20th century), as Faulkner settles the score with his corrupt employer: "I had a speech prepared for you. I've been rehearsing it for three months, it was pretty good, as a matter of fact. All about the betrayals of dead friends, kind of a passionate requiem. And naturally, what a filthy and cold-blooded monster you are, et cetera, et cetera. That part was very eloquent. It even went into the philosophical implications of the relationships between a mercenary and his employer. You would have been impressed. But right now, face to face with you, I don't really want to go through all that".

The film's politics are similarly ambiguous: a surface appeal for a communal spirit that even overcomes segregation is rather on-the-nose and at the same time is undercut by the mercenaries' careless disposal of faceless African soldiers. The protagonists are in it for the money, their code of honour is revealed to be obsolete, and their failed heroism turns *The Wild Geese* into a kind of mournful western of the post-colonial era; one that laments the 'loss of a continent' instead of celebrating the 'birth of a nation' (Ritzer 85-88). Fittingly, the film was directed by Andrew V. McLaglen, a British-born director who had specialised in Westerns starring James Stewart or John Wayne throughout the 1960s.

Having dedicated the first section to the recruitment of the soldiers, the film employs a training montage in order to evoke the idea of group strength and to prepare the viewer for a radical shift in tone, merging the idea of masculine resilience with some final moments of comic relief. Unlike more generic examples of the training montage, this one does not assemble material from different exercises; it merely summarises one unit of endurance training. The sequence contains 39 shots in 119 seconds (Ø shot length: 3.1 seconds), constantly alternating between slowing-down and speeding-up (to emulate the task of the soldiers, who jog and spring around the courtyard), and cutting back and forth between large-scale ensemble shots, medium close-ups of the film's main players hitting dirt and getting up again, and two rather comic micro episodes that single out two soldiers who have run out of steam (fig. 3). This interplay between orchestrated shots of the group on the one hand and individualised episodes of suffering and recovery on the other not only highlights the varying degrees of fitness among the group, it is also indicative of *The Wild Geese* at large, as the film zooms in on the fates of about half a dozen men among its 50-strong army, sketching out their reasons for going to Africa and whether or not they make it back home. Repeatedly, the montage adopts the point of view of individual soldiers above whom Jack Watson's fierce

Sergeant Major towers. The fact that he spits abuse at them and even fires a shot next to the head of an exhausted soldier who claims to be "dead" tired is a crucial difference to other genre films: the scene, set to a march composed by Roy Budd and edited by John Glen (who would later direct five James Bond films), is neither wordless nor without wit, which means it willingly runs the risk of undercutting its surface celebration of male bravado and its hard-as-nails, 'no mercy' rhetoric with moments of irony that look ahead to more playful, tongue-in-cheek uses of the trope, which is a particular virtue of British cinema.

This quality was notably absent from *Rocky*, where the montage sequences did everything they could to camouflage male anxiety and to hold effeminacy at bay. Unlike *Rocky*'s disarming what-you-see-is-what-you-get gender politics, *The Wild Geese* plays with duplicity and deceptive appearances. This applies to the team's ruthless employer as much as it does to some of the soldiers. The unforgiving Sergeant Major tends to his rose bushes; the trademark debonair quality of Roger Moore's performance as Fynn hides a sadistic streak; and even the film's most homophobic caricature of effeminacy, Kenneth Griffith's medic Arthur Witty (a telling name if ever there was one), is subsequently revealed to be a skilled combatant. While the Hollywood Production Code ruled out the presence

of gay soldiers in traditional war films, *The Wild Geese* features a gay character

does not make *The Wild Geese* a very progressive film – it arguably remains



*The Wild Geese*

who not only takes pride in his sexuality, but who is also given the privilege of quick repartee. This is another marked contrast to the traditional and completely non-verbal training montages, because it puts the virtue of eloquence on par with other skills that are emblematised by the soldiers. As Witty manages to turn the Sergeant Major's homophobic taunt ("You screaming faggot, move it before I sew up your arsehole!") into a double entendre ("The Lord in His infinite wisdom would never ordain that!"), he not only wins the argument but also queers the clichéd scenario and effectively puts the 'Camp' into 'training camp', releasing some of the Hollywood combat film's typical "repressed homosexual tension" (Sikov 65). This

rather problematic in its depiction of race relations and never fully cuts ties with the genre's trademark nostalgic yearning for military glory – but it demonstrates that montage can exceed the dominant notion of masculinity. Like a lot of genre films – and one might consider some of the examples that I have briefly alluded to in this text, including the James Bond series and the British working-class comedy –, *The Wild Geese* looks back to retrograde notions of masculinity in order to navigate male anxieties. In the film's coda, Faulkner approaches the young son of his late comrade, Janders (Richard Harris), presumably to present him with a narration of his father's heroic deeds, which underlines the instrumental role that story-telling plays

in the reproduction of male stereotypes. It is worth stressing, however, that the constructedness of this endeavour is very much highlighted by montage scenes, and that even a film as problematic and, to an extent, reactionary as *The Wild Geese* does some tentative steps towards pluralising the idea of masculinity.

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1 It is no coincidence that Laurence Olivier's adaptation of the play (Henry V, 1944) was an instrumental film during the Second World War – incidentally, he films Henry's big two-minute speech without a cut, thus maybe confirming the old stereotype about the theatre mentality of Britain's leading directors.

# Summer School

## “Political Masculinities in Europe: New Definitions, Methods and Approaches”

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The summer school “Political Masculinities in Europe: New Definitions, Methods and Approaches” took place from August 20th to 24th 2018, at the Landau Campus of the University of Koblenz-Landau in Germany. It was organised by Kathleen Starck (University of Koblenz-Landau) and Birgit Sauer (University of Vienna) and funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung.

We welcomed a group of fifteen Early Career Researchers, who are currently pursuing PhD-dissertations or postdoc research connected with the concept of *political masculinities* to participate in a large variety of teaching and discussion formats such as set-classes, workshop-sessions, peer- and keynote-tutoring, a round-table discussion as well as a joint lecture and a number of keynote

lectures. The group proved diverse and international, coming from Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden and Turkey. The keynote speakers, who also functioned as tutors to the researchers, were as international as the participants: Jeff Hearn (Örebro University, Sweden), Marina Hughson (Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research, Belgrade, Serbia), Ov Cristian Norocel (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium) and Niels Spierings (Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands).

The first basic term to be discussed was *masculinities*: it was addressed by Jeff Hearn in his opening keynote-lecture. Since both terms *masculinities* and *political* are heavily loaded, Hearn suggested to scrutinise these through a ‘material discursive analysis’, i.e. an analysis of the potential differentials and the processes of constructedness that simultaneously underpin them. Much of this work was new, with initial steps undertaken in Hearn’s seminal studies *The Gender of Oppression* (1987) and *Men in the Public Eye* (1992). The resulting six categories Hearn suggested promise to be helpful for reframing the term *masculinities* as originally defined by Starck and Sauer (2014) and also for engaging with the more recent modification of the definition by Starck and Russel Luyt (2018). Thus, the participants were able

to witness and actively contribute to the development of a new theoretical concept in the making as well as test its merits by applying it to their own work.

A second important issue to be addressed were the different methodologies that are used in the analysis of *political masculinities*. The international group of Early Career Researchers – coming from ten countries and nine academic disciplines – presented a living example of the interdisciplinary potential of this varied field: methodologies from political sciences, sociology, psychology to cultural-, literary- and film- and drama studies, etc. found their way into the discussion. But this fruitful mix of perspectives also highlighted the necessity of an overarching definition of what may constitute *political masculinities*.

In his lecture (read in absentia) Niels Spierings proposed an empirical approach in order to analyse voters’ inclination to lean towards right-wing parties. At the centre of his paper stood the evidence-based hypothesis that the attraction for voters of the parties forming the Populist Radical Right (PRR) can be explained by a mixture of ideology and a leadership framed as ‘*politically masculine*’, though it is not limited to men. The clarity and validity of the empirical data presented in Spierings’s paper also raised the question of the applicability of the term *political*

*masculinities* across countries, cultures and mentalities, which sparked a lively discussion among the international group.

Taking up the thread from both Hearn's and Spierings's observations, Ov Cristian Norocel first proposed to identify the 'political players' mentioned in the working definition of *political masculinities* before zooming in on these with regard to right wing populism. Then Norocel applied the analysis of conceptual metaphors in order to illustrate the ideological tenets in right-wing populism and the never-neutral implicit power relations. Perceiving these relations from an intersectional perspective exposes the differences and inequality on the basis of gender, ethnicity, class, race and sexual orientation found in the right wing portrayal of institutionalised categories such as 'families'. As Norocel showed, reframing the nation as a 'family' metaphorically clouds acts of exclusion on the grounds of gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. This opened the possibility of ascribing also to language the role of a potential 'political player'.

Marina Hughson highlighted a problematic methodological pattern, questioning the nature of both interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches. She pointed to the operational differences in the production of knowledge in established Western core theories and in non-core knowledge

in East, Central and Southeast Europe, further suggesting that knowledge from the 'semiperiphery' should not be essentialised but empirically tested. Knowledge-production, then, appears as a construct similar to culture and as such impacts the formation of theories surrounding *masculinity*. This proved a particularly successful and new approach to cross-cultural comparisons in the application of *political masculinities*, as the animated input of the research group showed.

The keynote lectures were combined with varied teaching formats, which also produced valuable insights. During a session led by Birgit Sauer and starting from an analysis of Eva Kreisky's "Masculinity as an Analytical Category: Work in Progress" (2014), the participants examined her initial observations on *Männerbund* and *masculinism* in order to theorise *political masculinities* in a wider context. In her essay, Kreisky utilises political categories from the beginning of the 20th century to form current strategies for political science. She introduces three dimensions of masculinity as analytical categories: *masculinity*, *Männerbund* and *masculinism*. In the following discussion, the participants found that *masculinism* could be a useful concept for empirical studies with a view to identifying it as a symptom of a wider structure. The term *homosociality* was found to be more widely

applicable than Kreisky's *Männerbund* – or *male bonding* – as the former also includes the competition between men, whereas the latter exemplifies an institution. While *homosociality* denotes a more spontaneous grouping, *male bonding* tends to be more organised.

A workshop-session led by Starck and Sauer focused on the visual (self) representation of Austrian right-wing politicians and their appropriation of Hip-Hop music. In their analysis of two videos the group differentiated between various portrayals of charisma and their role in the construction of political masculinity. Other workshops moderated by the keynote speakers focused on the many overlapping spheres and sites of political power. In smaller groups and poster sessions the international research group worked on aspects of politics of the everyday and different spheres of social life (environment, militarism, health, economic development, intersectionality, etc.), the incommensurability of the political domain as a fragmented site and the framed gender of political actors. This last point led back to the discussion of methodology, as the researchers' posters highlighted the role of texts and theories as potential 'political players' in their own right. The different cultural perspectives of the research group proved particularly stimulating in these sessions.

During a joint lecture given by the organisers and keynote lecturers,

various local and global phenomena of political masculinities were analysed. Birgit Sauer showcased the visual self-image of the Austrian populist right-wing, while Marina Hughson introduced historical changes of political visions from the former Yugoslavian society to its post-war state. Kathleen Starck emphasised a global view on political masculinity by examining cinematic cold war propaganda. Jeff Hearn again stressed the importance of the role of *homosociality* for the concept of *political masculinities*, which – as had previously been pointed out by Hughson – is a concept and not (yet) a closed theoretical approach in itself.

The summer school "Political Masculinities in Europe: New Definitions, Methods and Approaches" proved to be a great success, which was reflected in the concluding poster-session, during which the participants evaluated the overall performance, structure and concept of the event. They especially appreciated the large range of formats and teaching methods of the summer school. In order to consolidate the various results, all lectures, the round table discussion, the joint lecture, as well as impressions of the workshops and tutoring sessions were filmed and made available through the summer school's website, which is now part of the Political Masculinities Network.

The summer school helped to solidify aspects of *political masculinities* while opening the concept to necessary modifications of the initial definition and its methodological approaches. This showed, that while the event was a success it is still but a stepping stone to an understanding of the global currents and power structures in their (mostly) masculine framings. We can only encourage the organisation of further events on the topic as well as the exploration of synergies through the research network “Political Masculinities” which could help to sustainably facilitate an international and intersectional view on *political masculinities*.



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# Mainstreamed into Oblivion?

## LGBTIQ+ Cultures in the UK Today

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### The State of Things

In 2014 marriage was opened up to same-sex couples in England, Scotland, and Wales (though not in Northern Ireland). This seemingly final amelioration after centuries of legal discrimination against lesbian and gay people was greeted with much public and media attention. Prominent couples, first and foremost the old stalwart Elton John, who – since his somewhat torturous coming out in 1988 – has become a figurehead of the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement, but also younger celebrities, such as the diver Tom Daley, have since tied the knot and even fathered children with the aid of surrogate mothers. Lesbian relationships are still much less frequently reported in the media, but if they are, they are now generally portrayed as perfectly acceptable and even as adding glamour to a personality. The media history of the model and actress Cara Delevingne, who actively publicises

her bisexuality, is a typical example.

The present essay wishes to shed some light on the background and consequences of this seeming normalisation, but it also wants to challenge it. The challenges come from at least three trajectories. Firstly, how ‘real’ is this normalisation? If being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is now considered normal, how does one explain the following *Guardian* report from 12 December 2018?

LGB 16- to 21-year-olds are four times more likely to have felt depressed, harmed themselves and thought about killing themselves, according to a study based on interviews with 4,800 young people from in and around Bristol.

Experts said the numbers were linked to the bullying, stigma and abuse that some young people experience as a result of their sexuality. (Campbell 2018)

Secondly, does this supposed normalisation only have positive

effects? Does it not also lead to the disappearance of the dissenting groups in the eyes of the public and therefore to a decreasing awareness of their remaining problems? Thirdly, is being gay and lesbian perhaps now the ‘new normal’, while other forms of sexuality, e.g. those labelled queer, or other gender issues, such as those of transgender and transsexuality, have moved to the forefront of debates? After all, a BBC report from 7 August 2017 already mentions a remarkable rise of British children experiencing unhappiness with their biological sex and social gender:

In the last two years, the number of children aged 10 or under who were referred to the NHS because they were unhappy with their biological gender has risen from 87 to 216, including 32 aged five or under over the last year. It is something psychologists at the trust admit surprised them. They say it is impossible to know for sure why so many more children are being referred, but that it is clear there is much greater awareness and acceptance in society for young people to be able to talk about questioning their gender. (Bell 2017)

Examples illustrating these issues will cover the realm of the media, education, but also information concerning the daily ‘infrastructure’ of non-heteronormative lives, e.g. meeting points, pubs, bars, etc.

## **The Impact of the Social Media and the Supposed Death of the Gay Bar**

Gays, lesbians and bisexuals spend more time on the Internet than other groups of the population (Harness 2017). This is also true for Britain. In terms of visibility and lifestyle, though, this contributes both to integration and to the increasing invisibility that was suspected of being the accompaniment of this assimilation into the supposed mainstream. Old meeting places, be they illegal or semi-legal, such as cottages (public toilets used for sex by gay men), swimmingpoolsandsaunas (again, mainly the haunt of gay men and sometimes marketed exclusively at them), but also cafes, bars, and restaurants catering exclusively for LGBTIQ+ people, are on the decline. London and Manchester were traditionally the most LGBTIQ+-friendly metropolises in Britain, though most other cities had a quarter or at least a pub catering for non-heterosexuals. When rural Gloucester lost its only gay bar in 2015, this even provoked a headline in *The Independent*: “What happens when a county of 590,000 people loses its only gay bar? That’s what has just happened in Gloucestershire – but do we need them any more?” (Lusher 2015). The second half of the headline refers exactly to the questions of normalisation and assimilation raised above. Brighton remains another hotspot of LGBTIQ+ life, as does

(remarkably) the West Yorkshire market town of Hebden Bridge for lesbians.

In London and Manchester, the areas around Old Compton Street in Soho and Canal Street respectively became party heavens for the LGBTIQ+ crowd

are now 'LGBTIQ+-friendly' rather than exclusively gay, lesbian or whatever, which is, of course, also a result of considerable rent increases.

That Soho is not the only place in London where LGBTIQ+



Leeds Pride © Bryan Ledgard

on weekends. Yet once the British original of the TV series *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4, 1999-2000) had begun to promote the supposed excesses around Canal Street, the area also started swarming with heterosexual revellers eager to participate in the fun. Stag and hen parties began taking over, and with them the decline of LGBTIQ+ life began. The *Manchester Evening News*, in a line of reports that started as early as 2011, printed an article with the headline "There are fears the Gay Village is losing its identity" (Williams 2018) on 28 June 2018.

London's 'bermuda triangle' in Soho proved little more resistant to such a straight 'touristification', so that even there pubs and restaurants

life takes place, and that the decline through the impact of the social media and ever rising overheads is not an inevitable destiny, however, was strongly emphasised in a comprehensive assessment by King's College London in 2016. It questioned both customers and proprietors of LGBTIQ+ venues throughout London in a study entitled "LGBTQI Nightlife in London from 1986 to the Present: Interim Findings" ("I" stands for "intersex" in this use of the acronym). In the survey one reads:

A strong misconception is that LGBTQI nightlife in London equates to 'gay bars', and more specifically, to Soho. This is a sign of the success of Soho as a branded 'gay village' or 'gaybourhood': an important super cluster of bars, clubs and

other businesses. But it overlooks the way in which LGBTQI nightlife, in its diverse forms, has been dispersed across the capital and integrated into the fabric of many neighbourhoods and communities. Our surveys and mapping of venues and events has emphasised that London is distinctive because of the diversity of its LGBTQI nightlife scenes: surely the most diverse in the world. The range of spaces in which LGBTQI nightlife is accommodated – from shopping centres to theatres and art galleries – is remarkably wide. (Campkin & Marshall 2016)

The opening up towards straight customers as well as the contradictory tendency of first differentiating formerly ‘deviant’ sexualities into ever increasing identities (the longest acronym I could



Traditional Gay Pub in Old Compton Street, London

© Stephanie Sumner

find reads LGBTQIAPK+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, intersexual,

asexual, pansexual, kinks, i.e. fetishes; some of these labels have multiple meanings, such as queer or questioning, pansexual or polyamorous), before homogenizing them again for marketing purposes also goes hand in hand with the virtualisation of sexual dissidence. Dating platforms such as *Grindr* cater largely for a gay crowd and are infamous for their superficiality: if your profile picture lacks sex appeal, one swipe to the left will eliminate you from the game. (Its lesbian equivalent *Her* is much less known.) One could argue that this does not differ much from chat-up at the bar in former times, but a pub visit at least granted the visitor some minutes to view the scene and display her- or himself. The old staple of politically aware gay activism, the *Gay Times* (founded as early as 1984), is now more of a showbiz and lifestyle magazine, as is its competitor, the glossy magazine *Attitude* (founded in 1994). Is LGBTQI+ existence thus, as many of its critics assume, nowadays merely a lifestyle choice?

Many of these old as well as new information sources as well as dating scenes and devices were and are geared towards gay men. (The lesbian magazine *Diva*, for instance, is only available online and not in print.) Lesbians have traditionally relied on less commercial and public means of networking. This stems from the long-established invisibility of lesbians under

patriarchy (see e.g. Franzen 2000). This has also led to the historical fact that sexual acts between consenting women have never been criminalised in the United Kingdom – largely because previous eras could not imagine that what happened between women could be sexual, if they did not dispute the existence of sexuality in ‘healthy’ women altogether. The Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s onwards then produced politicised women’s groups in which many lesbians found a home – to the degree that haters of women’s emancipation often denounced all feminists as lesbians.

In terms of a commercial infrastructure, lesbians have always fared much worse than gay men, and it remains a bone of contention if this is because lesbians do not like bars and prefer private places of encounter or if the commercial scene has regularly excluded them as customers. An official London’s tourist webpage, [visitlondon.com](http://visitlondon.com), sports an entire category labelled “Lesbian and gay bars and clubs in London” (note the order of adjectives!), which continues with the opener “There’s a huge choice of lesbian and gay bars in London, from relaxed drinking spots, to lively DJ bars and gay nightclubs”. If one browses the listed locations, though, one finds exactly *one* lesbian location, and even that is not exclusively so: “She Soho, primarily a ladies bar (although gentlemen are welcome with female guests). A

standalone bar for the lesbian community, with fresh decor and an indoor garden, this is a great place during the week to hang out with girlfriends.” But even the gay contingent is subject to the strategic opening up towards a straight clientele that was observed above: “A cafe by day, club by night, Dalston Superstore is a vibrant and trendy hub for gay and straight party people in east London, and one of the area’s best clubbing hotspots” (“Lesbian and Gay Bars” n.d.)

Now one could rightly argue that the opening up of venues for a broader slice of the population is really a step in the direction of normalisation and acceptability. Yet even if this is so, it also leads to the disappearance of what used to be sub-cultural and counter-cultural about LGBTIQ+-life in Britain and elsewhere. Normalisation here means assimilation into a commercialised mainstream in the same way that originally highly political Pride marches (usually tracing their lineage back to the Christopher Street riot commencing in the Stonewall Inn in Christopher Street in Greenwich, New York City, on 28 June 1969 after a particularly nasty police raid) have become week- or indeed (as in London) month-long tourist events. [Visitlondon.com](http://Visitlondon.com) has now reduced “Pride in London” to the catchy slogan “Celebrate the diversity of the LGBT+ community with the colourful Pride in London Parade through central

London, free festivities in Trafalgar Square and city-wide events.” Even if one reads on, there is no mention of reasons behind the event. Perhaps it has indeed shed its political origins, at least as far as glossy surface and professional organisation are concerned, and all that is left is entertainment and commerce:

Join the party as thousands of people of all genders, sexualities, races and faith come together every year for Pride in London. Pride in London celebrates the capital’s LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans +) community with a programme of events showcasing LGBT+ culture, including theatre, dance, art, cinema, parties and activities across the city. (“Pride in London” 2018)

It is to a large degree this party connotation (together with a liberal display of skin) that has made Gay Pride events known – and often given them a bad name, even among LGBTIQ+ people themselves. People who do not fit the image, perhaps because they are conventionally less attractive and fit, over a certain age, or simply not into mindless partying, easily feel excluded from such events and thus also sidelined by the LGBTIQ+ community that should by right be theirs.

## Old Hostilities, New Enemies?

Now that the supposed mainstream has embraced lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, and increasingly, though in often problematic ways, transsexuals, old and new fault lines keep (re-)emerging. In the same way as the Women’s Movement of the 1960s onwards often regarded gay men as problematic allies – because they were, after all, men and all too frequently pretty patriarchal ones at that -, the new “genderqueer” representatives of a younger generation often view gay men – and to a lesser degree lesbians, but, interestingly, never transsexuals – as the



U.S. ambassador to the United Kingdom Matthew Barzun and Mayor of London Sadiq Khan along with senior members of the Pride in London team during a photo call before the parade at Pride in London 2016

© Katy Blackwood

enemy. “Genderqueer” or “non-binary” stands for the rejection of the traditional male/female and masculine/feminine

binary in sex and gender. Yet if this is so, why do genderqueer activists not also criticise lesbians, and why are trans people generally exempt from their critique? After all, most of them transition exactly between the two sexes that the non-binary movement wishes to overcome.

The reason for making gay men (and now increasingly also more traditional lesbians) their target lies largely in their assumed success in having reached the mainstream. Many gay men and also some lesbians have indeed successfully reached the highest pinnacle of social esteem, and not merely in their traditional enclaves of the arts and show business. The list of LGBTIQ+ members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords (“List of LGBT+ Politicians” 2019) is impressive in its current sections, and they hail from all political parties (though men are, as usual, overrepresented). Ruth Davidson, the Leader of the Scottish Conservative Party, is a lesbian, the current leader of Plaid Cymru, the Party of Wales, Adam Price is gay, as, on John Bull’s other island, is the Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar.

What this view disregards is, of course, that many gay men as well as lesbian women, bi- and transsexuals still live at least part of their lives in the closet, out of an often justifiable fear of negative discrimination in the workplace and in their communities. The UK government’s own website now

provides an interesting list of types of discrimination, which runs as follows:

Types of discrimination (‘protected characteristics’)

It is against the law to discriminate against anyone because of:

- age
- gender reassignment
- being married or in a civil partnership
- being pregnant or on maternity leave
- disability
- race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation (“Discrimination” n.d.)

In it, sexual orientation has equal status with pregnancy, and is even preceded by “gender reassignment” (the logic of the list’s arrangement is intriguing).

That discrimination against sexual minorities is still a daily fact is especially true for individuals living outside bigger cities, but also in stricter religious or ethnic communities. Their problems have not gone away, and neither has the common bullying of non-straight-identifying youngsters in schools, as the opening statistic of the three times higher suicide rate among homosexual teens amply illustrates. In fact, if one trails the Internet for famous UK gays and lesbians, one still ends up with a list

that largely consists of writers and media personalities – and remarkably few women (“Famous Homosexuals” 2019).

That many so-called genderqueer activists are not homosexual, but set out to challenge gender and sexual norms that they themselves hardly touch on in their personal practice, is another problem posed by this movement and perhaps explains its often doctrinal expressions.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, non-binary identities are, in contrast to same-sex marriages, not recognised by British law. The Gender Recognition Act of 2004 permits individuals to change their legal gender if they are able to provide supporting testimonies from two health professionals, but only between male and female. In Germany, a change in law from December 2018 makes it possible to opt for “diverse” now, without any backup requirements. A further complication is presented by in-fighting between a strange alliance of supposedly radical lesbians and anti-trans activists. At Gay Pride London in 2018, a group of so-called Terfs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) disrupted the parade. “The small group carried banners and flyers stating ‘transactivism erases lesbians’ and describing the trans movement as ‘anti-lesbianism’” (Gabatiss 2018). One of the origins of the dispute was a statement by the first-generation Australian-born feminist Germaine Greer, author of *The Female Eunuch*

(1970), who refused to accept trans-women as real women (Greer 2015).

In the not so distant past, churches and schools and many parents taught their children that being lesbian, gay, or transsexual was an aberration, and the persons identifying as such best avoided. The infamous Clause or Section 28 of the Local Government Act, introduced by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government in 1988 (and only repealed in 2000 in Scotland and 2003 in the rest of the United Kingdom, excluding Kent) stated, after all, that

A local authority shall not (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship. (“Section 28” 1988)

The current educational trend in Britain, however, clearly represents a complete turnaround. In November 2018, the *Guardian* reported, “Scotland to embed LGBTI teaching across curriculum” (Brocks 2018), an article that also claimed that “In May, the Welsh government announced an overhaul of relationship and sex education in schools, with plans to make the subject LGBT inclusive and embed it across the curriculum rather than teaching it separately.”



Trans Rights Protesters © AnemoneProjectors

The conservative press, as is to be expected, never tires of reporting the latest ‘over-the-top’ idea of progressive schools vis-à-vis diversity education. A typical article, here from the *Daily Telegraph* of 6 September 2017, carries the headline “School bans skirts to make uniform ‘gender neutral’ for transgender students and combat complaints about ‘decency’” (Turner 2017).

What this chequered picture of LGBTIQ+ life in Britain today spells out is that, contrary to the impression that the discussions about supposed sexual norms and normalities have reached a convenient and comfortable truce, issues are still (perhaps once again) up for debate. On the one hand, traditionally conservative institutions such as the Bank of England now make diversity recognition (and perhaps also its exploitation) compulsory for its staff. At the same time especially right-wing populists try to turn back

the wheel by denouncing feminists as “feminazis”, a term attributed to the US radio broadcaster Rush Limbaugh, but one that also disgraces the headlines of the *Daily Mail* (see, for instance, Taylor & Payne 2015). The same not so silent masses that have very likely brought about the Brexit mess with their wish to see Britain return to the 1950s can openly express their wish that there were no LGBTIQ+ persons (or at least no visible ones outside the realm of media and entertainment), while radical genderqueer activists are busy challenging even the emancipation of gays and lesbians in their critique of integration and insistence on ever more diverse identifications. At the same time, lesbian groups, sometimes in tandem with anti-trans activists, dispute the right to trans identities.

This splitting of identities into ever smaller contingents is, on the one hand, the result of an individualism

that has been gaining strength since its emergence in the Early Modern period with its ideas of the emancipation and power of the individual. Coupled with an education system that refuses integration of individuals into collectives in favour of giving each individual what he, she, or it seemingly requires and an economic system that views every person as a potential customer, this may indeed lead to an increasing fragmentation or even to the end of communities and interest groups altogether. (That being non-binary and gender queer is now *de rigueur* can be seen, for instance, in the latest declaration by the already “openly gay” pop star Sam Smith, who felt it necessary to add that “he feels ‘like a woman sometimes’ and has considered having a sex change” [“Sam Smith” 2018].) If everyone merely feels solidarity with themselves, we might witness the end of society as we know it. Equally frightening might be the idea that people subscribing to such a rampant sense of individual entitlement might be powerless to stop those who, on the extreme other end of the spectrum, are happy to support simplified and homogenous idea(l)s of identity that are already waving well-known political flags.

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# I Am A Man

Jay Hulme

## Introduction

by Ingrid von Rosenberg

Jay Hulme, born 1997 in Leicester, is an outstandingly talented young performance poet, who started his career with a spectacular success: in 2015 he won SLAMBassador UK, the biggest youth poetry slam (for the 12 to 18 years old) in Britain, run by Joelle Taylor on behalf of the Poetry Society and judged that year by Anthony Anaxaragou. In the following years he successfully took part in several poetry slams, becoming a finalist in the Roundhouse Poetry Slam in 2016. By now Hulme has self-published two collections of poems, and several of his texts have been included in anthologies like *I Can make You Laugh* (Bloomsbury) and *Rising Stars* (Otter-Barry Books). Hulme is also involved in educational work, for instance contributing to Amnesty International's teaching project *Words That Burn* and giving advice against fear of exams on YouTube. Hulme's poem "I Am A Man", which proves his special feeling for speech rhythm and won him the SLAMBassador, speaks impressively of the pains and difficulties involved in realising and owning up to a trans identity as a young person in a social environment which – as also pointed out by Rainer Emig in this issue - often is still hostile despite all the official acceptance of Trans rights. We are very grateful to Jay Hulme for allowing us to print the poem. If you want to feel its full impact, go to YouTube and hear and see him perform.



Reproduced with kind permission of Jay Hulme.

## **I AM A MAN**

By Jay Hulme

I am a man.  
A touch too short  
In children's clothes,  
Rows of yellow teeth  
Open like doors into nowhere  
To correct a pronoun - or twenty.  
Plenty of mistakes are accidents.  
Plenty are not.

I hold my head bowed  
In public places,  
Feeling so strongly  
The gaps and the spaces  
Where parts of my body should be,  
For though the man within  
Belongs here,  
He belongs in fear  
Of the actions of others.

Brothers.

I stand in fear of you -  
Of the fists you hold beside you.  
Of the fists you hold inside you.  
Of your pistol lips,  
Issuing words like pistol whips,  
Swear words crack  
And the pretence slips,  
And I am always falling.  
One syllable at a time.

The line is always the same:

I'm not a man

They say.

I tell a lie

They say.

I'm a freak

They say.

I should die

They say.

Words.

They never quite leave you.  
My life is traced in scar tissue,  
Along the paths these shrapnel syllables  
Have scorched into my history.  
The symmetry of my skin  
Is broken by the past within  
And I cannot begin to name  
The cause of every wound.

But here is birth,  
And here is worth,  
And here is fear,  
And fault, and earth.  
And here is girls PE class,

And gendered groups,  
And bras, and pants,  
And shirts with scoops  
For necklines.

And here are my fault lines,  
Rewinds, first times.  
Here are long hairdos,  
And women's loos,  
And how to choose  
A knife or noose.

And here is self-hatred,  
I created a hedonistic horror show  
Out of my own torso.  
Tore my skin into cobwebs  
To capture my demons,  
Bloodied fists in fights  
About rules and regulations,  
And tried to hide  
The scars upon my skin.

I was born to never win,  
To never sin,  
To quietly sit  
And never sing.  
Never express myself,  
Never search for wealth,  
Never care for health.

I was born to be a blank canvas  
For my parents failed dreams,  
And it seems to me that I  
Have failed in that duty,  
And the beauty of it all  
Is I don't care anymore.

My fists forget my own face.  
When, out of place,  
I erase my morals  
In a fight for morality.  
The shattered skin of me  
Is draped on every shaking tree,  
Like the breaths I take,  
Breaking when no-one can see me.

I left my family.  
In the shadow of that skin,  
In the shadow of the person  
That could never let them in,  
In the shadow of the person  
They could never see the truth within,  
I left them shouting.

Pitchforks raised to chase away  
The man I have become.  
I left them, on a hurricane Tuesday.  
When the weather broke against me  
Like the wrath of a God  
Others told me existed.

I left my family without hesitation,  
Without breaking my stride,  
Without breaking my pride,  
Without looking back.  
Because the lack of regret on their faces  
Would have written my gravestone.

I walked alone  
Into the alleyways of life,  
Knife tucked into my jacket  
To fight for my future,  
Palms pressed bloody

Over scar and suture,  
Wishing my mind  
Was as easy to fix  
As my skin.

Sometimes I think of a world of lies,  
Of family, and brevity,  
Of lightness, and of levity,  
A world where I can stand as me  
Unburdened by this mask you see,  
It sends me down to purgatory  
And hides my shining soul.

But whenever it breaks.  
Is less than whole.  
I fix it.  
For it hides more than me,  
You see,  
It hides a bullet shot  
The moment I was born,  
Worn smooth  
From years of probing,  
It says,  
A word  
That has never been  
My name.

# Austerity, Women and Right-wing Populism

## The Case of Monroe vs Hopkins

Kirsten Forkert

*(Birmingham School of Media)*

### **Austerity politics in the UK**

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 and the 2010 General Election, which ended 13 years of rule by the Labour Party, the Conservative Liberal-Democrat Coalition government undertook a programme of drastic cuts to public spending. This was justified by the argument that the previous government had irresponsibly overspent and that the public must now 'live within their means' – essentially a revival of the economy-as-household metaphor used by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher many years earlier. Like in Thatcher's time, this was an argument which was mostly accepted by the public, who – as intended – made the common-sense intuitive link between household finances and macro-economics. Although there were vibrant protests and anti-austerity campaigns, these did not involve a majority of the population and did not force the government to change course. After the

2015 General Election, a Conservative government continued the austerity programme. Cuts were applied to a great number of welfare benefits such as Child Benefit, Employment and Housing Support Allowance, Universal Credit, but also to the salaries of public sector employees and to the budgets of local authorities, who in their turn were forced to close hundreds of libraries and youth clubs as well as reduce support for creative activities. All these measures together had the combined effect of entrenching social and economic inequality.

### **Women hit hardest**

At a closer look the brunt of austerity was mostly borne by women, thus reversing gains made on gender quality. Although women were already at a disadvantage because of the gender pay gap – they earn 82 p for every pound earned by a man – and were more likely to live in poverty, at the time of writing £22 billion of the £26 billion of 'savings'

since 2010 have come from women (MacDonald 2018). This was partly due to tax and benefit changes which reward traditional single-earner families with a male 'breadwinner' and penalise the 'second earner' (most likely to be a woman) in dual-income households. Furthermore, according to the Women's Budget Group, public sector job cuts have affected women in particular, as 73% of the work-force is female. Cuts to benefits for low-paid part-time workers have also disproportionately affected women, notably mothers who find it difficult to work full-time because of inadequate childcare support. By 2020, women will have borne 86% of the burden of welfare cuts. (Stewart 2017).

Some groups of women are hit especially hard. Among them are lone mothers, who represent 92% of single parents and are 50% more likely than the average citizen to be living in poverty (ibid). Black and Ethnic Minority women are also particularly vulnerable, as, due to workplace discrimination, they are more likely to be unemployed than white women. These groups depend more than others on the benefits system and are therefore more vulnerable to the cuts, which increases their risk of falling into deeper poverty and deprivation (Women's Budget Group/Runnymede Trust 2017).

## **The role of right-wing media and popular responses**

The tabloid press (with a conservative or right-wing bias) have successfully supported austerity propaganda by vilifying certain social groups such as the unemployed and immigrants as scroungers and burdens on the taxpayer. Positioning these people as objects of resentment has caused a hardening of public attitudes towards them, which then has made further cuts affecting these groups more socially acceptable.

Pro-austerity arguments are often based in old prejudices such as the lingering Victorian fears of the 'residuum': the lazy, feckless and dangerous underclass, who were seen as a demographic threat to other social classes. A large number of the stories proliferating in the tabloid press along these lines additionally draw on ideologies concerning traditional views of social reproduction and family care, putting most of the blame on women: single mothers, unemployed and migrant women with large families - not coincidentally the groups which are also the most vulnerable to austerity cuts - have served as favourite targets for scorn. They are blamed for being irresponsible parents who had too many children. Such accusations tend to play on moral panics about public health.

In particular, food has become a politicised issue within the austerity

context, as the increasing reliance on foodbanks and reports about children going to school hungry have alarmed the public. Commentators in the media, arguing from a mixture of old and new prejudices, have especially singled out working class mothers, blaming them for rising childhood obesity and the poor diets of children. For example, in 2013 celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's bemoaned "the mum and the kid eating chips and cheese out of Styrofoam containers, and behind them is a massive f\*cking TV" (Deans 2013). Note that in Oliver's comment mothers, and not fathers, are assumed to be responsible for cooking and preparing meals. Food is thus mobilised within discourses and processes of othering. The reference to televisions and other gadgets in the quote further suggest *en passant* that the poverty experienced by working-class mothers is not real, and that unhealthy food is an irresponsible lifestyle choice and an example of bad parenting.

A part from traditional gender roles, heteronormativity and cis-gender normativity are brought into play to underpin austerity rhetoric. For example, former Prime Minister David Cameron's "hardworking families" rhetoric combines 'hardworking' and 'family', which suggests that the hard work of individuals who are not in families or might have other living arrangements does not matter. On the other hand,

there is the fact that the past few years have seen a renewed activity in feminist and LGBT+ campaigning, from #MeToo to women's marches to the increased visibility of trans rights campaigns. The UK voted for gay marriage in 2013, and there are currently plans to update the Gender Recognition Act to define gender in terms of self-identification rather than biology. Therefore, an austerity discourse which draws on traditional gender and sexual norms is no longer uncontested.

A further form of othering within austerity discourses is the framing of people as unpatriotic subjects. I have mentioned immigrants as key targets for public resentment and have written about this elsewhere (Forkert 2017). However, unlike immigrants - whose very right to be in the country is disputed - British citizens can be vilified as traitorous, often through accusations of lacking respect for the military. These accusations are routinely employed to discriminate those on the Left, as for instance the frequent attacks by the tabloid press on Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn for his anti-imperialist politics show. Conversely, to assert the importance of respect for the military is to make a claim for the authority and moral superiority of traditional values such as the discipline associated with the British national character - symbolised in the stereotype of the 'stiff upper lip' -, adherence to social norms, etc..

Disrespect for the military is also proxy for other controversial issues. Thus it is used as an argument in an intergenerational conflict: the younger generations are accused of lacking gratitude towards the bravery and sacrifices of older generations, particularly those who had served in the Second World War, which still is a powerful symbol of British identity. At this point in history there are few people still alive who served in the Second World War, so that it has become less of a living memory and more of a generalised and simulacral association with older generations. Memories of the backlash in the 1970s against anti-war protestors and stereotypes about scruffy, undisciplined hippies are also deliberately exploited – the tabloids’ obsession with the clothes Corbyn wears during official memorial events is a good example.

Accusations of disrespect for the military have become further politically loaded in the context of discussions about ‘compulsory patriotism’, originally an American concept much employed after the 9/11 attacks and in the war on terror debates. Whilst the 9/11 attacks have, however, not mobilised the same strong support of ‘compulsory patriotism’ in the UK as in the US, the recent rise of the populist right and far right - represented by the UK Independence Party, the Brexiteers and street protest groups such as the English Defence League

or Britain First – has created pressures on mainstream politics to embrace compulsory patriotism in the form of English nationalism, lest this be ceded to the far right. Conversely, those who do not embrace patriotism are dismissed as an out-of-touch metropolitan elite (ironically a right-wing version of Stalin’s “rootless cosmopolitan”, a discriminatory term for Jews).

### **Jack Monroe and Katie Hopkins as paradigmatic figures of Austerity Britain**

These three themes underpinning austerity discourses – responsibility for providing healthy food, the traditional role of women and respect for the military – became issues in the controversy around a dispute between two public figures: the food blogger and anti-poverty campaigner Jack Monroe and the right-wing columnist Katie Hopkins. In different ways they are paradigmatic figures of Austerity Britain.

Jack Monroe first came to prominence through a food blog entitled *A Girl Called Jack* (now renamed as *Cooking on a Bootstrap*), on which she shared cheap recipes which could feed a family under £10/week. Formerly a call handler for the Essex County Fire and Rescue Service, Monroe became unemployed after having given birth and being unable to negotiate changes to her work schedule to accommodate

childcare. She was living in poverty and struggling to feed her family, which led her to develop the blog. The term ‘Jack’ referred to a ‘Jack-of-all-trades’: someone who is good at fixing things and does a combination of odd jobs to make a living.

Monroe became known as both a foodwriter (she has since published several cookbooks with budget recipes and written for *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*) and as an outspoken anti-poverty campaigner. In her newspaper columns and in her campaigning, Monroe consistently rejected these stereotypes and moralising



Jack Monroe, English writer, journalist and campaigner, in 2015

© Fox Fisher

arguments and contested the necessity of austerity cuts in general. For example, in a

recent article in *The Guardian* she sharply criticised the government’s decimation of free school meals and pointed out the hypocrisy of “those who sit back and moralise under a warm roof with food in the cupboard” (Monroe 2018).

Unsurprisingly, Monroe’s views on food poverty have made her the target of columnists in the right-wing *Daily Mail*, including Sarah Vine (the wife of former Prime Minister David Cameron), who accused her of choosing a life of poverty, and Richard Littlejohn, who described her as “a cross between [Labour Party politician] Yvette Cooper and [cookbook writer] Delia Smith, with tattoos” (Littlejohn 2013). Littlejohn berated her for resigning from her job at the fire brigade, calling it a “lifestyle choice” – ignoring the difficulties she faced in securing flexible working arrangement or job-shares that would enable her to keep her job. He also got some other facts wrong, including her marital status (Monroe 2013).

Monroe has been frequently targeted by right-wing commentators and received online abuse not only because of her living circumstances, but also because of her gender identity. Although using the pronouns she/her, Monroe identifies as non-binary; she came out as lesbian at the age of fifteen and identifies as trans. At one point, Monroe had considered transitioning and having a double mastectomy, which provoked

a furious response from journalist James Dellingle, who, in a blog post on the far-right website *Breitbart*, compared the operation to “drowning a sack of puppies” (Dellingle 2015).

Right-wing newspaper columnist Katie Hopkins first attracted media attention in 2006 as a contestant on *The Apprentice*, a reality television programme, in which she made a series of negative statements about the other contestants, working-class children’s names and overweight people (*The Guardian* 2013). Hopkins worked for the tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, who promoted her as “Britain’s most controversial columnist”. She then left *The Sun* in 2015 to work for the *Daily Mail* until 2017. She has since become known for her extremist views, like comparing refugees to cockroaches, saying that Islam disgusted her and expressing conspiracy theories about white genocide. She repeatedly attracted complaints and legal challenges for both the content of her columns and her Twitter feed; the latter will be discussed below.

### **The Monroe vs. Hopkins case**

The issues discussed above - gender identity, anti-austerity campaigns and perceived lack of respect for the military - came together in the Monroe vs. Hopkins court case. This was triggered by a Twitter exchange in 2015, in which Hopkins accused Monroe of approving

the defacing of a war memorial during an anti-austerity demonstration. A memorial to women of the Second World War in Whitehall, Central



Katie Hopkins in 2018  
© Almostangelic123

London, had been vandalised with the words “Fuck Tory Scum”. Hopkins was in fact confusing Monroe with Laurie Penny, another prominent anti-austerity campaigner and *New Statesman* columnist. Penny had tweeted from her @PennyRed account saying that she didn’t “have a problem” with the graffiti as a form of protest because “the bravery of past generations does not oblige us to be cowed today”. Hopkins attributed the tweet to Monroe, tweeting her former account @MsJackMonroe and saying: “Scrawled on any memorials recently? Vandalised the memory of those who fought for your freedom. Grandma got any more medals?” Monroe, who is from

a military family, responded by saying “I have NEVER ‘scrawled on a memorial’. Brother in the RAF [Royal Air Force]. Dad was a Para in the Falklands. You’re a piece of shit.” She then followed this up with a demand for a public apology: “Dear @KTHopkins, public apology + £5K to migrant rescue and I won’t sue. It’ll be cheaper for you and v satisfying for me.” Hopkins deleted her tweet but refused to apologise, asking what the difference was between “irritant @PennyRed and social anthrax @MsJackMonro”. The judge ruled that Hopkins’ tweets were defamatory and had caused reputational damage to Monroe. Jack Monroe won the case in court on 10 March 2017, with Hopkins being ordered to pay hundreds of thousands of pounds in damages and legal fees.

### **Why does the court case matter?**

The confusion of Monroe and Penny reveals how easily right-wing commentators conflate the issues of anti-austerity campaigning, trans and queer identities and (lack of) respect for the military. Notably, Laurie Penny identifies as pansexual and is involved in polyamorous relationships. There is a sense that the sexuality of both Penny and Monroe represents something unsettling and transgressive for right-wing columnists like Katie Hopkins, who then make a link from the challenging of sexual norms to other forms of transgression, such as vandalising war

memorials or supporting others who do.

The court case was the beginning of a series of events in 2017 which led to Hopkins’ financial ruin and the collapse of her career as a mainstream journalist, and her self-reinvention as a spokesperson for the alt-right. After losing the court case in March 2017, Hopkins left LBC Radio in May 2017 after tweeting about the need for a “final solution” following a terrorist attack in Manchester. In July 2017 she was tweeting on board a boat which was commissioned by Defend Europe, an international coalition of far-right groups formed with the intention of disrupting and harassing NGOs rescuing refugees in the Mediterranean. Her association with projects such as these possibly explains why Hopkins did not apologise to Monroe or donate £5,000 to a refugee organisation: such a gesture would have made it more difficult for her to operate as a far-right spokesperson. On 27 November 2017 Hopkins’ contract with the *Daily Mail* newspaper was not renewed after a series of complaints from readers, although a spokesperson said that this was by mutual consent and gave no further details. The collapse of her journalistic career, combined with the costs of the court case, forced her to sell her home and apply for an insolvency arrangement to avoid bankruptcy. Hopkins then became a columnist for *Breitbart* and the Canadian far-right news

website *The Rebel Media*, which features contributors such as Tommy Robinson, founder of the English Defence League.

There are lessons to be learnt from the court case and Hopkins' further movements. For a while, Hopkins provided profitable clickbait to right-wing tabloids, which was controversial but attractive at a time of declining sales, until her views were considered too extreme even for them. However, her controversial tweets still give her a presence in mainstream media, enabling her to claim an anti-establishment outsider status within the networked alt-right. Although the Monroe-Hopkins case can be largely considered to have a positive outcome, questions remain about where far-right commentators go when they are forced off mainstream platforms.

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# Giving a Voice to Women on the Margin

Poems by Sabrina Mahfouz

## Introduction

by Ingrid von Rosenberg

Sabrina Mahfouz is a very versatile young poet, playwright, screenwriter, essayist, female activist, who has already won several prestigious awards. The daughter of an Egyptian father and a Guyanese-British mother, she spent her childhood between Cairo and South London and has always remained very conscious of her dual identity, describing herself as a “working-class, immigrant-class woman”. After studying English Literature and the Classics, International Politics and Diplomacy, Mahfouz broke off a fledgling career as a civil servant working for the Ministry of Defence and decided to turn her love for literature into a profession. At the beginning she had to earn her living as a waitress in various London bars and strip-clubs, until a Sky Academy Arts scholarship (2013) allowed her to write full-time. Mahfouz has staged an impressive list of her own plays, runs writing workshops from prisons and schools to the Royal Court and the National, writes for children and brilliantly performs her poetry at national and international events. Central to her writing are questions of identity and the position of women in contemporary societies, British and Arab, with a special interest in women on the margin. Her main book publications to date are *The Clean Collection* (2014) containing plays and poem, *The Things I Would Tell You* (2017), an edition of texts by British Muslim women which became Guardian Book of the Year, and *How You Might Know Me* (2016), a book of poetry, in which Mahfouz gives voice to four women working in the sex industry. We are very grateful for the permission to reprint three poems from this collection. They are characteristic examples of Mahfouz’s poetry, which is subtly political, often ironical, but always full of empathy and marked by a great formal and linguistic flexibility. We listen to 62-year old Sylvia, Muslim girl Sharifa and immigrant Darina.



Reproduced with kind permission of Sabrina Mahfouz.  
Photo by Naomi Woddis

### **marriage proposal (sylvia)**

Scott heard his mate steve's missus  
do a bit birthday speech for him at the pub  
his whole heart felt treacherous  
limbs stranded in ice-filled bathtubs;  
all because he'd never dented knees  
to ensure his name sounded with hot coals,  
scott must tell sylvia she's more than quickies  
under duvets, more than rants and rigmarole.  
in the kitchen he proposes with a white ring  
made from rizla, he'll get a proper one in time  
she isn't speechless just unimpressed and angling  
the threads that sewed him her paradigm;  
sylvia shakes her head I'm too old for all that scott,  
I know you'd rather I unwrap this ring and roll you a bit of pot.

### **Even revolutionaries get horny (sharifa)**

Men with revolutionary principles  
are just like men without any principles at all  
when it comes to sex.

They want to share more maybe  
want to divulge to me the secrets of their theories  
how they wish the world would spin  
so people like me could be free  
could be so much better off.

But ultimately  
they will expect my clothes to disappear  
they will expect flesh to be put against flesh  
they will expect at least some effort from me  
they will expect a nest of pleasure in eyes  
they will expect an audible sign of encouragement,  
as do I.

The difference with revolutionary man  
is that they will also expect a discount,  
as of course I should be aware that they are fighting  
fighting the system for people like us  
so people like me can be free  
can be so much better off.

### **the most honest job I've ever had (darina)**

is this one, to be honest. *To be honest* is a phrase I've picked up  
in this country and have started to use almost obsessively. I  
have picked up many phrases, it is a country full of phrases,  
but here is something particular about *to be honest* that gets me,  
pulls me to it, hypnotises me with its complete lack of irony in  
a country full of irony. To start a sentence, a conversation  
a confession with the phrase, *to be honest*, what it does is  
suggest that usually you are not. The specific thing you are  
about to say is most definitely honest, but such honesty exists  
as an exception, being employed only for the purpose of  
being taken incredibly seriously on this very point. It also  
suggest that honesty is not expected and that not lying

requires an introduction, a declarative statement followed by a pause and perhaps a slight frown, raise of forehead or narrowing of eyes. To be honest, I have found that this simple combination of words really does work wonders. It immediately offers the person you are talking to a feeling of exclusivity, of encouragement that they are worthy of your honesty, something that is reserved, remember, for only the most special and deserving of occasions. It makes you appear disarmingly self-aware and constructively reflective.

I am not honest. My mother thinks I work at a gym in Westminster. I told her Westminster because she loves the cathedral and would think Canary Wharf was a made up name no matter how many times I might say, *to be honest mum. I work in a place called Canary Wharf.*

I tell clients I'm studying to be a personal trainer, sometimes a yoga teacher depending on how guilty they seem about being in the club. *To be honest, this work complements my yoga teaching practise as I get to keep fit, stretch and work on my inner self by having enlightening conversation...such as this one* is a real winner.

But honestly, if I'm honest to myself, then this is the most honest job I've ever had and, to be honest, I absolutely love it.

*All three poems from:*

*Sabrina Mahfouz, How You Might Know Me. Out-Spoken Press, 2016.*

# Human Rights Are Universal. Aren't They?

## The Precarious Situation of Women and LGBTIQ Refugees in Britain

Fanny Rotino & Sophie Rotino

### **The 'refugee crisis' and human rights legislation**

The year 2015 marks the beginning of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in collective European memory. The sudden arrival of large numbers of refugees from other continents was a hot topic, passionately discussed by politicians, the media and civil society. True, unending civil wars, hunger and poverty had driven millions of people from their homes in Africa and Asia, but of the 23 million refugees and asylum seekers counted worldwide in 2017 only 3.2 million arrived in the European Union (UNHCR 2019a; Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2018) and only 162,202 arrived in the United Kingdom (UNHCR 2019a). Other nations, especially neighbouring countries took in infinitely more: Turkey, for example, neighbour to Syria, hosted 3.8 million refugees and asylum seekers, Pakistan and Uganda 1.4 million each, Lebanon

1.0 million, Iran 979,519, Ethiopia 892,021 and Jordan 734,841 (UNHCR 2019a). This shows that numbers alone cannot explain the outbreak of the so-called 'crisis' in Europe.

Why was the reaction in many European countries so strong? In general the exclusionary reflex is triggered by a construction of an idealised European self and a demonised non-European other. The European self is seen as characterised by enlightenment, progress, liberty, peace and – particularly important – human rights (Spijkerboer 2018). No need to say in detail what identifies the 'European-other'... Yet the power of such prejudices is – for complex historical reasons, which cannot be dealt with here – differently strong in the various European countries. Therefore one has to look closely at the individual nations, for the situations vary greatly.

Most Eastern European countries, which achieved national

independence only in the 1990s, flatly refused to share in the distribution of refugees, while Italy, as one of the first destinations after the flight across the Mediterranean, but also Sweden and Germany were very welcoming in the beginning until public protest from the Right enforced a more restrictive immigration policy, though, with the exception of Italy under the new populist government, the doors have not been shut completely. Sadly Britain, however, according to an article in *The Guardian*, is “one of the worst places in western Europe for asylum seekers” (Lyons et al. 2017). Since 2010 the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government and the following Conservative one have pursued a tough anti-immigration policy, which targets Eastern Europeans (especially Romanians and Bulgarians, who gained the right to work in the UK in 2014) and asylum seekers alike. When in 2012 Theresa May as Home Secretary declared her notorious policy of creating a ‘hostile environment’ for foreign newcomers in the hope they might voluntarily leave, this was originally aimed at illegal immigrants, but in effect it also hit other groups such as recognised refugees, Eastern Europeans and even black citizens who had lived and worked in Britain for decades such as members of the *Windrush* generation (a scandal which caused a public outcry and forced the government to apologies and compensations). Some

of the administrative measures of May’s policy affecting asylum seekers are: smaller financial support than in other countries, the provision of substandard housing, the right to work as late as 12 months after application (in Germany after 3), urging landlords, doctors and banks to check people’s legal status and even sending out vans carrying posters with “In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest.” In a sinister way the policy has worked: Britain lodges only 3% of applicants for asylum in Europe and with 28% has the lowest rate of approval (compared to the European average of 65%) (Lyons et al. 2017).

As far as human rights are concerned, they are in Britain currently defined by the Human Rights Act of 1998, which incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into domestic law. (Not surprisingly considering the Brexit vote, the Conservatives plan to leave the Convention, repeal the current Act and replace it by a more British “Bill of Rights”.) Basic rights under the Human Rights Act of 1998 which are particularly important for asylum seekers include the rights to life, liberty, family life, respect for privacy, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom from discrimination and degrading treatment. The UN Refugee Convention of 1951, signed by 149 nations and included in British law with the 1993 Asylum and Immigration

Appeals Act, had ruled an even more essential right: it prescribes that nobody can be sent back to a country where he/she faces threats to life or freedom.

Although, as we have seen, the pride in the definition and legal implementation of universal human rights are an essential part of the construction of the Western self, in reality the devotion to the high principle is often not more than lip-service. Gender plays an important role in the practical application of the law, and certain groups are in danger of being especially disadvantaged. Though feminist and queer perspectives have gained influence in refugee law in recent decades, they are increasingly being neglected in practice as the current legal policy discourse on refugee law is becoming more and more restrictive. Consequently, the legal duty to protect women and minorities not fitting into the heteronormative pattern is more and more disregarded. In the following we will focus on women and LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, inter and queer) people among the refugees – both groups particularly at risk of violation – and see how far the treatment by the British legal and administrative system complies with the demands of universal human rights. We will look at three areas in some detail, in which the gender aspect has special weight: family reunification, the concept of so-called *safe countries of*

*origin* and modalities of accommodation.

## The situation of female and LGBTIQ refugees in Britain:

### A. Family reunification

Family reunification is one of the increasingly rare possibilities for legal entry to the UK as to other European countries: through this measure, a family



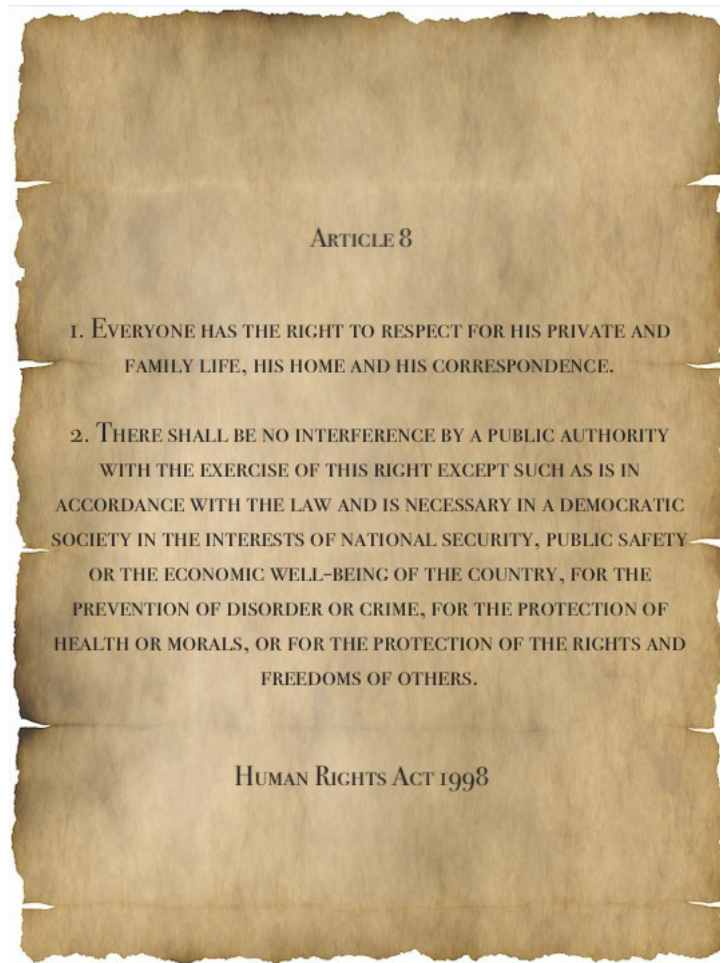
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member with a secured status can bring over members of the nuclear family. The right to family reunification is part of the right to family life, which – in the UK – results from Article 8 of the Human Rights Act of 1998. It is also guaranteed explicitly in Article 10 of the UN-Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and as part of the right to family life.

Yet eligibility is restricted to the immediate family as it existed before the claiming refugee's flight, and the only people automatically eligible to join the refugee in the UK are the spouse or same sex partner and dependent children

under the age of 18. In the UK refugee children cannot apply to bring over their parents and/or siblings. For children this

deadly Mediterranean migration route.



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means a loss of the right to family and thus a violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Wives and mothers are also particularly affected by this regulation, as their husbands usually flee before them, while they remain in insecure crisis areas or in precarious and dangerous stopovers, such as refugee camps. Restricting family reunification thus discriminates particularly women and children, who due to a lack of legal channels, flee via the dangerous and often

In the case of polygamy, second or third wives are particularly disadvantaged, since only monogamous marriage is legally recognised. Only one wife will be eligible for family reunification, but the question is how to decide which one. In order to obtain asylum due to family reunification a so-called *genuine relationship* has to be proved. Other wives and their children are condemned to remain within the country of origin. It is not difficult to imagine that an abandoned and single wife's living

conditions will become very hard.

For LGBTIQ persons, too, restricting family reunification has significant consequences. Civil partnerships and homosexual couples and spouses are in principle also recognised within the framework of family reunification. Yet an unmarried partner is eligible to family reunification only, if the couple has been living together for at least two years and the relation existed before the recognised refugee left the country of their former residence. For many same-sex couples coming from countries where homosexuality is stigmatised it is impossible to prove this. Thus they are robbed of their right to family.

All this shows that due to the highly formalised consideration of the conditions, many close people are excluded from family reunification. The definition of the asylum seeker's family members should be more realistically defined to avoid unnecessary and cruel separations, as separated families suffer serious psychological consequences (Beaton & Musgrave & Liebl et al. 2018).

Nevertheless these consequence are ignored if not even political calculus, as some politicians cynically hope thus to diminish incentives for migration. Yet in the long history of migration deterrence has never proved an effective tool. As long as conditions in the countries of origin remain existentially

critical, migration will continue. Restricting family reunification only leads to a violation of human rights.

## **B. The *Safe Countries of Origin* concept**

Another area in which universal human rights are endangered and women and LGBTIQ people are particularly disadvantaged is the concept of the so-called *safe countries of origin*. In Britain as in many other European states asylum applications by citizens from these countries undergo so-called *swift processing*, which means a fast-tracked examination of the claimants' application at the border and in transit zones and weaker safeguards for claims deemed 'manifestly unfounded' including restrictions on appeal, quick deportation and re-entry bans. Although there is no international obligation to compile a list of *safe origin countries*, the UK has done so: it is enacted in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (NIAA) and is compiled by the Secretary of State for the Home Department, who can add or subtract countries from it (with the approval of Parliament). According to section 94(5) NIAA, those countries are considered to be safe in which "there is in general [...] no serious risk of persecution of persons entitled to reside". Further it is demanded that "removal to that State or part of persons entitled to reside there will not in general contravene

the United Kingdom's obligations under the Human Rights Convention".

Interestingly, the number of countries designated as *safe countries of origin* differs significantly between EU-Member States. While Sweden, Italy and Portugal have rejected the concept completely, the UK follows the Netherlands with the highest number on the list (European Migration Network 2018). Currently 94(4) NIAA contains Albania, Jamaica, Macedonia, Moldova, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, South Africa, Ukraine, Kosovo, India, Mongolia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mauritius, Montenegro, Peru, South Korea and Serbia. The following states are considered safe only for men: Ghana, Nigeria, The Gambia, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mali and Sierra Leone.

Even though the UK regularly reviews the list, there is no clear fixed timespan for updating. This leads to the problematic situation that the classification of countries as 'safe' often stands in sharp contrast to the actual human rights situation, the high number of asylum seekers belying the term 'safe'. One comes to the conclusion that the categorisation as *safe* or *insecure countries of origin* represents a political rather than a humane decision. For example, Ukraine was not taken from the list throughout the escalation of violence in 2014.

Especially for the LGBTIQ community the assumption of a safe

country is short-sighted as their particular situation has not been considered in the security categorisation of countries and sexual minorities are discriminated in many so-called safe states, for instance in many Arab and some Caribbean countries. Recognising gender-related causes of flight requires gender sensitivity and corresponding knowledge – in many cases merely a desideratum. The case of the Jamaican national Jamar Brown is an example: Brown applied for asylum in the UK on the ground that as a homosexual he feared persecution if he returned to Jamaica. He was detained to be sent home as Jamaica was on the list of safe states. He appealed, and his claim was successful: The Supreme Court found that persecution is a *general* risk for the LGBT[IQ] community in Jamaica, if not for the majority of the population. (Supreme Court 2015). Therefore, his detention as well as the decision to place Jamaica on the list was unlawful.

The principally dangerous situation of divorced or single women, victims of human trafficking and prostitution and other women who are not part of a heteronormative nuclear family in many parts of the world – not only in the 8 African countries on the British list considered secure only for men – is also disregarded in assessing a country as 'safe', as in general only the danger of political prosecution, not gender-related violence is acknowledged as a reason for protection.

Thus the concept of *safe countries of origin* deprives many asylum seekers of their basic rights to life, liberty, integrity, anti-discrimination and their access to protection as stipulated in international law, but also in national law, namely in the Human Rights Act of 1998 and in the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act of 1993.

### C. Accommodation

The reception and accommodation system for refugees in the UK is a third area in which basic human rights, particularly in the case of women and LGBTIQ people, are endangered.

Any asylum seeker who asks for support gets accommodation in reception centres, called *initial accommodation centres*, each of which accommodates around 200 people. People are supposed to stay there for only a short period, but due to a lack of proper alternative housing, the time spent there often amounts to weeks. The conditions in these *initial accommodation centres* are often appalling and have been repeatedly criticised for failing to provide security, particularly for women, respect for privacy and basic levels of hygiene (cases of rats, mice and bugs have been cited). There is no guarantee that single people will be accommodated on single sex corridors. Rooms are lockable, but some inmates have to share with a stranger, which neutralises the benefit.

The Home Affairs select Committee, after receiving several reports from women who feel unsafe, has made strong recommendations in this regard. The Committee was especially critical of the conditions for pregnant women and new-born babies. Though nuclear families are normally kept together, the accommodation frequently fails to meet the needs of persons with mobility or other special health problems. Food is provided at fixed times and there is very little choice, dietary or religious needs are not always taken into account. Additionally, this affects the right to family: the joint preparation and consumption of meals is an essential part of family life. Especially for smaller children, family should be the place and parents the persons who satisfy their basic needs. Children who experience their parents as powerless in the face of an all-determining institution cannot develop a stable fundamental confidence. The unsatisfactory state of these accommodations may be due to a variety of reasons like incompetence, lack of suitable buildings, staff or money, but one may also suspect that Theresa May's 'hostile environment' policy is a motivating force preventing efforts for improvement.

This suspicion is even stronger in the case of the 10 *immigration removal centres*, in which between 2,000 and 3,000 persons considered to have no right to stay in UK are locked up before

deportation. Some are arrested right after arrival, others after years of living in the country. The UK, Ireland and Denmark are the only European countries without a legal time limit for keeping immigrants imprisoned, who have not committed any criminal offence. In all other EU member states the time limit is a maximum of 18 months (Directive 2008/115/EC). One of the centres, Yarl's Wood in Bedfordshire, is reserved for women, 85% of them victims of rape and other gender-based acts of violence. The health and living conditions there are so unspeakable that in 2018 the women protested with public demonstrations and that 120 went on hunger strike.

If an applicant qualifies for support, s/he is moved into smaller units, flats and shared houses in the same region managed by private companies contracted by the Home Office. Asylum seekers have no choice of location. Accommodation is available in the North, Midlands and South West of England and in Wales and Scotland, not in the South or in London. The situation in dispersed accommodation is, however, not significantly better than in the *initial accommodation centres*. Even though people are granted more autonomy, there are frequent reports of slow or inadequate repairs and bad sanitary conditions. Complaints concern a general lack of cleanliness, the lack of heating or hot water, windows

and doors that cannot be locked and a lack of basic amenities like cookers, showers, washing machines, sinks. All these are violations of basic living standards according to European law.

Sexual violation poses a particular problem. Refugee women and girls are no longer a minority, but form almost half of the world's registered refugees (UNHCR 2019b), and more than 50% of them are children under the age of 18 (UNCHR 2018). Female refugees are particularly vulnerable to violence, more than any other female population group in the world. The danger often begins in the country of origin, where due to a lack of legal protection they have to expose themselves to risks of violence in order to escape their situation: human smuggling, forced prostitution, rape and other forms of sexualised violence are not uncommon on the way to a seemingly safe destination. Nevertheless, once arrived in the UK, they cannot feel completely secure either. For one thing the accommodation situation, as we have seen, does not provide sufficient protection, for another the women cannot count on special legal help, as the UK has not – as 33 other European countries have done – ratified the “Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence”, also called Istanbul Convention, of 2018, which considers protection against sexual violence a



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human right to be watched over by the state. Thus due to their precarious legal status and financial dependence, refugee women in Britain again must fear abuse and sexual violence by perpetrators within or without the asylum system (Baillot & Conelly 2018). For LGBTIQ people the situation often looks similar.

It should not go unmentioned that there are a number of organisation across the country, some of them working nationwide like Women for Refugee Women, Safer Refuge Women's Project and UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group, others locally, which try to ease the fate of female and LGBTIQ refugees by supporting them in legal matters, health problems or protest actions and helping in many other ways. It is a small consolation, but an important one.

## Conclusion

Migration is not something that happens to Europe. Europe has been a leading protagonist in creating this 'crisis', partly through its colonialist history, partly because of pursuing economic or military aims in Africa and Asia. In this article we hope to have shown that the asylum reception system in the UK endangers basic human rights of asylum seeking refugees and that women and LGBTIQ persons as especially vulnerable groups are particularly affected. Not only repeatedly revealed cases of discrimination, harassment and violence to female and LGBTIQ asylum applicants in detention centres show that standards of protection are neglected, but it is also crucial to realise the role of structural discrimination, which, based on prejudices deeply

rooted in society, means institutional disadvantaging of people on the grounds of gender, religion or race.

**N**arratives, which consider migration of refugees from outside Europe as the irregular and undesirable influx of the Other, as something that has to be prevented, fuel a hostile climate which is a fertile soil for structural discrimination. The same holds true of discourses in which war and conflict are described as drivers of 'migrant flows' and not with a view to the suffering victims. A 'Fortress Europe' policy is no solution to the true causes of this 'crisis'. The global north has to accept its responsibility as the rich part of the world and own up to its share in creating the reasons for migration. After its long history of colonialism, Britain in particular has to recognise that this history is not over yet as long as people, seeking shelter and protection, have to face racism in their daily lives in a hostile environment ignoring their needs and rights. Decency demands to work for providing a peaceful environment for the victims of war and expulsion, especially for the weakest among them, based on the ideas of dignity and equality.

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# The Times They Are A-Changin'

## Black and Asian Drama in Britain

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When I was asked to write about Black and Asian Drama in Britain in August 2018, it immediately raised the question of what had happened since I worked on *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain* (Cambridge University Press) in 2003, then – surprisingly – the first volume on this topic in the UK. The ‘war on terror’ was in full swing at that time, and anti-Muslim sentiments were being fuelled on many fronts, but much, including Brexit, had not begun to happen. In 2018 we confront a different scene – politically, socio-culturally, economically. Globalization has taken many turns, including the expansion of the Chinese sphere of influence, the addition of Eastern Europeans as the ‘new others’ within the UK – new others here meaning a social group that is variously vilified in public discourse, the media, and political efforts seeking to extrude these others. The politico-cultural focus, which in 2003 was on

‘Black and Asian’, is, from within the UK public sphere, no longer so firmly on those communities – except when it comes to gang-related knife crime in London, or mass sexual abuse of young white girls by men of Pakistani and other ‘Asian’ descent in the north of England<sup>1</sup>

This shift in focus is also evident in the theatre scene where in 2018 we see, for instance, the Royal Court Theatre offering an extremely interesting, sold-out, short season (4-6 Dec. 2018) on ‘New and Now: Plays from China’<sup>2</sup> to be followed by a strongly multi/mixed cultural program in the spring/summer of 2019 that includes the play *White Pearl* by Anchuli Felicia King, a New York-based, multidisciplinary artist of Thai-Australian descent. Meanwhile at the Arcola Theatre in Dalston, London, presided over by the fantastic Turkish-born artistic director Mehmet Ergen, there has been a significant push to promote the canon of Russian plays and



Royal Court Theatre © Wikimedia Commons

plays by African and Arab playwrights as well as by writers of mixed descent such as Gabriel Gbadamosi, an Irish-Nigerian writer whose *Stop and Search* – the title speaks for itself in some ways – opens in the spring of 2019. The hyphenated identities of the playwrights mentioned above point to one of the impacts of globalization: identities are no longer as unitary as even in 2003 it was still possible to imagine them, even as the empire had been writing back for a long time<sup>3</sup>. Nowhere is this more evident than in *British East Asian Plays* (2018) where ‘British’ might mean ‘about Britain’ rather than living in Britain or being in some way of British origin. In this volume, too, ‘Asian’ is geospatially qualified to denote a region not thought of in 2003 when ‘Asian’ generally meant ‘South Asian’ in that still quasi back-to-empire manner

that, alarmingly, is being resurrected in current Brexit discussions where the ‘divorce’ from Europe is expected by some to be countenanced by a reunification with the ‘empire’ supposedly eagerly awaiting Britain’s return into the new embrace of new trade agreements.

The playwrights represented in *British East Asian Plays* are of diverse heritages: Chinese-Malay, Singaporean but living in New York or in London, Hong Kong born and adopted in the UK, mixed Chinese-English, etc. Many represent a first generation that no longer consider themselves as such – the idea of generationality in migration having itself become unmoored by global mobility trends that invite and incite different dispositions towards mobilities. This is evident not least in

two plays in this volume which deal with transracial adoption: Lucy Chau Lai-Tuen's *Conversations with my Unknown Mother* and Joel Tan's *Tango*. Transracial adoption as a concern has come to the fore only in the past ten years and then mainly in the US, as such transracial adoptees have come off age. Lai-Tuen, herself such an adoptee, uses the trope of ghosts and hauntings in this play, a trope one finds in a number of cultures

that practise ancestor worship including Chinese ones, to explore the relationships between Michelle, a transracial adoptee from Hong Kong, her birth mother, her adoptive mother and the adoptive mother's mother. With the exception of Michelle, all are dead at the point in time when the play takes place. The play's multiple locations (Michelle's adoptive mother's house, her own flat, outside places, hell in various forms, etc.) and



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multiple conversations between Michelle and her mothers, between Michelle and her grandmother, between that grandmother and Michelle's adoptive mother, between the two mothers – which may either be in Michelle's head or psychically 'real' – reflect the complexities of the decisions made and effects created by the women involved. They also reveal the gap between intention and outcome. As is common in adoption scenarios, the focus at the point of adoption is on the parents' desire and needs<sup>4</sup> but it is the adopted child, the central character in this play, who lives the consequences of that action perhaps most fully. Rather oddly, the adoption of Michelle is motivated within the play by the adoptive mother's dislike for heterosex, coupled with her desire for a submissive female child she can raise in her own image. But as the adoptive mother herself as a child proved difficult and resistant, so Michelle does not turn out to be the submissive daughter her mother wanted. Both Michelle and her adoptive mother Mary feel unloved by the mothers who raised them though for different reasons. Mary's mother Betty lost many children in childbirth and mourned them – from Mary's perspective at the expense of paying attention to her living daughter. Michelle thinks her adoptive mother was not maternal: kind, warm, cuddling. I found the motivation for this adoption rather odd – though of course there are many reasons for adopting. Adopting

from China was quite common among UK feminists in the 1990s (Jacqueline Rose is just one example here) but such adoption was not commonly motivated in the ways described in this play. It often arose from complex personal reasons but also socio-ideological commitments that do not form part of this play. Heterosex disgust as a motivating factor in adoption occurs more commonly in writings in western cultures from the 1970s or early 1980s and often relates back to a pre-feminist age when women were by law and convention compelled to submit to the sexual demands of their husbands. However, the play speaks powerfully to the alienation generated by transracial adoption for the adoptee whilst at the same time suggesting that biological relations are not necessarily more binding or less alienating. Relationships are not a given, the play suggests, even if we yearn for this, encouraged by the sociocultural ideals of relationships that surround us.

Joel Tan's *Tango* picks up on transracial adoption within a context of gay parenting, a currently much discussed topic within queer and trans circles and studies (see e.g. Griffin and Leibetseder 2019). The play features a mixed-race gay couple from Singapore, Kenneth and Liam, who have migrated to Britain and adopted an English boy. This neatly counters the more common scenario of Lai-Tuen's play where people from the wealthy north adopt children from the

less wealthy south. The play also raises the nowadays often made point of elite migration: Kenneth, originally from Singapore and a banker, moves back to Singapore because he feels guilty about his elderly father Richard living alone there. Kenneth has the money to facilitate his transnational movements – back and forth. As an elite migrant he has choices, including to leave a homophobic culture that those who experience forced migration do not invariably have.

**H**is father Richard had thrown Kenneth out when he discovered that he was gay, and like *Conversations...*, this play is partly concerned with cross-generational family relations. Inflected by the issue of homophobia and repressive politico-cultural regimes, the play both celebrates the young adoptive son's ability to stand up for his gay fathers in a confrontation with conservative agitators, and portrays the problematic of being politically engaged in contexts that are fundamentally hostile to queers. Kenneth and Liam end up going back to Britain, constructed as less homophobic than Singapore.

**T***ango*, unlike *Conversations...* which is in many ways theatrically quite conventional, is theatrically typical of certain recent theatre work which utilizes and normalizes multi-media material, makes reference to internet activism and social media, as part of a performance grounded in realist theatre

conventions that reference the everyday to anchor the social issues they deal with. The question of individuals' relation to movement politics forms part of that scenario which is one of the serious political concerns of the 21st century.

**T**his is also raised in Asif Khan's (2017) *Combustion*. Set in Bradford in the north of England during Ramadan, the play explores the question of political involvement and activism as a gendered and raced phenomenon. *Tango* centres on conflicts over gender identity and gender activism whilst *Combustion* explores race relations through a gendered lens. Samina, a feisty young Muslim woman, decides to go on a counter-demonstration, 'Bradford for Peace', to an English Defence march. However, the young men around her, her brother and his friends, try to stop her, quite prominently through asserting male authority over females in commandeering and belittling ways, e.g. 'You'll be staying indoors. Help mum out. Play with your make-up' (Khan, 2017, sc. 1: 31). Samina, however, outwits her brother and his friends and, in the course of the play, befriends an older English Defence supporter, Andy, who had a halal shop, whose daughter has married a Muslim, and who is finally convinced by Samina to join forces with the 'Bradford for Peace' movement. Whilst all of these latter points seem somewhat unlikely – even if the

underlying message that interpersonal contact is key to ‘changing hearts and minds’ is reasonable – perhaps the most interesting dimension of this play is that a young male playwright produces the image of a young Muslim woman who navigates the constraining and at times outrightly sexist attitudes of her male peers successfully and is constructed as cleverer and more politically competent than they. This play, like *Tango*, considers the issue of citizen activism and suggests that it is a successful strategy for change – with the English Defence supporter emerging as the carrier of that change, a rather optimistic take in a time when nationalism and right-wing populism are on the rise.

Ambreen Razia’s (2016) *The Diary of a Hounslow Girl* (henceforth: *Diary*), like *Combustion*, is partly concerned with growing up in an ethnic minority community in contemporary Britain. It was toured by Black Theatre Live, a company ‘committed to effecting change for Black, Asian and Minority ethnic touring theatre’ (see [blacktheatrelive.co.uk](http://blacktheatrelive.co.uk)). Here ‘Black’ in the theatre company’s name features as a political term to cover racialized and ethnicized minorities, a practice that has history in west London<sup>5</sup>. *Diary* in its title references well-known texts such as *Bridget Jones’ Diary* but also what in Britain is known as ‘Essex girl’ – the idea of a particular kind of young woman

identified with a geosocial terrain that she has to manoeuvre. In the introduction to the play Razia writes of her school days when she was surrounded by ‘beautiful, confident, streetwise hijab-wearing Muslim teenagers who often led double lives. . . try[ing to] balance their two co-existing worlds’ (Razia 2016: 12). Caught between an Islamic world that casts these teenage girls as needing to ‘preserve’ themselves and learn obedience, and their desire to explore love relationships, Shaheeda, the central character, aged 16, dreams of a life beyond Hounslow, a place she regards as boring. She wants to travel the world. She meets Aaron, a young man who is a tattoo artist and who seems to be interested in her dreams. Seduced by his interest in her and by the fact that he buys her a round-the-world ticket, she has sex with him and becomes pregnant. She decides to have the baby and stay put.

Shaheeda’s narrative is juxtaposed with that of various other young and older females: her sister who is getting married the traditional way via an arranged marriage, her mother who was left by her father to ‘hold the baby’ exactly as Shaheeda finds herself at the end of the play, another schoolgirl, Tracy Brooker, whom everybody slags off because she had a baby and dropped out of school, Shaheeda’s two best friends who are only interested in fashion, make-up and boys but not in education or anything else. The

play is interesting because it features a girl of Pakistani extraction getting pregnant when the conventional version of this, including for the stage, has been young Black women having that experience. But the play also makes uncomfortable viewing (and reading) since Shaheeda ends up precisely where she did not want to be, her dreams replaced by a problematic reality that grounds her in territory she did not want to inhabit. A surprising element is the imam in this play: having seemingly produced mainly fairly sanctimonious messages about girls 'need[ing] the most guidance' (Act 1.7: 35), he comforts Shaheeda when she confides in him by telling her that 'Allah has written everything already' (Act 3.1: 59). This may be construed as fatalistic and as absolving people of responsibility – the latter does occur to Shaheeda – or as reassuring her when she 'wants stability' (Act 3.1: 60).

Much current Black and Asian writing for theatre, as this article has shown, remains concerned with questions of identity and identification in the context of coming off age. This invariably involves gendered dynamics, most often within heterosexual scenarios. But the plays also and simultaneously engage with important contemporary issues in ways that unpick conventional understandings of such issues. A good example is Ery Nzaramba's (2017) *Split/Mixed* which premiered at the Edinburgh

Fringe Festival in 2016. Nzaramba came to the UK from Rwanda via Belgium, and this one-man show is partly autobiographical. It features Eddy, a Rwandan actor who tries to pick up a girl in an East London club by telling her that he is from Rwanda, hence – so he implies – a victim of the genocide there<sup>6</sup>. His story then unravels in a fashion akin to medieval morality plays, with Vanity and Conscience playing two perspectives on his life narrative and arguing over the pros and cons of presenting his story in this or that manner. Eddy is a witness to the genocide but not a 'survivor' – he lost his family to AIDS, not to the genocide. He thinks that using the survivor narrative will help him to get a girl, but the play suggests that this also keeps him stuck in the position of survivor. We might read his purposive identification with the survivor role as a symptom of melancholia and grieving for the family he did lose. But it is also one, the play suggests, that does not allow him to develop into a person in his own right.

The play is unconventional in casting Eddy as a middle-class Rwandan with a middle-class lifestyle and the possibility of escape when the genocide occurred. This countermands the association of refugee status with poverty, but also that of Rwandans as either survivors or perpetrators of the genocide in some unmediated fashion. Nonetheless, Eddy's emotional

dilemmas – as embodied by Conscience and Vanity – are no less convincing. The end of the play which repeats its beginning, as Eddy moves back into his role as one-man performer, is modulated by him saying to the girl that he is from Belgium, rather than from Rwanda, as he did in the opening scene. This signals his

is that the unmooring of ethnic identity from place – as the identities of many of the playwrights mentioned indicate – as much as the provisionality and multiplicity of residence in many cases as an effect of globalization (whether this be for economic, political, cultural or other reasons) produce new questions



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readiness to move on from the survivor persona he had taken on in order to ‘pull girls’. But it also reinforces the issue of the split as opposed to being mixed since he could with equal legitimacy say he is from Rwanda and/or from Belgium. Each identification tells only part of the story – though the question might also be, what exactly is the story here, or which story are we after? The point

about how to frame identities and identifications. As a phenomenon this contrasts interestingly and worryingly with the rise of nationalism across Europe. The question we might ask is: what will replace the question, ‘where are you from’.

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## Endnotes

1 This topic is picked up in the play *Combustion* discussed below.

2 See <https://royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/new-now-plays-china/>, accessed 5 Dec. 2018.

3 See B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (1989) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. London: Routledge.

4 David Eng has written movingly about the issue of transracial adoption in the US (see with Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2018), *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

5 See, for example, Southall Black Sisters (at <https://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/about/sbs-timeline>, accessed 6 Dec. 2018).

6 Interestingly, BBC2 in late 2018 ran a series entitled *Black Earth Rising* which also dealt with the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide and featured a female survivor as the central character (see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0b-k8t10>, accessed 8 Dec. 2018).

# The Turner Prize 2017 - A Turning Point in the Public Recognition of Black British Women Artists?

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## **Introduction: The Turner Prize and Black British Art**

The Turner Prize, awarded since 1984, is for the art world what the Booker is for the literary scene: the most prestigious prize a contemporary British visual artist can win. When on the evening of 5 December 2017 the winner of that year was announced in the Ferens Art Gallery, Hull (then UK City of Culture), it was a surprise to many British art lovers and a great pleasure to those who take a special interest in black art, admiring its characteristic combination of a political stance with great artistic talent. The winner was Lubaina Himid, 63 years old and a very active black British woman artist and curator since the 1980s. Two things were new that year: the age limit of 50 was removed, and the limitation to recent work was also lifted, so that the lifelong development of the competitors could be taken into account.

Before continuing, a word on my use of the term “black British”: I am using it here as the politically active artists in the 1970s and 1980s had done, namely referring “to *all* those communities, of whatever ethnic or ‘racial’ origin, who were regarded as ‘other’ – *different* – and thus racially excluded” (Hall, 2001a: 35). Though in theory covering all kinds of people, in practice the term meant black and Asian British citizens. Several in that sense black British male artists had won the Turner since the 1990s: sculptor Anish Kapoor in 1991, painter Chris Ofili in 1998, film maker Steve McQueen in 1999, while film maker Isaac Julien made it to the shortlist in 2001 and painter and installation artist Yinka Shonibare in 2004. But only once, in 2013, a black woman artist was shortlisted: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye was honoured for her timeless, fictional portraits of black subjects. This is surprising for two reasons: for one thing six white women before Himid had won

the prize, and for another quite a few black British women artists had been very productive since the 1980s. It seems that the naming of Himid has finally cleaned up with an unspoken prejudice: that black women don't make great art.

In a seminal article Stuart Hall has divided the history of black art in Britain into three phases, a pattern that has meanwhile been taken over by other historians of art, e.g. by Eddie Chambers (Hall 2006, Chambers 2014). The first phase is defined as covering the period from the 1940s to the 1980s, when fully trained black artists from all parts of the Commonwealth came to the "mother country", (falsely) assuming they would be welcomed as equals by the art scene. The second phase began in the 1980s, when young artists, who – though not all born in the UK – had grown up there and were trained in British art schools, came to the fore with a distinctly political art programme. Lubaina Himid was one of them. The third phase, according to Hall, began in the 1990s with artists like Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare, who approached critical topics in a more playful, sometimes carnevalesque manner, appealing more easily to the taste of an increasingly international and commercialised art scene.

### **A Bit of History: The Work and Exhibition History of Black Women Artists from the 1980s on**

Women were involved in the second phase right from the start: in 1979 Marlene Smith joined three very young men, Donald Rodney, Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper, in founding the first political group of black artists in the UK, the legendary Blk Art Group. They were inspired by the American Black Art Movement (BAM) of the 1960s and 1970s, part of the Black Power Movement, and in Britain there was also good reason for an artistic protest: in times of an economic decline and under the influence of the National Front, Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood Speech" and Thatcher's politics, racism and marginalisation had intensified and led to the first violent clashes since the late 1950s. Three years later, at the First National Black Convention in Wolverhampton in 1982, an impressive number of black women artists with the same experiences and a similar agenda joined the Blk members, forming the wider British Black Arts Movement: Lubaina Himid, Sonia Boyce, Joy Gregory, Claudette Johnson and (of Indian origin) Sutapa Biswas, Chila Kumari Burman. Yet despite the same motivations, the women preferred different topics as they were not only fighting racism but also male dominance. While the men focused on historical

and current public events and symbols (the flag, the cross, the slave ship, a lynching scene, cruise missiles etc.), the women turned to the personal and the private, especially the body and the domestic sphere, which was, however, perceived as a highly politicised space. Characteristic examples were Sutapa Biswas's *Housewife with Steak-Knives* (1985) and Sonia Boyce's *Missionary Position I* and *Missionary Position II* (1985) (see von Rosenberg 2008).

Realising that public visibility was an essential part of their political struggle, many of the young artists engaged in curating. Eddie Chambers was particularly active among the men, Lubaina Himid among the women. Always very interested in the work of other black artists, Himid had interviewed many of her colleagues for her MA thesis "On Being a Young Black British Artist in Britain Today: A Political Response to a Personal Experience" (1984). Her first exhibitions in 1983 were dedicated to women only: "Five Black Women", shown in the Africa Centre, and a few months later "Black Women Time Now" at the Battersea Arts Centre, displaying work of 15 women. Himid's exhibition "The Thin Black Line" in 1985 was the first group exhibition of black artists hosted by a major British institution, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA)/London, and – despite the gender-neutral title – also

focused on women: work by 11 female artists was on display and thus came to the knowledge of a larger audience. In 2011 Himid was invited to restage part of the exhibition under the slightly changed title *Thin Black Line(s)* at Tate Britain in acknowledgement of the importance the original show had for the gradual acceptance of black art as an essential contribution to British art history.

Several of the female artists, whose work was included in the pioneering shows of the 80s, as well as some other black women who started working in the 1980s like Joy Gregory, have developed impressive careers as artists, curators, archivists and academic teachers changing their techniques and topics, but never deviating from an underlying motivation: the critical view on British society and history from the "double perspective" they were born to. As it is impossible to give a complete overview of the success of black British women's art here, I will look at four exemplary careers and try to draw some general conclusions concerning their public reception.

### Lubaina Himid

Let us begin with Himid. Born in Zanzibar in 1954 to an African father and an English mother, she came to London with her mother after her father's death, four months old. Having studied theatre design at Wimbledon Art School but finding no entrance to

the theatre world after her BA, Himid first had to earn her living with waiting and occasional teaching while studying for her MA at the Royal College of Art. Gradually she developed her own artistic practice and committed herself to curating the work of fellow artists, finally running her own small Elbow Room Gallery from 1986 to 1988. Since 1990 she has been teaching at Lancaster Polytechnic, now University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), at the same time continuing to produce and exhibit her own work as well as launching several projects promoting black art, e.g. *Colour Code*, an informative website for an interested circle, and *Making Histories Visible*, an ever growing archive of images by and documentary material relating to black artists.

Himid started with painting, and her *Between the Two My Heart Is Balanced* of 1991, figuring two black women in a boat tearing to pieces the charts of colonialism, was early acquired by the Tate. Soon she also turned to installations using all kinds of material from paper, cardboard and wood to textiles and objects of everyday use, which she overpaints, e.g. antique crockery, drawers, wagons as well as pages from *The Guardian*. She changes between abstract art, inspired by textile patterns (her mother was a textile designer), and figurative work, which is sometimes easy to read, sometimes somewhat enigmatic.

Many critics have noticed the alluring brightness of her saturated colour scale, seducing the viewer to swallow critical messages along with aesthetic pleasure and fun, a combination reminiscent of the work of some male colleagues, e.g. Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare. Like them Himid has also relished the ironical re-working of icons of European art: *Two Women* referred to *Portsmouth Dockyard* (1877), a gallant painting by James Tissot showing a Highlander flirting with two women in a boat. Another important specimen was included in the pre-Turner show of Himid's work: *A Fashionable Marriage* (1987), an installation of 10 cut-out figures, is a modern version of Hogarth's satirical print *Countess's Morning Levée* (1743-1745).

Cut-out figures from cardboard or wood have been a technique specially favoured by Himid from early on. She has traced it back to "a very British tradition known as the dummy board" (Himid 2018: 73), flat wooden figures, of waiters for example, she first came across in Blenheim castle, but it was certainly also influenced by her training as a theatre designer. Many of her most arresting works are cut-outs painted in her characteristic bright colouring, telling a scandalous story from black history or present, but with humour and empathy for the black characters. An early example is the *Carrot Piece* (1985, ironically referring to the codpiece

worn by men in 16th century Europe).



Lubaina Himid: The Carrot Piece (1985)

Courtesy of Lubaina Himid 2019

A white man, straddling a unicycle, is dangling a carrot in front of the nose of a black person (man or woman?), who is turning round with a sceptic look – obviously an image of the white race trying to outsmart black people from the slave trade to modern society. But does the work perhaps specifically target the art world? The biggest project with cut-out figures is the installation *Naming the Money* (2003) thematising the wealth made by the slave trade. First shown at Nottingham Contemporary, then in parts in various exhibitions, it was re-installed in *Navigation Charts* at Spike Island/Bristol in 2017, one of the two big exhibitions leading up to the Turner. Inspired by black servants

portrayed in 18th century paintings, the work consists of 100 figures, larger than life, of elegantly dressed black servants, entertainers, craftspeople working in rich men's households. Refusing to stress their status as victims, instead emphasising their humanity, Himid provided each of them with two names, one African, one European, and an individual life story told in five lines ending on a positive note to be read or heard on a soundtrack. After that she abandoned the technique because "there didn't seem any point in making cut-outs again" (Himid 2018: 84).



Lubaina Himid: Figures from Naming the Money (2003)

Courtesy of Lubaina Himid 2019

Himid's abstract work is less humorous. Thus her memories of Zanzibar, where she travelled in 1997 for the first time, are expressed in large delicately coloured graphic patterns. And a unique historical event, a rare act of solidarity between British textile workers and black slaves during the

American Civil War, is remembered in *Cotton.com* (2002), an installation of 85 square panels painted with black and white abstract patterns.

Recently Himid has discovered textile as a medium, making series of so-called Kangas, squares of cotton cloth used in Zanzibar for garments or flags and printed by Himid with bright graphic images of objects and text lines. And she has returned to painting pictures, most recently *Le Rodeur* (2016-2018): a series of images depicting groups of strangely forlorn black figures on board a ship, some of them in modern dress, some in historical costume, referring to a horrible crime in the 18th century, when slaves were thrown overboard to stop a disease.



Lubaina Himid: *Le Rodeur: The Exchange* (2016)

Courtesy of Lubaina Himid 2019

Some of Himid's early works had been acquired by the Tate, but larger ensembles had for decades been shown in provincial galleries only and thus were known to comparatively few

art connoisseurs. This has changed. In 2017 two major exhibitions of much of her older and recent work - *Navigation Charts* in Bristol and *Invisible Strategies* at Modern Art Oxford - and a prominent place in the group exhibition *The Place Is Here* remembering art from the 80s at Nottingham Contemporary plus the exhibition *Warp and Weft*, her show in the Tate as a shortlisted artist - all these together earned her the Turner Prize. Suddenly there was great interest in her work worldwide. Several exhibitions followed at home and in Sérignan/France, in Karlsruhe and at the Berlin Biennale 2018 and a solo show at the New Museum/New York will open this summer.

### Chila Kumari Burman

Chila Kumari Burman was born to Punjabi parents in Bootle near Liverpool in 1957, growing up in an Asian British working-class milieu: "we didn't have any books in our house, let alone art books and magazines..." (quoted in Bernier 2018: 188). Nevertheless she studied at Southport College of Art, the Leeds Polytechnic and Slade School of Fine Arts, where she specialised in print-making, graduating in 1982. Ever since she has been leading the financially precarious life of a free-lance artist and is proud of it: "Artists are slightly outside the system. I avoid anybody who is going to upset my confidence" (McKenzie 2018). In her art - painting, photography, collages, films - Burman combines fine

art techniques and photography with compositional ideas from popular art and advertising and uses all kinds of everyday objects like bindis, fashion jewellery, flower petals, items of clothing. Activist of the black arts movement from the beginning and included in Himid's second and third exhibitions, Burman began with straightforward agit-prop art, for instance collaborating with Keith Piper on the *Southall Black Resistance Mural* (1986). But soon she developed a more specific feminist agenda. Questions of identity, the female body and sexuality, especially of Asian British women, became central to her work.

Burman frequently used her own body and face in her artworks. Body prints, made in the 1980s and 1990s in sugar and Indian ink or acrylic and glitter, highlighted the female sexual body parts with pride, for Burman saw sexuality as an element of empowerment for Asian women. Burman's many pictures of her face from single mirror images overwritten "*This Is Not Me*" or "*Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover*" (both 1992) to multiple self-portraits hit a special nerve of the time, thrilling writers and cultural theorists concerned with hybrid identity construction like Stuart Hall and Meera Syal. In *28 Positions in 34 Years* (1992), for example, the artist looks at the viewer in various costumes from elegant Western style to Indian dress or as a black tribal woman, thus ironically expressing

her multi-layered cultural identity. The work was reproduced in important art books (e.g. Hall and Sealy 2001: 203) and appeared on several book covers like that of James Procter's anthology *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998* (2000).



Chila Kumari Burman: 28 Portraits in 34 Years (1992)

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In the late 1990s Burman's feminist zeal softened and her work became more playful. After making collages of flowers, she began exploring her Asian and Asian British legacy. Her father's work as an ice-cream seller became a topic: his van reappears as a profusely decorated icon in many of her pictures, and colourful glass cones are arranged to pretty installations. Another theme was the impact of Indian comics and Bollywood on Asian British people's lives. Burman saw Bollywood films critically – "fetishism of things Indian" (Burman 2007) –, but also used them as an inspiration adopting - tongue in cheek - the glaring colours, heavily made-

up faces and figures of women and men plus overboarding decorations into her mixed-media artworks. *Punjabi Rockers* (2009), for instance, is a kaleidoscopic collage of elements signifying Indian culture Bollywood style: portraits of film stars, a tiger, a skull, an elephant's trunk, flowers, the lettering "India".



Chila Kumari Burman: *Punjabi Rockers* (2009)

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Shows like *Icecream and Magic* (1997), *Candy Pop and Juicy Lucy* (2006), which included work by a Hackney youth group, and *Beyond Pop* (2017) charmed viewers in Britain, but since the 1990s her opulent work has also been internationally shown in group exhibitions in Asia, Australia, the States and many European cities. In 2017 Burman got a big chance to make her work known to a large audience: she was commissioned to contribute artworks to

a series of events at the Science Museum, *Illuminating India. 5,000 years of Science and Innovation* (2017). Burman's *India Illuminated!* consisted of 29 panels in mixed-media technique, arranged in orderly rows, and a richly decorated tuk-tuk, which welcomed the guests at the entrance. The panels, inspired by objects from the Science Museum's collection and elements of Indian culture, showed a Buddha figure, Hindu god Ganesha, the ancient game "snakes and ladders" invented in India, elephants etc. in combination with colourful patterns, her beloved "jewels" and beads only sparsely applied. On 8 August 2018 she e-mailed happily: "I live from my work now!" The latest sign of her growing recognition has been the awarding of an Honorary Doctorate from the UAL in 2018.



Chila Kumari Burman: *Illuminated Buddha* (from *India Illuminated!* 2017)

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## Joy Gregory

Joy Gregory, born in Bicester/Buckinghamshire to Jamaican parents in 1959, studied photography at Manchester Polytechnic and the Royal College of Art. Like Burman she is a free-lance artist and works in a variety of photographic techniques from Victorian printing methods to digital video installations. In contrast to Burman's exuberant colourful art, Gregory's photographic and filmic work comes across as carefully concentrated on essential elements, a restrained selection of colours and the thoughtful choice of the adequate technique.

Yet much like Chila Kumari Burman, Gregory as a young woman was fascinated by questions of identity, race and femininity, and images of her series *Autoportraits* (1988-1990) have been almost as frequently reproduced in

studies on cultural identity and books on black art as Burman's self-portraits (e.g. Hall and Sealy 2001: 132-134).

Gregory has explained that as a teenager she was an avid reader of women's magazines and became increasingly frustrated realising there was hardly a picture of a black woman to be seen. Her self-portraits of 15 years later were an attempt to create the black woman as the glamorous catwalk beauty the magazines had excluded. In the following years Gregory remained fascinated with the theme of beauty and its construction. *Objects of Beauty* (1992-1995), the *Hand Bag Project* (1998, ghostlike images of old handbags owned by white South African women referencing silence and secrecy during Apartheid) and *Girl Things* (2002), all take issue with the western beauty craze. The images in the monochrome colours produced by early photographic techniques (kallotype print, salt print, cynotype), show single items of clothing, accessories, jewellery or tools of beautification, isolated like severed body parts. A more cheerful project was *The Blonde*, begun in 1998 and circling around a new meaning of blonde beyond the old stereotypes of the fairy princess, the dumb and the perfect sex object. Having noticed in the streets of London that more and more women and men of non-European origin dye their hair blonde, Gregory made photographs,



Joy Gregory: Autoportrait  
(1988-1990)

Courtesy of Joy Gregory 2019

drawings, installations, even started an interactive website, reading the trend as a sign of “the positive side of globalisation involving the crossing not only of political and physical borders, but also the internal borders of human identity and metaphysical space” (Gregory 2004: 36). A specially charming work, telling a story, was *Cinderella Tours Europe* (1997-2001), a series of nine large coloured photographs of European touristic landmarks, in which a pair of golden pumps is conspicuously placed. They symbolise the greatest wish of women in the Caribbean, whom Gregory had interviewed while taking their portraits for her project *Memory & Skin*: they all confessed that their greatest wish was travelling to famous European cities. Thus the images, a friendly parody of the Grand Tour, may be read as a playful reversal of the colonial conquest.



Joy Gregory: from *Cinderella Tours Europe* (1997-2001)

Courtesy of Joy Gregory 2019

From the mid-1990s on Gregory herself has travelled a lot, often on invitation by cultural institutions, and much of her work since has been triggered by her journeys, not only to the Caribbean, but to several African countries, Sri Lanka, Gomera, the Orkney Islands etc. Wherever she was, she explored the historical past and people’s memories, which she captured in portraits and images of landscapes and interiors. Endangered languages fascinated her specially. For the Sydney Biennale 2010 Gregory made a beautiful 10-minute film *Gomera* (available on Vimeo), figuring two boys using El Silbo, the musical whistled language used in a remote wooded corner of the island, once almost extinct, but now protected. A series of large colour photographs of the Southern Kalahari, the land of the San people (who like to be known as Bushmen), is meant as a memorial to their almost extinct language Nju, known for its clicking sounds. In 2011 Impressions Gallery/Bradford showed her first encompassing retrospective *Lost Languages and Other Voices*, restaged in Penzance in 2017 (catalogue available as pdf), and some of her work from the 1980s was included in *The Place is Here* in 2018. In 2017 Gregory was invited to contribute to the Venice Biennale and showed her work *Overlooked and Underrepresented* in the Diaspora Pavillion: a golden memorial plaque inscribed with the

names of extraordinary women from 40 BC to the 20th century, accompanied by a photographic wallpaper.



Joy Gregory: Overlooked and Underrepresented (2017)

Courtesy of Joy Gregory 2019

## Sonia Boyce

Sonia Boyce was born in 1962 in London to parents from Barbados. She studied at East Ham College of Art and Technology/London and Stourbridge College of Art and Technology/West Midlands, completing her BA in Fine Arts in 1983. She joined the black art movement from the start, and her work was included in all the major black art exhibitions of the 80s.

Boyce started off as a painter focusing in her early work on gender roles and sexuality as determined by colonialism, patriarchy and Christian religion. She expressed her criticism through treacherously beautiful pastels full of colourful patterns, leaves, flowers and young women's faces, frequently her own. Works like *Missionary Position I – Lay Back* and *Mr. Close Friend of the*

*Family* (both 1985) thematise the sexual harassment of black women by white men, while the four-panel work *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain Great* (1986) places the abuse of women in the context of a wider anti-colonialist criticism, and her very last pastel *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986) deals with the parent family's meaning to the young generation in Britain. After that Boyce stopped painting. In an interview she later explained: "I felt there was nowhere else to go. I had come to a full stop" (Higgie 2018).



Sonia Boyce: *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986)

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From the 1990s on Boyce got more and more interested in co-operation with others and turned to a very different manner of working: her art became improvised, performative and collaborative, a social practice. Her first work in that line was *The Audition* (1997). Through an open call she invited women of various racial backgrounds to her studio to put on Afro wigs from a fancy-dress shop and took their photographs. When placed side by side, these images – she made 900 - effectively challenge the automatic reading of particular body parts as racial signifiers.



Sonia Boyce: from *The Audition* (1997)

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The deconstructive play with racial clichés was continued in further works, e.g. *Tongues* (1997), showing four black and white pictures of racially indistinguishable open mouths. Close-ups of mixed couples caressing and a film project, *Exquisite Tension* (2005), in which a white and a black person plait their hair together, stress the common humanity of both.

Apart from the visual Boyce is also fascinated by touch and sound. Indefinable objects made from hair, most of it her own, some blonde, in an exhibition *do you want to touch?* (1993), openly appealed to the haptic sense as did *4 Tablecloths* (for the tearoom in St. Pancras Station). Of *Lover's Rock*, a series figuring the lyrics of a reggae song embossed on a white surface reminiscent of wallpaper, Boyce explicitly said: "I wanted to suggest a touch" and traced her obsession with touch to the fetishisation of black skin (Boyce 1998: 36 and 37). Her interest in music and the co-operation with musicians and singers has led to the production of several videos showing events, in which classical music – jazz, but more often church music - is mixed with modern improvisation (*Drift* 2009, *You, Only You* 2010, *Justicia*, 2010, *Oh Adelaide* 2011. All on Vimeo). Her biggest project on music began in 1999: the *Devotional Collection*. Over several years Boyce, supported by friends, family and others, collected all kinds of black music on hundreds of videos, CDs, vinyls etc. in order to preserve them for the collective memory.

Apart from her own creative work Boyce has been teaching in many art schools and is currently Professor of Fine Art at Middlesex University as well as Chair of Black Art and Design across six colleges of the UAL. Her work has been shown in numerous solo and

group exhibitions in Britain, the US and many European cities. Invited by curator Okwui Enwezor, she contributed to the 2015 Venice Biennale “All The Worlds Futures”. Her short video *Exquisite Cacophony* shows a joint improvisation by an indie rapper and a classically trained vocalist, exemplifying the world’s mixed voices. Also in 2015 Boyce was commissioned to lead another huge memorial research project: *Black Artists and Modernism*. Financed with £700,000 by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and based at the UAL and Middlesex University, the project’s aim was to compile over three years the first database of black visual artists in British collections. Over 2,000 pieces were found, many of them never publicly shown.

In 2018 Manchester Art Gallery staged the first retrospective of Boyce’s art, presenting five of her works from the 1990s on and a new work produced on site called *Six Acts*. This six-screen film and wallpaper installation documents an evening-long gallery takeover, prepared in a series of conversations with the gallery staff and others, in which a modern approach to the outdated politics of gender, race and sexuality in the gallery’s 18th and 19th century paintings display was discussed. The takeover, to which a number of independent performance artists were invited, caused a public outcry, as a popular picture by J.W. Waterhouse, *Hylas and the Nymphs*

(1896), figuring naked nymphs and a lusting Hylas, was temporarily taken down. Since 2016 Boyce’s has been involved in her first public commission, a great challenge she has met with the help of the community, contributing their ideas: the *Newham Trackside Wall Project* (or *Crossrail Project*). She has been asked to cover the 1.3 km long bare trackside wall in the Docks with multimedia artworks, a project that linked up with her early fascination with wallpaper. Boyce is intimately familiar with the area, having grown up in the East End. Regarding the topic, she decided to commemorate the local past by pictured stories and the inscription of family and street names, framed by William Morris-style patterns of local plants and flowers.



Sonia Boyce: Newham Trackside Wall (Crossrail Project) (2017-2019)

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## Conclusion

Of course, each of the artists discussed deserves a much longer appreciation of her work than was possible here. But a few general observations seem possible. First of all, all four artists resemble one another

in their development. All have moved away from their early commitment to feminist issues to an interest in a wider range of people and in the larger topics of history and memories of the colonial past impacting on people's lives today in Britain and other parts of the world. Their artistic techniques also show a certain similarity. Though Himid and Boyce began with figurative painting, in general the artists prefer modern media, film, photography, installations or multi-media work, as less loaded with the legacy of European art history.

As to their success, all of them have made careers though in varying degrees; an academic position proved a great help, providing not only a regular income, but also easier access to public notice. Himid and Boyce, both academic teachers, have proved the most successful so far, but the work of all four artists has been shown in a great number of solo and group shows in Britain and in many other countries, and their work has been collected by private art lovers as well as by bigger and smaller commercial and public institutions in Britain and abroad. The Tate has bought works by Himid, Boyce and Burman from early on, while the V & A holds work by Gregory. Himid and Boyce have both been honoured by the Queen, Boyce with an OBE and an MBE, Himid with an MBE and – after the Turner – in 2018 with a CBE “for services to art”. Burman was awarded

an honourable doctorate. And yet, none of the four women artists are as visible and internationally well-known as some white female colleagues like Tracy Emin and Sarah Lucas on the one hand and some black or Asian British male artists like Yinka Shonibare, Steve McQueen and Anish Kapoor on the other. Thus, considering all this, how is the title question to be answered: does the Turner Prize for Lubaina Himid indicate a generally increasing public recognition of black British women artists? Let us hope that Himid is too pessimistic in her judgment of the current situation: “I think you'd only have to look at the evidence to see that it's more difficult for a young black woman to make it as an artist. Me winning the Turner Prize does not mean we've made it. It's a pity that it could ever be touted as such, because it probably means that there'll be a bloody gap before anything like that happens again” (Sherlock 2018). A hopeful sign may be that Tate Britain has announced a major survey of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's work, showing 80 paintings, from 19 May to 31 August 2020.

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# In the Flesh – The Politics of Abortion in Ireland

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*Centuries ago,  
Women accused of witchcraft faced,  
amongst other ordeals,  
Trial by water  
[...]  
A body is a body is a body is a body is a  
body is a body is a body  
Not a house. Not a city. Not a vessel, not  
a country  
The laws of the church have no place on  
your flesh  
[...]  
We ask for the land over the water. Home  
over trial. Choice over none.  
For our foremothers, ourselves, the  
generations yet to come  
Witches or women - these are our bodies  
which shall not be given up*

These lines from the poem “We Face This Land” by Irish author and novelist Sarah Maria Griffin were published on the website of *The Irish Times* in 2016, accompanied by Irish

director Dave Tynan’s eponymous short film in support of the *#repealtheeighth* pro-choice campaign (Griffin 2016, n.p.). In the clip, the powerful verses are spoken by women walking on a beach, among them the comedian and writer Tara Flynn, the *Irish Times* journalist Róisín Ingle, former student activist and now independent politician Lynn Ruane and her daughter, the actor Jordanne Jones. The video features women of all ages wearing black shirts displaying the word “repeal” in white capitals. They are walking barefoot towards the sea. Some enter the water until it is up to their necks while others fully submerge. During this scene, symbolically evoking witchcraft trials, all women continue to recite the poem one by one. The last shot displays the women standing together at the seashore speaking the final verses in chorus. The clip ends with the word “repeal” set against a black background.

The power of this video arises from the combination of Griffin's verses with the representation of *real* women with *real* bodies, who are still suffering under "archaic" abortion laws based on moral and religious doctrines that cause distress, pain and – most of all – "shame" (Smyth 2016, n.p.). The project supported Ireland's abortion rights campaign that culminated in the repeal of the *8th Amendment to the Irish Constitution* in May 2018. This amendment, ratified in 1983, provided in Article 40.3.3 that "The State acknowledges the *right to life of the unborn* and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees [...] to defend and vindicate that right" (De Londras/Enright 2018, 1; emphasis added). The campaign's website acknowledges the repeal of the *8th Amendment* on May 25, 2018. It also clearly states that "Our work is not done yet" (Cosgrave n.d.).



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## Pregnant Female Bodies as Battlefields for Politics

In the strictly legal sense, until the early nineteenth century abortion in Great Britain and Ireland was only considered a crime under special circumstances. This was because, in the philosophical, religious and medical discourses of the time, women were not considered pregnant before the foetus 'quickened' (i.e. moved), usually between the fourth and fifth month of gestation. In Aristotelean terms, still adhered to by the early church fathers, it took 40 days after conception for a boy and 80 to 90 days for a girl to acquire a soul, a view that, apart from its dubious factual basis, reflects a sexist attitude further contributing to a masculinist perspective on pregnancy. Before it moved, the foetus was just part of the female body and not a person in its own right; until abortion was criminalized women who lost their foetuses simply 'miscarried'. Since the 'quickening' of the foetus could usually only be identified by the mothers themselves, they were the ones to determine their own pregnancies. This granted them a certain, albeit small, scope for self-determination and agency.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, abortion was regarded as a crime. The *Ellenborough Act* of 1803, also termed the *Malicious Shooting or Stabbing Act*, made abortion after the 'quickening' of the foetus a criminal act

that was punished with the death penalty. Of course, this law did not prevent unwanted pregnancies, and many girls and women turned to secret and thus more dangerous methods, poisons and backstreet abortions performed by botchers that could permanently damage their health or even result in death (*The Independent* 2005; BBC n.d.).

It should be emphasized here that the reasons for the criminalization of abortion in the early nineteenth century are complex. A number of factors contributed to this shift, including the repression of the (traditionally feminine) realm of midwifery and the rise of the (masculine) medical discipline of obstetrics as the dominant knowledge system concerning pregnancy and birth. From about 1800 onwards, it fell to – mostly male – doctors to decide when a woman was pregnant. Eventually, the prohibition of abortion was extended to the period before the foetus ‘quickened’. The death penalty, however, was repealed in the amendment of the *Ellenborough Act* in 1837 and replaced with life sentence (abortionrights n.d.). Pragmatic reasons also fostered this process of criminalization; leading doctors of the nation regarded untrained abortionists not only as a threat to public health but as rivals to their own profession since they offered cheap treatments (Mohr 1978, 34, 147). I argue that the pregnant female body posed a threat not only to

the wealth of the (male) obstetricians but also to that of the nation. It became the battlefield for British and Irish politics.

### **Establishing the Basis for the 8th: Abortion as Offence Against the Person**

In 1861 abortion laws were again amended. The *Offences Against the Person Act* rendered every abortion a criminal act in Great Britain and Ireland. Anyone who performed or participated in an abortion could be sentenced to up to 14 years in prison (Pierson/Bloomer 2017, 178; Felzmann 2014, 195): *Every Woman, being with Child, who, with Intent to procure her own Miscarriage, [...] shall be guilty of Felony, and [...] shall be liable [...] to be kept in Penal Servitude for Life or for any Term not less than Three Years [...], with or without Hard Labour, and with or without Solitary Confinement* (Legislation.gov.uk a) n.d.).

With the strengthening of women’s rights and mass protests against abortion laws in the twentieth-century, legislations were liberalised. It took more than 100 years before the 1967 *Abortion Act* rendered ‘medical’ abortions – by a registered medical practitioner only and after the approval of two other doctors – legal in Great Britain until the 28th week of gestation. The Republic of Ireland, having gained its independence in 1921, retained the older British legislation, however. In the UK, it was

also legal to terminate a pregnancy beyond this period, but only if the mother's life was at risk or if the foetus showed fatal abnormalities (Legislation.gov.uk b) n.d.). Still, this did not mean that women could end their pregnancies simply because they wanted to. There had to be medical evidence that a pregnancy would put the mother's health at risk. Thus, although the new Act gave women some legal ground to defend themselves, abortion still remained a crime as under the previous law.

What sometimes causes confusion is the fact that the *Abortion Act* 1967 was never extended to one of the UK's regions: Northern Ireland. During the 1960s the Parliament of Northern Ireland was more concerned with the beginnings of what would turn into a three decades long civil war ('The Troubles' 1968-1998) between mostly Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists – it simply ignored the example set by the rest of the UK. Westminster turned a

blind eye to the problem and remained reluctant to adjust Northern Ireland's abortion laws (Kelly 2016, n.p.). As a result, abortion throughout Ireland is still subject to the 1861 *Offences Against the Person Act* until this very day.

### Acts, Cases and Referenda: From 1967 to 2013

The main question is: if abortion had already been illegal since the mid-nineteenth century throughout Ireland, why did the Republic see the need to amend this law in the 1980s in favour of the anti-abortionists? As stated, Northern Ireland had simply ignored the *Abortion Act* 1967 while Westminster continued to look away. In the Republic of Ireland, however, Irish conservatives and the Church seemed alarmed by certain international developments. After the *Abortion Act* in the UK, the US Supreme Court followed suit; it, too, legalized the termination of pregnancies until the 28th week of gestation (subsequently reduced to 24 weeks) in the famous 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case. In *Roe v. Wade* the court decided in favour of the 21-year old Norma McCorvey from Texas, single mother of two, who was seeking a legal abortion of her third pregnancy. Because Irish conservatives feared this liberalisation of the law might spread to the Republic, pro-life campaigns were launched to amend the Constitution with a view to preemptively strengthening the Irish ban. This resulted in a referendum



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in which 67% voted in favour of “the right to life of the unborn” (Nugent 2018, n.p.). The *8th Amendment 1983*, a law that grants the foetus personhood, thus restricted judicial interpretation to the degree that it allowed abortions solely if the mother’s life was at risk. However, “no attempt was made to clarify its legal implications, especially on the questions of how to balance the woman’s and the fetus’s rights to life” (Felzman 2014, 193). In reality, the question whether a woman’s life was actually at risk remained a decision to be made by others, not by the woman concerned. As a result, not much had changed: the pregnant female body continued to be used as a battlefield for conservative politics and Irish patriarchy.

Unsurprisingly, the *8th Amendment* had severe consequences for thousands of pregnant Irish women. In 1983, shortly after the implementation of the *8th*, Sheila Hodggers was denied cancer treatment because doctors feared that the drugs might harm the foetus (De Londras/Enright 2018, 13). Despite her husband’s appeal for mercy she was forced to carry her pregnancy to term and “died in agony two days after the death of her premature baby” (McKay 2018, n.p.). In 1987, the High Court additionally prohibited the provision of information about abortion at home and abroad (Cullen 2012). In 1992, a 14-year-old girl became pregnant after a

man known to her and her family had been sexually abusing her for several years (*thejournal.ie* 2012). During the court proceedings of the so-called *X case* she and her parents were hindered from obtaining an abortion in the UK by the imposition of a travel ban. The High Court based its decision on article 40.3.3 of the *8th* that acknowledges “the right to life of the unborn” and granted the injunction despite the fact that the girl had become suicidal. After mass protests the Supreme Court finally lifted the ban and the *X case* culminated in a referendum in late 1992 that made abortion travels and the provision of respective information in Ireland legal (Felzman 2014, 193; Nugent 2018, n.p.) In 2012, Savita Halappanavar was admitted to hospital in Galway suffering from severe back pain. Although doctors identified her miscarriage, they refused to abort the foetus for days because they could still detect a heartbeat. After spontaneously delivering a stillborn Savita Halappanavar fell into a coma, suffered a septic shock and eventually died of multiple organ failure and cardiac arrest (Holland).

This case led to widespread protests and forced legislators to act, which resulted in the *Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013* that legalized abortion if the pregnant woman’s life was at risk. Whether she ‘qualified’ for such a ‘crisis pregnancy’ was to be decided not



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by her, but by a number of specialists. If she was suicidal, it also required the report of two psychiatrists in addition to her obstetrician (Felzman 2014, 196). In spite of its title, the Act only provided for narrowly defined medical emergencies, excluding cases of rape or of fatal abnormalities of the foetus (Felzman 2014, 194). This meant that women who received the diagnosis that their unborn child would not survive long outside of or even inside the womb were forced to continue their pregnancy until the non-viable foetus was born or had died inside the woman's body. Only in the latter case was a termination legal. Since 2013 the UN Human Rights Commission has repeatedly criticized Ireland's "abusive and intolerable" abortion laws for harming Irish women and violating their human rights; legislation compelled women in emergency situations to undergo "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment[s]"

by denying them medical services and impelling them to travel abroad, which for many remained one of the very few possibilities to end an unwanted pregnancy (Amnesty International 2017, n.p.; United Nations 2018, n.p.).

### **Options and Choices: 'Abortion Tourism' and the Home Use of Pills**

Since the ban on abortion was emphasized by the *8th Amendment of the Constitution Act 1983*, many Irish women have been secretly seeking abortions in the UK or elsewhere. After the 1992 *X case* the Irish government not only legalized pregnancy terminations abroad but even assisted women by offering information about suitable clinics in the shape of the Treatment Abroad Scheme. This led to what the Irish government euphemistically called "abortion tourism" (Gilmartin/White 2011, 275-6). As Gilmartin/

White point out, the problematic term ‘tourism’ suggests option and choice, just like any other form of medical tourism such as cosmetic surgery. It also ignores the financial side: “A trip to Britain is expensive. It involves travel costs, accommodation costs, and the cost of the procedure, estimated at between 965 and 1,750 Euros in total in 2005” (Gilmartin/White 2011, 275, 277). Other data show that between 1980 and 2018 more than 170,000 Irish girls and women travelled abroad for an abortion – 3,265 to the UK alone in 2016 (*Thejournal.ie* 2018). These trips often required women to take time off work or to lie to their families. What is more, only Irish citizens or women holding an EU passport could ‘benefit’ from the right to travel; non-EU residents living in Ireland had to undergo tedious application processes. Undocumented women were forced to resort to dangerous backstreet abortions. ‘Abortion tourism’ thus absolved the Irish state from the duty to provide legal and affordable services at home (Gilmartin/White 2011, 277-278).

Women who were unable to go abroad turned to self-medication. Since neither travel bans nor criminalisation have ever prevented unwanted pregnancies, the home use of abortion pills has become widespread among Irish women. Since 2001 the number of recorded abortion travels has declined, owing to the increase

of online information about herbal or pharmaceutical abortifacients and surely also to the increased availability of contraceptives under the *Health (Family Planning) (Amendment) Acts* of the 1980s and 1990s. Since 2006 and 2014 two organisations – Women on Web (WoW) and Women Help Women (WHW) – supply abortion pills and advice via the internet. Between 2010 and 2015, 5,650 Irish women requested access to abortion pills from Women on Web alone. This, of course, can never replace the medical advice of an expert or local health care. Further, the illegal selling of a desperately needed drug always holds the potential for a black market (Sheldon 2016, 91, 92, 98). The fact that none of the activists providing access to these pills has been prosecuted so far suggests a legal limbo.

On the one hand, women do not have access to abortion at home, but on the other they have the explicit right to travel abroad (if they can afford it), the right to information about suitable clinics and the right to aftercare in Ireland. The downright absurdity of the Irish legislation lies in the legitimization of the “extra-territorial use of abortion services whilst simultaneously entrenching a domestic failure to provide them” (Sheldon 2016, 97).

## What Happens Next – Votes are Not Laws

The people of the Republic of Ireland have voted. On May 25, 2018, 66.4% decided not to subordinate a woman's constitutional rights to that of the foetus anymore: "How much pain, suffering or risk the pregnant person can be compelled to endure – [will soon] carry [...] constitutional weight" (De Londras/Enright 2018, 2). The vote does not mean that abortion is now legal. Legislation is yet to be approved. Until the appropriate Bill is passed, abortion is still considered an 'offence against the person' and can be punished with life imprisonment. As Ireland's Minister for Health, Simon Harris, had announced, the new law was passed in January 2019.

But what about Northern Ireland? In October 2018, a Ten Minute Rule Bill was introduced looking to repeal respective passages of the *Offences Against the Person Act 1861* with the aim to 'properly' decriminalize abortion in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, meaning that abortion "would be treated like any other clinical procedure" (Ryan 2018, n.p.). As expected, the Bill failed in the second reading, with the London government unwilling to impose the necessary follow-up legislation on a devolved Northern Ireland. As the 1967 *Abortion Act* has never applied to Northern Ireland, there still is a lot of work to do – once more, the sensitive political

situation in Northern Ireland is blocking all initiatives to reform the 19th century abortion legislation. In November 2018, Wales also offered free abortion services to women from Northern Ireland (BBC.com.news 2018). In December a group of 40 mostly anti-abortion GPs walked out of a meeting, held at the Irish College of General Practitioners in Dublin to discuss the new provision of legal abortion services from January 2019 on. Although Irish GPs continue to have the right of 'conscientious objection', Simon Harris criticized them for giving women "the cold shoulder" (Cullen 2018, n.p.). But in the same month, the *Irish Times* also wrote: "We used to accept that the killing of innocent human beings is wrong" (Binchy 2018, n.p.). These are just some of the many anti-abortionist examples that demonstrate the ongoing divisive potential of an issue that should concern the affected women alone. They also confirm the power of the pregnant female body, so powerful that institutions like the church and the state recognize it as a threat in need of control.

## Concluding Remarks

The 8th Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland was never necessary. The referendum that led to it in 1983 was the result of "a potent mix of political turbulence, religious domination and conservative lobbying" (De Londras/Enright 2018, 3). With the increasing secularisation of post-Celtic

Tiger Ireland, however, the social power of the Catholic church is visibly on the wane. Tainted by the scandal of the Magdalene laundries for unwed mothers (a euphemism for penitentiary work houses), and the gradual public disclosure of the 1993 discovery of a mass grave for babies in the grounds of a convent, the church has been losing moral, and

success of the Repeal Campaign in 2018 may also be linked to the recent revival of 21st century feminism. Young women in the campaign have certainly been using the social media to great effect this time. Yet, Pro-choice campaigners in Northern Ireland will still need to march, on beaches and through streets, using physical presence to protest against



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thus cultural, authority. Other referenda in Ireland that, for instance, led to the legalization of divorce (1996) or same-sex marriage (2015) demonstrate that a younger, more urban and European generation is taking over.

If the *8th Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland* can be regarded as part of the 1980s backlash against the success of the 2nd wave women's movement, the cultural shift that finally led to the

laws that deny women the sovereignty over their own bodies. The pregnant female body has long enough been a battlefield for conservative Irish politics. As Griffin underscores in her poem, “a body is a body is a body”. It is as *real* as the women who own it. Neither the laws of the church nor of the state have a place on its flesh. Ireland's work is not done yet.

## TIMELINE

- 1803: the *Ellenborough Act* makes abortion after 'quickening' liable to the death penalty
- 1837: the death penalty is replaced with life sentence
- 1861: the *Offences Against the Person Act* renders every abortion a criminal act
- 1921: Ireland gains its independence from Britain, Northern Ireland remains in the UK
- 1967: the *Abortion Act* legalizes abortion under certain circumstances in the UK
- 1968-1998: The Troubles dominate Northern Ireland politics; the *Abortion Act* is ignored
- 1973: *Roe vs. Wade* case leads to the legalization of abortion in the US
- 1983: *8th Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland* enshrines the rights of the unborn
- 1983: Sheila Rodgers is denied cancer treatment and dies after birthing a non-viable foetus
- 1992: *X case*: a 14-year-old rape survivor is temporarily prevented from travelling abroad
- 1992: referendum makes travel for abortion-seeking Irish women legal
- 2012: Savita Halappanavar dies from septic shock after being refused an emergency abortion
- 2013: *Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act* legalizes abortion under certain circumstances
- 1980-2018: more than 170,000 girls and women travel abroad to access abortion services
- 2018, May 25: *8th Amendment* repeal referendum: 66.4% vote for yes
- 2018, October 23: *Ten Minute Rule Bill* seeks to decriminalize abortion in Northern Ireland, but fails in the 2nd reading in November 2018
- 2018, November 9: Wales offers free abortion service to women from Northern Ireland
- 2018, December 2: 40 anti-abortionist GPs walk out of a meeting in Dublin
- 2019, January 1: scheduled date for the provision of legal abortion services in Ireland

- 2019, January: a 12-year-old Northern Irish victim of sexual assault has to travel to the UK
- 2019, March: activists march for reproductive rights during Women's Day rally in Belfast
- 2019, April 25: The Women and Equalities Committee of the House of Commons publishes report on unsolved legal and health care problems for abortion-seekers in Northern Ireland
- 2019, June: new figures show that travels to the UK are slowly declining while the purchase of abortion pills online is rising

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# How to Be a Feminist in the Twenty-First Century

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## Feminism, the Assault on Women's Reproductive Rights, and Sexual Harassment

In 2006, feminist critic Toril Moi claimed that

We are witnessing the emergence of a whole new generation of women who are careful to preface every gender-related claim that just might come across as unconventional with “I am not a feminist, but\_”.

It is a familiar phrase; one that I suspect everyone who teaches gender and/or feminism has heard their students use at least occasionally. In the face of the assumptions usually implicit in this disavowal of feminism, that feminists are “strident” or unreasonable in their demands, or, on the other hand, that feminism has nothing more to offer contemporary women because its aims have long been achieved, I find it not only easy but necessary and urgent to self-identify as a feminist. To argue, as Jan Dalley did in the *Financial*

*Times* on 20 October 2017, that

“feminism”, as a purely western credo born in America of postwar affluence, is no longer particularly relevant, to me or to others. The principle of equality between the sexes is now sturdily enshrined within a general notion of liberal human rights; feminism has done its work there

seems laughable to me at a time when there is a backlash against those very rights, with various incarnations of the alt-right leading the assault while decrying what they often refer to as “gender madness”, and purportedly ‘mainstream’ politicians like US President Donald Trump, President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro, and Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán not far, if at all, behind. A central goal of the alt-right seems to be to curtail women's reproductive rights; this ties in both with the patriarchal view of the family frequently espoused by its members, and with its claim that the comparatively low rates of childbirth among ‘white’ women

amount to a form of genocide. Their anti-abortion stance unites prominent members of the alt-right, like Steve Bannon, with traditional conservatives like Gloria Prinzessin von Thurn und Taxis. Donald Trump's nominations of ultra-conservative candidates to the Supreme Court have given rise to concern that *Roe v. Wade*, the case in which it was found, in 1973, that State legislation banning abortion was unconstitutional, may be overturned in the near future. An increasing number of Republican-controlled states are banning abortion after the first six weeks of pregnancy.

Albeit abortion has been legal in Great Britain for over fifty years, it remains



© Tiocfaidh ár lá 1916, taken June 2017

Anti-DUP march in London

illegal in Northern Ireland. The DUP, currently at centre stage of UK politics due to the Brexit deadlock, are strongly anti-abortion in their stance. While in

Great Britain, between 65% and 93% of the population support the legality of abortion, depending on the reason why a pregnancy is to be terminated, a majority of the population of Northern Ireland think abortion should be illegal if a woman does not want the child, but support its legalisation in cases of rape, incest, or foetal abnormality (Taylor 2017). The legality of abortion within the US is supported by 58% of the population, a relatively small majority ("Public Opinion" 2018), and anti-choice movements are increasingly using the popular media in their effort to turn people against women's right to choose. On 29 March 2019, the film *Unplanned* opened at 800 US cinemas.

It is based on the memoirs of Abby Johnson, a former employee of the NGO *Planned Parenthood* turned anti-abortion activist. Johnson denounces *Planned Parenthood* for profiting from abortions and argues that the legality of abortion does not in fact empower women. It is one of a wave of anti-abortion movies. While it may be tempting to dismiss these developments as primarily confined to the bible belt of the United States or historically Catholic countries like Ireland, Hungary, or Brazil, the anti-abortion message is not confined to single-issue movies like *Unplanned*; rather, it is becoming prevalent in the mainstream media.

The *Twilight* franchise is, perhaps, the most successful instance of this development. In 2012, Dorothy Pomerantz wrote in *Forbes* that

[o]verall, the films have earned \$2.5 billion at the global box office. You can probably double that number when you include DVD sales, cable and television showings and the gobs of merchandise sold annually.

The protagonists, human teenager Bella and vampire Edward, wait until their wedding night to have sex, a decision that is motivated in the story by Edward having been born as a human in the early twentieth century and therefore being old-fashioned. When Bella gets pregnant and her life is threatened by the half-vampire baby who is effectively eating her from the inside, she refuses to terminate the pregnancy, albeit her vampire in-laws unanimously advise her to do so. She explicitly states that she is willing to sacrifice her own life for that of her baby - and her choice of words, too, is significant here. Though it is Bella's choice not to have an abortion, and author of the *Twilight* books, Stephenie Meyers, therefore, argues that the story is not anti-feminist, all other characters consistently use the term foetus, while Bella vehemently insists that what she is carrying, a few weeks after conception, is a baby. Her choice of term is consistent with the anti-choice movement's contention that a fertilised egg is a human baby as soon as conception has taken place. Albeit *Twilight* has garnered

its share of criticism due to the high visibility entailed by its exceptional popularity, its politics are most clear-sightedly summarised not by a liberal critic, but by the conservative James P. Pinkerton in a celebratory article that appeared on Fox News in 2010. He exults in the fact that "Bella, the classic damsel in distress, relies on men to protect her, and she will reward only one with her virginity—and, of course, at the same time, her hand in marriage." Pinkerton reads the *Twilight* films as a paean to Authority with a capital A, and suggests that by watching them, kids will receive "Conservative Imprinting".

By comparison with the immensely popular *Twilight*-franchise, *The Frankenstein Chronicles* has largely remained below the radar of critical and academic commentary. The critically-acclaimed series was first broadcast on ITV in 2015, but has since been picked up by Netflix. Set in an 1827 London where a serial killer inspired by Victor Frankenstein's experiments dismembers and reassembles the bodies of street urchins, one of its central characters is a poor, underage girl, Flora, who is made drunk and impregnated by a surgeon. In dealing with this plotline, the series rehashes many of the tropes invoked by anti-choice activists. Flora wants to "get rid of the baby", but Marlot, a retired officer who investigates the case of the murdered children on behalf of the

Home Secretary, as well as his Constable sidekick, Nightingale, want to protect her unborn child and place her in the care of a practitioner of alternative medicine. The latter, Daniel Harvey, however, is pro-choice and provides Flora with herbal remedies that induce a miscarriage. Nightingale, albeit distraught, assures her that God will forgive her if she repents, in a manner that is reminiscent of the “hate the sin but love the sinner”-rhetoric of fundamentalist anti-LGBT rights activists. Flora herself is full of regrets for killing her “baby”. Most importantly, however, while Flora’s actions are represented as driven by desperation, Daniel Harvey, the only character who explicitly advocates a woman’s right to choose, turns out to be the psychopathic child killer whom Marlot has been pursuing. Furthermore, his sister, Marlot’s love interest, who is represented in unambiguously positive terms in the series, clearly considers the fact that her brother helped Flora to induce a miscarriage to be just as monstrous as his dismemberment of the street children that he uses in his Frankenstein-inspired experiments.

The salience of anti-abortion topoi in the popular media is not merely evidence of ‘residual’ attitudes that may safely be shrugged off. They occur at a time when a report published by the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development,

presumably not an organisation prone to spreading ‘fake news’ or conspiracy theories, finds that anti-choice extremists within Europe collaborate in a highly organised, systematic, and deliberate manner, with the declared goal of “roll[ing] back human rights for sexual and reproductive health in Europe” (Datta 2018). They affirm that the Agenda Europe “movement would force women to carry unwanted pregnancies, restrict access to contraception, decide who can marry and decide who can call themselves a family. Many will be surprised that they also target divorce and access to IVF treatment.” Though the 100 to 150 members of the “clandestine” network that the Forum was able to identify may sound like a small number, it appears to enjoy significant levels of support among wealthy players willing to bankroll its strategies, including members of the European aristocracy like Otto von Hapsburg. According to the report, Agenda Europe’s to-do list includes points like “Repeal all laws allowing divorce”, “Prohibit sale of all pharmaceutical contraceptives” and, of course, they would like to see “Abortion bans in all jurisdictions, including in international law”. The report suggests that Agenda Europe has hitherto been significantly more successful in its aim to protect what it considers to be the “traditional family” and halt “expanding marriage rights to same-sex couples” than in its attempt to

roll back abortion rights. It registers the network's "rapid professionalization", its successful "network-building" and "placing the right people in the right place", however, and warns that

Progressive actors should take heed that this fight is engaged and that social progress is not necessarily inevitable.

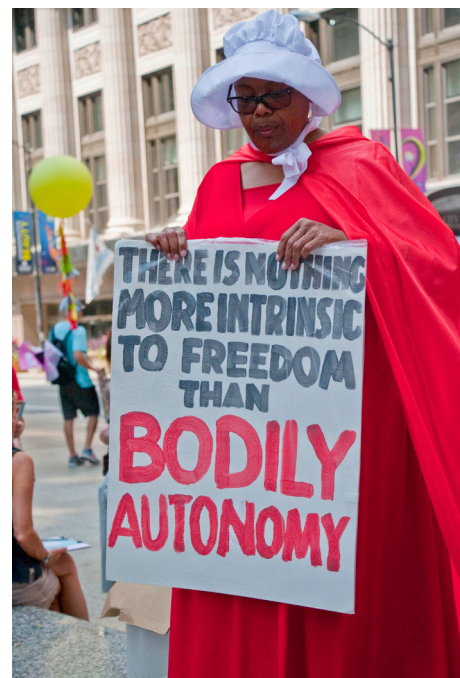
Overall, the situation in Europe as well as in the United States is not one in which we can afford to be complacent concerning women's rights; in the face of professionalization of the anti-choice and anti-gender campaigners, solidarity among feminists is important and necessary.

As yet, in the area of reproductive rights, the anti-choice agenda seems to be driven by an extremist minority, albeit a well-organised and dangerous one. The #metoo-phenomenon, however, has drawn attention to the casual acceptance of sexual harassment in the mainstream of Western societies that tend to understand themselves as committed to liberal humanism and the rights it entails. While I am normally sceptical of hashtag activism, sometimes, and in my view with some justification, referred to as 'slacktivism', the responses to #metoo have proven it to have been necessary: what made #metoo different, and what eventually prompted me to also post under the #metoo hashtag on facebook, was the derisory response that some (predominantly, but not

exclusively self-identifying as male) people felt was acceptable in the face of the overwhelming number of narratives of sexual harassment and discrimination. The continued existence of such attitudes even among some academic colleagues, and, on the other hand, the concerns of many women, some of whom are also academic colleagues, who were reluctant to post their stories for fear of a backlash, means that here, too, solidarity among feminists is imperative.

### The Horns of the Feminist Dilemma

Yet—I am almost tempted to say “I am a feminist, but” at this point—while I know which side I am on in



© Charles Edward Miller, taken on 26 August 2018

Protest rally in Chicago against Brett Kavanaugh's appointment to the Supreme Court. Costumes inspired by the recent Hulu adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel *A Handmaid's Tale* play an increasingly central role in feminist protests, illustrating the almost exclusive focus on sexual and reproductive rights at such events.

these debates, what concerns me, as a self-identified feminist, is that the ground over which they are conducted is too limited. The focus of mainstream proponents of gender equality and women's rights appears to be as firmly on female reproductive capacities and female sexuality as that of the right-wing extremists. Reproductive rights and freedom from sexual harassment are important, no doubt, but their centrality to debates over women's rights implicitly confirms a biologicistic conception of what it means to be a woman, and one that reinforces the long-held view that women are more determined by their biology than men at that. By extension, it would appear that women who are not bearing and have never been sexually harassed (though the #metoo phenomenon leaves one in doubt regarding the existence of such a group), who are not in need of either an abortion or an infrastructure that enables them to better combine family responsibilities with their careers, do not, presumably, need feminism. Some so-called feminists might even argue that such a person does not fully qualify as a woman; womanhood, all too often, is conflated with the ability as well as the desire to bear and raise children, and feminism, all too often, is seen as coterminous

with family-friendly policies. Yet women are still overrepresented in relatively low-prestige, low-pay jobs and the gender pay gap is not entirely reducible to the career breaks that are still considered a natural corollary of women's ability to bear children (though the fact that the mother typically takes a longer career break than the father is not 'natural' but a consequence of the aptitude for caring that is a central component of the way in which femininity is socially constructed). Furthermore, businesses are encouraged to employ more women based on their supposedly 'feminine' qualities, like empathy and emotional intelligence; as recently as December 2018, Rosie Millard wrote in *The Independent*: "I think that the typically 'female' traits of collegiate working,



© Reclaim Reklam, taken on 27 February 2010

It is symptomatic that an image search yielded only a Swedish example of a feminist campaign focused on something not related to reproductive rights or sexuality. The hacked advert draws attention to the fact that women's earnings in Sweden amount to 83% of those of men.

emotional intelligence and keen antennae for sensitive issues are key to today's boardrooms." Here, a restrictive image of femininity is put forward even by those who would promote women's rights. The implications of promoting women to boardrooms primarily based on their supposedly specific skill set is empirically problematic; also, it is a corollary of the exultation of women's emotional intelligence and other 'feminine' qualities to assume that they lack the stereotypically 'male' qualities, such as bravery. Yet as Christina Patterson (2019) points out in *The Guardian*, "It's a cliché [sic] that women aren't brave enough. It's also a lie." The reason why women should be promoted to boardrooms isn't any specifically feminine skill set; it is simply the fact that hitherto, they are underrepresented due to discrimination. Affirmative action is needed to overcome this situation, as it is needed in the case of 'race', not because there is a specific black or feminine skill set, but because of the injustice of discrimination itself.

Nevertheless, in addressing these issues, mainstream feminism will almost inevitably be caught on the horns of a dilemma: what Moi describes as liberal humanist feminism, in its focus on formal and legal equality between men and women, fails to address and combat the devaluation and marginalisation of qualities that are frequently regarded as stereotypically feminine (2002, 15).

What, following Kristeva, she calls "radical" feminism, on the other hand, even in "praising the superiority" of women, at least in some respects, "runs the risk of becoming an inverted form of sexism [...] by uncritically taking over the very metaphysical categories set up by patriarchy in order to keep women in their places" (12). There is some evidence of this stance in the mainstream 'liberal' media: in 2017, it was announced that the role of the protagonist of *Doctor Who*, one of the longest-running and most popular British television series, often considered as iconically British, would, for the first time, be played by a woman. Some fans were outraged, though why a time-travelling alien with the ability to regenerate into a new body when he/she dies should not be regenerated as a woman is not clear (Flury 2017). The uproar that greeted the news shows the necessity of these kinds of casting decision. Nevertheless, the changes to the Doctor's character that accompanied the casting decision—what showrunner Chris Chibnall describes as a "new mixture of Doctorishness" ("Doctor Who" 2019)—are problematic from a feminist perspective. As a woman, the Doctor, who in his last few male incarnations sometimes behaved in an authoritarian way (Ecclestone), tended to lack sensitivity and awareness of the needs and personal boundaries of others (Smith) or even seemed to lack empathy completely (Capaldi), leading fans on the

asperger/autistic spectrum to highlight the character's significance to them as a generally positive portrayal of behaviour patterns often linked to autism (Evans 2017), suddenly exhibits continuous concern for her companions' emotional state. Thus, the apparently emancipatory decision to cast a female doctor ultimately serves to reinforce gender stereotypes.

Where liberal humanist feminism implicitly devalues qualities stereotyped as 'feminine', 'radical' feminism devalues women who fail to exhibit those qualities—Moi adduces the example of Margaret Thatcher, whose enthusiasm for the Falklands War was framed as evidence of her lack of femininity (174). This does not entail any approval of Thatcher's stance concerning the Falklands War on Moi's part; but criticism of warmongering does not necessarily have to be linked to a politician's gender, or the qualities that one would expect them to exhibit based on that gender. Moi explicitly, and rightly, rejects any position "that tries to define some women as 'real women' and others as 'deviant'" (175). In refuting this position, however, she appears to once again define women based on their biological bodies and thus runs the risk of endorsing an essentialist view of femininity, despite her earlier acknowledgement that women need to "reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical" (12).

Such a rejection of the very dichotomy between men and women, masculine and feminine, would require saying goodbye to the expectation that women ought to be more sensitive, caring, and empathetic than men. Nevertheless, it does not mean that discrimination of people who exhibit these traits ought to be tolerated, whatever their biological characteristics. While women are, indeed, discriminated against as women, fighting discrimination does not require one to acknowledge any essential 'reality' of womanhood beyond the shared experience of discrimination, any more than fighting racism requires one to accept any 'real' basis of 'race'. In order to combat discrimination, feminism is nothing less than superfluous. On the contrary, it still has a long way to go.

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# A Blog of One's Own

## British Feminism and Social Media in the 21st Century

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Feminism seems omnipresent these days. At the 2014 Music Video Awards, Beyoncé performed her song “\*\*\*Flawless” against the backdrop of the word FEMINIST on a huge screen; actress Emma Watson started a feminist book club on Instagram and publicly promotes HeforShe, a UN solidarity campaign for gender equality; the #MeToo Movement, originally started by Tarana Burke in 2006 but popularized in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse scandal of 2017, sparked a public debate about sexual harassment; in March 2017, up to five million people worldwide joined the Women’s March for equal rights; and most recently, the Time’s Up Movement campaigned for more gender equality in the workplace. It seems like a new kind of feminist activism has entered the scene largely outside academia, using pop culture and grassroots movements to create platforms for debates about equality. Women all over the world use social media

technologies such as blogs, podcasts, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Youtube or Instagram to promote their ideas and causes. In fact, online-based feminist activism has increased to such an extent that some of its proponents speak of a “fourth wave” of feminism (Cochrane 2013a). But what differentiates the ‘fourth wave’ from its predecessors? And who are its most influential advocates in Great Britain today?



Laura Bates © Conway Hall

## Feminists in the British Blogosphere

The central idea behind the ‘fourth wave’ is to make feminism accessible to the masses via technology. In Britain, one of the first campaigns using these tactics was Laura Bates’ *Everyday Sexism Project*. Founded in April 2012, this website encourages women to recount incidents of sexism in their everyday lives, ranging from workplace discrimination to assault and rape. Bates aimed at demonstrating that sexism is not a niche phenomenon but a harrowing reality for many women. The website was a huge success with more than 60,000 people giving testimony of their experiences with gendered discrimination. While many have praised the campaign for triggering a public debate about sexism (Kallaway, Klassen), others, like Germaine Greer (2014), for instance, have criticized its methods: “[u]npacking your heart with bitter words to an anonymous blog is no substitute for action”. It is true that the entries on the website are in no way moderated; they are simply left to speak for themselves. As a result, the blog leaves responsibility entirely with the authors and thus unintentionally presents them as victims of a system that they cannot change. Later projects, especially the #MeToo Movement begun in 2017 with its worldwide repercussions, by contrast, have been much more active in forcing perpetrators of sexualised violence into taking responsibility. Yet, the *Everyday*

*Sexism Project* has more than served its purpose in pointing out the extent to which society is still pervaded by patterns of gender inequality. Due to its success, the project was exported into 25 countries and published in book form with additional editorial comments. It therefore seems not quite fair to claim, as Germaine Greer has done, that words don’t translate into action. Because of its extensive press coverage, the blog succeeded in de-stigmatizing conversations about sexual violence.

Campaigns like the *Everyday Sexism Project* are an admirable way to engage people who might otherwise not consider questions of gender equality. The internet provides a veritable host of podcasts and blogs with a similar goal – that is, to re-locate feminism from the ivory tower of academia onto people’s phones. Holly Baxter’s and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett’s *The Vagenda*, a pop culture blog and self-proclaimed “media watchdog with a feminist angle” (Baxter/Cosslett), comedian Deborah Frances-White’s tongue-in-cheek online podcast *The Guilty Feminist* (turned into a face-to-face experience on a live tour in 2019) or Caitlin Moran’s website offer down-to-earth feminism for the masses. These British bloggers proudly call themselves feminists and do not shy away from covering controversial topics like rape culture, media stereotypes of women or the gender pay gap. Interestingly,



Deborah Frances-White, *The Guilty Feminist*  
Tour Poster

Courtesy of Hannah Allan

many of these authors even stress their decidedly non-academic approach to feminism. Their articles work primarily on an emotional level and frequently approach relevant issues in a humorous way, satirizing the style of glossy women's magazines. As Kira Cochrane, author of *All the Rebel Women* (2013) and key player in coining the term 'fourth wave', points out, humour can be used quite effectively as "a 'gateway drug' to get young women involved, a vehicle for political ideas and campaigning, as well as for rage" (Cochrane 2013b).

## Whatever Happened to Intersectionality?

A common criticism directed at this 'fourth wave' is that for all its talk of liberation, its technology focus perpetuates socio-economic inequalities within the movement, as only people with proper access to technology can participate. Moreover, women of colour, disabled women and LGBTQ+ women who promote issues that are not necessarily in line with dominant white, able, straight, cisgender feminist narratives are excluded. Initiatives that tackle Hollywood sexism or demand more women in CEO positions are laudable efforts to end gender-based discrimination, but they might not necessarily be the main concerns of, say, disabled women or women in the low-income sector of society. It is quite true that the social media activism that receives wide press coverage is usually that of white, middle class women who promote their own concerns, thus marginalizing issues such as racialized sexism, better social support programs for low-income single mothers or the discrimination of trans women in the debate. In short, intersectionality – the key term of 'third-wave' feminism – needs to be put back on the table. As Nagarajan and Okolosie (2012) suggest, we need to "move away from dissension into recognition of the diversity of our realities and voices. Feminism should not be an individualised

movement [...] we need to adopt a ‘no woman gets left behind’ policy. No woman is free until we are all free”.

In fact, there are already a great number of British online sources that tackle these concerns. *Gal Dem Magazine*, for instance, was founded by Liv Little as a response to the lack of media diversity and offers thoughtful articles about politics, art and lifestyle of (non-binary) women of colour. Blogs like *Racialiscious* and *Media Diversified* investigate the intersections of gender, race and pop culture in modern Britain. Chidera Eggerue, blogger and author of *What a Time to Be Alone* (2018), comments critically on racialized beauty standards, body shaming and media representations of black women in her podcast *The Slumflower* and on her Instagram account. One of the most influential non-academic feminists of recent years, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, achieved internet fame with her TEDx talk “We Should All Be Feminists” (2013) which has more than five million hits on Youtube. The talk was subsequently published in book form and was followed by Adichie’s *Dear Ijeawele* (2017), which is designed to help parents in raising their children as feminists. The British LGBTQ+ community also contributes to debates online through outlets such as *Trans Media Watch*, which monitors media representations of trans and intersex

issues, *META*, an online magazine concerned with trans and gender queer entertainment, or *Transadvocate UK*, a twitter account providing commentaries on trans concerns.

### Commercialising Feminism

So far, so good. However, the content and quality of these online publications varies considerably. While some offer profound feminist critiques, others operate with a rather shallow understanding of feminist theory. *The Vagenda*, for instance, nonchalantly balances columns on domestic abuse with Kim Kardashian’s corset diet. And there’s the rub. This free-for-all feminism has no control mechanisms, anyone can publish anything on any given subject. This is liberating, yes, but it can also lead to a bastardization of the term ‘feminism’. Since many of the websites are geared to be easily consumable rather than theoretical think-pieces, thorough analysis is sometimes bound to be neglected in favour of clickbait. Feminism, of course, is not – and never has been – a homogeneous movement. Nor should it be. Many different kinds of feminism coexist. Nonetheless, the issue of clickbait hints at a slightly more problematic aspect of this kind of online feminism: the question of financial interests. Ultimately, all online content must generate financial revenue, whether through product placement, advertisements, or book deals. Caitlin

Moran's book *How to Be a Woman* (2011) sold more than a million copies; Eggerue promotes make-up and fashion brands on her blog; Cosslett and Baxter signed a six-figure book deal for *The Vagenda* (2014). Profits are vital for these writers, which is why this commercialised kind of feminism is bound to be less independent than comparable academic work. After all, it is much harder to deliver a convincing critique of patriarchal capitalism if you have to be careful not to antagonise sponsors.

Occasionally, this alliance of 'fourth-wave' feminism with corporate capitalism goes even further. In 2013, fashion magazine *Elle* started a campaign to "re-brand" feminism as "a term that many feel has become burdened with complications and negativity" into something more consumable (Swerling). (Incidentally, *The Vagenda* founders Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett were among the "feminist groups" and "award-winning advertising agencies" asked to participate in *Elle's* re-branding endeavors.) Marketplace feminism – defined by Andi Zeisler (2017, xiii) as a feel-good, "decontextualized" and "depoliticized" call for superficial gender equality that never truly challenges patriarchal and neoliberal capitalist systems – is suddenly *en vogue*. L'Oréal sells an eye shadow palette that is called *The Feminist*; beauty blogs incite 'woke' feminist consumers to buy certain

products; Chanel's 2015 summer/spring collection transformed the catwalk into a pseudo-feminist demonstration complete with placards proclaiming 'Be Your Own Stylist.' Ironically, the trendy feminist can even buy 'The Future is Female' t-shirts sewn by women in the global south under inhumane sweatshop conditions. Feminism's 'fourth wave' has hit the mainstream, which is a good thing because more people are made aware of gender inequality. But if it is not backed by a critical assessment of the harmful effects of patriarchal and neoliberal structures on women's lives, feminism runs the risk of being reduced to a meaningless t-shirt slogan.

### **Laurie Penny's *Bitch Doctrine***

One of Britain's most essential contemporary feminist voices to point out this dangerous liaison is blogger and journalist Laurie Penny. Her latest non-fiction book *Bitch Doctrine: Essays for Dissenting Adults* (2nd edition, 2018) is an eclectic collection of articles as well as a manifesto of "straight-up pinko right-on lefty feminist rage" (Penny 2018, 4). On well over 400 pages, Penny takes a sweeping look at the ills of modern society: she eloquently discusses feminist marketing, domestic violence, cyberbullying, Donald Trump, the discrimination of sex workers, James Bond, body politics, the alt-right movement, trans rights, millennial anxiety, emotional labour,

toxic masculinity, the BREXIT and rape culture, to name but a few topics. Penny explores these diverse issues with great panache, sometimes with caustic wit, sometimes with empathy, sometimes with burning rage. Even though the author tends to overgeneralize and contradict herself at times, she manages to clearly delineate her position. What unites all of her writing – and separates her from the legions of more commercial feminist bloggers – are Penny’s fervent socialist politics. She combines applied feminist theory with a decided critique of neoliberal economic practices and an appeal for more solidarity. It is of course slightly contradictory to eschew neoliberal market practices while trying to sell books at the same time. Nonetheless, social equality is a genuine central concern of Penny’s work. To

put it more bluntly, even Marxists have to make a living, and it might as well be with articles denouncing capitalist patriarchy as the root of social inequality.

Penny’s essays, which are an unapologetically angry call to arms, are always political and demonstrate that she is first and foremost an activist: “Feminism is active. It’s not something you are; it’s something that you do” (Penny 2018, 20). Therefore, her outspoken support of the LGBTQ+ community is a welcome addition to contemporary feminist debates. Penny, who identifies as genderqueer, does not shy away from criticising established feminists for their queer- and transphobic tendencies: “taking a stand against violence and gender essentialism is what feminism is all about, and that’s precisely why solidarity with trans people should be the radical heart of the modern women’s movement.” (Penny 2018, 243)

This makes her an essential part of 21st-century feminism: she tries to steer the movement beyond the interests of middle-class cisgender women. However, Penny herself falls a bit short when it comes to including women of colour or women from a low-income background. As a white, middle-class, college-educated woman, she knows herself to be quite privileged. While she acknowledges this privilege in many of her essays, she rarely deliberates in depth what that specifically means for



The English journalist and writer Laurie Penny  
at Leipzig Bookfair 2016

© Amrei-Marie

her. She mentions issues that feminists of colour might voice, but in doing so, she occasionally sounds patroni-zing.

**B**ecause of her radical views and divisive rhetoric, Penny has become somewhat of a millennial feminist poster girl. Many media outlets concur with *Bitch Doctrine's* dust cover blurb that she is "one of the most urgent and vibrant feminist voices of our time". For this, Penny is equally idolized and reviled by critics, bloggers and online communities. The author candidly addresses these criticisms in her writing, but in doing so, she demonstrates a great deal of ambivalence. Her writings are frequently personal, she writes about her anorexia as a teen, her anxiety disorder, as well as her personal experiences of rape and online harassment (Penny 2017). Some critics call her narcissistic because of that, and it is true that her personal fame silences less privileged feminists. Penny herself, however, views her style as a weapon against faux-objectivity inherent to much academic writing. She argues convincingly that the personal is always political, particularly when it comes to gender and identity politics. To the claim of being overly provocative, she responds that "[a]nything any woman ever writes about politics is considered provocative, an invitation to dismissal and disgust and abuse". (Penny 2018, 10) Interestingly, Penny writes extensively about the ways in which

patriarchy forces women, especially female professionals, to compete with each other: "Feminist activists are pitted against one another, often against their will, as male-led outlets ask us to determine who's the best, as if women's liberation were just another axis on which to judge one another and fight for prizes, as if feminism were not a movement that needed all of us" (Penny 2018, 291).

**I**n this regard, her status as the media's favourite controversial feminist is a particularly vexing example of patriarchal structures at work: few women are allowed to be 'feminist authorities' and if they are, they are made to compete with each other and criticised for silencing other women – which is a shame because Penny definitely has substantial things to say about feminism today.

### **A Fourth Wave?**

**S**o what is the *status quo* of British feminisms in the early 21st century? At present, we still face a lack of inclusivity and diversity that must be overcome in the long run. A movement striving for true equality cannot simply focus on the liberation of affluent white women. Instead, it must take into consideration the complex concerns at the intersections of race, class, gender or disability. In this respect, the increasing digitalization of feminist debates can arguably help to level the field by creating bigger platforms for diverse feminist

concerns. Young people growing up with the internet have a vast amount of freely accessible feminist content at their disposal. Since anyone can publish their ideas in the blogosphere, we experience the liberation of knowledge. This free-for-all debate culture admittedly has its drawbacks, but on the upside one no longer needs to be able to afford college education to be part of contemporary gender debates. If we disregard the blatantly commercial contributions of marketplace feminism that only focus on individual consumption, we are still left with numerous thoughtful contributions – though it may take some effort to disentangle the two in our daily media usage. Feminism thus has the chance to thrive, particularly by including more diverse voices. To some extent, this diversification also includes the role of men within the movement. More traditional women's liberation advocates might criticise this notion, but influential 21st century feminists like Penny or Adichie see patriarchy as a problematic social system that inflicts structural violence on both women *and* men. To be clear, women at present experience inequality and discrimination to a greater extent than men, which is why female concerns are still at the heart of 'fourth-wave' feminism. Still, many contemporary feminists encourage men to not only come forward as allies in the struggle for gender equality, but also to address how

toxic masculinity affects their own lives.

In the face of such heterogeneous feminist movements, can we speak of a 'fourth wave'? The unprecedented use of social media and technology definitely sets many of the aforementioned writers and activists apart from previous feminists. Their distinctly non-academic approach succeeds in making the F-word acceptable to a whole new generation of women (and men). Despite their different tactics, 'fourth wavers' are still concerned with many issues central to previous waves. In the end, what unites all of the different waves is their shared concern for gender equality. Feminism, then, should perhaps not be seen as a set of successive waves. To quote Penny, it is rather "a great grumbling tsunami, moving slow, sweeping across a blighted landscape of received assumptions, washing away old certainties" (Penny 2018, 19). It is only when diverse strands of feminism come together in empathic support of each other that they can succeed at the sea change that is true equality.

## A Short Guide to Online Feminism

Chamamanda Ngozi Adichie: We Should All Be Feminists <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXUqWc>

Chidera Eggerue <https://soundcloud.com/theslumflower>

<https://www.instagram.com/theslumflower/>

The F-Word <https://www.thefword.org.uk/blog/>

Gal Dem Magazine <http://gal-dem.com/>

The Guilty Feminist <http://guiltyfeminist.com/>

Media Diversified <https://mediadiversified.org/about-us/>

Caitlin Moran <https://www.caitlinmoran.co.uk/>

Laurie Penny <http://laurie-penny.com/>

Racialicious <https://twitter.com/racialicious>

Trans Media Watch <https://twitter.com/TransMediaWatch>

UK Transadvocate <https://twitter.com/UKTransadvocate>

The Vagenda <http://vagendamagazine.com/>

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# TV Sitcom *Fleabag*: How to Be a Funny Feminist on Television. Or Maybe Not

Annette Pankratz  
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You know that feeling when you really get into a series and happily binge your way through all the episodes in one late-night sitting, only to wake up the next morning with a hangover and a strange taste in your mouth? This is what happened to me when I watched the first series of *Fleabag* (BBC, 2016)<sup>1</sup>, the sitcom created by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge. In 2017, the

show won the Writers' Guild of Great Britain Award for best TV situation comedy; Waller-Bridge won a BAFTA for best female performance in a comedy programme, the Royal Television Society Awards for Best Writing (Comedy) and Breakthrough Star of the Year, as well as the Broadcasting Press Guild Awards for best writer.<sup>2</sup> By 2018, Waller-Bridge was considered one of the leading

“dramedy queens: the women who built TV’s new golden age” (Press 2018). The same year, the BBC commissioned a second series of *Fleabag* to be broadcast in 2019. In short: Critics, TV executives and viewers are equally enthusiastic about *Fleabag*. But what about the strange aftertaste?

But maybe I should start at the beginning, with heavy breathing and the close-up of a door at night. A young



Not a happy family (from left to right):  
Godmother, Fleabag, Claire, Dad

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woman in a trench coat enters the frame and addresses the audience:

You know that feeling when a guy sends you a text at two o'clock asking if he can come and find you and you've accidentally made it out like you've just got in yourself. So you have to get out of bed, drink half a bottle of wine, shower, shave everything. Decide I'm going to up my game a bit. Dig out some Agent Provocateur business – suspender belt, the whole bit and wait by the door until the buzzer goes? (ep. 1, 00:16-00:31)

You know that feeling? I don't. Never mind for the moment and dig out some suspension of disbelief. The buzzer goes, the guy enters and very soon the two have sex in all possible positions. Despite her obvious physical commitment, the woman delivers a running commentary into the camera:

After some pretty standard bouncing, I realise he is edging towards my arsehole. I'm drunk, and owe him a 'thank you' for coming over, so – I let him. He's thrilled. The next morning, I wake to find him sitting on the bed, fully dressed, gazing at me. [...] He touches my hair and thanks me with genuine earnest. It's sort of moving. He kisses me gently. [...] And I spend the rest of the day wondering: Do I have a massive arsehole? (01:08-02:41; cf. Waller-Bridge 2013, 23)

### **(Post-)Feminism(s)**

The opening sets the tone for the entire show: *Fleabag* combines formal experiments with racy outspokenness. Protagonist Fleabag – the woman in the

trench coat – lives the life of an urban hedonist. She has on-screen sex, not only with Arsehole Guy (no offense, this is the only name we get to know him by), but also with her best friend's lover, someone she meets on the bus, her long-term partner Harry, a vibrator and – albeit indirectly – Barack Obama. She indulges in alcohol, nicotine and the occasional joint, usually hanging out with her best friend Boo (Jenny Rainsford) and guinea pig Hilary in their own rickety café.

The celebration of a liberated lifestyle is undercut by Fleabag's comments and her frequent moments of desperation. The sitcom developed out of a stand-up piece first performed at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2013, in which Waller-Bridge plays with the sympathies and antipathies of the spectators: "I knew I wanted to write about a young, sex-obsessed, angry, dry-witted woman, but the main focus of the process was her direct relationship with her audience and how she tries to manipulate and amuse and shock them, moment to moment, until she eventually bares her soul" (2013, vi). Adapting this strategy for TV seems to have worked brilliantly. As Stuart Heritage points out in his review for the *a*: *Fleabag* is full of unlikeable characters, "defeated and broken", but the series as a whole is "hilarious, obviously" (2016).

The protagonist's sarcasm not only highlights the absurdity of the situations she gets herself into;

her main target is herself. Behind the self-confident façade hide loneliness, insecurity and haunting memories, mainly circulating around two watershed moments: the death of her mother from breast cancer and the accidental suicide of Boo (after finding out about her lover's infidelity, she walks into a busy bike lane and is eventually killed by a car). This is enhanced by the filming and editing. The series works with a fast-paced montage of shot and counter-shot, thereby emphasising the isolation of the characters. We usually do not see two people engaged in a dialogue, but a succession of close-ups of (cartoon-like) talking heads, with Fleabag often addressing the audience and thereby adding even more distance between herself and her respective interlocutors.<sup>3</sup> The interspersed flashbacks from her point-of-view – to her crises with Harry or the good times with Boo – create narrative complexity and suspense, hinting at some unresolved trauma.

The combination of sex, wit and melancholy lends the sitcom a very specific flavour. It seems to encapsulate the feelings of a new generation, who see through the cant of sixties feminism and still have to put up with old-style patriarchy. In interviews, Waller-Bridge positions herself firmly in the feminist camp: “I think feminism is integral to everything that I’m trying to write but I didn’t know how to articulate my own

feelings. I wanted to explode the myth that feminism is without personality, and that women who talk about it are sanctimonious. *Fleabag* is me trying to inject some humour into the issue” (quoted in Bullimore 2016). The author here seems to have forgotten or suppressed the existence of sitcoms like *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-1996; 2001-2004) that already feature loud, unruly, sexually self-determined, unlikeable, but funny main characters. Moreover, *Fleabag* itself perpetuates the myth of feminism as drab and sanctimonious.

When the lecturer of the “‘Women Speak’ (since 1998)” series (Tree Waller-Bridge) asks her audience: “please raise your hands if you would trade five years of your life for the so-called perfect body” (ep. 1, 13:52-14:03), Fleabag and her sister Claire (Sian Clifford) are the only ones to raise their hands, admitting: “We are *bad* feminists” (14:12-14:13). The stepmother (Olivia Colman) claims to be a good feminist, believing in the power of “innate femininity” (22:45). As an artist, she professes to celebrate the female body in a “sexhibition”. But behind her stance of female solidarity lurks a narcissist ego full of malice. The exhibition hosts only self-portraits, statues of naked men and sculptures of penises. And when the family gathers for the commemoration of the dead mother, she greets the sisters with: “It’s a sad day, sad, sad day. I’ll get the



At the “Sexhibition”: Godmother, Arsehole Guy and Fleabag

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champagne” (ep. 5, 03:18-03:19).

The ambivalent attitude of the series towards feminism is very obvious in episode four. In order to commemorate their mother on Mother’s Day, Fleabag and her sister Claire are gifted a weekend at a very expensive country house by their father (Bill Paterson). In the “female only Breath of Silence Retreat” (ep. 4, 05:34), the Retreat Leader (Jenny Galloway) admonishes them that “women don’t speak” (05:34) and “a word must not be heard” (06:50). They find themselves in a group of women who scrub the floors or cut the lawn in order to rediscover their own spirituality. The therapeutic women-centredness sells Victorian misogyny as Zen exercise. It appears a sham to make money (and to save on

personnel). “We’ve paid them to let us clean their house in silence” (14:39-14:42), as Fleabag whispers to her sister. While the women adopt traditional roles, a group of men nearby practices anger management with plastic doll ‘Patricia’, which basically boils down to them shouting “slut” at the top of their lungs and kicking ‘Patricia’ around.

These only slightly exaggerated oppositions of traditional masculinity and femininity serve as frame for the two sisters’ personal dilemmas. Claire received an ardently craved promotion, but does not want to go to Finland and leave her husband and stepson, claiming that “My husband is my life” (17:16-17:17). Fleabag tries to come to grips with her betrayal of

Boo. (We find out at the end of the series that it was her who had the brief sexual encounter with Boo's lover that motivated the lethal accident.) Moreover, she meets her nemesis, the bank manager (Hugh Dennis) who refused her a loan in the first episode, called her "slut" and threw her out of his office (ep. 1, 08:12). Now the two form a friendship and she admits to him, of all people, "I cry all the time" (ep. 4, 22:24-22:26).

The series here follows a post-feminist strategy: depicting old-style feminism as a thing of the past, because nowadays women are both sexually liberated and full members of the market force. As Angela McRobbie has pointed out in *The Aftermath of Feminism*, the participation in a global neoliberal culture as supposed equals correlates with a new "sexual contract" (2009, 54), a return to

traditional gender roles. "Young women are able to come forward on condition that feminism fades away" (2009, 56). This perfectly describes Claire's personal predicament and her decision for family and husband. *Fleabag*'s life, however, is slightly more complex.

*Fleabag* does not indulge in simply cherishing neo-liberal consumption and a de-politicised, liberated and heteronormative life in the vein of Bridget Jones (cf. McRobbie 2009, 12; 20-23). It replaces the celebratory happy ending with a succession of problematic relationships. Arsehole Guy (Ben Aldridge) gets off on his own attractiveness, and a series of red herrings – him loving small breasts, anal intercourse and claiming that "I usually don't connect with women" (ep. 6, 02:09-02:11) – imply that he might be a closet

homosexual. At the end, he confesses to *Fleabag* that he has to leave her for a woman who is not really his type, because "I'm in love. [...] I don't wanna have sex with anyone else" (07:14-08:10). While *Fleabag*'s partner Harry (Hugh Skinner) has long and arduous sex ("making love", as he calls it), Bus Rodent (Jamie Demetriou) climaxes almost immediately ("I'm nearly finished. I'm nearly finished. I'm finishing. I'm finishing. I'm done, I'm done, I'm done", ep.



One of the few tender moments of the series: *Fleabag* and the Bank Manager having a smoke and a talk

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3, 22:40-22:49). Both men mean well and have a sensitive side, but they also lack *Fleabag*'s intellectual acumen. When buying a sex toy for her sister's birthday, she runs rings around Bus Rodent when he is intrigued by a plastic vagina:

Bus Rodent: You should totally get one of those.

Fleabag: A vagina?

Rodent: Yeah.

Fleabag: Oh, I've already got one.

Rodent: Really? You have? No, you've got one?

Fleabag: I take it with me everywhere.

Rodent: Look, no, you lie. You don't have one on you now?

Fleabag: Yeah. [Into the camera] Never gonna get it.

Rodent: Where? [...]

Fleabag: Ha, you got me! I don't carry a vagina around with me. That'd be way too provocative. [Into the camera] Didn't get it. (13:45-14:18)

## White Girls with Class

Decca Aitkenhead praises *Fleabag* as revolutionary, "[rewriting] the grammar of television comedy overnight [...] being unlike anything on TV before" (2017). She probably has not been watching TV for quite a while. Waller-Bridge herself admits to being indebted to the American series *Girls* (2013-; cf.

Bullimore 2016). The parallels are indeed rather striking. In both 21st-century London and New York, the characters are twenty-to-thirty somethings who enjoy sex, nudity, sending snapshots of their genitals via smartphone, drunkenness and drugs. Both *Fleabag* and *Girls* protagonist Hannah Horvath (Lena Dunham) leave their lovers and grapple with loneliness and lack of money.

British critics like David Baddiel and Stuart Heritage, amongst others, have found another possible source of inspiration: BBC One's popular flagship *Miranda* (2009-2013). Protagonist Miranda (Miranda Hart) also loves to break the fourth wall. Each episode opens with a brief monologue, contains occasional asides and conspiratorial glances into the camera. Both shows developed from semi-autobiographical stand-up pieces and feature inept entrepreneurs (Miranda owns a joke shop), who run businesses together with their blonde best friends and who have to deal with adulthood, their families and loves. Both also cultivate a self-deprecatory stance and show a predilection for hunky, funky and stubbly men.

More importantly, *Girls*, *Miranda* and *Fleabag* share the same ideological underpinning, representing a middle-class norm of white privilege. In *Miranda*, this serves as one of the central elements of the comedy. Hart relishes in making fun of the antics of

the Establishment, especially of her boarding school days. In one episode, the tall and lanky Miranda gallops in the corridor (s1, ep. 3). Meeting up with her school friends – “Milly, Tilly, Bella, Bunty, Hootie, Pussy, Puggle and Podge” (s1, ep. 1, 02:46-02:47) – always triggers a relapse into school jargon, giggles and “kissingtons” (09:05).

In contrast to *Miranda*, *Fleabag* neither makes fun of nor problematises the class position of its main characters. It takes white bourgeois entitlement for granted and thereby naturalises it. Even more, it creates sympathy for the plight of the well-off. The audience sees *Fleabag* struggling with her café: Hardly any customers come and when they do, they hardly consume anything. The question of getting or not getting a loan from the bank here serves as an important narrative frame. The clash with the bank manager introduces *Fleabag*’s precarious life in episode one (and lest we forget, at every meeting, the stepmother loves to remind her of her financial problems); the surprise encounter in episode four marks a turning point; finally, episode six culminates in the visit of the manager at the café, a reconciliation and a kind of happy ending.

The threatening bankruptcy and precariousness are relative, though. Affluent career-sister Claire could and would lend money, *Fleabag* just refrains from asking her (ep. 1, 10:07-10:30).

When she gingerly approaches the topic of a loan, her father prevaricates, because he plans to buy a farmhouse in France (ep. 5). It is quite clear, however, that he would and could help her out when push came to shove.

Money has nothing to do with happiness, anyway. On the contrary, the wealthy have problems that members of the underclass cannot fathom, or so the series seems to suggest. In sitcoms with a lower- or working-class cast like *Shameless* (2004-2013) or *Stella* (2012-2017), the families grieve the loss of a parent, but manage to muddle through and cope. In *Fleabag*, the whole family seems to be paralysed and traumatised by the death of the mother. We see wonderful houses, lovely apartments and stylish interiors filled with misery. In the case of Claire, money and wealth even aggravate her marital crisis, as husband Martin (Brett Gelman) feels inadequate in view of his wife’s career and takes to drink.

The critics praise *Fleabag* as representative of a whole generation of young women. They do not mention class or ethnicity. And indeed, the series is not *Midsomer Murders* (1996-), the “last bastion of [white] Englishness” (according to erstwhile producer Brian True-May). *Fleabag*’s politics of representation acknowledges London’s actual demographics. Bus Rodent and

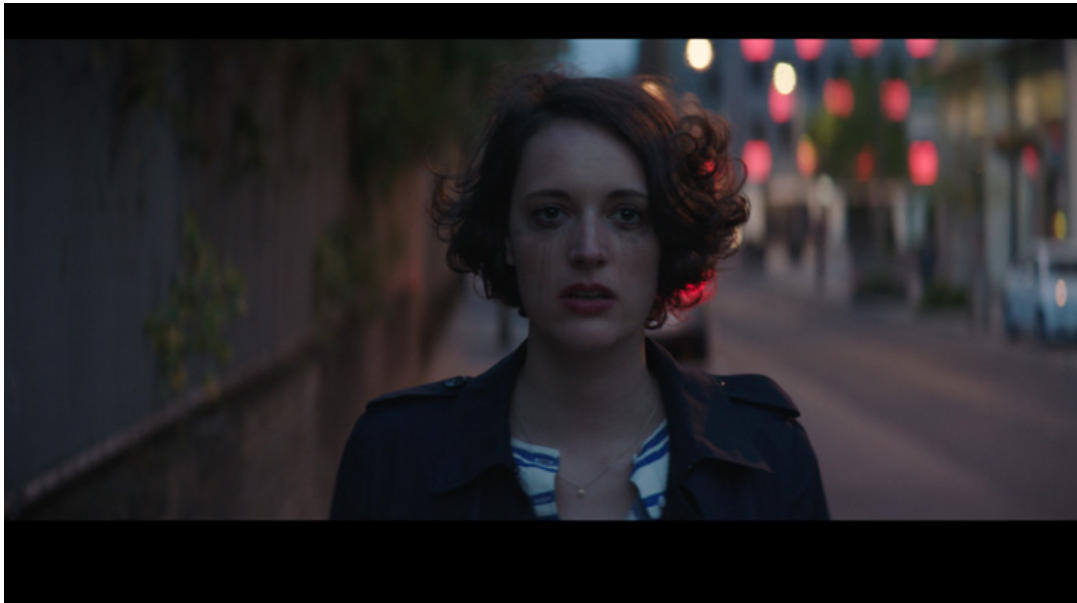
Boo's lover are mixed-race; most of the customers in the café and the passengers on the London Underground are black; Harry's new partner Elaine is Asian, all of them well-behaved and well-dressed. This framing implies that ethnicities no longer play an important role; racism and xenophobia do not seem to exist, everyone embraces multi-culturality; everyone is equal and equally middle class. The plot just happens to focus on white people.

### Cultural Resonances

Naturalising a white upper-middle class lifestyle correlates with implicitly setting up the heterosexual family as norm. Admittedly, *Fleabag* presents patchwork and problem families, but this is a far cry from the ideal of collective living advocated by the Women's Liberation Movement and only highlights the traditional nuclear family as universal norm. *Fleabag* takes sexual emancipation into the 21st century without political agenda. She might be sex-obsessed, but she is so in a serially monogamous way with the implicit goal to have a partner to bring to family functions and to have children with. When copulating with Arsehole Guy, Fleabag feels the biological clock ticking: "Madame Ovary is telling me to run back to safe place. It can make baby in safe place" (ep. 2, 13:11-13:16). She panics and briefly gets back with Harry.

Queerness or homosexuality only figure in tiny doses, often as jokes, as when Fleabag threatens her sister with pretending that they are a lesbian couple (ep. 4) or when a completely drunken woman mistakes her for a man (ep. 1). In that respect, Miranda plays it less straight. Hart makes the most of her androgyny and has her character perform gender as if in female drag. In one episode she is even complimented by a cross dresser: "you could pass" (s1, ep. 1, 21:02). Where Fleabag always carries her vagina with her, Miranda sometimes sports a chocolate penis.

And yet. The high critical acclaim and the wide fan base indicate a high cultural resonance of the sitcom. What does it resonate with, then? The critics highlight the sex, sarcasm and the vulnerability of its protagonist. According to Elizabeth Alsop, in *Fleabag* (and also *Girls*), "'weak' characters undermine the conflation of complexity with an implicitly masculine code of values" (2016) and thereby destabilise fixed gender roles. But Fleabag hardly ever admits to being weak or vulnerable in public. The play with the camera indicates the split between her outer poise and the reactions which she only shares with the viewers but keeps hidden from others. With a view to her class position, one can read her behaviour as the return of the good old stiff upper lip. In this, she resembles yet another



Rare breakdown: Fleabag in the last episode of the first series

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young woman who has to struggle with her love life, family and job: Elizabeth Windsor in her most recent, equally dark, handsome and posh incarnation by Claire Foy in *The Crown* (2016-). In *Fleabag*, the thoroughbred horses have been replaced by a guinea pig, and compared to the stuffy and prudish morals of the 1950s, women have come a long way. What unites the two series is the notion that the best of international Britishness consists of a sense of class, humour and self-control. And maybe it is not a coincidence that Fleabag's stepmother Olivia Colman will replace Claire Foy as Elizabeth II in the third series of *The Crown*. 2019 promises to be another good year for dramedy queens: in February, Colman won an Academy Award as Queen Anne in *The Favourite* (2018); the second series of *Fleabag* (starring Colman, Waller-Bridge and Andrew "Moriarty" Scott) starts 3 March.

I will binge on. Never mind the aftertaste.

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## Endnotes

1 Originally released on BBC Three in July, broadcast on BBC Two in August and lastly distributed by Amazon Prime in September 2016.

2 Waller-Bridge was also commissioned to write the first series of the award-winning *Killing Eve* (2018-).

3 Thanks to Ingrid von Rosenberg for pointing this out.

# HARD TIMES



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## *The State of the Left*

Eds. Sebastian Berg and Luke Martell