Transmisogyny, Colonialism and Online Anti-Trans Activism Following Violent Extremist Attacks in the US and EU

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Executive Summary

This report investigates the rise of online anti-trans activism following two prominent attacks involving LGBTQ+ communities, namely the October 2022 attack on a gay bar in Bratislava, Slovakia, and the March 2023 shooting at a school in Nashville, Tennessee perpetrated by a trans man.

We use a postcolonial approach, through which we find that the transphobia espoused online following the attacks was predominantly transmisogynistic, a consequence of the colonial logics around gender which assign the monopoly of violence to white cisgender men. The main themes identified were the erasure of trans identities, particularly transmasculinity, the overlap between transmisogyny and other forms of discrimination, and the demonisation of trans people.

The most important conclusion from our research is for everyone – technology companies, policymakers and other stakeholders – to take transphobia and transmisogyny seriously. Too often transmisogyny is seen as a side problem, or as a complement to another set of more radical ideas, including but not limited to white nationalism or anti-government sentiment. It can often be the case that transphobia, alongside misogyny, hate speech, or other forms of discrimination, is seen as "harmful but lawful" or described as "borderline content", thereby not in need of online moderation. While simply removing such material from platforms may be neither appropriate nor advisable in all cases, there are other forms of content moderation that platforms can consider, depending on how online transphobia manifests itself.

In the conclusion of our work, we provide practical recommendations to technology companies of all sizes for tackling transphobia more effectively. Key among these are the importance of knowledge-sharing between platforms and subject matter experts, defining transphobia and transmisogyny in platforms' terms of service, and employing content moderation practices such as disinformation tags and algorithmic deprioritisation.

Recommendations for technology companies

1. Increase online monitoring following attacks that are directly relevant to the LGBTQ+ community as transphobic content is likely to increase, including material that violates terms of service, incites violence or is otherwise illegal.

2. Collaborate with experts to comprehend and classify transphobic rhetoric, and produce a taxonomy alongside subject-matter specialists, technology representatives, civil society, and government partners.

3. Consider diverse moderation methods, removing illegal content and also using alternatives to removal such as fact-checking and algorithmic adjustments to mitigate exposure to transphobic channels and content.

4. Define transphobia in terms of service to guide users as to what is allowed on platforms and enable user reporting.

5. Design clear reporting and appeal mechanisms for moderated content, including online transphobia, to protect digital and human rights.

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1 Introduction

Anti-trans activism is on the rise. In the US, 2023 has seen an unprecedented 500+ bills targeting trans rights, particularly gender-affirming care.[1] In the UK, the Conservative Government announced it was considering changing the legal definition of sex under the Equality Act to "sex at birth".[2] This heightened transphobia has extended into online spaces: one study found that 15% of online comments over a three-year period could be considered transphobic, including calls for trans genocide.[3] Likewise, some accounts on a large, popular social media platform have used anti-queer and anti-trans rhetoric to provoke bomb threats against eleven schools and school districts in September 2023 alone.[4] Accompanying this rash of online and legislative activity is a steep increase in transphobic violence, including a 56% rise in hate crimes in the UK between 2021 and 2022.[5]

Nevertheless, transphobia is often treated as "borderline content" by online platforms: material that is harmful but not necessarily illegal or against platform rules. Concerns about such borderline content have risen in recent years due to the proliferation of new legal frameworks for online content regulation, including the EU's Digital Services Act and Canada's proposed Online Harms Framework.

Legality aside, so-called borderline content can do considerable harm. What forms does transphobia need to take to warrant content removal, such as when content incites violence or contains a credible and immediate threat to life?

In this report, we emphasise the need for technology companies, policymakers, and industry partners to address transphobia, on a par with their efforts against other harmful content, and suggest ways they can do so. This work also offers wider contributions to a growing body of literature regarding content moderation, free speech, and human rights. It examines a form of online hate with the potential for offline violence that is complex and versatile, and that will need a varying response including, in some cases, content removal, while in others the use of alternative methods of content moderation.

In analysing anti-trans activism, scholars, practitioners, and technology companies have tended to either downplay transphobia or treat it as a siloed phenomenon, distinct from or at most an additional layer of hatred espoused by some far-right actors. This can result in an incomplete understanding of far-right ideology, at best, and an active downplaying of anti-trans rhetoric and violence, at worst.

1 "Trans Legislation Tracker," 2023, https://translegislation.com/.
2 Aubrey Allegretti, "What Would Changing the Equality Act Mean for Trans People and Single-Sex Spaces?," *The Guardian*, 5 April 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/law/2023/apr/05/what-would-changing-the-equality-act-mean-for-trans-people-and-single-sex-spaces.
3 "Exposed: The Scale of Transphobia Online – Exploring Transphobia and Pro-Trans Conversation on Social Media," Brandwatch, https://www.brandwatch.com/reports/transphobia/.
4 Tess Owen, "Schools Report Bomb Threats Following Libs of TikTok Anti-LGBTQ Posts," *VICE News*, 4 October 2023, https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvj5dq/schools-report-bomb-threats-following-libs-of-tiktok-anti-lgbtq-posts.
5 Ashitha Nagesh, "Hate Crimes Recorded by Police up by More Than a Quarter," *BBC News*, 6 October 2022, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-63157965.

We take a different approach in this report by starting from settler colonialism as the system enabling both transphobia and white supremacy to grow. Writing about settler colonialism in North America, Scott Lauria Morgensen argues that "gendered and sexual power relations appear to be so intrinsic to procedures of indigenous elimination and settler indigenization" that it is impossible to understand colonialism without making gender central to our analyses.[6] We extend this logic to argue that it is not possible to understand the politics of contemporary discourses around gender and sex without paying attention to their colonial logics. When we do centre coloniality, we arrive at a more complete understanding not only of anti-trans activism, but also of the mainstream prevalence of transphobic discourse.

In this report, we undertake a thematic analysis of English-language transphobia on a range of online platforms, spanning small image-based forums (chanboards) and medium messaging platforms to large social media platforms after two major attacks involving LGBTQ+ communities: the October 2022 shooting that targeted an LGBTQ+ bar in Bratislava, Slovakia and the March 2023 shooting at a school in Nashville, Tennessee perpetrated by a trans man.[7] In doing so, this article raises implications for understanding and countering online transphobia and transmisogyny, focusing on both the narratives found in online spheres and the ubiquity of this rhetoric across online spaces following attacks that are relevant to LGBTQ+ identities.

Using a postcolonial approach, we find that online transphobia is overwhelmingly transmisogynistic (in that it primarily targets trans women) and that this dominance of transmisogyny is an inevitable extension of colonial ideas about gender that assign white cisgender men a monopoly on the use of violence. Furthermore, we find that transmisogyny takes precedence over other far-right talking points such as gun rights, underscoring the centrality of colonial gender roles to upholding authoritarianism and structural white supremacy. Our findings underline that transphobia is not just another far-right ideology – its logics are, in fact, crucial to upholding far-right systems of oppression. Any measures targeting anti-trans activism that do not acknowledge its coloniality will fall short of stopping broader societal transphobia.

The rest of this report proceeds as follows. Firstly, we outline in more detail what a postcolonial approach to online anti-trans activism can reveal about the politics and prevalence of transphobia in both far-right and mainstream discourses. We then outline our data and methodology before exploring the case studies of Nashville and Bratislava in more detail. Following this, we outline three prominent narratives: the erasure of trans identities, the other forms of discrimination related to transmisogyny, and the demonisation of trans people. We conclude with implications of our analysis and findings for technology companies seeking to protect trans users and minimise hate on their platforms.

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6   Scott Lauria Morgensen, "Theorising Gender, Sexuality and Settler Colonialism: An Introduction," *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 2 (2012): 10.

7   "Slovakia: Two Dead After Shooting Outside LGBT Bar," *BBC News*, 13 October 2022, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-63239523; "What We Know About the Nashville School Shooting," *New York Times*, 13 September 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/article/nashville-school-shooting.html.

2 A Postcolonial Approach to Anti-Trans Activism

Analysing online anti-trans activism through the framework of coloniality, we argue, makes clear that transphobia generally, and transmisogyny specifically, are foundational to European and North American ideas of how society should be organised and who is allowed to commit violence. Considering coloniality allows us to demonstrate the innate white supremacy of transphobia: rooted in settler colonialism, tightly prescribed gender roles made colonised societies simpler to understand and easier to control. Trans people, and particularly trans women, not only challenge these gender roles, but they expose them as roles chosen by colonisers rather than natural states of being. Transmisogyny – the specific oppression of transgender women – is not only a defence of colonial-style control, but also a reassertion of the desirability of masculinity and everything that comes with it.[8] This includes, crucially, the ability and authority to enact violence and aggression.

By *coloniality* we mean the lasting presence of colonial power structures in contemporary societies. European settler colonialism required not only religious and moral justifications to make its violence palatable to European publics, but also practical tools to enable the day-to-day subjugation of colonised peoples. Racial, religious, ethnic, and gender hierarchies fulfilled both roles. By presenting colonised peoples as "Others" in need of "civilising", European colonisers at once devalued indigenous ideas of gender, religion, and community, while erasing alternative ideas within European societies themselves. In so doing, they presented a binary idea of gender, equated with a binary notion of sex, as a "natural" state of affairs that could only be cultivated by white European traditions.[9] The resulting system of domination was *cisheteropatriarchy* – the simultaneous exaltation of cisgenderism and heterosexuality as "normal", and the elevation of cisgender, heterosexual men as society's natural leaders.[10]

Beyond erasing the pasts of colonised peoples and creating a "civilising" mission for colonisers,[11] cisheteropatriarchy had the added benefit of making colonised people "legible" to colonial governments.[12] If gender was deducible from physical characteristics, and if each gender had a delimited labour role within society (work outside the home for men; bearing children for women), then it was immediately clear to colonial administrators who should be doing what – and by extension, who was *not* doing what and thus deserving of either violent reeducation or elimination. Dubbed "the intimacies of empire" by historian Albert Hurtado, these ideas around gender – which, in serving to differentiate the coloniser and colonised, were also always ideas

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8   On transmisogyny, see Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Seal Press, 2007).

9   Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," *Representations* 26 (1989): 107–22.

10   Kody Muncaster, "Cisheteropatriarchy," in *Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education*, ed. Kamden K. Strunk and Stephanie Anne Shelton (Brill, 2021), 87–88.

11   Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (Grove Atlantic, 1961).

12   James Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, (Yale University Press, 1998).

about race – secured political authority for colonisers by managing marriage, domestic life, child-rearing, sexual relations, and sex work.[13] Without clear gender roles, determining who was subject to which rules (or privileges) under colonial rule became more complicated, harder to police and thus undesirable.

In such a system, someone who identified as a third or nonbinary gender, who transgressed the gender role assigned to them by colonisers based on their appearance, or who troubled normalised categories of classification by not aligning visually with idealised masculinity or femininity (even if they identified as a man or woman) became a threat. This was precisely because their existence revealed that colonial categories of rule were constructs, thereby casting doubt on the presumed moral justifications for colonialism itself.

Importantly, hierarchies developed and enforced under colonialism did not disappear with the formal independence of colonised countries. Both colonial power hierarchies and the ideas that present them as natural and unremarkable – what decolonial scholar Anabel Quijano calls the "coloniality of knowledge" – remain "the most general form of domination in the world today".[14] Contemporary far-right ideology, rooted in colonial frameworks of domination, is therefore similarly unsettled by and antagonistic towards trans people because trans people reveal that reductive and prescribed gender roles are tools of power, not natural inevitabilities. To keep colonial logics stable, anti-trans activists must present trans people as disturbed and monstrous, if not call for their outright elimination.

Trans women, in particular, upset colonial patterns of control by challenging the devaluing of femininity in the public sphere. In European colonial formulations, gender was reduced from its precolonial complexities to a way of understanding, and by extension controlling, sex and reproduction. Colonised women were given the inferior, weak, undesirable status of "woman" without any of the privileges that accompanied that status for white, bourgeois women, instead being viewed as more animal than human.[15]

Thus "woman" in the colonial mindset was either submissive and requiring male protection or inferior and animalistic; neither construction of femininity was, ultimately, desirable in comparison to the power and dominance associated with "man". Even trans men, despite their deviation from strict equivalences of gender and sex, are somewhat legible within this system. If cisgender people assume gender transition is to some extent about what a person can gain from transitioning, the perceived desire for the trappings of masculinity makes sense.[16] Paradoxically, this way of understanding transmasculinity, despite its incorrect reading of transition and transness, furthers colonial gender roles by emphasising male superiority: masculinity is the desirable gender role to which a woman might understandably aspire.

13   Albert L. Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California*, (University of New Mexico Press, 1999); Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (2001): 829–65.

14   Anabel Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 170; Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of De-coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 449–514.

15   María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 203.

16   Serano, *Whipping Girl,* 147.

By comparison, there is nothing desirable within colonial gender formations about femininity, however racialised. Trans women in this framework become even more deviant, in that they are seen as men willingly giving up masculine power in favour of the constructed weakness of femininity.[17] By "relinquishing" masculinity of their own free will, trans women further cast doubt on the desirability of other aspects of colonial masculinity – namely, and crucially, the right to commit violence. Violent women were already viewed as aberrations or "monsters", intruding as they did on the provenance of men;[18] trans women "rejecting" this provenance was unfathomable. That someone would give up their perceived right to legitimate violence again throws the entire power structure of colonialism into question, rendering transness as a threat to the persistence of the colonial order.

As colonial institutions and practices remain, so too do transphobia and transmisogyny as central ideas making these institutions and practices seem normal and natural. This normalisation means transphobia is not solely the provenance of the far-right: in unsettling gender relations from which all sorts of people derive power, not only far-right actors, trans people are seen as threatening by many mainstream actors. Bolstered by trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), self-identified liberal and left-wing actors propagate anti-trans discourses instead of confronting the precarity of their own positions as women under patriarchy and the simultaneous privileges patriarchy affords through their other identities (usually, but not exclusively, whiteness).

This presentation of transphobia as a reasonable liberal and even progressive position allows transphobes to distance themselves from the far-right and present it as uniquely and unacceptably racist, homophobic, and so on, ignoring that transphobia stems from and is upheld by the very colonial positions they self-righteously condemn.[19] At their roots, then, transphobia and transmisogyny are inextricably connected to the exaltation of colonial power structures that underlie the contemporary far-right, even when they are expressed by liberal or progressive actors.[20]

Implications of a Postcolonial Analysis

In summary, approaching transphobia through the framework of coloniality shines light on three key implications for understanding contemporary anti-trans activism:

i.   Transphobia is a central principle of the white far-right. It should be understood as foundational to far-right views, rather than as merely an additional component of far-right ideology.

ii. Given that transphobia is central, other far-right narratives that make furthering transphobia more difficult or call it into question can be subverted or dismissed at particular times and places. This is not

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17   Rachel Loewen Walker, "Call It Misogyny," *Feminist Theory* 25, no. 1 (2022): 12.
18   Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*, (Zed Books, 2007).
19   Jenny Andrine Madsen Evang, "Is 'Gender Ideology' Western Colonialism? Anti-Gender Rhetoric and Misappropriation of Postcolonial Language," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2022): 365–86.
20   Andrea Smith, "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy," in *Color of Violence*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Duke University Press), 71–72.

evidence of an incoherent or "unstable" ideology, but is central to upholding white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy.

iii. Cisheteropatriarchy elevates masculinity as desirable and naturally so, so transmasculine people – understood by far-right actors as women "aspiring" to be men – will be viewed as less threatening to the established order and may be erased entirely. The focus remains on trans women as threats because cisheteropatriarchy presents the idea of men "aspiring" to be women as unthinkable (however incorrect this formulation of trans identity is), as well as a betrayal of their in-group.

3 Methodology

Case Studies

To further examine our claims about transmisogyny and the far-right, we examined two case studies: the attacks carried out in Bratislava, Slovakia in October 2022 and Nashville, Tennessee, US in March 2023. These attacks were specifically chosen due to their relevance to LGBTQ+ identities, including the targeting of LGBTQ+ victims, reference to LGBTQ+ demographics in attacker-produced content, and the prominence of anti-LGBTQ+ narratives in supporter networks and mainstream media following the attacks.

Bratislava, Slovakia

On 12 October 2022, an attacker fatally shot two people outside an LGBTQ+ bar in Bratislava, Slovakia; a third person was wounded.[21] The attack perpetrator released a digital manifesto prior to the attack,[22] and interacted with users on the notorious subculture forum 4chan after the attack, before killing themself. The attack perpetrator declared that the attack was specifically directed against the LGBTQ+ space. That said, their overall ideology, as explained in the manifesto, also highlighted antisemitism as a key driver and a desire to attack other locations, including a Jewish community centre. Finally, the manifesto also mirrored that of the Christchurch attack perpetrator who killed 51 people in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019.

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

On 27 March 2023, an attacker fatally shot six people in a private, Christian elementary school in Nashville, Tennessee, USA, and wounded one other.[23] The attack perpetrator, identified after the attack as a transgender man and former student at the school, was fatally shot by police during the attack. According to police reports, the attack perpetrator wrote a manifesto, which has not been released publicly, although legal challenges to this decision may allow the text to be made publicly available in future.

Both attacks were heavily documented by far-right communities online, including communities that have displayed support for other perpetrators of extreme violence, such as the Christchurch, New Zealand 2019 attack perpetrator.[24] These cases therefore allow us to examine how online content following attacks involving LGBTQ+ identities spreads online and what can be done to counter this, which we address in the conclusion of this report.

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21 Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 147.
22 "Far-Right Lone-Actor Terrorist Attacks and Violent Extremist Use of File-Sharing Platforms," Terrorist Content Analytics Platform, 5 January 2023, https://terrorismanalytics.org/research-news/Bratislava-analysis.
23 Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 147.
24 "Two Years On: Understanding the Resonance of the Christchurch Attack on Imageboard Sites," Global Network on Extremism and Technology, March 24 2021, https://gnet-research.org/2021/03/24/two-years-on-understanding-the-resonance-of-the-christchurch-attack-on-imageboard-sites/.

Data

We based our case studies on an analysis of text-based posts on a range of social media and messaging platforms. We took a network-based approach to data collection, rather than focusing on specific platforms. Our data collection targeted small image-based forums (for example, 4chan), medium-sized messaging platforms (such as Telegram) and large social media platforms (namely Facebook and X (formerly Twitter)). This offered clearer insight into wider network discourse, rather than a focus on the narratives perpetuated by a specific community.

Our data collection began with communities that had previously been supportive of far-right attack perpetrators, as this was most likely to yield results in discourse around attacks. To identify these communities, we used key term searches on content-hosting platforms, including searches that used deliberate content moderation evasion techniques (such as misspellings and phoneticism), with which extremist communities can circumvent the content moderation efforts of technology platforms. From these starting points, we used a snowballing method to analyse fringe networks and related communities, and we cross-referenced communities across multiple platforms.

In collecting data, we used a two-pronged approach to identifying content likely to be relevant to the research. Firstly, we selected attack-related content that received significant interaction from the audience. Secondly, we conducted key-term searches relating to LGBTQ+ identities, slurs, transmisogyny, and related themes within pre-defined online spaces. To ensure we were not simply observing one narrow slice of far-right online activity, we also employed this methodology to search for inverse terms, such as key terms relating to trans men versus trans women.

We employed reflexive thematic analysis to interpret the data. Research into online transmisogyny, specifically in far-right spaces, is in its infancy. Thus, we were most interested in providing a foundation for future research by seeking to explain how transmisogynistic narratives – primarily in relation to attacks involving LGBTQ+ identities – currently occur in these spaces. As such, we opted for reflexive thematic analysis as its adaptive nature does not assume a data-coding process exists or can be easily generated for a set of data.

We identified a range of broad themes, all of which could provide a potential focus for future research, which might result in more nuanced analysis of a particular finding. Reflexive thematic analysis also allowed us to consider our own experiences, expertise, and potential biases in the data analysis stage of the research. In short, this approach mitigates the risk of reifying dominant narratives within the research, and also allows for subject-matter expertise and the inclusion of marginalised perspectives that are unlikely to be easily encoded and analysed with other methods.[25]

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25   Lorelli S. Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017).

Ethical Considerations

In collecting data, we upheld a strict non-engagement policy, and so only collected publicly available information from social media, messaging channels, message boards, and forums. We did not interact with individuals, request to join specific online spaces, or create online personas to influence others into thinking we were part of the same communities.

We have not at any point collected, analysed, or logged any form of personally identifiable information (PII). No online users or individuals can be identified from the final report. By omitting names of specific platforms, channels, groups, and key terms, we have ensured that readers cannot be redirected to violent spaces online.

To conduct this research, all authors were exposed to potentially harmful online content. We factored our mental wellbeing into the research through regular team debriefs, limits on time spent viewing content, and, where necessary, sessions with a qualified therapist to discuss exposure to the content.

4 Thematic Analysis

We identified a range of themes from the data, some of which were consistent across the two attacks and some of which showed differences in responses. This section will outline each theme with inference on the likely colonial roots of the narrative.

Erasure of Trans Identities

The erasure of trans identities is common among far-right networks, with the refusal to accept trans identities as valid, the labelling of trans people as mentally ill, and the deliberate use of incorrect pronouns, for example. This process of erasure manifested differently across the two case studies. Responses to the Nashville attack focused primarily on discursively punishing the perpetrator for being a trans man, namely by using "it" pronouns, rather than "he" or "him". Posters went as far as to correct others who misgendered the perpetrator with "she" or "her", stating that "it" was the appropriate pronoun. "It" can be considered a neopronoun and is used by some nonbinary people to better reflect their gender identity. However, in this case, the use of "it" asserted that the perpetrator, by living openly as a trans person, was no longer human – a continuation of colonial logics in which trans people represent an existential threat to dominant social relations and must be thoroughly erased as a result.

In contrast, responses to the Bratislava attack were notable for their distinct lack of messaging around trans identities immediately relevant to the attack. Posts did contain significant transphobic themes, which is interesting in itself given that the target of the attack, an LGBTQ+ bar, was not an explicitly trans target. Still, discourse in our data around Bratislava focused almost exclusively on the attack perpetrator, with very few messages containing information about the victims. In previous cases of far-right attacks on marginalised communities, far-right networks have exploited attackers' choice of victims to foment hate against related demographics, such as increased Islamophobia following the Christchurch, New Zealand attack in March 2019.[26]

The decision by posters on far-right networks not to centre general homo/queer/transphobia in discussing Bratislava is therefore conspicuous. However, those posts that did discuss victims included a significant volume of slurs specifically targeting trans people and gay men. Though the Bratislava perpetrator's identity did not make it possible for far-right networks to directly position trans people as a source of violence, as was the case in our data around Nashville, posters still used violent language against victims of the

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26   "Muslims in Australia Experienced Surge of Hate after Christchurch Massacre, Report Reveals," *The Guardian*, 14 March 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/mar/15/muslims-in-australia-experienced-surge-of-hate-after-christchurch-massacre-report-reveals.

Bratislava attack. This manoeuvre allowed posters to contribute to broader discourses positioning LGBTQ+ people as inferior and deserving of hate.

A highly prominent theme across both cases was the erasure of transmasculine and nonbinary identities at the expense of the focus on transfeminine identities. For example, the Nashville attacker, later confirmed as a trans man, was immediately assumed by far-right networks to be a trans woman. This assumption that the attacker was a trans woman resulted in a significant uptick in messaging relating to the supposed danger posed by trans women, focusing on the narrative of the need to protect namely white cisgender women from trans women. Likewise, the Bratislava attacker's manifesto included nearly a full page devoted to trans people, focusing on trans women exclusively and discussing the attacker's belief that they are not equal to cis women.

This focus on trans women both reasserts Eurocentric femininity as the only valid kind of femininity and associates transfemininity with aberrant, exceptional violence: within colonial gender logics, after all, men do not commit "illegitimate" terrorist or extremist violence. This also furthers the gendered constructs around the respective roles of cisgender men and women in violence and gendered logics of protection.[27] Feminist scholars of international relations have shown how cisgender women, positioned as " beautiful souls", need to be protected, whereas cisgender men need to fight to protect women.[28] This narrative draws on heteronormative conceptions of femininity and masculinity that lead to violence perpetrated by women being viewed as exceptional and in need of an explanation, whereas violence perpetrated by men is assumed normal and even necessary.

This logic extends to far-right networks responding to the Nashville attack. The assumption that the attacker must have been a trans woman rather than a trans man – leading to the denial and erasure of the attacker's transmasculine identity – allows for stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity to come back in, as well as notions around who is supposed to, and expected to be, violent – that is to say, cisgender men. Therefore, by denying the attacker's transmasculine identity, one could argue that the far-right community cannot understand how a trans man could commit the attack, as individuals assigned female at birth cannot be expected to be violent, but trans women can, given the supposed aggressive, innate traits ascribed to individuals assigned male at birth. This, then, also taps into the gendered protection racket, where the far-right community believes that trans women are a threat to cis women, given cisgender men's inherent and supposed masculinity. This is evidently ironic given the far-right's own tropes and aggression (both online and offline) towards cis women.

27   Lucy Hall, "Logics of Gender, Peace, and Security: Theorizing Gender and Protection at the Intersections of State and Civil Society," *Global Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2021).

28   Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (University of Chicago Press, 1995); Laura Sjoberg, "Gendered Realities of the Immunity Principle: Why Gender Analysis Needs Feminism," *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2006): 889–910; Laura Sjoberg, "Witnessing the Protection Racket: Rethinking Justice in/of Wars Through Gender Lenses," *International Politics* 53 (2016): 361–84; Hilary Charlesworth and Christine Chinkin, *The Boundaries of International Law: A Feminist Analysis* (Manchester University Press, 2006).

Transmisogyny as Related to Other Forms of Discrimination

While the far-right discussion following the Bratislava attack did not focus heavily on trans identities, there was a significant volume of homophobic rhetoric used against the attack perpetrator, the victims and the target location. The centralisation of homophobic narratives over transphobic narratives is likely to be a reflection of the decentralisation of trans identities within the attack, compared to the central nature of trans identities in the Nashville attack.

Anti-trans rhetoric is not just common following LGBTQ+ specific attacks where perpetrators may identify as trans; it is more deeply ingrained in far-right thought. This can be observed from the transphobic slurs to which they subject all their perceived enemies, regardless of the identity of those individuals. This highlights how anti-trans slurs are part of the core vocabulary of far-right networks, indicating just how integral transphobia and the accompanying rhetoric are to their culture, echoing colonial power structures in which transphobia was central to governance. This also suggests that transphobia should not be seen merely as a side problem to other ideas that comprise far-right ideology, as we will discuss in the conclusion of this work.

Demonisation of Trans Communities

The overlap between violent far-right messaging and conspiracy theories is well documented.[29] Throughout the data, we identified a moderate volume of messaging containing themes relating to specific conspiracy theory narratives and movements. Primarily, these narratives focused on demonising   Western governments in particular for allowing trans people to exist, stating that this was a danger to their children and played into a supposed New World Order regime, a conspiracy theory that believes that a supposed Jewish elite runs the Western world.[30] Posts contained a high volume of antisemitic themes, including antisemitic slurs and imagery. The co-occurrence of antisemitic conspiracy theories and transphobia underscores the interconnected nature of these beliefs and the larger ideational system of colonial logics that positions both Jewish and trans people (as well as non-white people, queer people generally, and so on) as threats to a supposedly natural white Western world order.[31]

A small number of users compared the prominence of trans identities in the modern day to the sexual liberation social movement of the 1960s and 1970s, claiming that this movement had resulted in significant negative effects on modern society, and that trans liberation would represent further social decline. The comparison with the sexual liberation social movement again centres sexual identities at the forefront of the discourse in messaging around both attacks. We noted that typical responses to both attacks heavily criticised the LGBTQ+

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29 Blyth Crawford, "Sleeping with the Enemy – Sex, Sexuality, and Anti-Semitism in the Far-Right," ICSR, 2020, https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ICSR-Report-Sleeping-with-the-Enemy-Sex-Sexuality-and-Antisemitism-in-the-Extreme-Right.pdf.

30 Myles Flores, "The New World Order: The Historical Origins of a Dangerous Modern Conspiracy Theory," Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, 2022, https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/new-world-order-historical-origins-dangerous.

31 On the interconnectedness of far-right beliefs, see Anna Meier, "'Salad Bar Extremism' as White Distraction: The (In)coherence of a Category," GNET, 24 August 2023, https://gnet-research.org/2023/08/24/salad-bar-extremism-as-white-distraction-the-incoherence-of-a-category/.

community as a homogeneous entity, with little consideration for how the community actually exists. As such, discourse stated that if one LGBTQ+ person could commit an attack, all LGBTQ+ people were capable, willing, and likely to commit such violence in future. This narrative was particularly prominent around the Nashville attack, and claimed that LGBTQ+ people would want to attack religious institutions in the future.

The generalisation of violence in relation to the LGBTQ+ community is not a new phenomenon; there are countless examples of condemnation of the entire community based on the actions of individuals. However, in relation to far-right discourse, this type of generalisation stands in direct contrast to the common narrative of "not all men" or, more specifically, "not all white men". These narrative points claim that (white) male attack perpetrators are aberrations or "bad apples" and not representative of men more generally, and have been used in relation to other attacks, including the Christchurch, New Zealand attack in March 2019 and the Buffalo, New York, US attack in May 2022. This also refers to colonial logics, as colonialism was reliant on and made possible by implementing binaries and singular categories in order to ensure effective governance, as we discussed above. Anything more nuanced and complex would have shaken this world order and made it harder to rule and control.

5 Discussion

This report has shown how, in response to two LGBTQ+ related attacks, far-right communities and networks espouse varying levels of transphobia, predominantly transmisogyny. The main themes identified were the erasure of trans identities, particularly transmasculinity, the overlap between transmisogyny and other forms of discrimination, and the demonisation of trans people.

By taking a postcolonial approach, we showed how online transphobia and transmisogyny rely on colonial and stereotypical notions of gender with consequences as to who has the accompanying monopoly on violence (cisgender white men). In doing so, we have demonstrated that transphobia and transmisogyny are inextricable from far-right ideologies that are prominent both online and offline and uphold white supremacy.

These findings lead to the conclusion that transphobia and transmisogyny should be seen as dominant and complex ideas that underscore far-right ideologies and not as secondary to other ideas such as racism, nationalism, or antisemitism when it comes to upholding white supremacy. Only by taking the threat seriously can we begin to counter some of these harmful (online and offline) manifestations and effects of transphobia. Furthermore, transphobia and transmisogyny also present themselves in various forms, such as material that is derogatory and incites violence. Other researchers have shown how online content can also contain imminent and credible threats to life.[32]

This report also underscores the importance of studying this type of violence from a postcolonial approach. Only by adopting such a framework have we been able to excavate the colonial roots of gender binaries that inform how and why certain groups (such as those on the far-right) react when those gender binaries are questioned. The resulting transphobia can therefore be neither understood nor countered without acknowledging underlying coloniality and inherent heteronormative gender binaries.

While this report shows that transphobia is a vital and dominant part of white supremacy and far-right ideology, we emphasise that this does not mean that transphobia and transmisogyny should only be studied in relation to far-right ideology and threat. It should be taken seriously even when it does not come from the far-right, and whereas this report may not have focused on transphobia beyond the far-right, our theoretical framework shows that transphobia exists as a broader logic, and future research should certainly consider its existence more generally.

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32   Owen, "Schools Report Bomb Threats Following Libs of TikTok Anti-LGBTQ Posts."

6 Recommendations

For technology companies large and small, it is imperative to counter transphobia and transmisogyny. Before diving into strategies for doing this, we reassert the most important conclusion from our research: that everyone – technology companies, policymakers and other stakeholders – should take transphobia and transmisogyny seriously. Too often transmisogyny is seen as a side problem, or as a complement to another set of more radical ideas. Furthermore, it can often be the case that transphobia – alongside misogyny, hate speech, and other forms of discrimination – is seen as harmful but lawful, and therefore not in need of moderation.

While simply removing such material from technology platforms may not be appropriate or advisable in all cases, there are other forms of content moderation that platforms can consider. What is essential to remember is that one type of harmful content, such as transphobia, manifests itself in many ways online, as this report has shown. Therefore, the term "borderline" should not be applied to all online forms of transphobia, as to do so would neglect certain speech that is certainly in need of moderation, whether that be removal or alternatives to removal. Based on our findings, we offer the following additional recommendations:

- Beyond the narratives identified, this report highlights the importance of examining online spaces and rhetoric following transphobic or LGBTQ+ related attacks. As with any attack, related material is likely to increase post-incident. Such material can be disseminated by the perpetrator themselves, the group they belong to (if relevant), supporters of their ideologies, as well as those who are opposed (such as far-right channels sharing Islamic State material). Research by Tech Against Terrorism finds that following far-right attacks, supporters of that ideology disseminate previous and ideologically related manifestos and livestreams of previous attacks.[33] Therefore, when there is an attack associated with LGBTQ+ identities, content moderators should monitor their platforms, as online rhetoric – including that which violates their terms of service and regulation – is likely to increase.

- Technology companies should work with experts to ensure they understand what forms transphobia may take online, such as through knowledge-sharing and consortium or network development. As we and others have shown, the narratives vary in severity, with some even advocating trans genocide. A taxonomy should be designed that classifies transphobic rhetoric and explores how such material should be moderated. This would best be generated by a combination of subject-matter experts with consultation from technology platform representatives, civil society, and government partners. The taxonomy could include derogatory language as well as credible and imminent threats to life, including

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33   Charley Gleeson, Tech Against Terrorism, TCAP Office Hours, 2023.

trans genocide. What stakeholders should not do is brush aside this form of online speech as merely one category that is "borderline", as this would be a misleading oversimplification.

- Platforms should consider a range of content moderation options. While content that violates online regulations and existing legislation focused on discrimination against gender identity should be removed – along with material that incites violence or includes a threat to life – other types of content may benefit from alternative measures to content removal. Those could be, for instance, fact-checking or disinformation tags that show the context within which a post was made, or the omission of certain material from algorithms to make sure internet users are not directed to transphobic channels on platforms.

- Platforms should monitor transphobic channels that are likely to incite violence, which is illegal under most jurisdictions[34] as well as in most platforms' terms of service.[35] This report started out by showcasing an account whose activity directly led to certain schools being threatened; as with any form of violence, transphobic material and channels that call for such violence must be moderated.

- Platforms should invest in defining types of abuse, including transphobia and transmisogyny, in their terms of service, so users know what is and is not allowed on the platform. This may hinder certain people from posting material that violates those rules, but it will also allow users to report material they know is in violation of the terms of service of a particular platform.

- As with any form of online hate, technology companies should lay out clear reporting mechanisms for transphobia and transmisogyny, accompanied by clear appeal processes so that digital and human rights can be respected in potential cases of excessive removal.

Reflecting on the introduction to this report, we have added to a growing body of literature that reflects on questions of other forms of online hate and what should be the appropriate response to such material, balancing content moderation and freedom of expression. However, we caution that, in trying not to over-censor others who espouse awful but lawful ideas such as transphobia, we must not silence and oppress those targeted by such online users. Trans people have the right to be safe online and to enjoy what the internet brings us all. Research has highlighted that the internet, if safe from harassment and discrimination, gives trans people an online community that can be harder, and even dangerous, to find offline.[36] To accept that trans people be cut off from such a safe haven to protect those who use their freedom of speech to target others is unacceptable. While there is no simple solution, we urge policymakers, technology companies and the wider industry to work harder when it comes to tackling online transphobia.

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34 "Who Designates Terrorism? The Need for Legal Clarity to Moderate Terrorist Content Online," Tech Against Terrorism, 2023, https://techagainstterrorism.org/news/who-designates-terrorism-the-need-for-legal-clarity-and-transparency-to-moderate-terrorist-content-online.
35 "Knowledge Sharing Platform," Tech Against Terrorism, https://techagainstterrorism.org/knowledge-sharing-platform.
36 A. Austin, S. L. Craig, N. Navega, and McInroy L., "It's My Safe Space: The Life-Saving Role of the Internet in the Lives of Transgender and Gender Diverse Youth," *International Journal of Transgender Health* 21, no. 1 (2020): 33–44.

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