Mundanity, fascination and threat: interrogating responses to publicly-engaged research in toilet, trans and disability studies amid a 'culture war'

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Article

Mundanity, fascination and threat: Interrogating responses to publicly engaged research in toilet, trans and disability studies amid a 'culture war'

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Abstract

Toilets are political spaces: inadequate toilet access means limited access to wider space and community. Between 2015 and 2018 I led a series of interdisciplinary research projects collectively known as Around the Toilet (http://aroundthetoilet.com), which centred the experiences of trans, queer and disabled people to explore what makes a safe and accessible toilet space. The research sought to consolidate commitments to feminist, queer, trans and disability politics. In this article, I interrogate the repercussions of doing work at these political intersections by focusing not so much on the research findings themselves, but on the ways in which the project has been responded to within a context which is anti-expert, anti-'woke' and one of perceived scarcity. I reflect on my experiences as a trans person, leading a public-facing research project which centres trans lives, within a context of increasing trans hostility. I will show how Around the Toilet has at once been understood as too mundane (a waste of taxpayers' money; a humorous thing to be researching); a fascination (a good journalistic 'hook'; focus on particular aspects of the work, whilst ignoring others); and a threat to social order. I argue that – during a time where 'impact' is valued and academics are expected to be 'public-facing' – universities need to recognise harms that can come from this, and resource the labour that it takes to mitigate these harms (if the risk is deemed worth taking). I also outline ways in which universities and those with varying degrees of institutional power can help to make the academy a more sustainable place to work for those targeted in current culture wars.

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Introduction

> We are all here, like this is a workshop about toilets, someone could write a comic about it in the *Daily Telegraph* and all they'd have to do is say: 'it's like sitting around in a circle and asking what each other's pronouns are and talking about toilets for an hour'. It's literally a joke in other people's minds because it's so ridiculously out there that that could be a thing that needs to change. But the reason why at least it's beneficial to carry it on is because it benefits those people. It continues patriarchy, it continues transphobia and those are not situations that don't benefit people. Like every single cis person benefits from transphobia. Every single man benefits from the patriarchy – like as much as they are disadvantaged by it as well – but they are also advantaged by it. So it's sort of like humourised in order to discredit it as an area of study. (Participant in research workshop, 2015)

The opening quote was taken from the first participant workshop of Around the Toilet (AtT) – the collective name for a series of research projects which examine what makes a safe and accessible toilet space. It was late spring 2015, and we had invited people that were trans, queer and/or disabled to come and share their experiences of trying to access toilets. During the day, one participant reflected, not on their own experiences of toilet access, but on how the UK press would react to the workshop. The workshop was held two years before a consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2014 (GRA) resulted in a heightened backlash to trans visibility and rights that we are still very much living through today (Pearce et al., 2020). Through such backlash, those calling themselves 'gender critical feminists' have positioned trans people's rights as in opposition to those of (cis) women; often siding with Conservative Christian and right-wing organisations and commentators to raise their profile (Phipps, 2020a). As one of a few gender segregated spaces, toilets have been in the spotlight within these debates (Jones & Slater, 2020). As a trans-inclusive public-facing and publicly engaged research project focusing on toilets, AtT too has gained media attention – sadly, often in the ways predicted by the participant quoted above. This article will contextualise and reflect on these experiences.

The affront to trans people has not happened in a vacuum but is part of what has been labelled a wider 'culture war'. The populism and authoritarianism of Brexit and Trump has encouraged increased group conformity through a fear of the Other (immigrants, 'foreigners', people of colour, LGBT+ people, etc.) (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Phipps, 2020a). As such, the culture war has been 'framed mostly around identity' (Riley, 2021, p. 6). Through a rhetoric that is anti-expert and anti-intellectual, universities have been positioned as places of anti-nationalist liberalism, and become a key culture war battle ground (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Riley, 2021). As Phipps (2020a, p. 22) puts it, '[e]ducation is seen as the nerve centre for indoctrination into progressive politics and/or LGBT identities'. The culture war has included arguments that free speech is being curtailed when the invitation of racist and/or transphobic speakers is protested (playing out most readily in students unions and university campuses), and attacks on the teaching of critical race theory (Riley, 2021). In 2021 in the UK (where I write from), the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill (at 'report' stage at the time of writing) attempted to ensure that 'the use of higher education and student union premises could not be denied to any group or individual on the basis of their ideas, beliefs or views'. Whilst the Bill

makes little sense without context (most people are never given a public speaking platform at a university), it threatens to punish universities who listen to students and staff about how to maintain university campuses as safer places for marginalised people to work and study.

With the above as its context, this article reflects on some of the social, media, academic and institutional reactions to research on trans, queer and disabled people's access to toilets through AtT (the wider findings from which can be found elsewhere: Jones & Slater, 2018a, 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Slater & Jones, 2018, 2021; Slater et al., 2018, 2019). AtT initially ran between April 2015 and February 2018 to examine the extent to which toilets provide a safe, accessible and comfortable space for everyone, whilst centring the experiences of disabled, trans and queer people. The project later evolved to include people who were not queer or disabled but had other experiences of toilet exclusion to share. In the most recent phase of the research (2020–21), focus turned to worker precarity and cleaning labour during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wellcome Centre, 2020).

AtT has been public-facing from its outset, aiming to: (1) remain committed and useful to the grassroots community, campaigning and arts organisations with whom we have worked; and (2) work with design professionals to try and influence toilet design. Whilst these principles come from our political commitments to and backgrounds in feminist, disability, queer and trans politics, it would be naive to think that they had not also been shaped by higher education policy. Impact agendas – the move to 'bureaucratically assess the social, cultural and economic impact of research' (Kidd et al., 2021, p. 149) – have resulted in increasing pressure for academics to be public-facing (Yelin & Clancy, 2021). Indeed, most of the project's funding was from a stream specifically designed for public-facing, community-engaged research. The project team has received many positive responses to the research, including winning an award for public engagement, influencing institutions such as sectors of the NHS, museums and universities, and grassroots, community and activist organisations using our outputs for discussions of toilet access. The research also formed an impact case study about toilet access in REF2021. Yet, doing the work – both inside and outside the academy – has become increasingly difficult and sometimes dangerous; not all the 'impact' has felt positive to us as researchers. Moreover, as I will show, the personal and political risks that we take in doing such work are rarely recognised or supported institutionally.

This article, then, explores my experiences, as a trans person, of doing trans-inclusive, public-facing academic work during a culture war. It will argue that the project is at once positioned as too mundane (a waste of taxpayers' money), a fascination (particularly our work on trans people's toilet access), and a threat (leading to attempts to silence and ridicule the work). Through her historical analysis of public toilets, Penner (2013, p. 22) reminds us that toilets are often 'bitterly contested spaces' because they enforce 'order and existing power relations'; this sentiment becomes clear as I explore responses to AtT in the first section of the article. Furthermore, Penner (2013, p. 20) writes that the concerns expressed over widening toilet access beyond a privileged few 'do not always stem from real threats so much as from broader social anxieties'. Reactions to the research sit at an intersection: as well as illustrating the, often passionate, cultural responses that are evoked by a call for widening toilet access (and therefore access to public space more broadly) to marginalised people, they also demonstrate a partial view of how researchers,

academics and universities are understood outside the academy. 'The problem', however, does not just lie outside of universities. I illustrate that the boundaries between inside and outside academia are blurry – with academics both fuelling and perpetuating violence. Furthermore, I explore the (often inadequate) institutional advice, guidance and support that I have been offered in relation to volatile responses. I close the article with suggestions as to how universities and related bodies could improve the ways that they support staff, particularly trans staff, but also those otherwise marginalised and working on identity-based and social justice projects.

The Around the Toilet project: Methodology, politics and theoretical perspectives

This article does not explore in depth the findings and recommendations that have been made from the Around the Toilet project (AtT), which can be found elsewhere through academic publication (Jones & Slater, 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Slater & Jones, 2018, 2021; Slater et al., 2018, 2019) and in more accessible formats (Jones & Slater, 2018a; Moore, 2017; https://aroundthetoilet.wordpress.com/useful-materials/). Nevertheless, before proceeding to further explore reactions to the project I share a brief methodology of AtT, alongside the politics and theory which shaped the research, as well as an explanation of how data are used in this article. This broad methodology is important as it contextualises the reactions which I go on to explore.

AtT rests upon the argument that toilets are deeply political, very much worthy of consideration, and fail for many people. The labels on toilet doors intentionally include some and exclude others, while the space, design and facilities themselves permit certain bodies, needs and actions, and forbid others. AtT used the toilet – somewhere that everybody needs to access – as a grounding space from which to have conversations, between different groups of people, broadly about accessibility, bodies, identity and who is welcome in public space. Whilst the research began with and centred the experiences of queer, trans and disabled people, it later included anyone who had a toilet story to share, as well as seeking out people with particular experiences (e.g. parents and carers, children and young people, lorry drivers and those whose faith shapes toilet use in particular ways).

The project team has been composed of early career researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds and research interests, including in architecture, English literature, education, childhood, gender, sex and disability studies. I, like other members of the research team, now additionally identify as working within the small disciplinary space of toilet studies. None of these disciplinary spaces are free from transphobia or the 'culture war'. The team has also included those outside of academia, some of whom were representing particular organisations, and others working in an individual capacity. We have at no time claimed the project to be working from a neutral basis – we work from varying located personal and political positions. Whilst there is not one homogeneous political understanding shared amongst all that have guided the research, the project has been explicit throughout in aiming to consolidate commitments to feminist, queer, trans and disability politics. Some anti-trans advocates have argued that feminist, and indeed,

disability politics, are in tension with trans rights. Yet, there was an intuitive and necessary connection between these movements for many of us, who – in some cases – had personal experience of multiple marginalisation across these axes (for further exploration of these arguments see Hines, 2020; Jones & Slater, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020; Slater & Liddiard, 2018).

The AtT methodology is akin to what Phipps (2020b) calls a 'composite ethnography': the piecing together of various different research encounters over a period of time. Between 2015 and 2018, 30 people in the north of England participated in data collection methods (including one-to-one interviews, film making, group storytelling, sculpture and performance workshops), largely focused around the question of 'what makes an accessible toilet space?' Scoping research and dissemination also took place with children and young people in formal and informal education settings. In 2020–21 our focus turned to worker precarity and cleaning labour, through which 21 hospitality workers were interviewed about their experiences of managing toilets in hospitality during the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Yet, research has been wider than these more formal research encounters. Many people who took part in interviews and workshops had some form of sustained participation, such as attending multiple activities, collaborating in later research design, joining advisory boards, becoming co-investigators, and/or participating in data analysis. As AtT has been consistently outward facing, more people continue to engage with the project internationally through social media, writing for project publications (e.g. Jones & Slater, 2018a; Jones et al., 2020) and through a host of public events which to date are estimated to have reached over 800 people. Accessible project outputs have allowed for the ongoing sharing and discussion of data with diverse audiences, which in themselves generated more data. Framed by our wider research encounters, we have also conducted textual analysis of various news, comment pieces and forums discussing toilet access (Slater & Jones, 2021; Slater et al., 2019), and we have written for and been interviewed by media outlets (e.g. Anderson, 2021; Jones & Slater, 2018b). Ethical approval for the above was granted through Sheffield Hallam University, University of Sheffield and University of Exeter.

The methodology

The data analysed in this article consist of media coverage of the project in national, local and LGBT+ specific press, comments on the media articles and tweets and public Facebook responses to the work. Unlike is often the case when collecting social media data, these data were not 'scraped' but collated, over the duration of the project, originally for the purpose of writing a REF impact case study. Ethical approval was then granted through Sheffield Hallam University to use the data to write this article. To protect the anonymity of those responding, different types of data are treated differently. Press coverage of the project is in the public domain on large and visible platforms. The same articles were often reprinted across several different news platforms; references to these platforms are therefore often general with specific illustrative examples. Public comments made on media platforms (e.g. the comments sections under news reports, or comments on the Facebook pages of media platforms) and the majority of tweets are anonymised – words quoted are changed in order to retain meaning but prevent

search-ability. Townsend et al. (2016) suggest that an exception to anonymity can be made for 'Blue tick'/verified accounts as these users are likely to realise that their comments are public. Whilst I have named some large or verified accounts, I have anonymised others to reduce the probability of facing further harassment on publication of this article. No data are taken from Facebook groups (private, hidden or otherwise). Analysis consisted of coding and grouping responses into overlapping themes, which are reflected now in the structure of this article: mundanity (those viewing the project as a waste of taxpayers' money), fascination (those focusing on trans people's toilet access) and threat (those working to intimidate the researchers and erase the findings of the project).

Mundanity, fascination and threat

A waste of taxpayers' money

In January 2017 we experienced our first taste of the media as a research team. A colleague got in touch, early one morning, asking if I knew that AtT was featured in an article on UK tabloid news platform *The Mail Online*. As the day went on it emerged that another tabloid news outlet, *The Sun*, had taken a press release from my university that was published weeks earlier and saved it for a slow news day. From *The Sun*'s publication, the story had then been covered by other national, local and LGBT-specific news outlets. It had snowballed.

The headline to the story, printed on page 3 of *The Sun*, read 'PEE-C Gone Mad. Loosing the Plot. £50k Study to Rename Male and Female Toilets'. The hook of the article was that money had been wasted: claiming that the only research finding was that toilets needed to be renamed as toilets with, and without, urinals. Thinking about the gendering and signage of toilets is an important aspect of AtT. At this point, however, although we had also relabelled toilets in this way for events (always including space for discussion of this relabelling), we had not made any recommendations. Whilst relabelling is sometimes one of very few ways to improve facilities at short notice or temporarily (Jones & Slater, 2020), AtT has never claimed that relabelling the toilet in this way is a perfect solution (for a full list of recommendations see Slater & Jones, 2018; for a more detailed discussion of toilet signs, see Slater & Jones, 2021).

Once you got past the headlines, the detail of the article made some more nuanced claims, which, with a different framing, may have been useful coverage of the research. It mentioned that we had talked to disabled people and others. It claimed that we had recommended the removal of hand dryers – which we had not – but we had had conversations about how hand dryers could be distressing or painful for some people, including some children and autistic people (Slater & Jones, 2018). Comments below this article and others – although often disparaging of the research itself, and sometimes including transphobic, sanist and ableist comments (which I explore below) – also shared people's own frustrations. Some commenters complained about the lack of public toilets; others stated that the priority should be 'providing clean and un-vandalised facilities', or shared the difficulties that elderly parents had leaving the house due to inadequate toilet provision. Amongst the actively hostile, debates also began about origins and practicalities of gender-neutral toilet facilities. Although a level of anonymity for commenters meant that

there was more violence in the comments than we experienced at in-person public events, in some ways they reflected our experiences of people eagerly taking up the opportunity to talk about toilets; they echoed our project mantra that 'everybody has a toilet story to share'.

The article ended with a quote from right-wing pressure group The Taxpayers' Alliance, saying: 'People will be furious to see their hard-earned cash flushed away like this'. This focus on 'taxpayer money' became a major talking point, and subject of frustration. There was an implication across both the press coverage and lots of the comments on it, that toilets were fine as they were. Those deeming the research an unnecessary waste of funds often also claimed that the only problem was a 'snowflake' generation – being oversensitive, making an unnecessary fuss and taking unnecessary offence. The focus on 'offence' was intertwined with what we might call – drawing on Serano's (2007) work – a 'trans fascination'. Despite AtT talking to many different people about toilet access, trans people's toilet access has usually been what has attracted the interest of both individuals and the press. Whilst at times this is well meaning, in these particular cases, trans people were often positioned as a 'snowflake generation' and optimised a feeling of 'political correctness gone mad' and 'pandering to minorities'. The comments below, from national tabloid papers, exemplified this:

> The world's gone crazy! It's always been toilets for men and women! If you have to stand up, go to the gents. If you sit down, go to the ladies. Sorted. Do I get paid for that?

> This is mad! All this money when it would've been better to keep the signs as they were before!

> For goodness sake! Just use one or the other!

It is easy to contrast the focus on offence and oversensitivity with our data. Poor toilet signage was not only about a lack of representation or 'being seen' (although I maintain that these are legitimate concerns). Rather, both trans and disabled participants spoke of how a lack of representation on toilet doors materially affected their lives (Slater & Jones, 2021) – including through the verbal and physical violence that they faced if others deemed them to be in the 'wrong' toilet (Jones & Slater, 2020).

There was also an irony in some of the responses to the media reporting as, whilst wanting to disregard the research as a waste of resources, 'proof' of the problem was demanded. For example, one reader felt strongly enough about the press coverage to write to my Vice Chancellor and demand a breakdown of costs. In his email, he also asked for 'proof' that a lack of public toilets stops people leaving the house – 'proof' of which has been gathered through the research and can be found in our publications (Jones & Slater, 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Slater & Jones, 2018, 2021; Slater et al., 2018, 2019).

The degradation of higher education

AtT is not the first toilet related academic project to experience this kind of backlash. Describing the response to a 2004 call for papers on gender and public toilets, Gershenson

and Penner (2009, p. 3) write that, for some, their project 'symbolized the degradation of publicly funded higher education'. This was the case for AtT: comments on news pieces claimed AtT was 'typical of universities nowadays'. Norris and Inglehart (2019, p. 4) write that the culture war positions those working in universities as 'arrogant liberals'. This classed position is similarly assumed of trans people's rights or liberation, which are often wrongly perceived as a purely middle-class concern[2] (Faye, 2021). Yet, whilst some commenters declared the research 'middle-class nonsense'; there was also an irony, in that it was also common for commenters to highlight that the research was conducted at a post-92 university.[3] In the UK, post-92 universities are more likely to be welcoming to 'non-traditional', including working-class, students than pre-92 universities (Cullinane, 2021), but nevertheless, commenters used the post-92 status to position the university as 'lesser', and used it to explain what was perceived to be poor research. One commenter on a national tabloid article, for example, said, '[post-92 university] WAS a polytechnic; this is not the same at the REAL [pre-92 university in same city]'. Another 'top rated' comment read, '[post-92 university] *rolls eyes*'. The cost of the research was also conflated with the marketisation of higher education and increasing student fees. In the local press, it was not unusual for people to tag in others, presumably students at the university, including remarks such as 'this could have paid for your fees!' or 'this is where your money is going. . .'. The following comment summed up some of the above:

> Universities increase fees and most people can't afford to go. Then they spend £50k on rubbish that's only done to keep otherwise redundant academics employed!

I need to stress here that I do not expect those outside of universities to understand the complex ways that research is funded or how money circulates around universities – nor do I think university finances function under an equitable or sustainable system. In the midst of austerity policy where we are constantly told of the shortage of public funds, it is understandable to consider £50,000 as a large amount of money to spend on research, even though it is relatively small in comparison to most UK grants. As Phipps (2020a, p. 19) describes, the economic crisis has 'helped catalyse the global swing to the right, in which marginalised groups have been blamed for scarcity and other problems not of their making'. The criticisms made were not purely about the amount of money spent, but the *type* of project it was being spent on. Furthermore, it was not just those outside of academia making such arguments, but also academics themselves, as I will now go on to illustrate.

Methodological critique or networked harassment?

The Real Peer Review is an anonymous Twitter account which currently has nearly 60,000 followers, though has gone through several iterations. The Twitter handle shares articles – largely those using qualitative and feminist, social justice, anti-racist and/or queer frameworks – in order to mock them; claiming that their own, Twitter-based review system is more valuable than peer review carried out via academic journals. The Real Peer Review was alerted to AtT work later in 2016 when tagged into a tweet thread commenting on the project by an academic from the University of

Oxford who disagreed with a piece on a different topic that I had published in The Conversation.[4] After that initial tagging, the Real Peer Review went on to share the following tweets:

> 'Publically-funded arts projects are useless' shocker. In other news, water found to be wet. @ bisgovuk@ahrcpress

> Let's be clear BTW: engineers working out better ways to make toilets accessible? Yes. Academics doing 'storytelling about toilets'? Um. . .

Like the tabloid journalists, the (presumably academics) tweeting from the Real Peer Review account were attempting to fuel outrage both at the money being spent on the research and the type of research being done. The Real Peer Review focused largely on the use of arts-based methods, arguing that only engineers should be researching toilet accessibility – an argument that has also arisen elsewhere. However, there was one key difference. Although my name was in much of the earlier news reporting, responses to the articles tended to remain in the comments sections underneath the articles, or Facebook pages and Twitter accounts belonging to the relevant media platforms. Aside from the one reader who contacted my university, none of the comments were particularly personal, and nobody sought members of the research team out individually. Yet, from the Real Peer Review followed reams of (mainly transphobic) personal threats and abuse aimed at the project researchers.

This kind of 'networked harassment' has happened several times through the project. Also sometimes known on social media as 'pile-ons', Marwick (2021, p. 1) describes networked harassment as harassment 'by a group of people networked through social media'. Often, networked harassment occurs when a highly followed 'node' account amplifies a particular person's perspective, flagging that person up to their followers, who contribute to the harassment. For us, these nodes have varied – from the Real Peer Review account (tagged in by another academic), to high-profile gender critical feminists, and academics admired by the alt right.[5] Often, the nodes themselves do little in the way that could be called incitement. A far-right figure, for example, simply quoted a line from an AtT paper on his Facebook account, whilst a gender critical feminist shared a publication of ours on trans people's toilet access (Jones & Slater, 2020), naming it 'propaganda'. The response, however, quickly moves beyond the original node, their networked followers targeting individual accounts, performing searches to find other social media profiles of that person, from which they often take and share screenshots. Personal comments, death and rape threats are routinely part of such harassment. Network harassment can also lead to contacting family members (which can be particularly harmful to queer and trans people who are not 'out' to their family), and moving harassment offline.

As well as explicit abuse (which I see no need to quote here), networked harassment has also led to responses claiming to be worried about methodology. One respondent to a high-profile gender critical feminist, for example, said: 'what about control groups? The participants all "back-up their hypothesis". That's not how science or research works.' Another account, responding on the same thread, said: 'they can fuck off if this research isn't about sanitation in developing countries. What a joke!'

Such challenges – albeit usually more politely put – are probably ones recognised by most people in the social sciences and humanities, but particularly those working within gender studies, queer, feminist, anti-racist and decolonial frameworks. Phipps (2020a, p. 22) highlights that '[r]eligious and far-right politicians and groups have consistently attempted to discredit [Gender Studies] by suggesting that it is unscientific and that its scholars are agents of an agenda to destroy the nuclear family, heterosexuality and traditional gender roles'. Echoing Phipps, Yelin and Clancy (2021, p. 183) argue that 'it is no coincidence that the subjects dismissed as feminised, degraded, "low", "gutter" scholarship are those questioning the status quo'. Networked harassment is more likely to happen to those who challenge power structures (such whiteness, cisnormativity, etc.) (Marwick, 2021). Such research – including my own – threatens the status quo; and so attempts are made to shut it down.

Those who experience networked harassment often self-censor to avoid further abuse, therefore, networked harassment can lead to 'systematically removing minority voices from the public sphere' (Marwick, 2021, p. 2). This is certainly something which resonates with the AtT work: as transphobia in the UK has been amplified, the project team has become increasingly careful in what and how we share our work. Indeed, keeping ourselves, our colleagues, students and participants safe has taken up huge amounts of time and energy, rarely accounted for within academic systems. Furthermore, whereas university teams have seemed used to handling the poor tabloid reporting, I have experienced little support in how to deal with such personal online attacks; nor how to prevent them. Advice was often to block individual 'trolls', with little understanding of the scale of the harassment. Rarely was there acknowledgement that other academics were both perpetuating and fuelling the violence, making this not a short term 'hiccup', but a longer term problem of how to safely and usefully disseminate the research, both in public, and also academic spaces – something to which I now turn.

Implications

So far in the article I have demonstrated how the AtT research – which focused on improving toilet access, and therefore public space, for marginalised people – has been construed as too mundane to be worthy of funding. This has, in part at least, been fuelled by a culture war rife with transphobia – responses to the project have regularly claimed that the project is 'only' about trans people, who are demonised through such discourse. The fascination with trans people's toilet access has also meant that attention to other forms of exclusion – particularly disabled people's lack of toilet access – have often been erased in media and public attention on the research. Furthermore, when responses are transphobic, they often come with ableist and sanist language (e.g. 'The world's gone crazy!'; 'This is mad!'). An aim of AtT was to use toilets as a grounding space through which to explore how solidarities can be built between different marginalised people. In the current culture war – rife with transphobic discourse – focusing on the research's trans politics is an easy way to delegitimise both trans people's lack of toilet access *and* any broader conversations about a lack of public toilet accessibility (which generally impacts more heavily on marginalised people, including disabled people, homeless people, women and so on; Slater & Jones, 2018).

Many responses to the research have been violent; some of which have been aimed directly at researchers through networked harassment, often fuelled by other academics. I am not alone in my experiences. Sikes (2008) details how media misrepresentation led to media hounding and personal attack. Savigny (2019) cites her own and others' experiences to argue that women are disproportionately affected by negative experiences of public engagement. Pearce (2020) reflects on her experiences of trying to survive academia as a trans woman researching trans health, situating these experiences within a context of academic precarity. Yelin and Clancy (2021) share the challenges that they have faced as feminist academics doing impact work. And I know numerous other – usually marginalised – academics who have dealt with similar issues. Wånggren (2018, p. 105) writes that 'the effects of the neoliberal university are . . . felt more by some bodies than others: women, people of colour, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, and colleagues of working class background or in financial precarity'. Whilst, as a project team, we hold various axes of privilege – not least our positions as a majority white group – as a group of early career researchers[6] of marginalised genders, some of whom are precariously employed, some of whom are disabled and some of whom are trans, we have experienced what Marwick (2021) finds in her research: that these attacks have made us wary about the ways in which we share our work. Public engagement has, if anything, been even harder during the COVID-19 pandemic, as transphobia has intensified in the media, and events have also necessarily moved online to spaces where abuse can happen in a more faceless form.

Whilst in this article I have focused on discussing responses to the project outside of what might be thought of as explicitly academic spaces, work within more traditionally academic spaces has also been difficult. As can be seen in our experiences with the Real Peer Review, the borders between inside and outside of the academy are murky. Furthermore, transphobia undoubtedly exists (indeed it is prolific) inside the academy (Pearce et al., 2020; Slater & Liddiard, 2018). Pearce (2020) suggests that for marginalised academics to survive in the academy, they will need both supportive communities of scholarship and an ethical responsibility towards the self. Whilst the institution has a duty of care towards its staff, the experiences outlined in this article illustrate that university workers are being made unsafe. As a project team we have developed practices to try and mitigate this within our own research. Here – drawing on Pearce's (2020) work and in the spirit of growing our communities of scholarship – I share some of the ways in which we try to maintain an ethical responsibility towards ourselves. Whilst these examples may seem obvious to those already entangled in similar situations, I write them down because they are not necessarily easy things to do, and sometimes knowing that others are making similarly difficult decisions can be helpful. Furthermore – as these are broadly structural, systemic and institutional issues – I outline ways in which universities and those with degrees of institutional power could strive towards creating more sustainable environments for trans researchers and others impacted by the culture wars.

Careful agreement but often refusal

To refuse can be political. Ahmed (2018) writes that saying no demonstrates 'a willingness to inhabit what seems negative' and 'an insistence that worlds can be otherwise'.

For us, saying no and refusing certain opportunities and discussions is important for our own safety and health, but also to maintain the politics of the project. Of course, refusal – examples of which I outline below – further positions us as 'snowflakes', 'censorious and oppressive' (Phipps, 2020a, p. 24) by those wanting to do us harm. Yet, we have learnt through experience that taking every opportunity to share our work is not helpful to the wider goal of improving toilet access for all and often only enlarges the platform of those opposed to the political aims of our work. Refusal through our work can mean:

1. Only agreeing to speak to journalists if they are either willing to discuss their trans politics, or if they have a track record of trans-inclusive work. This often means missing out on potential impact opportunities as journalists often speak to those who are available quickly/immediately (I reflect on the implications of this and how universities should respond, further below).
2. Not 'debating' or sharing platforms with those we know to be transphobic and asking questions of event organisers (academic or otherwise) as to how they will strive to maintain a space which is safe for trans participants. When I agree to speak at events I send guidelines to the hosts asking for specific practices to be followed (a working version of guidelines for online events, developed through the pandemic, is available here, which I welcome thoughts and feedback on: https://jenslater.wordpress.com/trans-safety-online-events/).
3. Not engaging with those that are responding in harmful ways on Twitter or other social media platforms, liberally using the 'block' button or making our Twitter accounts private. In order to mitigate some of the effects of the above, we have found it useful to create project Twitter accounts (@CCToiletTalk), rather than rely upon those attached to individual researchers. The benefit of this is that: (1) we can avoid tagging researcher's personal Twitter handles into tweets if necessary, which gives individual researchers some protection whilst still being able to share the work; (2) individual researchers can choose to make their personal accounts private, but still keep the project account public; and (3) we are able to share and swap who is managing the account if harassment occurs (this may mean those most impacted by harassment stepping away).

Work allocation and mentoring

I would not be able to quantify the hours and days that I have spent – often with colleagues – trying to keep myself, project participants, students and colleagues safe from transphobia. My main sources of support here have not been university systems or senior leaders. Rather, my communities of scholarship and support have come from other marginalised, often early career and precariously employed academics, who have offered advice from their own experience. The problem with this, however, is that: (a) such support relies on having existing informal networks; and (b) many of those that I rely on for support are also exhausted from the everyday dealings of trying to survive within the academy.

I therefore call on universities to recognise the extra time and energy that marginalised academics and those doing social justice work will be facing whilst carrying out

their work, often whilst supporting others in similar situations. Recognition must lead to: (a) resourcing this time; and (b) valuing this work through systems of promotion. For me, refusing to stay silent about discriminatory practice has meant losing the informal mentoring and support of senior colleagues. Furthermore, the lack of diversity in senior academic positions (AdvanceHE, 2021) means that many departments will not have the expertise or experience to provide necessary guidance. Universities can help by establishing paid external mentoring schemes, specifically for marginalised academics who cannot get the support which they require internally to their department/university. This both puts a financial value on the work of those mentors, who themselves are often marginalised, and allows marginalised researchers at an earlier career stage to formalise relationships with more senior academics.

Impact agendas

Pressure to produce societal impact from academic research (Yelin & Clancy, 2021) means that impact can be rewarded, even when that impact is not necessarily positive (Wouters et al., 2018). This was the case for the AtT research; a proportion of the REF2021 Impact Case Study around our research was framed around discourses spurred by negative media attention.[7] Wouters et al. (2018) call negative impact 'grImpact'. Although Wouters and colleagues focus on research which negatively impacts wider society (which I do not feel our research has), responses to the project have, at times, felt 'grim'; impacting negatively on our own health, and potentially that of trans people more widely.

Savigny (2019) highlights that gendered structural contexts are not taken account of in impact agendas. To broaden Savigny's point, there is little acknowledgement in policy or practice that doing impact work can be risky for academics, particularly those marginalised through identity, social positioning, early career status or precarity; nor what support should be offered when this happens. Indeed, I have been given explicitly dangerous advice by those positioned as impact experts, such as to showcase AtT work on notoriously transphobic platforms. I do not believe that this advice was meant to harm me, but it demonstrated a lack of awareness as to the context in which I am working. Such advice could have been harmful if given to a researcher not aware of the potential danger, or who felt unable to refuse due to precarity. I therefore call on universities and policy makers to take a more nuanced approach to impact; acknowledging that for some, the risks of impact work are too high; and find ways to ensure that researchers unable to do impact work are not penalised. Furthermore, universities need to urgently provide training to staff working in impact-related roles (including media, communications, public engagement), so they are able to support and advise staff, particularly those marginalised, as to how to safely carry out their work.

Publishing

I increasingly struggle to find places in which to publish my work. Some academic journals in the areas I write have powerful trans exclusionary gatekeepers (Ignagni et al., 2019; Slater & Liddiard, 2018). Problems have occurred both pre- and post-publication, including in trying to select a journal that I know will be trans-inclusive through peer

review and in dealing with complaints after publication. My experiences have led me to believe that journal editors who wish to be trans-inclusive in approach should:

1. Clearly and explicitly state that the journal is trans-inclusive, and include the practices which they follow within their guidance for authors.
2. Have people on the editorial board competent in recognising transphobic red flags during reviews and any subsequent complaints, so these do not reach authors.
3. Have policies in place to lessen the potential for transphobia through the peer review process. This could include allowing authors to specify people who should *not* be invited to review their papers where there are known trans exclusionary academics in the discipline.
4. Having processes in place to deal with post-publication complaints in ways which minimise the burden on the author, particularly if the author is trans.

Unions

My reflections in this article should be contextualised within wider university systems which rely upon individualisation, free labour, competition and precarity. Job security, alongside other forms of privilege, make it easier to follow some of my recommendations above (particularly refusal). Changing the wider systems in which we work will not come without struggle, and unions are a key part of this. Yet, for trans and other marginalised academics, union support does not always feel guaranteed. Struggling with the exhaustion of working within transphobic academic spaces with little in the way of support, I was driven to take a trans solidarity motion to my union branch. This felt scary because transphobia exists within left and union spaces and taking such a motion asking for trans solidarity meant 'coming out' as trans to colleagues. Although the motion passed without opposition, being out as trans in academia continues to feel risky; and it was only a matter of months later before the same union branch passed a transphobic motion. Cis colleagues can help to make and maintain union spaces as trans-inclusive by taking trans solidarity motions to their branches; therefore making trans-inclusion branch policy. Cis union members can also educate themselves and one another to recognise transphobic red flags and be ready to respond in such instances ('academic freedom' is a big one here; Lavery, 2021). Furthermore, if and when transphobic motions are taken to the same space, cis colleagues can lead in organising to oppose these, so the burden is not on trans people to do this work.

Conclusion

In this article I have reflected on my experiences of doing public-facing, trans-inclusive research within a culture war that has been in part fuelled by transphobia. As I have shown, toilets as a subject of research have been seen as too *mundane* to be studied: researching toilets is positioned as a waste of taxpayers' money. Yet, there has been a simultaneous *fascination* around the work on trans people's toilet access in particular – this is what has generated media headlines and heated online and offline discussion.

Trans fascination is also what has led to the online abuse which we have spent huge amounts of time trying to mitigate as a project team, alongside dealing with the often less visible and public effects of transphobia within more explicitly academic spaces. Whilst often a trans fascination has been detrimental to trans people, it has also led to the erasure of the work that we have done around disability and other forms of exclusion.

As I have argued elsewhere (Jones & Slater, 2020), access to safe and comfortable toilets plays a fundamental role in making trans lives possible. Excluding trans people from toilet spaces therefore denies 'trans possibility' (Cox, 2017; Pearce et al., 2019). Our research project which argues – very simply – that all people, including trans people, have the right to use the toilet, has therefore been seen as a *threat* to a status quo, where toilet access being difficult, dangerous and violent perpetuates the marginalisation of trans people. The participant in the very first AtT research workshop (whose words opened this article) was aware of this when they highlighted that patriarchy and institutional power benefit from the continuation of the status quo. I argue here that the denial of trans possibility also makes being trans in academia and doing trans-inclusive research increasingly difficult. Whilst there are things which individual researchers can do to mitigate risk, I have suggested some ways in which those in positions of power, including those in research leadership positions and on journal editorial boards, can help to create supportive environments for trans researchers. Overall, institutions need to recognise, resource and mitigate for the extra burdens that trans and other marginalised researchers face, both when doing public-facing work and within wider academic contexts.

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Notes

1. Reflections on this part of the research are not included in this article.
2. The majority of trans people are working class, and transphobia means that trans people also suffer severe economic disadvantage (Faye, 2021).
3. In the UK, post-92 universities were previously polytechnic colleges given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.
4. The Conversation publishes pieces by researchers and academics under a Creative Commons Licence, meaning that they can be reprinted by other media platforms. The piece in question

was a co-authored critique of the A-level psychology curriculum in the UK (Mills & Slater, 2016). A-levels are subject based qualifications which are often needed before continuing to further university study.
5. Whilst feminism and far-right politics perhaps do not seem easy bedfellows, Phipps (2020a, p. 136) documents how 'reactionary feminists have often found allies on the right'.
6. Whilst I am no longer an early career researcher, I was early career whilst most of the research was carried out, and the initial funding for the research was for early career academics.
7. It is interesting to note that Savigny (2019) was told by her institution that negative responses to her work did not count as impact. Given this was not our experience, there is arguably a wider point to be made here about the differing ways that institutions are interpreting what counts as impact under the REF agenda, and how this impacts upon marginalised academics.

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