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Cis-Supremacist Pasts: Constructing a History Against Contemporary Trans Equality

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Abstract: This paper uses Cal Horton's theory of Cis-Supremacy to demonstrate the interplay of trans exclusionist histories and contemporary cis power structures. The paper, through this preliminary discussion, dissertates how and why the obfuscation of trans narratives from history impacts the material conditions of trans lives. It demonstrates why cis-supremacist pasts should be seen as deliberate attacks on the trans community. It concludes, from an Applied Transgender Studies positionality, by offering some initial interventions that can be made against cis-supremacist historic narratives.

Keywords: archaeology; transphobia; transgender activism; applied transgender theory; Cis-Supremacy

1 Introduction

The use of history to propagate conservative ideals of sexuality and gender has long been documented by feminist and queer archaeologies.¹ Moreover, scholarship focusing specifically on the construction of cisnormative histories and their impact on trans equalities,² as well as in the alt-right pipeline,³ continues to demonstrate the importance of history to Applied Transgender Scholarship,⁴ and vice versa.

1 For example: Thomas Dowson, "Why Queer Archaeology: An Introduction?," *World Archaeology*, 32, no. 3 (2000): 161–65; and Robert Schmidt and Barbara Voss, eds., *The Archaeologies of Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

2 Notably in Mary Weismantel, "Towards a Transgender Archaeology: A Queer Rampage Through Prehistory," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, eds. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 319–34.

3 Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender* (London: Allen Lane, 2024).

4 Thomas J. Billard, Avery R. Everhart, and Erique Zhang, "Whither Trans Studies? On Fields, Post-Disciplines, and the Need for an Applied Transgender Studies," *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 1–18.

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However, Applied Transgender Studies' most recent development, Cal Horton's conceptualization of *cis-supremacy*,⁵ is yet to be directly applied to the study of history and archaeology. This discussion, therefore, is a preliminary investigation of conservative public histories of gender through the lens of cis-supremacist analysis.

I use the term "conservative histories of gender" in a broad sense to refer to any histories, public or academic, where conservative ideals of gender are uncritically presented as historically universal. I use it to specifically refer to histories which have precluded trans and/or non-binary individuals from the narrative. The axiom "there is no such thing as transgender history" has long been a rallying cry against trans inclusive histories, as, to offer one example, the responses of the tabloid press showed when the North Hertfordshire Museum updated its display of the Roman Emperor Elagabalus to include a trans interpretation.⁶ More than this, as I argue throughout this paper, it is a key anti-trans argument spread to present so called "transgenderism" as a modern "issue" in need of eradication.

In this article I briefly introduce Applied Transgender Studies before discussing the specific theory of cis-supremacy. After this I apply a cis-supremacist lens to examples of trans exclusionist histories, demonstrating how and why trans pasts are denied to propagate contemporary transphobia. I then conclude by offering interventions against these cis-supremacist conservative histories of gender.

2 Applied Transgender Studies

As defined by Thomas Billard, Avery Everhart, and Erique Zhang,⁷ Applied Transgender Studies is a "multi-theoretical and multi-methodological post-discipline of transgender

5 Cal Horton, "Towards a Theory of Cis-Supremacy," *International Journal of Transgender Health* 59, no. 3 (2025): 485–502.

6 Andrew Jehring, "Cross-dressing Roman Emperor was transgender, woke Hertfordshire museum declares: Elagabalus, the savage teenage hedonist who once set leopards and snakes on dinner guests for a prank, must be referred to as she," November 20, 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12772931/Roman-Emperor-Elagabalus-transgender-referred-museum.html>.

7 Billard, Everhart, and Zhang, "Whither Trans Studies?," 4.

studies... focused on identifiable and pragmatic social, cultural, and political problems of relevance to transgender people, both at the individual and collective level.” In short, it places a priority on research outcomes that seek to improve the material conditions of trans lives. To achieve this, various collaborative analytical frameworks have been utilized and developed by applied transgender scholars. These notably include the theories of cisnormativity, pathologization, gender minority stress (GMS), and the analytical tool of cis-supremacy. While the analytical framework for cis-supremacy is primarily used in this paper, it cannot be understood in isolation to other methodologies as Horton recognized when proposing the theory; offering a brief overview of these before moving onto a discussion of cis-supremacy is necessary.⁸ Each applied transgender studies approach is linked to an example of public history.

Termed by Greta Bauer et al., cisnormativity is understood as the presumption that everybody is cisgender (i.e. not transgender) by default, with society organizing itself around cis bodies.⁹ Analysis of cisnormativity recognizes the disbenefits and distresses encountered by trans people through their everyday interaction with this society. Cisnormativity encompasses every instance where society questions, denies, or polices our genders. An example from public history are museum interpretations which prioritize a cis narrative over trans possibilities such as when the Science Museum Group presented military surgeon Dr James Barry, a 19th century trans man, as a ‘deceptive woman’ as recently as 2024.¹⁰

The theory of pathologization, as it relates to trans people, is one in which ‘transness’ is considered exclusively as a medical condition. In short, this approach sees us as inherently disordered and medically *other*. Pathologization either flatly denies trans people exist – except as medical abnormalities – or it restricts trans acceptance to a set of diagnosable, strictly normative, and contagious “symptoms”, such as gender dysphoria.¹¹ Transmedicalism, social contagion theory, and the (robustly refuted) pathology of Rapid Onset

Gender Dysphoria¹² are all examples of pathologization. A recent example of claims about trans pasts in the public sphere can be found in the document which spearheaded the UK’s dangerous prohibition on the prescription of puberty blocker medication for trans youth on the grounds of trans pathologization.¹³ This document declared current trans demographics “unlike that in any prior historical period,” without citation, in order to bolster an argument that “transgender identity”¹⁴ was spreading in UK schools in a virological fashion through “peer influence.”¹⁵

Gender minority stress (GMS) recognizes that, due to anti-trans society, trans people face an elevated risk of mental health disorders when compared to cis people.¹⁶ It understands that these risks arise from this hostile environment and not from a unique predisposition to mental health disorders in trans people. GMS scholarship therefore focuses on the importance of dismantling these external stressors. Public histories, as Dulcie Newbury has discussed,¹⁷ can help alleviate GMS by highlighting non-cis actors throughout history to foster a sense of community and continuity in our trans existence.

3 Cis-Supremacy

Cis-supremacy, as theorized within applied transgender studies, was proposed by Horton in 2016.¹⁸ Building from

⁸ Horton, “Towards a Theory of Cis-Supremacy,” 3–6.

⁹ Greta R. Bauer et al., “‘I don’t think this is theoretical; this is our lives’: how erasure impacts health care for transgender people,” *The Journal of Associated Nurses in AIDS Care* 20, no. 5 (2009): 348–61.

¹⁰ Science Museum Group, “James Barry,” Wayback Machine Capture November, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20241108214219/https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/people/cp119158/james-barry>. See also Weismantel, “Towards a Transgender Archaeology.”

¹¹ Austin H Johnson, “Normative Accountability: How the medical model influences transgender identities and experiences,” *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 9 (2015): 803–13; and Austin H Johnson, “Transnormativity: A New Concept and its Validation through Documentary Film About Transgender Men*,” *Sociological Inquiry* 86, no. 4 (2016): 465–91.

¹² Transmedicalism is view that being trans is strictly a medical condition, with normative symptoms such as gender dysphoria. Social Contagion Theory and Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria both argue that ‘transness’ spreads through contact with a trans person. See Florence Ashley, “A Critical Commentary on ‘Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria,’” *The Sociological Review* 68, no. 4 (2020): 779–99; and Arjee Javellana Restar, “Methodological Critique of Litterman’s (2018) Parental-Respondents Accounts of ‘Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria,’” *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 49, no. 1 (2020): 61–66.

¹³ Natacha Kennedy, “Harming children: the effects of the UK puberty blocker ban,” *Journal of Gender Studies* (2025): 1–17.

¹⁴ Hilary Cass, *Independent review of gender identity services for children and young people: Final report*, 2024 (The Cass Review), <https://cass.independent-review.uk/home/publications/final-report/>. 118.

¹⁵ The Cass Review 122.

¹⁶ Michael L. Hendricks and Rylan J. Testa, “A conceptual framework for clinical work with transgender and gender nonconforming clients: An adaptation of the Minority Stress Model,” *Professional Psychology and Research Practice* 43, no. 5 (2012): 460–67.

¹⁷ Dulcie Newbury, “Beyond the Binary”: Funerary Archaeology, Gender Identity, and Its Impact on Mental Health and Wellbeing” (paper presented at Theoretical Archaeology Group conference 2023, University of Norwich, December 18–20, 2023).

¹⁸ Horton, “Towards a Theory of Cis-Supremacy”; and Cal Horton, “The Cass Review: Cis-Supremacy in the UK’s approach to healthcare for children,” *International Journal of Transgender Health* 26, no. 4 (2024): 1120–44.

cisnormativity, GMS, and pathologization – alongside scholarship on power dynamics and white supremacy – Horton theorized cis-supremacy as a system where coercive control and power is levied against trans individuals by cis actors. Cis-supremacy distinguishes itself from the conceptually similar system of cisnormativity, for whereas the latter “emphasizes the inequities that result from a society built without consideration of trans possibilities; cis-supremacy focuses on the operation of cis-power. *A theory of cis-supremacy draws attention to axis and forces of cis power that actively dominate and oppress trans people across our lives.*”¹⁹ Cis-supremacism, in a UK context, is readily seen, for example, in unequal access to identical National Health Service hormone medication (HRT) between cis and trans patients, lack of legal recognition for gender self-ID, and the recent UK Supreme Court decision and subsequent UK Equality and Human Rights Commission guidance which effectively segregates trans people in public life.²⁰ Cis supremacy therefore includes the deliberate erasure of trans identities from sanctioned historical narratives of known trans figures, such as the aforementioned Dr James Barry, in order to oppress the trans community.

4 Recognizing Cis Power Dog Whistles

Understanding when trans erasure from historic narratives is more than a lack of consideration or awareness, but a deliberate ploy of cis-power, requires recognizing when ‘justifications’ for this exclusion have their origins in conservative anti-trans ideology. The most prevalent, and undoubtedly the most pernicious, derives from a *transgender trend* positionality. At its core, the transgender trend position contends that contemporary trans people are an entirely modern phenomenon, with social media often blamed for a pathologic-like spread of trans identities in young children.²¹

Presenting trans identities in this way enables cis power to control trans acceptance through what Theo Van Leeuwen terms “the authority of tradition.”²² The

transgender trend position presents the contemporary transgender population as being incongruent with the traditional way of ‘doing gender’²³ through its claims of trans presentism. How can we view trans people as anything other than a modern issue if they have no history, trans presentists ask? Such a question is designed to be answered by having society stop any acceptance of trans people so that they may ‘desist’ and ‘return’ to a historically proven ‘natural’ cis binary.²⁴ Divorcing trans people from historic narratives becomes central to anti-trans propaganda for the very same reason our inclusion in historic narratives is essential to trans people; these narratives are powerful tools of legitimization for (or against) trans acceptance by the general public.

Of course, there is trans history back beyond social media and the 21st century. So how does this position support itself against the weight of historic trans and non-cis experiences? It cannot. Therefore, it must employ conservative histories of gender to obfuscate, deny, or otherwise dismiss histories that highlight beyond-the-binary pasts. This dismissal may include the argument that trans inclusion is merely being done to be “trendy” or “politically correct,” as Mary Whitehouse wrote of trans inclusion in pre-historic archaeology.²⁵ Additionally the dismissal may cite the constructed “Transgender Agenda” anti-trans dog whistle, a dog whistle designed to paint anti-trans advocates as victims of compelled speech, an attack on women’s rights, and a ‘world ending’ ideology.²⁶ There is no better example of this claim in historic narratives than anthropologist Elizabeth Weiss’s assertion that, by refusing to take a trans inclusive approach to sex analysis in her historic work, she is a victim of “a larger attack, within anthropology, on Western civilization,”²⁷

23 Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender & Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 125–51.

24 The Heterodox Academy, “[UNCANCELED] Why Biological Sex Remains A Necessary Analytic Category in Anthropology,” (Conference hosted on YouTube, November 8, 2023), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_i5gHhuLBpw.

25 Ruth D Whitehouse, “Gender Archaeology and Archaeology of Women: Do We Need Both?,” in *Archaeology and Women: Ancient and Modern Issues*, eds. Sue Hamilton, Ruth D. Whitehouse, and Katherine I. Wright (Left Coast Press, Inc.: Walnut Creek, CA, 2007), 27–40, 33.

26 Ben Colliver, “Claiming Victimhood: Victims of the ‘Transgender Agenda,’” in *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse*, eds. Jane Bailey, Asher Flynn, and Nicola Henry (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), 189–204.

27 Elizabeth Weiss, “There’s no such thing as a nonbinary skeleton,” *Spiked!*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.spiked-online.com/2022/08/10/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-nonbinary-skeleton/>.

19 Horton, “Towards a Theory of Cis-Supremacy,” 3 [emphasis mine].

20 *For Women Scotland Ltd. v The Scottish Ministers* [2025] UKSC 16, <https://supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2024-0042>.

21 Transgender Trend, *The Transmission of Transition*, (online, n.d.), <https://www.transgendertrend.com/product/the-transmission-of-transition-2/>.

22 Theo Van Leeuwen, “Legitimation in discourse and communication,” *Discourse & Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 91–112.

In addition to Weiss' article, other examples include Lauren Smith's diatribe for *Spiked!* which argued that "the trans movement cannot be allowed to bend history to its whims"²⁸ and Flat White's claim that trans people "have been busy re-writing history to support their world view for decades."²⁹ While there may be a temptation to see all this as inherently ridiculous, which to a certain extent it is, the accuracy of the claims espoused matters little to the impact of declaring them in the first place. This makes researching beyond-the-binary pasts difficult. When anthropologists with a large platform, such as Weiss, declare trans inclusion in fields related to public history a fiction, or articles go viral in which authors of trans histories are accused of rewriting the past, our work is undermined, and our credibility is weakened in the public imagination which only strengthens the real fiction of trans presentism. I, myself, have faced extensive harassment for studying in this area, including national newspapers calling for my funding to be cut with a sitting member of the UK parliament declaring my research a "scam."³⁰ Additionally, these claims of trans presentism also embolden those who desire to eradicate trans people from public life. These inaccurate claims *are* cis-supremacy attempting to justify and spread itself through the public credibility of history and archaeology. Then, when history and archaeology are discordant to its aims, it uses cis-power to declare these very same disciplines as *incredible*.

5 Impact on Trans Lives

The impact this has on trans lives comes through the anti-trans ideologies they are designed to foster. The aforementioned links between history and Applied Transgender Study methodologies again come to mind. The historic, and even still ongoing, presentation of past peoples as exclusively cisgender denies contemporary trans people access to our heritage and community and thus extenuates GMS. Moreover, this declared exclusively cis past attempts to justify

contemporary policies which resist trans acceptance. Further, if 'transness' is novel, then it becomes easier to pathologize, with pathologization then becoming the justification for the medical gatekeeping of trans identities and/or attempts to medically eradicate trans people. This includes forced detransition by withdrawing access to hormone replacement therapy (HRT), or by allowing the practice of gender 'conversion therapy' – both of which are ongoing in the UK.³¹

A cis-supremacist lens ensures we understand public histories that wholesale preclude any trans possibilities as aspects of a larger cis power structure, either *deliberately* in-and-of themselves, or, if they have simply resulted from people writing history unaware of trans possibilities, as co-opted by anti-trans activists. Either way, these narratives have the same consequence: as an axis of cis-supremacy they legitimize an exclusively cis past to the detriment of contemporary trans people.

6 What Can We Do About it?

Our efforts in tackling cis supremacist histories should focus on arming the public with a baseline understanding of trans possibilities in history. This will help inoculate them against the potency of conservative public histories of gender. This *informational inoculation* approach has proved to be, while by no means a golden bullet, currently the most effective strategy in combating conspiracy theory beliefs.³² It becomes a lot harder for people to fall into the ideology of trans presentism if their local history museum has a permanent exhibit on, for example, medieval life which discusses beyond-binary-gender through Finland's twelfth century intersex Suontaka individual,³³ or on Quaker history mentioning the 18th century agender preacher The Public

²⁸ Lauren Smith, "The dangers of trans-washing the past," *Spiked!*, February 1, 2023, <https://www.spiked-online.com/2023/02/01/the-dangers-of-trans-washing-the-past/>.

²⁹ Flat White, "How dare you assume the gender of ancient skeletons!," *Spectator Australia*, July 25, 2022, <https://www.spectator.com.au/2022/07/how-dare-you-assume-the-gender-of-ancient-skeletons/>.

³⁰ Charlotte Gill, "Ridicule over university's 'transgender archaeology' course," *The Telegraph*, April 13, 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/04/13/phd-york-university-transphobic-archaeology-course-taxpayer/>.

³¹ Andrew Gregory, "Puberty blockers to be banned indefinitely for under-18s across UK," *The Guardian*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/11/puberty-blockers-to-be-banned-indefinitely-for-under-18s-across-uk>; and Sophie Gallagher and Josh Parry, "Conversion Therapy: Ban to go ahead but not cover trans people," *BBC News*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-60947028>.

³² Cian O'Mahony et al., "The efficacy of interventions in reducing belief in conspiracy theories: A systematic review," *PLOS ONE*, 18, no. 4 (2023).

³³ Charles J Lockett, "Revisiting the Suontaka Sword: Unearthing Gender Identity in Medieval Europe," *Medieval Ware*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.medievalware.com/blog/revisiting-suontaka-sword-gender/>.

Universal Friend,³⁴ or on Roman Britain with a trans inclusive interpretation of the Galli.³⁵

This requires a proactive and sustained approach. While several museums focused on LGBTQ + histories have recently opened in the UK, such as Queer Britain³⁶ or the Museum of Transology,³⁷ trans narratives in more established museums are seldom represented. Moreover, in some instances they are even flatly denied, as was the case with Dr. James Barry. Until 2024, Dr James Barry was interpreted on the Science Museum Group's website, not as a trans man, but as a deceptive woman,³⁸ and elsewhere his manhood is still denied.³⁹ In this example, James' very existence provides community, and proof that you can live an authentic life as a trans person, to many within the community. The failure by the Science Museum Group until recently to even consider his well-known self-identification as valid acts as an axis of cis-supremacy. However, if his actual story as a trans man is properly presented, then this very same individual could become a great example of informational inoculation. Stories like James', when told rightly, are powerful tools in the fight against conservative gender histories and demand a real and meaningful fixity within the museum.

Our efforts also require co-creation with members of the trans community. The embodied knowledge inherent to being trans enables insights that even well-meaning and well-versed cis curators might miss. Working directly with the trans community ensures that trans histories are presented in ways designed to compassionately highlight trans pasts, and helps elucidate gender histories that might otherwise remain invisible.

The last initial intervention I will recommend is not directly related to history, but it is perhaps the most important. While we can intervene through our disciplines, this matters little if we do not also tackle transphobia in our everyday lives. Archaeologists and historians must build

meaningful solidarity beyond the academy with the communities whom we study.⁴⁰ This could include attending protests, supporting crowd funding efforts for trans healthcare, providing educational resources on trans topics to colleagues, and being willing to put your head above the parapet by using your platform to spread trans voices. Failing to do so, as Applied Transgender Studies puts so plainly, “may benefit our careers [but] at the expense of the very communities we research.”⁴¹ This means speaking up against trans inequities where we see them and offering personal and proactive support to the trans people in our lives and communities.

7 Conclusions

By viewing conservative histories of gender as manifestations of cis-supremacy we can better arm our discipline against the tyranny of transphobia. The preclusion of trans possibilities from historical narratives is a manifestation of cis power designed to support cis-supremacist authority and control over trans bodies. Intervening with a system of informational inoculation through a collaborative and compassionate co-creative approach with the trans community serves as the best method possible for our disciplines. The challenge against conservative histories of gender requires the tacit acknowledgement of their place within cis power structures over contemporary trans lives. This article serves as a statement of intent, and further research and work is required to fully reposition our disciplines as an activist tool for the transgender community.

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³⁴ Colson Kishimoto, “The 250-Year-Old “Fad”: The Public Universal Friend and Gender Nonconformity Then and Now,” *OutWrite*, February 3, 2023, <https://outwritenewsmag.org/2023/02/the-250-year-old-fad-the-public-universal-friend-and-gender-nonconformity-then-and-now/>.

³⁵ English Heritage, “The Galli: Breaking Roman Gender Norms”, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/lgbtq-history/the-galli/>.

³⁶ Queer Britain, <https://queerbritain.org.uk/>.

³⁷ Museum of Transology, <https://museumoftransology.com/>.

³⁸ Science Museum Group, “James Barry.”

³⁹ Rebecca Ortenberg, “How History Keeps Ignoring James Barry,” *Distillations Magazine*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.sciencehistory.org/stories/magazine/how-history-keeps-ignoring-james-barry/>.

⁴⁰ Randall H. McGuire, “Working Class Archaeology,” in Sonya Atalay et al. (eds.), *Transforming Archaeology*, 115–33.

⁴¹ Billard, Everhart, and Zhang, “Whither Trans Studies?,” 10.

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Owen Hurcum is a PhD candidate at the University of York. Their research project *Trowels, Trenches and #TransRights: Archaeology as Transgender Activism* investigates the way archaeology has become intertwined, directly and incidentally, with transgender equality. It focuses on transgender inclusion in archaeology and the political impacts that archaeology has had on the 'trans rights debate.' The project aims to position archaeology as a tool for transgender emancipation. The PhD project is funded by the White Rose College of Arts and Humanities, through the AHRC. Owen is also a member of the Heritage for Global Challenges Research Centre, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Owen is Non-Binary and uses they/them pronouns.