

HERE AND NOW

July 29: a gender studies professor at the University of Waterloo, Canada, was stabbed by a man who entered her lecture. Two other individuals, a man and a woman, were injured while intervening. This event mirrors the École Polytechnique Massacre in Montreal on December 6, 1989, where a gunman targeted female students and killed 14 women who wanted to become engineers.

Conceptually, explosions are classified as events, as rapid expansions of volume with the consequent release of energy. But this is an incomplete definition. Explosions are, if only for some instants, living organisms, ephemeral crinoids born from a single, hard point, that attract everything around them and assimilate it, making it a part of themselves. This attack, the point of the blade, was nothing but a shiny metal shard blown away by distant forces. This is how stochastic terror works. We want to trace the event back to its origin.

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Fragments explode and multiply. Recent data indicates a surge in violence against the LGBTQ+ community. In 2022, there was a 30-fold increase in anti-queer demonstrations compared to 2017.¹ According to a report by the European International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA Europe), 2022 saw the highest levels of violence against LGBTQ+ individuals in Europe and Central Asia in a decade.² The report also mentions that this violence is occurring amid an increase in hate speech from politicians, religious leaders, and the media.

Notable incidents in 2022 included a shooting outside an LGBTQ+ venue in Oslo, Norway in June that resulted in two deaths and 21 injuries, and another in Bratislava, Slovakia in October with two fatalities. In the United Kingdom, homophobic hate crimes rose by 41% and transphobic hate crimes by 51% in 2022, according to Home Office statistics. In Spain, hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community increased by 70% in 2021 compared to 2019.³

1. Christina Anagnostopoulos, *LGBTQ Community Celebrates Pride in the Face of Online and Offline Attacks*, Reuters, June 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/lgbtq-community-celebrates-pride-face-online-offline-attacks-2023-06-11/>

2. Nicolas Camut, *Anti-LGBTQ+ Violence in Europe Hits Decade-High, Report Finds*, POLITICO, February 20, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/anti-lgbtq-violence-europe-highest-report/> Nicolas Camut, *Anti-LGBTQ+ Violence in Europe Hits Decade-High, Report Finds*, POLITICO, February 20, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/anti-lgbtq-violence-europe-highest-report/>

3. Laura Navarro Soler, *282 Delitos de Odio Contra el Colectivo LGTBI en Un Año: Solo la Punta del Iceberg*, *Newtral*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.newtral.es/delitos-de-odio-lgtbi/20220611/>

These grim statistics are repeated worldwide: Brazil is also facing an increase in violence against transgender individuals. The National Association of Transvestites and Transsexuals (ANTRA) reported that over 150 transgender individuals were killed in Brazil as of September 2020, marking a 70% increase from the previous year.

On 19th November 2022, a lone shooter went into Club Q, a queer bar in Colorado, and started shooting indiscriminately. Tiny, sharp pieces of death are flying around. Where does all this shrapnel come from?

Peti Román

The escalation of violence cannot be viewed in isolation, as it is deeply intertwined with growing societal and institutional animosity. Violence is not spontaneous; it's cultivated, nurtured, and aimed at achieving certain objectives, and then, by remote means, it is released.

Acts of public violence are individually unpredictable, but statistically predictable. We can trace back the trajectories of the attacks to manufactured and politically motivated queerphobic hate, from before the time they hurt people. This surge in physical attacks has a strong correlation with the institutional measures taken against the LGBTQ+ community, where anti-trans legislation has been at the forefront of a multitude of legal actions aimed against the queer community.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a staggering 491 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced in state legislatures in 2023, which is the highest number seen in the last 100 years. A prominent segment of these legislative efforts, predominantly led by Republicans, aims to impose restrictions on drag performances, with at least 15 states moving in this direction.

D TERRORISM

A SHINY SPECK OF SHRAPNEL

In Florida, an extension to Governor Ron DeSantis's 2022 initiative was implemented, which originally limited discussions related to LGBTQ topics in schools up to third grade. This initiative, widely known as the 'Don't Say Gay' bill, has now been extended to encompass all grades in public schools.

Simultaneously, the narrative surrounding the LGBTQ+ community has been undergoing a disturbing shift. Defamatory language and slurs such as 'groomer' have seeped into mainstream discourse, painting the community in a negative light. The Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) and the Human Rights Campaign published a report last year, showing a 406% increase in the use of the term 'grooming' on Twitter in the month following the passage of the 'Don't Say Gay' bill in March 2022. CCDH data covering May 2021 to May 2023 indicates that such narratives were not common before the bill's passage. Now, queer people are associated with child abuse. Same as with blood libel, same as with all hate campaigns, this was done for profit. And it cannot be undone easily.⁴

Social media is a distorted mirror of our reality, although at this time it is no longer clear which one is the reflection. If we check the most popular platforms, we can see a plethora of hashtags promoting hate.

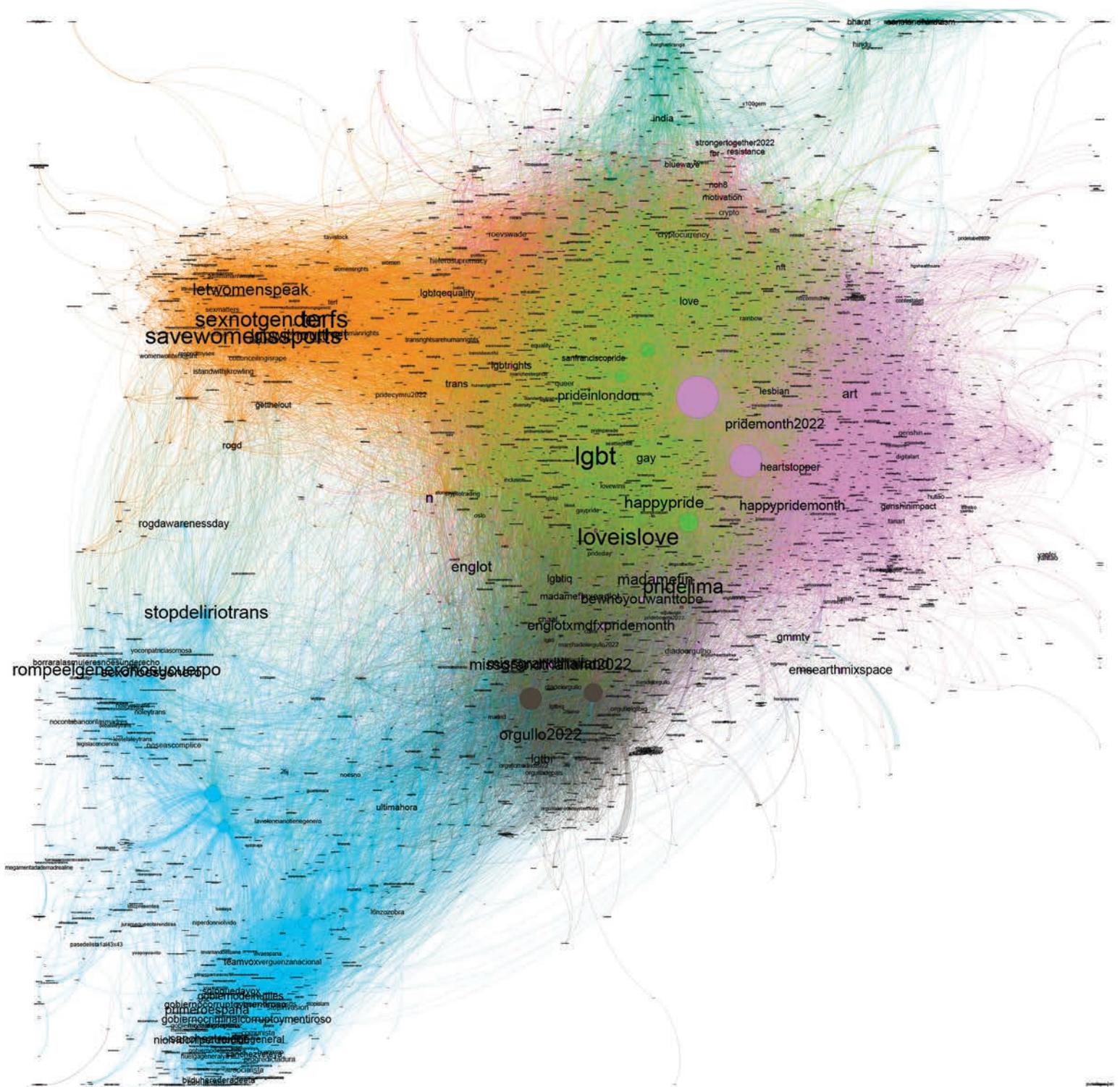
4. Ej Dickson and Nikki McCann Ramirez, *The Right Boosted Trans Hate – and Ran up Their Follower Counts*, Rolling Stone, June 15, 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/trans-hate-follower-count-matt-walsh-1234770675/>

Jara Juana Bermejo Vega is both a researcher and a survivor of transphobic violence. She is one of the members of the research project Trans-AI, straddling the dual role of investigator and subject. As part of her collaborative efforts with her research group on the Twitter user community, the group shed light on the pervasive spread of transphobic hashtags and narratives permeating the social media landscape. The good news for research is that digital traces are nigh impossible to erase; irreversibility goes both ways. Bermejo Vega has extracted hashtags related to surges of transphobic attacks in Spain and related user communities. The data visualisation lights up like a pretty Christmas tree, the tangles of threads linking user groups form clouds that mark user communities; Spanish Twitter is a rich and aggressive ecosystem, but it stays segregated.⁵

5. Jara Juani Bermejo-Vega, *How Anti-Trans Hate is Astroturfed on Social Media*, BRIDGES Conference, September 13, 2022, Video, <https://vimeo.com/754259618>; *Análisis de Red del Discurso de Odio Queerfóbico en Twitter*, PYCONES Granada, October 22, 2022, YouTube Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nC58DAXGhgw>

We sit by her desk, looking at how the communities evolve during Pride Month. Jara clicks on the screen. Several clouds appear: LGBTIAQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Asexual, Queer and others) community, conservatives, progressives, TERFs... We can see which hashtag was promoted during that time.

Another click. Transphobic hashtags appear, promoted by the TERF (Trans-exclusionary Radical Feminists) cloud and immediately absorbed and amplified into the conservative and alt-right community. This is a frequent occurrence, once you learn to look for it.



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#leytransespatriarcal, #aquiestamoslasfeministas, #irenemonterodimision... all these little pieces of hate come from the same two or three accounts, and they spread amongst a small circle of user groups who like and retweet obsessively, sometimes every ten seconds, for hours at a time. Then, the larger network of the right-wing trampolines them into the general public: buzz is generated.

The state forces control the narrative. They are the blast wave destabilising the surroundings, tearing apart the tender tissues of society, shattering the harder fragments that later become weapons of their own. Have I gone too far with the metaphor? We are, after all, talking about people's lives.

Cultural discourse has always been volatile, and policy makers know that. Previously secured advancements in the acceptance and rights of the LGBTQ+ community appear to be precarious, as they are constantly undermined by emerging societal and institutional challenges. This shifting landscape has tangible, detrimental impacts on the lives of individuals within the community.

The changes in the political panorama have been global: the necrotic force of modern conservatism has found in the hatred of LGBTQ+ people, in particular trans people, a new force. The heralds of the alt-right everywhere have chosen a new banner to spearhead their hate speech: look at the Orbáns, Abascal, Rishi Sunaks of the world. Look at the convective currents of money flowing from evangelical lobbies and corrupt governments into what are supposed to be grassroots organisations; listen to the conversations behind closed doors. This has been at work for a while.

This week, the Supreme Court of the United States determined that it is legal to refuse to serve queer people. The case, backed by the ultraconservative ADF, was based on a complaint by a graphic designer in which she complained that she could, hypothetically, be forced to design a website for a gay wedding.⁶ There was never such request and there was never a complaint. The case was a mere pantomime for the conservative majority in the Supreme Court to make their move and erode LGBTQ+ rights. One step further in a chain reaction.

To pinpoint the exact beginning of this explosion is futile: the forces of hatred and prejudice have always inhabited the not-so-subconscious of society, leaving a prime substrate for such violent outburst. In the neoliberal landscape, trans people are easy to hate: we disrupt gender roles, we disrupt reproduction, and, more importantly, we do weird things with our bodies. We are icky. So, 'pioneers' such as Meg Kilgannon, who spoke in the Values Voters summit in 2017, laid out a strategy to revitalise conservatism: divide and conquer. From her mouth: "Trans and gender identity are a tough sell, so focus on gender identity to divide and conquer." For many "gender identity on its own is just a bridge too far. If we separate the T from the alphabet soup we'll have more success."⁷ In the same summit, attendees were invited to disguise transphobic language as concern for women and children.

6. Melissa Gira Grant, *The Mysterious Case of the Fake Gay Marriage Website, the Real Straight Man, and the Supreme Court*, *The New Republic*, August 7, 2023, <https://newrepublic.com/article/173987/mysterious-case-fake-gay-marriage-website-real-straight-man-supreme-court>

7. Jeff Taylor. *The Christian Right's New Strategy: Divide and Conquer the LGBT Community*, *LGBTQ Nation*, October 23, 2017. <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2017/10/christian-rights-new-strategy-divide-conquer-lgbt-community/>

THE BODIES

In 2022, Helen Joyce, an editor at *The Economist* and affiliated with a group called Sex Matters, openly advocated for reducing the number of trans individuals, whom she deemed a "huge problem to a sane world". She proposed utilising institutional avenues and putting pressure on decision-makers, eventually conceding that her viewpoint didn't enjoy widespread support. This declaration, only five years ago, would have raised a scandal. Now it would barely raise an eyebrow.

Imagine, if you will, the eruption of sentiments like these as something of an institutional magic, with echoes as potent as an atomic blast. This magic, once unleashed, defies taming; it is like trying to coerce the explosion back into a neat uranium sphere. Words and actions, once cast into reality, are alchemy too fierce to be withdrawn; they bind and change realities.

Writing a hopeful conclusion to this feels like a performance, an exercise in futility. I could write about how for every action there is a counter-reaction, about a restorative alchemy of support and solidarity. I perform it because I want to believe. The time of action has come, or, I would rather say, it has come and passed. We are now in the time of counteraction, of restoration, of tending the wounds. The wounds can be healed; however, they cannot be uninflicted. You cannot make an object whole from shards.

These are the years of salvage. Let's hope we can build something from the ruins.

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