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If you tolerate mis(ogyny), then fascisms will be next: rewriting the classroom script through affirmative ethics

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the influence of misogyny in neoliberal UK educational settings, linking misogynistic ideals and ‘manfluencer’ practices to growing fascistic tendencies. Viewing this predicament through a posthuman lens, we draw upon posthumanist and poststructural knowledge, along with rhizomatic thinking to analyse how misogyny manifests in classroom interactions and curricula, revealing the affective dynamics of gendered power relations. We introduce microfascism to illustrate how the everyday enforcement of patriarchal norms, amplified by algorithms, reinforces misogyny and authoritarian structures. In response, we propose a framework based on Spinozan affirmative ethics, which can resist and transform these oppressive dynamics. This framework emphasizes relationality, multiplicity, and transformation, offering a way to disrupt misogynistic and fascistic structures and foster inclusive classroom practices. By decentring traditional power hierarchies and encouraging difference, this approach empowers students and educators to create learning environments that challenge misogyny and fascism while promoting ethical, diverse, and creative engagement.

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Introduction

If you tolerate this, then your children will be next.

Rooted in resistance to fascism, the eerie warning from the Manic Street Preachers (1998) now resonates in an unexpected arena: U.K. schools. The spectre of fascism may seem alarmist, and the word itself often deemed impermissible (Mondon and Winter 2020), but in this paper we argue that through neoliberal operations and the manosphere, misogynistic practices have laid the groundwork for fascistic tendencies to manifest. As such, this article critically examines how these forces intersect.

Misogyny serves as a structuring force that bridges neoliberalism and emergent micro-fascisms. Through situating and positioning misogyny as both product and enabler, we first highlight its role in normalizing the conditions in which fascist ideals flourish. We

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then explore the concept of microfascism further as an ongoing, embedded logic, inseparable from the structures of power that govern daily life.

In order to counter and provide an ‘antidote’ (Braidotti and Dolphijn, 2022) to the insidiously viral contagions of microfascisms, we go on to employ posthuman affirmative ethics as a framework that proposes a potential solution grounded in theory with proposals for practice. In order to address the complexities of lived realities of the classroom, we move from the abstract to the practical, presenting real-world applications for educators who have to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway 2016, 1) of teaching in neoliberal times whilst simultaneously attempting to resist integration. In doing so we note that many of the posthuman concepts we embrace in this article challenge the linear and rational way in which academic thought is usually framed. Our intention however, despite our normative presentation, is that ideas may be taken up in rhizomatic or diffractive ways in order to put them to work in different locations and practices.

Context

The oft-referenced ideology of neoliberalism (see: Ball 2021; Harvey, 2005) – broadly conceived as the marketization and commodification of public services – has profoundly reshaped education by prioritizing competition, performance metrics, and privatized efficiency (Giroux 2022; Macfarlane 2016). Schools have been reframed as service providers, with students and parents positioned as consumers whose value is reduced to quantified outputs (Ball 2021). Metamorphosed with this is the ‘conservative modernization’ (Apple 2015, 3) of neoconservatism and its promotion of moral discipline, hierarchies and the nostalgic return of proper pedagogy (Ball 2021). This fusion positions schools as sites of rigid cultural norms and economic competition; neoliberalism champions competition in a quasi-market, with neoconservatism demanding a stricter discipline and return to traditionalism (Neumann et al. 2020).

This neoliberal-neoconservative assemblage fosters the conditions ripe for microfascist tendencies (Kuntz 2022). Via test scores, league tables and behavioural policies, the intensifications of surveillance and hierarchical rigidity encourage a culture that normalizes exclusion, privileging compliance (Zembylas 2022). Under the guise of accountability and raising standards, schools are shaped by such powerful policy technologies (Turner-Bisset, 2007), transforming them to spaces where biopower subtly operates to reinforce standardization and obedience; perpetuating a meritocratic fantasy that ignored systemic barriers (Stahl 2015). The result is an education system underpinned by hierarchical vision and relentlessly pursuant of performance, that manifests authoritarian proclivities and normalizes misogyny. This eroding of democratic educational spaces (Giroux 2022) both facilitates microfascist tendencies and allows discriminatory practices like misogyny to perpetuate and exacerbate.

The manosphere

Though not the central premise of this paper, and covered elsewhere (See for example: Marwick and Caplan 2018; Nichols and Agius 2018; Sharkey 2022; Solea and Sugiura 2023; Zimmerman 2022) it would be remiss not to provide a brief overview of the manosphere, as it is important to understand the online and offline influences which school children navigate.

The manosphere relates to myriad male-dominated and –oriented online and offline networks where men express grievances and galvanize feelings of disenfranchisement, often in response to societal shifts in gender roles (Chang 2022). Framing men in victimhood of feminist progression in a hostile world that unfairly favours women and removes their rights and powers (Haslop et al. 2024; Stahl, Keddle, and Adams 2023), these networks pursue an end-goal of the reinforcement of patriarchal dominance and a return and restoration of a more *natural order* (Haslop et al. 2024; for more in-depth views into the manosphere’s origins, see: Ging 2019).

These beliefs are concordant with broader identity politics that seep into public discourse (Haslop et al. 2024) that normalize narratives of misogyny. Pushed onto social media timelines, such views are amplified by algorithms, influencing both online and offline behaviours in schools (CCDH 2022); rising rates of harassment and stereotyping against woman and girls, cis-het male students are susceptible to such hegemonic masculinity formation (Ging et al. 2024; Solea and Sugiura 2023). Positioned firmly within this, are manfluencers such as Andrew Tate. Speaking of men’s rights being under attack by feminism (Renström and Bäck, 2024), asserting dominance over women, and promoting a warped view of masculinity (Haslop et al. 2024) Tate’s sentiments are shared by other manfluencers like Jordan Peterson and Rollo Tomassi, with both the normalization of manosphere discourse and manfluencers’ popularities having intensified, especially in relation to school-age boys (CCDH 2022; Horeck et al. 2024).

Misogyny

Such misogynistic influence is reported to be prevalent in U.K. schools (Wright and Hale 2025). Power relations in gender are subverted with emboldening of misogynistic values and homosocial currencies that reinforce boys’ affiliation to hegemonic masculinities (Haslop et al. 2024; Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024). From ‘boys will be boys’ and girls being informed that beauty and intellect cannot coexist (U.K. Feminista 2024) to online and offline structures leading boys down rabbit holes of extremism and hatred (CCDH 2022), schools may play their part in perpetuating identifying messages to students about what is valued and accepted; misogyny is being driven culturally.

Manne (2017) conceptualizes misogyny as the enforcement of patriarchal norms rather than merely a belief system about gender inferiority. Whilst sexism justifies male dominance by presenting women as naturally subordinate, misogyny punishes those who challenge or fail to conform to these roles; the law enforcement of the patriarchy. Bates (2020) expands this by examining how manospheric misogyny manifests in contemporary digital and cultural spaces, demonstrating how misogynistic rhetoric polices women’s behaviour, from the workplace to social media, often escalating into harassment or violence. Misogyny serves as an active force for the maintenance of gendered hierarchies, feeding on sexism’s ideological foundations; sexism is deemed the rational argument, with misogyny eliciting compliance with often violent repercussions.

Such enforcement is particularly visible within U.K. schools, through both structural and interpersonal mechanisms. Horeck et al. (2024, 858) note that in the aftermath of ‘Everyone’s Invited’ (a U.K. anti-rape movement organization based in the United Kingdom, focused on exposing rape culture) and their 97% statistic, Ofsted’s¹ rapid response review demonstrated what experts in school-based sexual violence had long

stated: that abuse and sexual harassment were widespread and normalized, with 90% of girls receiving media that they did not want or ask for. Such sexual harms have become commonplace, with many students feeling seeking help is futile (Firmin 2020; Lloyd and Walker 2023). Such factors skew power relations in a majority of U.K. schools, where boys, influenced by manospheric discourse, are shown to belittle, harangue and dismiss female staff and students (Horeck et al. 2024; U.K. Feminista 2024); enforcement mechanisms acting as a form of discipline through intimidation, coercion, harassment and violence.

Whilst this paper acknowledges the response to this misogynistic rise within U.K. schools, which includes the U.K. government's enquiry into Violence Against Women and Girls (2025), Prevent's (2023) updates, and Ofcom's (2025) and the PSHE association's guidance (2025), it often seen as tokenistic and piecemeal: Setty, Hunt, and Ringrose (2025) show significant tensions between disciplinary (surveillance-based) and supportive (relationship-based) policing approaches in schools, whilst the Shawcross Review (2023) highlights disparity between ideologies, in that far-right or misogynist 'incel' views should only lead to Prevent referrals when there is an actual risk of violent activities (as opposed to Islamic extremism). Frustratingly, policies appear to typically fail to adequately empower staff or address deeply ingrained misogynistic attitudes amongst students (Bunker-Bramley 2024), which prevent student disclosure, making students feel uncomfortable in reporting, due to 'environments that condoned sexism, sexual violence, and harassment' (Ringrose et al. 2025, 17) and in cases, can partly be seen to promote a culture of snitching, victim blaming and inadequacies (Lloyd and Walker 2023).

Fascism

Misogyny and fascism share a logic of hierarchical control, punitive conformity, and aggrieved entitlement. Misogyny enforces patriarchal norms through punishment and reward, functioning as a disciplinary mechanism (Llanera 2023). Microfascism (fascism's precursor, which we expand on later in this paper) translates this into mundane yet pervasive practices that embed authoritarian ideals in everyday life (May 2013; Milani 2024). Patriarchal masculinities act as microfascist assemblages, reinforcing gendered hierarchies on affective and unconscious levels (Pease 2025). Misogyny, then, becomes both a tactic and an affective infrastructure of fascism.

Eco (1995) saw fascism as an adaptable and fluid ideology that emphasized traits like the fear of difference, the rejection of modernity and support of nationalism. For Paxton (2004), fascism is a process that transcends ideology, where democracies under socio-economic strain allow fascistic practices to more easily embed. Stanley (2020), meanwhile, views fascism as reliant on propaganda, mythologized pasts, and anti-intellectualism to undermine democracy. By exploiting crises such as a feminist conspiracy (Chang 2022) and simultaneously promoting a return to normality, Stanley argues that such rhetoric stokes division, thereby providing legitimization.

Mondon and Winter (2020) argue that it is the mainstreaming of far-right discourse, normalizing exclusionary rhetoric under the banner of populist concern and culturally driven by political and media actors, that enable and embolden fascism, allowing it to integrate into the mainstream without explicit consent. Similarly, Giroux (2018, 2022) makes the case that it is neoliberalism's erosion of democratic institutes and individualist

advocacies that have fostered fascist conditions. It is within these contexts that misogyny has the capacity to provide a pipeline to more nefarious times.

Microfascism as theoretical framework

Given the intrinsic connections between misogyny, the manosphere and fascism, it is crucial to counter behaviours at their root, whilst acknowledging their complexities. Thus, this section offers a philosophical framework that can help educators understand how individual desires, shared emotional intensities, and deeply encoded views of what it means to be human can coalesce within contemporary schooling, giving rise to practices that foster and facilitate the connections between misogyny and fascism as outlined previously. We firstly examine fascism at the micro level, then explore how employing a critical posthuman lens can enable educators to understand and shift behaviours towards more affirmative, equitable futures.

Microfascism

As conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), microfascism relates to the fascist tendencies and practices on an individual and institutional level. Whilst perhaps those unfamiliar with the term may compare with contemporary ‘microaggressions’, microfascisms operate differently: rather than rooted in prejudice and referring to slights and implicit biases, microfascisms employ not merely acts of harm but desires that align with and uphold authoritarian logics (Raisifard 2022). As Bratich (2022) argues, it is about how individuals desire discipline, enact control, and participate in structures that produce domination from within.

Microfascisms are everyday, nuanced, subtle behaviours and desires. Unlike its macro counterpart, microfascism embeds on a molecular level that shapes interaction. Such everyday annoyances like a queue-cutter or someone wearing trainers at a black-tie event reveal how deeply ingrained is the expectation for conformity and discipline (Mohammed 2019). Microfascism has no need for explicit coercion, for it operates in the desire for people to not just follow any rule, but to have others follow them as well. It does not emerge as a singular event but functions as an ongoing, embedded logic, inseparable from the structures of power that govern daily life (Evans and Reid 2013). Rather than being imposed from above, microfascism is internalized, taking root in both conscious and unconscious desires (Dolphijn and Braidotti, 2022). People do not merely endure hierarchical and repressive structures; they become invested in them, seeing them as necessary for order and stability (May 2013). This is what makes microfascism particularly insidious; it does not require external enforcement when individuals themselves uphold its mechanisms, disciplining both themselves and others in ways that sustain its dominance.

Microfascism and the neoliberal school

Neoliberal schooling does not simply impose discipline; it cultivates a culture whereby students internalize control, making microfascism self-perpetuating (Mohammed 2019). Schools operate as microfascist assemblages, embedding mechanisms of surveillance,

competition, and hierarchical discipline into everyday practices. Rather than being external constraints, these structures become deeply ingrained in students' sense of normality (Evans and Reid 2013). While neoliberal education presents itself as meritocratic and liberatory, it depends on disciplinary structures that align with microfascist control. The expansion of neoliberal governance has not countered authoritarian tendencies but rather normalized them through education's emphasis on regulation, competition, and standardization (Evans and Reid 2013; Lloyd and Bradbury 2023). Forming part of a wider network of power structures, the neoliberal school positions itself neutrally (Hamer 2023; Braidotti and Dolphijn, 2022). This ensures that those it is shaping and making subjects of the system come to desire it, thus ensuring that microfascist logic is maintained.

School discipline is not merely a set of rules, but a process of forming compliant actors (Braidotti and Dolphijn, 2022) as schools function as biopolitical sites where bodies, emotions and behaviours of students are all regulated to maintain the power structure (Zembylas 2022) and discipline is embedded into everyday school life by performance tracking, standardized testing and accountability measures (Kuntz 2022). The increasing emphasis on surveillance (both physical and digital) ensures that students not only conform to behavioural expectations but also internalize the gaze of authority, regulating themselves even in the absence of direct oversight. Attempts to regulate social issues through rigid school policies often deepen microfascist tendencies rather than dismantling them (Evans and Reid 2013). Contrary to their claims, educational reforms like behaviour management reinforce such microfascisms and tie discipline centrally; microfascism is not just external but ingrained in speech and behaviour, even pleasure (Braidotti and Dolphijn, 2022), making its disentangling an arduous process. The embedding of microfascist logic into institutional practice ensures that not only are fascistic tendencies perpetuated but they are then actively sought out by those within the system, exacerbating the neoliberal school's function as a mechanism that shapes students into willing subjects to participate in hierarchy and control.

The role of desire

It arises not because we desire fascism but because what we desire is fascistic. (May 2013, 26.)

While a full exploration of desire's role in microfascism is beyond this paper's remit, its function in sustaining these structures must be acknowledged. Not requiring coercion or imposition, microfascism emerges from the molecular yearn for control and order, cultivating a desire for discipline, that positions authority and hierarchy as natural and necessary (Bazzano 2022). Foucault (in Deleuze and Guattari 1983, xiii) shows how microfascism works through individuals embracing of order, and not through oppression itself:

the fascism in us all, in our heads, and in our everyday behaviour, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.

Ergo, individuals are conditioned to invest in the very structures that seek to regulate them. This is exemplified in the neoliberal school where adherence and internalizing competition and discipline are deemed desirable goals (Mohammed 2019). Thus, the neoliberal school does not enforce control, but fosters its continuation. May (2013) contends

that such structures mould desire, with microfascism not just a conscious choice but what is valued as a product in such systems. Schools rewarding hierarchy and regulation teach students that compliance is not enough, but it must be aspired to.

Microfascist misogyny

Misogyny functions as a key mechanism through which microfascism takes root and expands, reinforcing hierarchical power structures at both the institutional and cultural levels. The manosphere exemplifies this process, presenting masculinity as a competitive struggle in which power is achieved through domination and the rejection of feminism (Bazzano 2022). By exploiting neoliberal rhetoric and connecting success to traditional patriarchal gender roles, alongside a perceived threat from femininity, manfluencers marketise a nefarious form of masculinity. Such an ideological framework corresponds to wider microfascisms that normalize exclusionary practices.

Schools play a central role in embedding these logics, shaping boys and young men through disciplinary structures that encourage competitiveness, control, and the policing of gendered behaviours (Evans and Reid 2013). These environments cultivate a hierarchical masculinity that mirrors the manosphere, reinforcing the idea that dominance is both natural and desirable, pushing boys via competition and discipline towards a framework that promises stability through control and reinforces a rigid masculinity that aligns with microfascist tendencies (Zembylas 2022). In contrast to this, girls are subjected to increased surveillance and regulated through practices such as uniform policies that implicitly position them as objects of control as opposed to autonomous individuals, highlighting the microfascist mechanisms and sustaining structures of misogyny. As Braiddotti and Dolphijn (2022) argue, microfascism functions through multiple intersecting forms of oppression, regulating gender hierarchies. Misogyny is deeply embedded within this framework, presenting male dominance as an essential organizing principle of social life.

Essential to the maintenance of misogyny is control and surveillance. The feminine perception perpetuated by the manosphere is one of commodification and restriction that promotes the view that a woman's value is inherently tied to their adherence to performativities of gender (Peters 2022). Like the neoliberal school policies, digital platforms enforce such narratives through the biases of algorithms' amplification of misogynistic content behind a façade of neutrality (Bazzano 2022); misogyny is not just a byproduct of microfascism but one of its key principles. Microfascism ensures that misogyny is deeply embedded in both digital and educational spaces, through its policing of gender roles, the reinforcement of hierarchic structures and in shaping desire.

Fascistic growth

Fascism is not an imposition, but a process that is continually reproduced by individuals and institutions (Evans and Reid 2013). It is through the everyday acts of microfascist foundations upon which macrofascist structures emerge. Such a process is intensified in times of fear and instability where social cohesion is decimated and a populace turns to undemocratic solutions to seek security and salvation (Evans and Reid 2013). The neoliberal school serves as a space of conditioning for this shift. The values that are instilled by

the neoliberal school are argued to desensitize individuals to macrofascist formations (Giroux 2022). These ideas do not just arise from mobilization at the grassroots level, but are legitimized and mainstreamed by those who shape public discourse; the transposition of the far-right to a legitimate force has resulted in a normalization of fascistic practices (Mondon and Winter 2020). Through soft labelling and a failure to address systemic inequalities, such ideologies are sanitized.

Neoliberal schools mask exclusionary practices, teaching students to see inequality as a natural consequence of competition as opposed to a structural issue. This promotes the standing that hierarchy is not only accepted but seen as essential to social order. Furthermore, neoliberal institutions cultivate a sense of competitive individualism, encouraging individuals to embrace stratification rather than challenge it (May 2013). Over time, this reinforces a broader culture in which fascisms become desirable, not through overt coercion but through its normalization. When enough in society accept such microfascisms, a fascist state emerges.

Critical posthumanism and affirmative ethics as antidote

In order to uncover the roots of (micro)fascistic desires and associated 'othering', the critical posthuman thinking of Braidotti firstly calls us to question what kind of humans we centre in education and society in general. This process calls us to '... mark the end of the self-reverential arrogance of a dominant Eurocentric notion of the human, and to open up new perspectives' (Braidotti and Hlavajova 2018, 3). The human referred to as 'centred' here is the white, cis-het, male, able-bodied, neurotypical, Western 'Man of Reason'; rational, liberal and evolving in line with scientific perfectability, competition, and the reification of the individual above the relational. Posthumanism requires us to go beyond – or after – the kind of humanism that positions this ideal as the marker of what humans should, or could be. It requires us to augment and reposition the voices of those overlooked and oppressed by Enlightenment ideas of 'humanity', as exemplified by neoliberal 'Homo Economicus' (Attick 2017) or Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. However, this challenge to Man as the 'basic unit of reference' (Braidotti, 2018, 18) is typically met with a backlash; manifesting in fears of loss of power and control which are subsequently manipulated within the manosphere resulting in increased behaviours of misogyny, sexism and chauvinism. Disrupting the hegemonic Vitruvian norms which facilitate and underscore fascist practices is a necessary starting point, but should be undertaken with the understanding that such disruptions will be unsettling and give rise to defensive positions.

Critical posthumanism encourages us to think in post-identitarian ways; not to minimize the struggles of identity-focused movements and civil rights gains, but in order to challenge the idea of an autonomous, rational human subject. Limiting our focus to fixed identities and representations can cause us to think in insider/outsider ways, rather than acknowledging that relationality is paramount. Our different positions and locations should be appreciated, but the emphasis is on what we can produce as a community who share a love of humanity; as Braidotti states 'We are in this [predicament] together, but we are not one and the same' (2020). This intersectional approach, in which multiple axes of difference can combine to shape experiences of injustice, calls us to employ identities – not as characteristics, but as cartographic tools. Thus, although

the focus of this paper is gender, understandings of micro-fascism could also be read through the lens of class, race and so on – as well as the intersections between them. This nomadic and mobile approach to identity is particularly pertinent given the tendency of the manosphere to fix subjects into particular positions and affix victimhood to them – for example, the working class boy, or ‘ugly’ male. Such appropriations are illustrated through the framing of working-class males as systematically oppressed by feminism and institutional structures (Hopton and Langer, 2021). Through terms such as ‘divorce rape’, (Hopton and Langer, 2021) legitimate experiences of marginalization faced by communities are co-opted, weaponising working-class male identity to reinforce misogynistic and anti-feminist positions. Educators must therefore critically recognize such narratives, dismantling them by affirmatively addressing genuine marginalisations without inadvertently validating misogynistic framings.

Critical posthumanism and education

Applying critical posthuman thinking to mainstream education calls us to notice and call out the normative, pervasive, Vitruvian ideas of humanity which are encoded, either overtly or covertly in schooling practices. These notions show up not only through content and practice (white, colonial narratives; the erasure of women’s history; sports designed for the able-bodied; gendered school uniforms, and so on) but also sit behind inclusion practices that position Vitruvian bodies as the norm and the ‘othered’ as somehow in deficit. Further to this, Posthuman thinking argues that children by their very nature are also positioned as deficit beings under hegemonic developmental modes of psychology. Within linear framings of development as espoused by Piaget and others, children are seen to mirror human biological evolution. Much like Darwin’s evolutionary model of man ascending from apes, children’s development was seen to render them only provisionally human; needing to fully attain specific stages in order to achieve rationality and cease being ‘othered’, ideally ultimately achieving a certain classed, raced, gendered and abled status. As Kromidas (2018, 68) suggests:

... this figure is veritably the child of Man, a Western bourgeois model that takes as its referent the white middle-class child, a not-quite-human being that is made human as it is subject to particular forms of power – surveillance, measurement and ranking along a scale of development, the zenith of which is Man himself.

Due to children’s lack of rationality, and status as not fully human, teachers are positioned as ‘civilising agents’; instructors and guides managing lesser beings ‘... that must be surveilled and brought into the fold of fully human-ness’ (Kromidas 2018, 70). The reification of a certain type of human child (white, male, able-bodied, neurotypical, European and so on) can thus manifest as ableism and inflexibility in teaching and assessment, meritocratic attitudes that suggest giving everyone the same opportunity will result in fair treatment, and the persistence of gender binary splits in practices such as school uniform enforcement and PE teaching. This ‘othering’ of children, and an entrenched belief in their lack of rationality also discourages agency, autonomy and the development of independent critical thinking.² In the mainstream, covert male supremacy and limited belief in the capacity of the child work together to create fertile ground for the development of the problematic power relations that allow fascistic and misogynistic attitudes to develop.

Critical posthumanism importantly includes a ‘material turn’; that is, an acknowledgement that human relations are impacted and affected by the non-human agents that intra-act with them. Intensities of emotion in combination with oppressive surveillance practices, for example, can create affective atmospheres which are pre-cognitive in the way they influence moods and modes of being and interacting. Agents, both human and non-, combine to create networks, or assemblages of forces, which influence our ability to act. Being attune to such intensities and assemblages which go beyond the social, cultural or linguistic practices of a learning space is key to the managing of micro-fascisms in the classroom.

Affirmative ethics

The only way to fight a hegemonic discourse is to teach ourselves and others alternative ways of seeing the world. (Brodkey 1996, 113)

To counter the effects of microfascisms, we propose an approach that pays attention to the affective, contagious nature of desire and leads instead towards hopeful alternative positions. Posthuman affirmative ethics are based around the creation of ‘joyful encounters’ which move people away from spaces of negativity and cynicism. The philosopher Spinoza (2002) warns against the ‘sad passions’ of nefarious world-views (such as those rooted in fascism and misogyny) which connect people through shared anger and frustration and diminish the capacity of people to act in positive ways. Instead, being ethically affirmative calls us to turn *towards* difference, rather than flattening it via uniformity. Ethics here differ from morals, in that they are not a universalized series of rules to be followed, but ongoing practices of positive modes of relations which increase each person’s capacity to act. They are, as Braidotti (2016, 26) explains, ‘a transformation of negative into positive passions’. This philosophical approach is antithetical to the individualist, neoliberal and meritocratic values often embedded in our education systems. As such, it offers a radical way to live and work whilst accepting that we are embedded in the very systems we attempt to resist. As Kuntz (2022, 594) warns however, being affirmatively ethical should not be just about philosophizing, it is about taking material action through the ‘... creation of conditions necessary for alternative ways of living toward an unknown, yet potential, future’. This includes paying attention to the ways in which our own intrinsic tendencies can lead us to be ‘enamoured of power’ (Foucault, in Deleuze and Guattari 1983, xiii) and mapping the ways in which our own practices and ways of living can be inherently fascistic, even whilst feeling liberatory.

This section explores different five facets of affirmative ethics: pain to knowledge, turn to difference, nomadic subjects, potestas and potential power, and more-than-human affective relations. We then consider how they may be enacted in practice by educators in order to counter microfascisms and provide ‘immunisation’ (Braidotti 2019) against workings of the manosphere and misogyny within education.

Pain to knowledge

In our complex contemporary times of ongoing pandemic, climate fear and grief, rising identity-related hatred, and environmental breakdown (amongst many other global,

societal and personal challenges) it is easy to fall into patterns of cynicism, withdrawal or melancholia. In such a climate of individual and collective pain, people may be (understandably) drawn together in communities bonded by ‘sad passions’ rather than hope or optimism. This is both true of adults and young people; given that we are always relational and hard-wired to seek community, both groups will gather in spaces where they identify and align with the ideas of others (the manosphere, with its suspicion of women and focus on male victimhood is one such example of a community centred around collective angst). As Braidotti states: ‘... melancholia expresses a form of loyalty through identification with the wounds of others and hence that it promotes an ecology of belonging by upholding the collective memory of trauma or pain’ (2016, 10). Whilst it is not suggested that such spaces are necessarily negative – indeed, they can be liberatory, particularly when centred around minoritised identity characteristics – Braidotti warns against this tendency to associate on the basis of fear or shared anxiety. What she instead suggests is that other ways of resistance are necessary in order to create new realities; by transforming negativity into positive imaginaries. This need to de-link pain from (ongoing) suffering can still allow for recognition of impotence and frustration, but necessitates a belief in communal creation of alternative ways of being that do not ‘other’ humans who are different, or to gather against shared enemies.

Turn to difference

As noted in the previous section, ‘sad passions’ often coalesce around a fear or hatred of difference. For the incel elements of the manosphere, this hatred is focused particularly on women and men deemed to be of higher attractiveness or sexual appeal. Paradoxically, it lies in an envy or desire to manifest these qualities which are deemed to be lacking in the individuals drawn to the community; and also relies on a belief in male supremacy, the privileging of the ‘Vitruvian Man’ ideal in its perfectability and unattainability. This pernicious belief in the dominant vision of the ideal subject – male, able-bodied, physically fit and so on – leads necessarily to a diminishing of those human bodies deemed less worthy. In contrast, affirmative ethics calls for a turn *towards* difference, where difference is not seen as lack but as generativity and productivity.

Nomadic subjects

Braidotti (2019) urges us to undergo processes of de-familiarisation and dis-identification in order to give us critical distance from the systems that constrain us. Oppressive practices have become so normalized that we cannot imagine other ways of doing things. Yet when we examine structures, organizations and political systems from a critical distance we begin to see the cracks and even feel a sense of the ridiculous. This application of affirmative ethics requires a stepping back and mode of objectivity in order to disassociate from processes and practices that may not be rooted in joy and affirmation. Within education, this criticality may cause us to become nomadic in our thinking and reconsider how we view loyalty to organizations; as Cottom (2022, n.p.) states: ‘Institutions cannot love you ... They are choosing to reproduce themselves’. Understanding that communities may need to be formed both within and outwith organizations, and that ‘the work is the organisation, the organisation is not the work’ (Braidotti 2019a) requires a

shift in mindset and a critical distancing. This does not mean that we should attempt to dismantle institutions or only work outside them, but instead that we should look to change and improve whilst at the same time knowing that our aims may be different. In education, defamiliarising ourselves from, and disidentifying with readily-accepted practices, which may be rooted in problematic traditions or neoliberal beliefs, and making them 'strange' through critical distancing is an essential first step towards detaching from the pain of misalignment with personal and professional ethics.

Potestas and potentia power

When thinking about power, we are constrained by language. In English there is only one word for it. French has two (*pouvoir* and *puissance*); other languages have many. Spinoza used the words *potestas* and *potentia* to form an important distinction between hierarchical, bureaucratic and political power (*potestas*) and natural, generative, relational power (*potentia*). Organizations such as schools are generally spaces of *potestas*; rigid, hard to change, and mired in complex bureaucratic processes ('politics-as-usual'). *Potentia* energy, meanwhile, is the affective, hopeful power often felt in the body; in the moments teachers and students share a joke; when educators start a project with people outside their own usual working environment; or when you meet a new person at work and find someone who shares your values. It is an activist power; rhizomatic in its messy, serendipitousness, and often subversive. *Potentia* is ultimately relational; it is not about the pursuit of individual attainment or competition, but about systems working together for the good of all.

'More-than-Human' affective relations

For Braidotti, affirmation is as much about the material as the human: it is, as she states '... embodied, embedded, relational and affective' (Braidotti 2019, 466). In affirmative ethics, there is a clear distinction from morality, as ethics extends beyond the human: 'no thing or body is taken to be inherently good or bad; instead, good and bad function as increases or decreases in the body's capacity to act and connect *with multiple others*' (Mulcahy 2022, 1004, our emphasis). Affect can be a difficult concept to grasp, but nonetheless what it produces will undoubtedly be familiar to teachers and children within schools. Social, material, cultural, and other forces combine to create atmospheres or moods of 'affective intensity' that produce something; this assemblage of agents shifts the focus in a dialogic situation from the linguistic or cognitive to the embodied creating a 'visceral prompt' (Hickey-Moody 2013, 80). Keddie (2021) suggests that educators should pay attention to such affective encounters in teaching; becoming aware of intensities of emotion is a necessary skill which will allow teachers to affirmatively disrupt and redirect their flow. An affective teacher will thus take notice of moments which derail teaching-as-usual and interfere with clock time; connecting with ideas of shared 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 2008) and 'knowledge encounters' (Colebrook, in Parr, 2010, 3) in which 'relations, potentials and powers not our own' come together to enact events. In the context of misogyny, this may involve leaning into moments of discomfort and allowing students to 'stay with the trouble' of difficult conversations; being sensitive to the

shifts in affective intensity (Ging et al. 2024) and avoiding the creep of pervasive 'sad passions'.

Putting affirmative ethics to work

In this article we have discussed the challenges of the manosphere and associated micro-fascist inclinations and behaviours within formal education systems. Applying a framework of critical posthuman affirmative ethics, we suggest, could promote thought and challenge the viral contagions of toxic misogyny that threaten young people both online and within their educational environments. In line with Kuntz (2022, 596), we do not suggest that philosophy in itself could be '... some antidote to an imagined fascist poison'. However, we propose a number of strategies and actions that teachers could employ as ethical subjects (Mulcahy 2022) in order to critically analyse pedagogy, policy and personal values, and promote a new affirmatively ethical stance which may counter the pull of the manosphere and its appeal to young boys. In doing so we align with the work of Keddies (2021) 'pedagogies of discomfort', Ging et al.'s (2024) call to acknowledge underlying power structures in neoliberal environments, and Zembylas (2021) emphasis on the affective connections between microfascism and misogyny. In this final section we therefore explore how the concepts discussed previously may be put to work practically by teachers through a framework consisting of three key practices: affective and care-ful pedagogies; cartographic reflection on power and ethics; and cross-disciplinary critical education.

Affective and care-ful pedagogies

Within systems of 'schooling-as-usual', as suggested previously, acting with compassion and care in times of pain or conflict can be problematic. As Chatzidakis et al. (2020, 8) state: 'Neoliberalism [...] has neither an effective practice of, nor a vocabulary for, care'. Contemporary discourses of meritocracy, 'grit', zero-tolerance and warm-strict behaviour management within education use the language of masculinity, strength and dominance – more 'Vitruvian-mannery', which furthers the conditions for (micro)fascist tendencies to grow. Increasingly, rigorous disciplinary and surveillance practices serve to further flatten difference and limit the ways in which we can demonstrate care within the boundaries of fixed disciplinary systems. We are also facing the growth of algorithmic, instrumental care practices which are often linked to computerized systems which, while aiming to streamline teaching support services, can depersonalize and de-individualise. The role of an affirmative ethical approach thus rests on the belief that together, professionals and children can work to different ethical codes and beliefs. Practically, this may mean teachers taking 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987); that is, seizing moments of opportunity to act differently, via deviations to lesson plans, responding to provocative conversations rather than dismissing them, or suggesting alternative ways of working.

Snaza (2020, 113) suggests that by paying attention to, and noticing affect and affective assemblages which bring atmospheres of joy or sorrow, teachers can become 'affect modulators'; sensitive to where affective atmospheres are circulating and attune to what those affects are producing. Mulcahy (2022) gives the example of a secondary school class in which affective assemblages form during discussions about Australian

citizenship: 'Having to pass a test to be Australian appears 'absurd' and 'ironical' to the students. There is a shift of energy, an affective charge, the emergence of 'an ironically festive mood'. Anxiety appears to dissipate with fascination and farce now taking up the 'affective oxygen' (2022, 1008). In this scenario the teacher 'modulates' affect by shifting the focus to a new artistic task in which students create their own country. Harnessing affective energy and channelling it into joyful modes of action is an everyday behaviour which, as Zembylas (2021) suggests can shift the 'affective dynamics of microfascism' by 'reorientat[ing] knowledge practices in order to invent and circulate new modes of relation and belonging' (12). We do urge caution here however, as affective states are fluid and ambiguous; they do not fall into binary positions but rather emerge, with pre-determination of outcomes being an impossibility. As Darwish and Gottzén (2025, 3) note, seemingly affirmative affective states can also be manipulated for nefarious ends by agents within the manosphere. Affect is thus '... never exclusively positive or negative but rather moves and transforms depending on what it encounters'. Nevertheless, attuning to affect as an everyday process of awareness is an important embodied practice for both teachers and students, as it helps us to not only recognize when and how affect is at work in the classroom, but to also sense when it is being employed to influence decisions and choices in other aspects of life.

Cartographic reflection on power and positionality

Whilst teachers generally undergo regular reflective practice as part of their initial teacher education, opportunities to consider their own relationships to power – not only in the organizational sense but concerning their own relations to it – are minimal once qualified. Spaces in which we can recognize our own interior desire for power and accept our responsibility as educators to reflect on this with others – in spirit of critical challenge – are essential for anti-fascist work. Undertaking critically reflective processes that make us question our own assumptions and prejudices within trusted communities can help us to examine and align with our own values (as individuals and within our organizations) and to consider the roots of these and their influences on our practice. As Zembylas (2021, 560) suggests, 'educators have a lot to gain from interrogating their own complicity'.

Facilitating this critically reflective process could involve the introduction of a 'pedagogista'; a practice drawn from the Reggio Emilia programme of anti-fascist schooling. A pedagogista is '... someone who is devoted to thinking about pedagogical possibilities' (Vintimilla 2018, 21). They trouble and problematize engrained assumptions and ways of understanding education by 'being-in-question' and 'putting-into-question' (Vintimilla 2018, 22), moving between educational centres in a role that works similarly in a procedural sense (but conceptually and ethically very differently) to a local government or Ofsted educational advisor. Vintimilla (2018, 22) suggests that this 'putting-into-question' is an unpicking of the 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1980) that '... produce, sustain and interweave understandings of [teachers'] profession, of relations with children and families, and of the curricula that stage their intersection – for example, regimes of truth such as developmental-based understandings of children and childhood or the role of educators as nurturing and caregivers, or images of children as needy and innocent'.

Whilst the pedagogista role is not one that could (or even should) be formalized within a neoliberal education system, it does propose the possibility of relational coaching and mentoring which, instead of typically individualizing issues and promoting linear solutions to complex educational problems, open up space for exploring the difficult questions of how to teach critically within hardened neoliberal educational contexts. Fostering ‘affirmative alliances’ of ethically affirmative educators who are committed to enacting such practices together is a suggested strategy which could extend reflection from the individual to the collective. Sharing the ‘pedagogista’ role in online or face to face networks, perhaps developed through social media, academic programmes, or sports/community groups could create critical distancing and the processes of disidentification and defamiliarisation necessary to build from pain to knowledge. In addition to this, affirmative communities create spaces for generative joy and hope (rather than sadness and cynicism) to coalesce around shared values and endeavours.

Cross-Disciplinary critical education

Teaching about the dangers of on-line radicalization is generally limited to specific subject areas within the English school curriculum; statutory ‘relationships and health education’ in primary schools – and ‘relationships, sex and health education’ in **mainstream, U.K.** secondary schools. These can even be as limited as ‘one-off sessions run by external organizations, punitively-oriented talks from school leadership, or letters sent to parents outlining the dangers of Tate’s content’ (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024, 180). More comprehensive pedagogical strategies are required, which address the fact that misogynistic views can manifest across the curriculum at any time, with multiple and unpredictable entry points. Zembylas (2022, 568) suggests that such strategies, which will be anti-fascist in their nature, require

... ongoing maintenance work committed to highlighting with urgency the pillars of anti-fascist sensibility: nurturing a positive ethos of engagement; engaging in non-dogmatic judgment; resisting human exceptionalism and narcissism; recognising that education and pedagogy are not exempt from the possibility of engaging in microfascist practices.

Interdisciplinary activities such as children’s theatre, Zembylas suggests, could work to build relationality and appreciation of difference. The understanding here is that non-verbal, affective pedagogical interventions are necessary, as dialogic counter-arguments will not be enough to address the visceral forces of microfascism.

For Giroux (2022), teaching has to be attune to language, with educators able to critique, explicate and address the linguistic and cultural forces that shape society, in a way that is accessible and non-threatening. This will necessarily include ‘... providing narratives in which people can recognize themselves, place their problems in a wider context, exercise their critical faculties, and develop strategies to challenge the conditions that oppress them’ (2022, 11). Echoing Braidotti’s call to extract knowledge from pain, this process of ‘conscientisation’ (Freire 1980) should not provoke defensiveness but instead ‘enhance the creative capacities of young people and provide the conditions for them to become critical agents’ (Giroux 2023, 54).

Encouraging critical thinking across the curriculum will enable students to become ‘active citizens’ (Giroux 2022), able to interrogate and question, see issues from

different perspectives, and understand the role of historical and political forces in creating the challenges of the present. This is bell hooks' (1994, 130) notion of critical dialogue; a practice which involves 'individuals who occupy different locations ... mapping out terrains of commonality, connection and shared concern'. For hooks, coming together in the spirit of beloved community requires us to cross borders, thereby enriching each other's knowledge. It is thus a pedagogy of care and kindness as well as criticality. Embedding and elevating the stories of the minoritised – across all subjects – enacts a turn to difference which goes beyond tokenistic inclusion agendas, as 'difference' here is not seen as deficit, but as a productive force for the creation of new knowledges.

In summary, this framework of affective interventions, collaborative reflexive practices and critical education across school and subject boundaries can, we argue, create the spaces required to counter misogyny and similarly fascist forces within education.

Conclusion

In this article we have joined the dots between microfascist desires, misogynistic practices in schooling, and the rise of fascism on a macro level. We have argued that fascism is not a static panic needing to be overcome, but is intrinsically embroidered into the human psyche on a molecular level. Given this, fascism is something to be continually mindful of and mitigated over and again, continuously contested and critically given pertinent scrutiny.

Our critique draws upon affirmative ethics as a framework for possibility, growth, and solidarity. It is not proposed as an iterative process for educators, but as an opening into thinking in new ways – particularly those modes of thought which return us to the body and the noticing of affective states, desires for power, and emotional intensities, both within ourselves and the students we teach.

In a time of low-energy, where schooling is becoming increasingly restrictive and micromanaged, it can be difficult to find the energy to resist and work towards alternative futures. Haraway (2016) calls us, however, to 'stay with the trouble' and eschew the future, a process which requires us '... to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings' (Haraway 2016, 1). Waiting for (educational) revolution which may never come is a trap which can lead to cynicism or capitulation; instead we need to focus on the unexpected collaborations that can be enacted in the here and now to continually resist the pervasive forces of fascisms and misogynies. Working from pain to knowledge together, as Spinoza advocates, is a practice of care and joy; as indeed the production of this article has been. The thinking-making-writing enacted here together has been animated by and underscored with affective practices of joy and hope; bell hooks' 'theory as liberation' (1994, 59). Noting the presence of affect in research and writing processes can be a powerful means of harnessing potential energy and encouraging endurance and resistance in difficult times. An affirmative posthuman ethics thus, '... entails the composition of communities sharing the same imaginings and values' (2022, 13) and as such this is a call to join together in these endeavours. It is '... the antidote, the immunity shot against the social pathology of polarized hateful rejection of the interdependence that makes us all function as humans' (Braidotti and Dolphijn (2022, 13)).

To return to our titular words from the Manics, the present may well teach us to be 'afraid and cold'. However, taking an affirmatively ethical approach can open up spaces for new forms of hope and desire, allowing us to reimagine education together.

Notes

1. For international readers: In the UK, Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) is the national inspection body regulating education quality, childcare and children's social care; Ofcom (Office of Communications) is the government-approved regulator for broadcasting, telecommunications, and online safety; the PSHE Association is the national body for supporting schools in delivering high-quality Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education; and RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) is a mandatory component of the curriculum that provides information on healthy relationships, consent, and sexual health.
2. Despite the critical depiction of education presented here, the authors acknowledge numerous educational interventions and activist pedagogies actively disrupting structures of othering in the U.K., including initiatives such as Gendered Intelligence ([n.d.](#)), and Decolonise the Curriculum (Decolonising SOAS Working Group [2018](#)). Such pedagogies emphasize embodied learning, interconnectedness with the environment, and affirm difference as generative rather than deficit-based. For example, pedagogies of bewilderment (Snaza [2013](#)), the wild (Jickling et al. [2018](#)), air (Ford and Zhao [2018](#)), affect (Hickey-Moody [2013](#)), desire (Zembylas [2007](#)), and kin and care (Haraway [2016](#)). Thus, whilst education remains structurally inequitable, vital counter-currents persist.

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