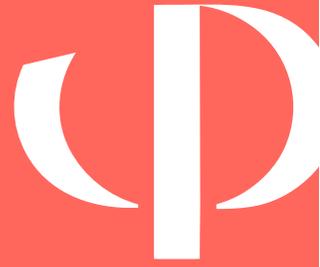


# LGBTQ Philosophy



FALL 2025

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CAROLINA FLORES, EDITOR

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## FROM THE EDITOR

### *Make Philosophy Queer Again!*

Carolina Flores

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ

Dear reader,

I am delighted to take up editing the *APA Studies in LGBTQ+ Philosophy* from Amy Marvin.

Dr. Marvin focused on publishing interviews and more creative pieces, providing space for philosophical work that “takes up a more conversational or creative tone over our typical defensive style,” as she put it in her final letter to readers last year. As an editor, I will continue to pursue this line.

Philosophy as a discipline needs more space for exploratory, creative, personal, and boundary-pushing work—more space for queer play. Academic journals by and large publish pieces that justify each move, engage with established literatures, and adopt an impersonal tone, following the advice we give our undergraduate students to not include anything that does not directly support the paper’s thesis. This is not the space to assess this model, with its benefits and costs; suffice it to say that there is worthwhile philosophical work that does not naturally fit in such confines.

Indeed, despite what academic papers standardly look like, we often start philosophizing from our own lives, concerns, and social positions; rely on a community of friends, comrades, teachers, and fellow travelers to develop our ideas; and, at least when working on topics relevant to LGBTQ+ lives, many of us need to feel around in the dark to discover/invent ways to do justice to the crevices we want to explore while remaining intelligible to broad audiences. Why not make this process more visible?

My goal as editor, then, is this: to (continue to) make the *Studies* a space where LGBTQ+ philosophers can (1) explicitly draw on our experiences, (2) play with ideas without the sour threat of the judgmental cis het gaze over our shoulders, and (3) encounter new thinkers and build a community of queer thought and care. In doing so, my aim is also to expand the range of topics that queer philosophers see their social position and experiences as being relevant to, by featuring LGBTQ+ philosophy that is not directly about gender and sexual orientation.

The *Studies* will focus on interviews and shorter essays that blend philosophy with personal reflections and storytelling, in the author’s own human (or highly stylized—we queers know sincerity is a performance, after all) voice. I want to publish pieces that allow us LGBTQ+ philosophers to build glittery personas in a world that tries to coerce us into gray drabness, pieces that give us a chance to really see and touch and move one another. (The nonstandard author bios are also meant to help with this.)

The *Studies* will also include a new section, The Queer Agenda. This consists in a list of recommendations by the philosophers included in the issue of (1) recent texts (and perhaps other media) relevant to LGBTQ+ philosophers and (2) queer philosophical questions that we would like to see more work on (graduate students, take note!). If you’re craving more human-curated recommendations in the algorithmic age, more queers-hyping-up-queers, or just more of a sense of what’s hot in philosophy right now, this is your place.

Finally, to create long-distance connections, highlight commonalities between work being done in different spaces, and hopefully allow new shared projects of inquiry to emerge, each issue will focus on a specific theme.

This issue’s theme: *Make Philosophy Queer Again!*

Making philosophy queer is an urgent task. LGBTQ+ life and lives (as well as, nonexhaustively: Palestinians and pro-Palestine activists, immigrants, BIPOC, women, disabled, working class and low-income people, and universities as institutions) are under attack. We are facing well-funded and highly organized campaigns that seek to reinforce white supremacy, heteronormativity, and traditional gender roles, and which aim to silence all questioning of systems of oppression. In the face of this, it is crucial to hold the line: to continue to speak from queer perspectives, address potent toxic narratives about “gender ideology,” create spaces for critical discussion, and provide new visions of gender liberation.

Still, reading the cheeky appropriated slogan that provides the topic for this issue, you may be tempted to ask: Has philosophy ever been queer? Isn’t our problem precisely that philosophy has actively excluded queer voices, continuously pushed us into closets, and at most allowed us peripheral space, as long as we “act normal” (“I don’t mind the gays, as long as they are private about it”)?

All of these charges must be acknowledged. Nonetheless, there is no reason to grant that philosophy is an inherently

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straight space. Much the contrary. In many ways, philosophy has always been queer: in its radical questioning, willingness to start afresh, and free-style exploration of scenarios that raise incredulous stares. It is time for philosophy to come out of the closet.

Like most appeals to return to past greatness turn out to be, then, the injunction to make philosophy queer again calls us to reimagine the past and to build a future that is in fact unlike what came before—the future we want and deserve.

To do so, this issue of the *Studies* provides a kaleidoscope of inspiring visions of what philosophy could be. The philosophers featured in this issue—writing from a range of identities, locations, life stories, and career stages—survey the state of the field and its history, explore questions of philosophical method across fields of the discipline, propose novel approaches, argue for new guidelines in how we theorize LGBTQ+ experience, flip around old philosophical puzzles to help us see them afresh, forcefully make the case for why their experiences must be taken into account to provide good abstract theories of action, language, intimacy—and much else.

Together, their brilliant pieces make the case for why queerness is *indispensable* to philosophy. And they do so with fresh voices, a big attitude, penetrating/circling intellects, zesty humor, and (what else?) pride.

If you find yourself with this issue in hand, you are in for a delectable treat, a feast of Big Beautiful Ideas. You will find a wide-ranging conversation between trans philosophers Nico Orlandi and Talia Mae Bettcher on Talia’s celebrated career and new book, including some tasty fun facts; a fabulous piece that looks back to Plato and Socrates for a liberatory, thoroughly queer account of sex and love, by Joshua Kramer; a sharp, clarifying analysis of what it is to queer ethics (one that can be expanded to other fields of philosophy), by Erin Beeghly; a bold case for how trans experience should refashion philosophy of language, by Willow Starr; a spectacular, funny-yet-tender provocation to denaturalize the cis, by Ding; a personal case for why queer theorizing needs to be capacious and do justice to the rebellion *also* performed by passing trans people, by Scout Etterson; this edition’s Queer Agenda, full of delicious suggestions for you all; and, finally, a call for papers advertising the topic of the next issue.

One last word: this issue largely grew out of the Queer Analytic Philosophy (Queer A Φ) conference I organized (with my colleagues/friends/comrades Nico Orlandi and Lauren Lyons) at UC Santa Cruz in April 2025. Inspired by all that I learned from the conference, I commissioned the pieces within this issue from philosophers who attended or gave talks there. I will continue to commission pieces from people whose work I admire; but, of course, my network is limited and I want to publish diverse voices. So please do send submissions—as well as your comments, thoughts, suggestions, appreciation, or devastating criticism. Details for how to do so are towards the end of this issue. And you can write to me with any questions you have at florescaro@pm.me. (and, more informally, you can

find me under @floresophize across various corners of the internet).

Happy readings!

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## CONVERSATION

### “*What Ever Happened to Joy?*” Talia Mae Bettcher Interviewed by Nico Orlandi

Talia Mae Bettcher

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, LOS ANGELES

Nico Orlandi

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ

It is no exaggeration to describe Talia Mae Bettcher as a living legend in trans philosophy. Talia is professor at Cal State University, Los Angeles, a city where she is also deeply involved in trans community subcultures and grassroots organizing, drawing on those experiences in her work. She has published dozens of groundbreaking articles on gender, sexuality, personhood, desire, transphobia, and trans resistance, among other topics, pioneering attention to such topics from a trans perspective. Her book *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy* is recently out, and promises to shape the field in years to come.

In this interview, Talia talks with Nico Orlandi, professor further up north in California, at UC Santa Cruz, and currently Fellow at the College for Social Sciences and Humanities at the University Alliance Ruhr. Nico is a trans philosopher who specializes in philosophy of mind and cognitive science. They are currently working on a project on what concepts are and how we learn them, with a focus on social categories, as well as one of the most fun people to talk with in philosophy.

Read on for discussion of Talia’s new book, the significance of intimacy, models of desire, survival as a trans person in philosophy, Mick Jagger impersonations, the importance of sleep, what makes for a good friend, late capitalism and its impact on the discipline, mentoring, loving analytic philosophy, performance art, the risks facing trans philosophy, and so much more.

**Nico Orlandi:** We just saw a keynote address at the recent Queer Analytic Philosophy conference at UC Santa Cruz that left everybody equally surprised and teary-eyed. Half the audience was really in tears, including my wife. And many people didn’t know that you do performance art, and the keynote was, in part, performance art. Are there other things about you that you would like to share that you don’t think people know?

**Talia Mae Bettcher:** Well, thank you for that question, Nico. Of course, there are quite a few things that many people don’t know about Talia Bettcher, and some of them are not fit for public consumption. But I do do a mean Mick Jagger impersonation, if that helps.

**Nico:** That is amazing.

**Talia:** I used to do this before transition, and I still do it, or I used to do it after transition. I'm a bit too old for it now because I can't move as well, but it's actually cooler after transition because you get to play with gender. And it's pretty fun.

**Nico:** What motivates you these days? What gets you going, especially in your research?

**Talia:** Well, two things get me going and they flow from the same place, and that is this shitty situation that we're currently in. I feel that oppressiveness every day when I get up and some other horrible thing has happened, and I also feel this extraordinary sense of urgency. It's precisely for that reason that part of my work has taken a more public turn.

There's a combative side to it. Part of me wants to fight with these people, I don't know to what avail, but part of me wants to. To grind it out a little bit. And then there's another part of me, and I think I'm pursuing both at once. That other part of me yearns for fun. What ever happened to fun? What ever happened to joy? And one of the things that I found when I did the performance piece at Santa Cruz was that it was *fun*; I enjoyed myself.

Sometimes I feel like I bear the weight of the world on my shoulders, and this is just a function of my personality. But after being a mother and after, like, really grinding out my career, I look back and I see pictures of myself and I say, *I used to smile*. Another thing that we might want to know about Talia is that she used to smile. And I'd like to return to that. And so for me, returning to something a bit more creative is a little bit more about returning to the joy just to keep myself going and perhaps keep others going through these times.

**Nico:** We intend to have the Queer Analytic Philosophy Conference going on every year, and we would welcome the Mick Jagger impersonation even now or recorded! And I 100 percent agree with you on the need for joy and for just finding ourselves in these times and staying happy in the face of all the happenings.

Also, I don't know if you've noticed this, but you serve as a parent not just to your kid, but also, evidently, to lots of trans and queer people in the profession. You must feel this when you go to a conference or to a workshop where people really want to connect with you, look up to you, see you as leading the way, opening up new paths. Does that also motivate you and how do you understand that role?

**Talia:** It does motivate me. And it's because of that role that I feel a little bit of pressure and responsibility. If I see something really obnoxious happening in the profession, I feel like it's my job to speak up, because I feel like I'm the senior one in the profession and, you know, it's not fair to expect anyone else to do it. Here again is where the joy comes in for me. I find myself able to work with a lot of trans and queer students and junior faculty informally and to look at their work and spend time with them and mentor

them both professionally and personally. And I really, really welcome that role. If I ought to be doing anything at all right now with my time, it's that professionally—and I do. I will say, one of my big regrets is that I've never been able to get myself into an institution that is PhD-conferring. It's something that I really would love to have done. But I'm still finding a way to do it in this informal capacity.

**Nico:** Yeah. Hopefully that will change. There's still time since you're young. And following up on that: How do you balance work and fun? How do you counterbalance a day full of work? What do you do to decompress from all of this pressure?

**Talia:** I go to sleep. No, actually, I do more than that now. For a while that's all I did. That was my fun. Fun as a grown-up parent is going to sleep. But especially now that the fascists are in control, I've really devoted time to making my bedroom a kind of sanctuary place where I can go inside and hide out. Making it aesthetically pleasing to me, so that I can go there and I can light candles, I can listen to music and just chill. I need that place. I listen to music; I walk every day. I have a close inner circle of friends and usually I'm talking to one of those friends every day. And once or twice a week I'm doing coffee with a friend or going out for dinner or something like that. I try to be social. I don't do anything like clubbing or anything like that, but being social with others is important to me.

**Nico:** What would you say is the defining characteristic of your friends? What is it that really makes you be friends with someone?

**Talia:** Well, all of my friends are in various ways different. But they share the ability to go deep and be present emotionally. I don't like superficial friendships. I like deep friendships. Friendships that can survive over periods of duress and transformation on the side of either one of us. And I like friendships that are intellectually stimulating as well.

**Nico:** I personally can't have friends that have bad taste in music and not excellent politics. Those are my two things. But let's move on to talking a little bit about your research. You just published an awesome book, *Beyond Personhood*.<sup>1</sup> From my own experience, I found that I only understood what my book was really about after I got done writing it. As I was writing it, I thought, oh, this is about this or about that. But then after finishing it, I was like, oh, maybe really the main theme of the book is this other thing that also was covered there. I wonder if you have the same experience with your work. And if so, what is your most recent book, *Beyond Personhood*, really about?

**Talia:** That's a really interesting question. I mean, the thing with this book is I've been working on it for decades. I mean, I think that some of the ideas came to me when I transitioned, but I started writing it in earnest when I published "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers" in 2007.<sup>2</sup> And you could say that I've been working on it concurrently with all of my publications, and it's gone through various different iterations. And so it has changed in conception as I've been writing it, but during the last push, it has stayed

pretty consistent and is what I imagined it to be, more or less.

And that is starting off with this idea that we trans folk have these two friendly accounts that we often appeal to—I call them the Wrong Body Account and the Beyond the Binary Account—both of which are inadequate. The book is largely supposed to be a theory that is not inadequate in the ways that I feel that those theories are. In order to do that, I introduce a novel account that really concerns intimacy and distance and develops a theory for explaining what intimacy is. The starting point is that intimacy is really, really important and hasn't been taken seriously enough. And once you really take seriously how saturated our lives are with intimacy, you start to see things differently.

The idea is that you need this theory of intimacy for my overall account to work. And this theory of intimacy has important consequences for our assumptions around personhood. We philosophers use these concepts, person, self, subject. In my view, there are certain underlying assumptions that we need to make those make sense. My theory presses on those assumptions, it says we need to get rid of those assumptions. That suggests we need to get rid of the concepts: instead of thinking about person and self, we need to think about boundaries and pathways and gestures and attention, ways in which we're automatically related to each other, in a new framework.

**Nico:** I find it very convincing, in part because I'm kind of the poster child of the type of trans person that's described as being born in the wrong body. I realized when I was very, very young, about three, that there was something profoundly wrong with me and it didn't have to do just with the people I liked. But I also would say that it's really inaccurate to say that I was born in the wrong body. It's just not that. That doesn't describe my phenomenology at all. Did you feel like your motivation for this ongoing reflection was your personal story as a trans person?

**Talia:** My personal story as a trans person, but not just my own. My personal story as a trans person includes the stories of other trans people, because I spent so long interacting with so many trans people over so many years in trans community. For example, one of the first things I learned in Los Angeles coming out was that there are trans women who say, I'm a woman, 100% woman, and I don't want bottom surgery. Well, that seems to go against the wrong body account. And you need a theory to accommodate it. In my view, this is a woman every bit as much as a trans woman who's had every kind of surgery. You need a theory that doesn't slice it up in a way that it shouldn't. So it's not just my personal experience as a trans woman, but it's experience and the things I've learned along the way.

**Nico:** And you think that the book, in a sense, is also centrally about intimacy and boundaries. So can it easily be applied also to sexuality studies, where we talk a lot about boundaries and what's real intimacy and how to achieve it in sexual relations?

**Talia:** Oh, for sure. In fact, I had to cut out a whole section because it wasn't quite fitting. I have views about the nature

of sexual desire or about eroticism and erotic content, as I would prefer to put it, that I develop in "When selves have sex."<sup>3</sup> And the section on this just didn't really fit with the narrative, so I had to take it out.

But I think that this idea of intimacy and boundaries really makes sense, not only in terms of thinking about the boundaries that we have when it comes to sexuality, but in terms of figuring out the nature of desire itself and how various different forms of sexual desire or erotic content operate. I mean, my view has always been that the models we have are so extraordinarily inadequate to the task of accommodating actual sexual experiences. Particularly if you look at it from a queer perspective. It's as if you have this model of sexuality that is based on straight vanilla people eating soda crackers at the corner of the table, and there's this banquet going on. And you have this theory that explains the soda crackers, but it doesn't explain the feast. And so we need a better theory. I think that my theory can actually accommodate some of that or be useful for that.

**Nico:** That's fantastic. We're going to move on to talking a little bit about trans resistance and existence in philosophy. You actually are one of the people that I think of when I think of the perfect blend of continental and analytic philosophy. But because I'm an analytic philosopher, some of the questions I'll ask are more geared at that. So the first question I have is just which insights, ideas, or inspiration have you gained from being trans in the profession?

**Talia:** That's an interesting question. I would say I've gained a lot of methodological insight into what's wrong with a lot of philosophy and why it's thin, why it's meager, and perhaps why it's not going anywhere. I always felt like, in a sense, I don't belong. As a trans person, I've never felt like I belonged in the profession. And being a philosopher was sometimes an obstacle to inclusion in trans communities. But for me, operating in trans worlds was always a starting point in doing trans philosophy. There was a richness to that that I find sorely lacking in a lot of philosophy.

**Nico:** Did you find that philosophy was sometimes extraordinarily boring? Trans people are usually much better at performing, whatever it is they're performing. And I found both the performance and the writing of philosophy to be really boring.

**Talia:** That is certainly true. But I don't know that you need to be trans to see that. I think that even boring people sometimes know they're boring. I realized that very early on, in grad school, even before I transitioned full time, when I spent a couple of years living one way in my social life and then another way at school. And my social life was not with philosophers. It was a trans life. And that was way more fun. And it was like, I don't want to hang out with philosophers. You suck. You're boring. This is ridiculous. And in general, now that's not true. Now I do socialize with some of my colleagues. But there's a kind of lack of worldliness I find astonishing. This is a confession. I kind of judge philosophers. If they haven't really lived a life, if they really aren't worldly, how much can they really know? How good is their philosophy?

**Nico:** 100 percent. And part of that is also class. But I also wanted to ask you if you felt more comfortable in other disciplines. Because actually, my experience is I don't feel particularly comfortable in other disciplines either. And I think that might be a distinctively trans experience where you don't feel quite comfortable anywhere.

**Talia:** Yeah, I don't feel comfortable in other disciplines. There is something that I like about philosophy that you don't get in other disciplines. I don't mean to put down other disciplines. I just think that it's not within their purview to do certain things. You do get, with some analytic philosophy, a kind of precision that you might not see elsewhere. And in general, you're going to see a kind of depth that you're not going to see elsewhere. I tend to miss that in other disciplines.

**Nico:** How would you like to see philosophy done? In particular, analytic philosophy, but obviously, you can also comment on continental or whatever you like.

**Talia:** I think that what I have to say maybe applies to both traditions, but I mean, I'll make it specific to analytic philosophy. It's funny because sometimes now I read to some as continental. People take me as rejecting analytic philosophy or don't see me as an analytic philosopher. So I was pleased when I was invited to the Queer Analytic Philosophy Conference. It made me feel good because I didn't see myself as part of that world. And I think that there is an extraordinary value in analytic philosophy.

However, I think that the greatest danger facing analytic philosophy and probably all philosophy now is professionalization and philosophy's failure to really recognize how much late capitalism has informed it and undermined its capacity to do what it's supposed to do. There's this joke about the accountant who can't balance their own checkbook or the psychologist who is not well. And I think that we have the philosopher who doesn't actually pay attention to where they are as a philosopher, to philosophizing in an actual context.

Take, for example, the proliferation of journal articles, this demand to publish. And link it up with the perennial metaphilosophical question that has long dogged philosophy: What is the nature of philosophical perplexity? It probably has many sources, but one of the answers is that philosophy creates its own problems. A Wittgensteinian take: the perplexity comes from philosophy.

Let's say philosophy is a truth-seeking endeavor, which it appears to be, on the face of it. We have a profession that is encouraging folks who aren't fully cooked yet to start cranking out stuff and generating cottage industries and trying to hook into those industries so that we can get jobs. Does this professionalism actually undermine this truth-seeking goal? Does it create problems that aren't there? Does it promote philosophical confusions that need not be caused? And does it raise a dust that actually makes us more confused as philosophers than we need be? How are we doing ourselves a disservice because of all this? Well, I don't see us coming to serious terms with these issues

as philosophers. I mean, if we're philosophers and we are interested in the pursuit of truth, we should ask these questions. How is it that our goals are being undermined by the way that we're doing philosophy right now? How are we being compromised?

**Nico:** I completely agree with that. It doesn't have to be half-cooked people, but even people who are fully cooked like us. I don't have enough ideas to publish. It's refreshing to hear that you worked on your book for essentially ten years. Because I've done the same thing. So let's reflect on how we professionalize in a way that is deterrent to doing actual philosophy.

**Talia:** Here's another thing I will add, and this is specifically true for those who want to engage in work that is socially relevant, though it could be extended to those who don't purport to do so. I think it comes to the same point of not knowing who and where you are. You have a paper that ends we should all do X. And you put out this paper and that's your conclusion. And I just really have to scratch my head and wonder about that because I think that we need to think seriously about who we are as philosophers and what it is that we're contributing to the real world, if anything at all. Is it a serious project to say we should all do X when we know that we can't even get two philosophers to agree and we know that our paper is not going to get disseminated past ten people? And if it's not a serious project, then don't we need to rethink what we're trying to do as philosophers and what it means to produce this material and what kind of projects we're attempting to engage in? Don't engage in a philosophical project that doesn't pay attention to whether or not it's actually realistic and belies your own ignorance of who and where you are as a philosopher.

**Nico:** I have two follow-up questions. What do you think of any type of rankings of philosophy departments? I feel like that's part of the capitalistic influence on philosophy. And then also, and this is a bit of a cheeky question, how do you not feel resentment about the fact that analytic philosophy has now fully embraced the projects that you brought to the fore, with all these people now taking on these projects without due recognition of your work?

**Talia:** I do think the rankings are a problem, of course. I liked the Pluralist Guide to Philosophy when that was put together. On your second question, I think that people recognize the work that I've done. Do you not think they are recognizing me enough? You should get to work on that.

**Nico:** Yeah, I'm going to work on that more. What I was talking about are people, like, coming out of the blue from other subfields, like philosophy of mind, and writing on issues that they know nothing about, and which you have written extensively on.

**Talia:** For me, there's a big difference between trans people and non-trans people writing about trans issues. I make a big distinction. I'm not sure that writing about trans issues is doing trans philosophy. In order for work to count as trans philosophy, it needs to be something more.

For example, at the last Pacific APA, I went to a session entitled Trans Philosophy and I was surprised to find that none of the presenters were trans. And then I was surprised to find that I had to educate the first presenter on what it was like to go through puberty as a trans woman, as a trans girl. And the second presentation was basically two non-trans philosophy bros, mixing it up over dead names. I know for a fact that there are trans folks who have had really cool ideas on this topic who have struggled to get published and I worry about that. I worry that trans becomes a trendy topic perhaps because of the political situation that we're currently in. People come in and they go "oh, this will look cool on my CV." And that makes me annoyed. But I'm not annoyed because of a lack of recognition in that case. I'm annoyed because they're exploiting all of us. They're exploiting trans people, and they're making it harder for young trans people to make it in their profession. I've already run my career. I've done my thing. But that pisses me off.

**Nico:** Yeah, that seems perfectly legitimate. I saw that session, by the way, at the APA, but I only stayed for a little bit until your question on puberty. And then I decided, okay, I'm done. There's only so much I can take.

**Talia:** I caused a big scene during the bros' talk, and I stormed out. And then I heard afterwards that after I stormed out, they ignored my entire hissy fit and continued on as normal, as if nothing had happened. Well, that old crazy tranny.

**Nico:** I'm sorry. I also love the word "tranny," which I can use but my cis wife cannot. My wi-fi at home is called "trannies." And every time we have a guest, I get to use this term. When you reflect on your career as a trans philosopher and you think of the challenges you have faced and still continue to face, what would you do differently if you could?

**Talia:** I mean, so many different things, but I didn't know what I was doing at the time. There was no plan. It was just blundering ahead, you know? But I guess two things strike me. One, if I knew whatever it was that I could have done that would have helped me get hired at a program that was PhD conferring, I would have done that thing. Unless it required selling my soul, in which case I wouldn't have done it anyway. And the other thing is I would have kept better records because I think that coming up and doing the stuff we were doing, even in the '90s and then just onwards, I think that those records are worth having. I think that we have to guard our own history. So I wish that I had been more diligent in that.

**Nico:** I have a follow-up about picking a job. When you attend grad school, there's a whole lot of professionalization. But a big reason for me to have the job that I have is that it's in a certain location, and that makes a big difference as a trans person or queer person. And that is often not reflected in the rankings at all. In the rankings there are some programs that are in places that many, many queer and trans people just don't want to live in. I was wondering if that played a role at all for you.

**Talia:** Yeah, it played a huge role for me because I had a bad experience as a visiting professor as a trans person. When I went on the market after that, I landed two offers. One from the University of Toronto and one from Cal State LA. And I opted for Cal State LA. And the reason for that was that I had such deep roots in the LA trans community already. And also because I was already out to the folks at Cal State LA. I'd already taught there part time. There were a lot of reasons, but I think that that choice aggrieved many people. My advisor brings it up to me to this day.

I confess sometimes I think about it now during these times, being in the US when things are so, so bad. But actually, I don't know that that is one of the choices that I regret. I don't know what other choice I could have made. And I don't think that I would have been able to produce the kind of work that I produced. I don't think that I would have been able to do trans philosophy in the way that I did, if at all. So that's a decision that I do not regret.

**NOTES**

1. Talia Mae Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025).
2. Talia Mae Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion," *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (2007): 43-65.
3. Talia Mae Bettcher, "When Selves Have Sex: What the Phenomenology of Trans Sexuality Can Teach about Sexual Orientation," *Journal of Homosexuality* 61, no. 5 (2014): 605-20.

**ARTICLES**

*How Do Pregnant People Dance? Socratic and Diotiman Reflections*

Joshua Kramer  
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**1. GENDERQUEER INSPIRATION FROM DIOTIMA**  
Strikingly, the prophetess Diotima teaches Socrates the one subject in which he says he is an expert: *ta erotica*, or the art of passionate love (*eros*), in Plato's *Symposium* (177d9, 201d). As relayed by Socrates, one of Diotima's central lessons is that *eros* motivates us to work toward *eudaimonia*, roughly "happiness," by getting us to "give birth in beauty." This Diotiman "birthing" is pluralistic in form and content: biological children, laws, works of art, science, philosophy, and more. In all these cases, Diotiman *eros* brings forth a "baby" that is *already* present in a human. Diotiman *eros* is, thus, primarily productive. It's the labor of midwifery.

Recently, scholars have puzzled about Diotima: Was she a real, historical person? If not, why does Plato attribute this central Socratic doctrine to *her*? And why does Plato choose to have a man relay Diotima's view to an audience of all men?<sup>1</sup> In these debates, it is uncontroversial that Diotima's view of *eros* closely parallels what she earlier described as so-called masculine *eros* (*Poros*) (203b-d). Yet, she also characterizes *eros* via the ideals of self-expression and creation, rather

than pursuit, possession, and capture (which are usually associated with so-called masculine *eros*).<sup>2</sup> More than that, she either subverts or rejects gendered language in her ascriptions of conception, fecundity, gestation, pregnancy, midwifery, and “giving birth” to *all* human lovers, not just women.<sup>3</sup> *All* humans are pregnant in both body and soul (206c1-3), even if some are said to be *more* pregnant in soul than others (209a1-2).<sup>4</sup>

Diotima’s view can thus be read as gender-neutral, genderqueer, or a mix of both.<sup>5</sup> In language and theory, she *invites* such a modern reading that encourages erotic experience that is essentially unrelated to, or disruptive of, traditional gender and sex types and roles. As Frisbee Sheffield argues, this is no accident: Plato’s “playful and provocative use” of gender exposes the “contingency of gendered categories and, ultimately, their irrelevance to a philosophical account of *eros*.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to her language, Diotima’s *eros* acts as a conceptual “non-binary facilitator,” as Sheffield puts it. For example, Diotima teaches Socrates that *eros* is not binary: it is neither divine nor human, but rather a messenger *between* those two opposites (201d-203a).<sup>7</sup> Lastly, Diotima’s picture is also inclusive of various forms of love and “pregnancy” that extend beyond the most “normative” heterosexual sense: most notably, through non-biological forms of reproduction, such as passing on the skill of writing or creating art. In fact, if forced to choose, Diotima would likely suggest that these psychic forms of reproduction ought to take priority over more bodily reproduction (although, she would surely question the need for such a binary choice in the first place). Her more pluralistic picture of love and “pregnancy” might also more easily include alternative forms of reproduction, such as IVF, surrogacy, and adoption.

Perhaps this inclusivity in language, concepts, and vision partially explains why Plato’s *Symposium* often grabs LGBTQ+ readers and thinkers. Supposing this attractive Socratic-Diotiman inspiration as a starting point, then, what more can we learn from this picture of *eros*? What more can be clarified in, or added to, the genderqueer vision of love that Diotima either professes or inspires? Rather than a full-on scholarly defense, my aim here is to recover, envision, and build a more liberatory and LGBTQ+-inclusive account of *eros* and how we relate to one another generally. In particular, I will put Diotiman pregnancy into conversation with non-choreographed dancing as an analogy for *eros*. I argue that this analogy illuminates an aspect of *eros* that complements Diotima’s picture: specifically, the spontaneous and atelic valence of non-choreographed dance offers a model for understanding a crucial aspect of the experience of *eros* and suggests a path for loosening and disbanding rigid social and sexual roles around *eros*.

At first, it may seem I am examining a surprising case study given my ends: ancient Greek society and philosophy, a context marked by numerous inequalities, especially in the realm of sex and love. As I hope to show alongside Diotima, clear vision of another possible world sometimes emerges from a world that is, in many ways, incompatible with that very vision.

## 2. A DISCONTENT WITH DIOTIMAN PREGNANCY: IS THERE A SPONTANEOUS, ATELIC ASPECT OF EROS?

A core tenet of Diotima’s view is that *eros* is *productive*: it drives us to “give birth in beauty” in various forms (206c-e).<sup>8</sup> Diotima’s thought goes: since we are mortal, we can only approximate immortality; procreation is our way of approximation. Then, she posits that we need beauty for this procreation and observes that *eros* is particularly indexed to, and productive in pursuit of, such beauty. Only with beauty in view is the labor of pregnancy induced, according to Diotima. From this picture, we can see that Diotiman *eros* is not only productive, but also teleological: it strives to produce a human or psychic good, like knowledge of beauty and virtue, *in order* to achieve an approximation of immortality. A common objection to the teleology and productivity of *eros* (in this Socratic-Diotiman picture) is that it leads to an undesirable consequence: one’s beloved becomes a replaceable *instrument* as one ascends the “ladder of love” to Beauty itself.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than re-adjudicate that debate, I want to pose another, perhaps more fundamental, problem that applies to both the lover and beloved. Namely, *productive eros* is not the only—or, perhaps, best—kind or aspect of *eros*. In an important sense, one does not only experience *eros in order to* produce things (although such production could, perhaps, be a compatible result). The experience of *eros* is often crucially without conscious, deliberate choice, control, or a clear end. For instance, we cannot genuinely *choose to*: fall in love with someone—to feel alternating stress, anxiety, confusion, elation, pain—so *that* we can produce, say, beautiful paintings;<sup>10</sup> or act differently from our normal self—by buying flowers or mirroring our lover’s preferences or behavior—*in order to* produce said beautiful paintings; or feel enthused by someone *for the purpose of*, say, having children with them; or see someone’s whole aura as “so beautiful” while dancing with them, so *that* we can produce said children. All of these things in the realm of *eros*, in some important sense, *just happen*. Even when they *are* the result of *eros*, these things often appear to us as spontaneous and atelic in the moment. To think otherwise would be to miss some of the erotic phenomenon through over-intellectualization or self-deception.

Let’s dwell on the “self” of that self-deception. The common objection to Diotima—that her proposal treats the beloved as a (disposable) instrument for the lover’s ends—is, I argue, downstream from a deeper problem: the instrumentalization of *one’s own* experience of *eros* for productive ends—i.e., for ascent up the ladder via children, laws, or philosophy. This Diotiman view is powerful and compelling, but, as an exhaustive account, it risks missing how the experience of *eros* can be beautiful or valuable in itself. This beauty is analogous to the beauty found in smelling a flower on a whim, seeing striking light on a building, or becoming “time-blind” on the dance floor.

From a point of view external to these experiences, there is something decidedly *non-productive* about them. When one comes upon a beautiful flower and smells it on a whim, one can enjoy the moment without a prior or further

aim. Likewise, when one comes upon a beautiful patch of sunlight on a building, one often enjoys it without a prior or further aim. When one finds oneself absorbed, time-blind, and simply enjoying on the dance floor, the experience also presents as without a prior or further aim. In these experiences, there is a sense of spontaneity that is usually experienced without a guise of productivity.

Of course, it is not that one has *no* choice or control over these experiences. One can, at the least, engineer distal conditions by, for example, going to a meadow of beautiful flowers, a bike path at “golden hour,” or a dance floor with good vibe. But control of such distal conditions differs from having control *during* or *within* the activity at hand—e.g., as one does when holding a yoga pose or refining a free throw shot. Not only do many erotic experiences not present this internal state of control, productivity, and teleology, but they are also awe-inspiring precisely in virtue of this spontaneous, non-productive, and atelic aspect. This raises two questions: Where is this spontaneous, atelic side of *eros* in the Socratic-Diotiman account? And, is there an aspect of the Socratic-Diotiman view of *eros* that does not instrumentalize our experience of *eros* for productive ends?

There are at least a few places in the *Symposium* and Plato more generally from which we could briefly construct a complementary picture of *eros*’s spontaneous and atelic aspects.

First, consider the Platonic conception of the divine that undergirds Diotima’s own account. In Plato, the gods’ primary activity is to simply think: they view the intelligible Forms. Generally, the gods are presented as primarily doing anything else in Plato. Diotima claims that *eros* is not a god, but an intermediate spirit, since *eros* produces union among humans and gods, rather than purely viewing the Forms.<sup>11</sup> *Eros*’s bridge building work might suggest that the human experience of *eros* presents as primarily productive and goal-directed. However, insofar as *eros* is *partially* divine, it may also partially imitate the divine’s spontaneous, non-productive apprehension of the Forms. If so, then it would be reasonable to think that *eros*’s duality also involves a spontaneous, non-productive aspect. If we then infer from *eros*’s metaphysics to the human experience of *eros*, as Diotima does, it would be reasonable to think human *eros* also partially presents as non-productive and spontaneous on Diotima’s view.

Second, in Aristophanes’s speech in the *Symposium*, lovers are said to spend all their time together and, nevertheless, cannot say what they wish to *gain* from doing so or from one another (192b-d). They are, in an important sense, atelic. At times, they are even described as dying because they *do nothing* but embrace one another (191a-b). This atelic and non-productive side of *eros* is not, however, part of the Socratic-Diotiman account. Further inquiry is needed to show how Diotima and Socrates build on this Aristophanic element.<sup>12</sup>

Third, Socrates describes a state of atelic confusion in *eros* in the *Phaedrus*. There, *eros* is a kind of madness which involves emotional and intellectual confusion. We can observe the atelic aspect of this confusion in Socrates’s

description of the beloved, finally in love with the lover: “so he loves, *yet knows not what* he loves: he *does not understand*, he *cannot tell* what has come upon him” (255d). Presumably the beloved, in this confusion, not only does not understand *what* he loves, but also *why* he loves. He does not understand “what has come upon him.” These descriptions suggest that *eros* can be experienced without a subject understanding what’s happening or why it’s happening.

Diotima and Socrates ultimately offer explanations for *why* we have *eros* in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Crucially, however, these explanations are often not represented as being understood or presented *from within* the experience of *eros* itself. This fact—that the philosophical task of the *Symposium* must be undertaken as a “further inquiry”—suggests that erotic experience itself does not straightforwardly present a teleological “why.” To the extent that such experience does not present a “why,” it points toward some atelic and non-productive aspect of *eros*.

If we take this evidence of atelic and non-productive aspects of *eros* seriously, we can ask where these aspects emerge in the Socratic-Diotiman project of “giving birth in beauty.” To answer this question, I will put into conversation two images that are already at play: Diotiman pregnancy and spontaneous, atelic dancing as both representative of aspects of the experience of *eros*. When dancing without choreography or a plan occurs well, movements and emotions emerge spontaneously, expressing a more organic, non-instrumental flow of experience. What would it mean if Socrates and Diotima’s pregnant people experienced *eros* with this same spontaneity and atelic valence? In fact, there is Socratic evidence on dancing that could help us answer this question.

### 3. DANCING PREGNANT? SOCRATIC DANCING IN XENOPHON’S SYMPOSIUM

Diotima’s speech appears in a dialogue whose namesake, the ancient Greek symposium, customarily included music, drink, discussion, games, and *dancing*. Thus, while not an explicit topic in Plato’s *Symposium*, dancing is implied in its setting and namesake.<sup>13</sup> As such, dancing is a particularly illuminating analogy for the topic of this symposium, *eros*, and may be less far-fetched than other ancient analogies for *eros*—such as war (in Ovid). In Xenophon’s version of the *Symposium*, Socrates confirms the relevance of this analogy by directly addressing dancing in the same context, on the same topic (*eros*). He is enthusiastic about dancing and even expresses a desire to learn to dance. What, then, does this Socratic dancing look like and can it help us arrive at a Socratic-Diotiman theory of *eros* that includes an atelic, spontaneous aspect? To answer this question, I will briefly elucidate six core tenets of Socratic dancing in Xenophon.

Toward the beginning of Xenophon’s *Symposium*, guests, including Socrates, are joined by a dancing girl and boy. Socrates remarks that they “dance very beautifully” and thanks the Syracusan, who brought them, for the “most pleasant sights and sounds” (II.1).<sup>14</sup> Later, during a debate about whether virtue is teachable, Socrates initiates an intermission, specifically, to watch the girl dance

through a knife-studded hoop (II.7). After seeing this, Socrates proclaims that the virtue of courage seems to be teachable (II.12).<sup>15</sup> Then, the boy starts dancing. Socrates says that, although already beautiful, the boy seems to be more beautiful during dance routines than at rest (II.15). Socrates's praise prompts a guest named Charmides to interject: such praise ought to be directed at the dancer's teacher, not just the boy. Socrates agrees and goes on to explain this further beauty of dancing:

Yes, by Zeus . . . and I thought of something else in addition, that no part of his body was idle during the dance, but his neck, legs, and arms were exercised at the same time, just as one who intends to maintain his body in a good condition should dance. And I...would very gladly learn the routines from you, Syracusan . . . I'll dance, by Zeus. (II.16-17)<sup>16</sup>

This passage and its context reveal several key tenets of Socratic dancing. First, Socrates values dancing that is taught via a choreographed "routine," as Socrates puts it. Second, it involves the concurrent movement of all body parts, much like calisthenics, to create "bodily equilibrium." Third, Socratic dancing is primarily productive and teleological since, as Socrates says, it aims at achieving desired ends like health, better sleep, and good eating (II.18).<sup>17</sup> We can further observe this when Socrates doubles down on his view in response to laughter: he wants to dance so *that* he can work every part of his body *in order* to create a complete bodily equilibrium (II.17). He also wants to dance *because* dancing is exercise that can be done indoors during the winter (in other words, presumably for more health) (II.18).

Socrates also highlights a fourth tenet: he does not need a dance partner. He says Charmides recently found him dancing on his own (II.19). Later, he ignores Callias's request to be his dance partner and fellow novice (II.20). Finally, while not explicitly Socrates's theory of dance, the dancing girl and boy do not dance *together* and none of the symposiasts join them.<sup>18</sup> This solitary aspect of Socratic dance may remind one of Diotima's ladder of love, which culminates in *eros* focused on more impersonal objects, such as laws and intelligible Forms.<sup>19</sup>

Later, Socrates implies that the pleasures of sight and sound that come from viewing the dancers are inferior to the symposiasts' benefits and pleasure (III.2).<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, even if inferior, dancing is pleasant for the audience and Socrates thinks it should be maximally so. He expresses this toward the end of the text when the Syracusan asks him if he is the infamous "Thinker" (from Aristophanes's *Clouds*). He replies that he is *thinking* about how the Syracusan's dancers can "spend their time as easily as possible" all the while having the group "especially delighted in watching them" (VII.1-2). In other words, Socrates is formulating a theory of how dancing can be as efficient and productive of pleasure as possible. This is his theory:

In my opinion, leaping into daggers is an exhibition of danger, something not at all appropriate to a banquet. Moreover, reading and writing on a

spinning wheel may be *something of a wonder*, but I can't understand what pleasure even these things would supply. *Nor is watching those who are beautiful and in bloom twisting their bodies and imitating wheels more pleasant than watching them at rest. For indeed, it is nothing very rare to happen upon wondrous things, if someone is wanting in these.* It is possible to wonder very much and without delay at what is near to hand: why in the world does the lamp supply light by having a brilliant flame, while brass, which is brilliant as well, does not produce light but reflects off itself images of other things? And how is it that oil, while being wet, increases the flame, but water, because it is wet, extinguishes the fire? But these things too do not urge one on to the same things as does wine. *If they were to dance routines depicting the Graces, the Seasons, and the Nymphs to the accompaniment of the flute, I think they would spend their time more easily and the banquet would be much more agreeable.* (VII.3-5)<sup>21</sup>

At the beginning of this passage, Socrates introduces the fifth tenet of his theory of dancing: being wondrous or amazing does not affect how pleasant a dance is to watch. We can observe this tenet in Socrates's ruling out various *wondrous* kinds of dance that have already been performed at this very symposium: for example, the girl dancing through a "dagger"-studded hoop or the boy dancing in a wheel. Socrates rules these out, at least explicitly, because wondrous things are not rare. The thought goes: If everything around you can provoke wonder, why think wonder would distinguish good dance? (One might think dancing through a knife-studded hoop sounds quite rare.) Instead, the sixth tenet of Socratic dancing: it is superior not because it is wondrous, but because it is productive by efficiently creating the best pleasure for the audience with the fewest movements. Thus, Socrates says these routines would enable the dancers to "spend their time *more easily*" and would be "much more agreeable" to the audience. How so? Socrates says the routines would choreograph the Graces, Seasons, or Nymphs—to a flute. The content of this choreography could be more pleasant in virtue of being a more "appropriate" narrative, although Socrates does not elaborate here.

What, then, can Socrates's theory of dance in Xenophon teach us about Socratic *eros*? Given this emphasis on routines and de-emphasis on wonder in dancing in Xenophon, spontaneous, atelic dancing does not seem to be an explicit Socratic complement to the Diotiman theory of *eros* here.

#### 4. EQUAL PARTNERS IN DANCE AND EROS? SOCRATIC-DIOTIMAN POSSIBILITIES

Xenophon's Socrates seems to espouse a theory of dancing which leaves little room for spontaneity and atelic activity. This productive approach to dancing cannot supplement the Socratic-Diotiman theory of *eros* in Plato. Therefore, instead of seeking a direct textual basis for the *spontaneous* dance analogy, we can approach it as either a challenge or compatible amendment to the Diotiman theory of *eros*. In

this final section, I argue for the latter, address objections, and sketch out what such an amended theory of *eros* might look like and how it could emerge for Diotima and for us.

First, recall how Diotima can be read as inviting genderqueer roles in procreation and *eros*. Spontaneous, atelic dance also encourages this mixing up, or even disregard for, social roles and types, which we can also read Diotima's theory of *eros* and pregnancy as inviting. By making universal, mixing up, or disbanding roles, both spontaneous dance and Diotima's genderqueer procreation share the potential to make an egalitarian theory and practice of *eros* more imaginable.

If our goal is "a mutually passionate love, in which both parties are *lovers*"<sup>22</sup>—as opposed to one being a beloved object—then a good way to materialize that *possibility* is to first ensure everyone has as much access as possible to all actions, roles, and social categories. What would this look like? At its core, this would ultimately mean refusing the binary of one actor as subject and the other actor as object. In dance and *eros*, both must be subjects. This innovation would break the traditional binary and hierarchy in *eros*. Insofar as Diotima encourages thinking beyond binaries, it's likely she would be on board.

This goal can be spelled out in different ways. In spontaneous dancing, roles often switch and change fluidly, especially when gender and sex (and other) associations are authentically loosened. For instance, you might twirl your partner, and they might then twirl you. You might put your arms around them and then they might do the same. This can also be applied in the realm of *eros*: You might make, or pay, for dinner sometimes, while your partner might do so other times. Or you might do a certain sexual act or role one night, then your partner might do it the next. What is aimed at need not be a strict, tit-for-tat symmetry and equality, since life and relationships naturally ebb and flow. The spirit of the symmetry and equality comes more from an ongoing, authentic loosening of roles and types, and that process may come most naturally from spontaneous, atelic togetherness that deemphasizes a "routine" with pre-set roles and types.

This authentic role-reversal is a good way to loosen roles and types in both dancing and *eros*, but it's only a means to an end, not an end in itself. On such a picture, *more* people can be subjects, which is progress, but people still cannot be subjects at the same time. That is, even if roles are reversed, someone is still an object—to be twirled or sexually acted on. As an endgame, this is incomplete as an account. Making a human an "object" for another subject is a prime building block of potential objectification and domination.

This raises a deep problem: Can we develop a theory of shared action according to which we are both loving or dancing with each other, without an oscillation of subject/object and agent/patient? This is a deep problem in the metaphysics of shared action that we have yet to adequately solve. In many ways, we remain in the time of Plato and Aristotle in theory and practice: we still demand a "patient" or "object" in most, if not all, shared action,

particularly in sex. That is a story for another time, but I raise it as a conceptual space worth pursuing, if we want truly egalitarian *eros*. Regardless, authentic role-reversal remains a great way to aspire toward this vision since it helps us disrupt the codification of our acts as participants and observers. In dance, an environment of experiment and spontaneity, rather than pre-ordained "routines" or choreography, seems particularly conducive. Alongside aspects of Diotima's account, I suggest the same environment for *eros*.

Actualizing this ideal is not easy. A spontaneous and atelic activity may not always feel "natural," pleasant, or "productive" in the way traditional roles sometimes do. This is because traditional and codified roles and types in dance and *eros* are more intelligible, predictable, and deeply ingrained due to their privileged normative status. Normativity is not inherently bad: it provides rules that allow us to interpret others and is a crucial tool for coordination and mutual understanding. However, our normative frames can sometimes be too narrow, ideological, and a source of inequality.<sup>23</sup> In such cases—and the realm of *eros* is one of them—spontaneous and atelic experimentation may enable the organic emergence of new frames and interpretations. Thus, while spontaneous and atelic activity may be confusing at times, it could open up space for a kind of beauty, experience, and society that our current dance routines and erotic roles often do not make available to us.

Two elements of the Socratic-Diotiman view may seem in conflict with this vision: the asymmetry of the pederastic context and the sexual domination of some men and women by men in Diotima's era (and still, to some extent, in ours).<sup>24</sup> Such rigid dynamics are certainly in conflict with the egalitarianism envisioned here, but it is not clear how much the Socratic-Diotiman theory of *eros* is, or needs to be, on board with these inequalities of its time.

The first concern: Based on current evidence from Attic vases and literary (e.g., Aristophanes) and philosophical sources (e.g., Aristotle), it is reasonable to infer that norms around pederasty prohibited a younger beloved from experiencing sexual desire for an older, more powerful lover.<sup>25</sup> Xenophon, in fact, explicitly says this in his *Symposium* discussed above: "the boy does not share in the man's pleasure in intercourse, as a woman does; cold sober, he looks upon the other drunk with sexual desire" (VIII.21).<sup>26</sup> If he was honorable, the younger beloved would not only not experience pleasure, but also would not allow penetration of any bodily orifice so that he would "never assimilate himself to a woman by playing a subordinate role in a position of contact," as Dover notes in *Greek Homosexuality*.<sup>27</sup> Thus, this context was asymmetrical: the older lover could feel *eros* and its pleasures, while the younger beloved could only feel *philia*, or friendship.<sup>28</sup> This asymmetry also mirrored social and political inequalities: the lover who *could* feel *eros just so happened* to be the free, male citizen with more power in every other realm of life. How can we be equal partners if you have more power and experience, are my mentor, experience less social shame due to our relation, and are the *only* one who can experience certain pleasures? Or vice versa.

The second concern: the sexual domination of certain groups in Diotima's time—and, to some extent, our own—also conflicts with this egalitarian vision. This domination is often expressed through domestic or political metaphors of a “ruler-ruled” dynamic, which is applied to men or women who “submit to” the rule of men—including in bed.<sup>29</sup> A crucial assumption of this model of social and sexual relations is its oppositional, role-based style that emphasizes domination and submission and heavily discourages changing roles. For example, Dover notes that, in the ancient Greek context, “virtually no male both penetrates other males and submits to penetration by other males at the same stage of his life.”<sup>30</sup> The concept of being “versatile” and its role-reversing style would have broken the Greek mind that Dover describes. Why? Here's a hypothesis: it comes from an anxiety about being penetrated that is rooted in binary gender roles that organize who is “active” and “passive.”<sup>31</sup> This binary split is driven by an ideal of masculinity that requires men to *always* be “in control” and from an ideal of femininity that requires constant submission or domination.<sup>32</sup> Offspring of this mindset, which assumes a certain metaphysics of action and ideological interpretation of various bodily movements as “active,” still live on today. It is especially pronounced in quite homophobic and misogynist environments where self-ascriptions like “pure top” are prevalent. The idea is: an LGBTQ+ man remains “pure” (and honorable and “a man”) as long as he does not take the “woman's role” in sex and instead “actively” “us[es] men as women,” as Xenophon put it.<sup>33</sup> One might have thought that Xenophon's above description of young men not feeling pleasure with older men left open that, since women *do* experience pleasure, women have equal status in things *eros*. But women experience this pleasure, according to Xenophon and many other ancient Greeks, because submission is their “natural position,” not because of some egalitarian commitment.

How can we be equal partners if you assume that my sexual role is as agent in “controlling” or “dominating” you, an object to be “used”? Or vice versa. These asymmetric hierarchies, in which ancient Greeks used “women, slaves, [and] boys”<sup>34</sup> as *objects* of pleasure, seem—among other things—quite choreographed and incompatible with the spirit of spontaneous, experimental dancing and *eros* that I have envisioned here.<sup>35</sup>

In light of these two ancient assumptions, it's easy to think that the Socratic-Diotiman view of *eros* cannot be reconciled with an egalitarian ideal that ensures the *possibility* of equality and symmetry for all. But I think it can be. Below, I will offer some evidence that suggests that, at its core, the *best* Platonic *eros* is more symmetric and creative than asymmetric and acquisitive.<sup>36</sup> Diotima is the spearhead of this more symmetric theory of *eros*. As we have seen, she can be read as inviting us to genderqueer the pregnancy required for all erotic activity. Everyone is pregnant, regardless of gender or sex, and Diotima is explicit that a plurality of erotic experiences can induce this pregnancy into labor. As Sheffield argues, Plato uses the figure of Diotima to destabilize hierarchy, since her philosophy of *eros* “de-center[s] the importance of gender” and opens up space in which to move beyond the unequal structures of her time.<sup>37</sup>

In principle, then, anyone—regardless of gender, sex, and other social categories—*could* participate in any part of the Socratic-Diotiman erotic process. Diotima herself partially exhibits this: Plato presents her gender-inclusive language and gender-bending theory through Socrates, an iconic male philosopher, at a party with only men.<sup>38</sup> Even in her physical absence, she takes center stage and beckons all those men into further labor. Additionally, the most famous student of Diotima's theory of *eros*—Socrates—exemplifies a kind of dual-role membership in his relation with Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. Alcibiades, who is young and physically beautiful, begins as the passive beloved (*eromenos*) of Socrates. He ends up as the active lover (*erastes*), while Socrates, who is older, considered ugly, and would typically be the lover (*erastes*), becomes Alcibiades's pursued beloved (*eromenos*).<sup>39</sup> This role reversal comes to a head when Socrates, like a beloved (*eromenos*) who does not get an erection (to Xenophon's satisfaction), remains, at least to a large extent, erotically unmoved while sleeping next to a naked Alcibiades.<sup>40</sup> As a result, Alcibiades is “thrown into confusion about his role,” as Nussbaum notes.<sup>41</sup> This confusion, however, is not a mere accident. It is the fruit of Diotima's philosophical labor: her teachings on *eros* lead Socrates to disrupt the rigid correspondence of the masculine/feminine and active/passive binaries that underlie Alcibiades's erotic vision.

In this scene, roles change and reverse. Norms are broken. This role-reversal aligns well with Diotima's description of *eros* as *metaxy*, or an intermediate between the divine and human (202cff). Socrates seems to operate between lover and beloved. This role-reversal also resonates well with Socrates's view of the philosopher as a lover of wisdom who is an intermediate between ignorance and wisdom (202a). Since they are both intermediates between opposing poles, both *eros* and the philosopher are dual and can go both ways. This duality is consistent with Socrates's dual relation with Alcibiades. If we take up this spirit of intermediacy within the dance analogy for *eros*, we can imagine each lover moving toward each other in a spontaneous and unscripted way, straddling the poles of gender, sex, and other social categories and roles. *Metaxy* would be preserved.

Another instance of authentic role-reversal in Plato is the portrayal of Socrates as a midwife, a profession traditionally associated with women. Plato explicitly acknowledges this in the *Theaetetus* and alludes to it elsewhere, including perhaps in the *Symposium*.<sup>42</sup> Socrates's erotic midwifery helps others give birth to what is inside them, such as speeches or true opinions. One potential problem with this metaphor is that midwifery seems quite role-based, even when liberated from sex and gender roles. One person is pregnant. The other—with some skill, thus the midwife craft analogy—brings about the birth. One might wonder: can these roles switch up, let alone disappear? Yet, in some of the best Socratic discussions, the roles seem to do just that. There is *mutual*: contribution, lack of condescension, honesty and wholeheartedness, and desire to inquire together. Therefore, it is possible for roles to be reversed, interchanged, and perhaps even dissolved within this midwifery context. A good example of this appears in *Alcibiades I*, where Alcibiades says to Socrates: “we shall

in all likelihood *reverse the usual pattern*, Socrates, I taking your role and you mine” (135d). For Diotima’s Socrates, midwifery may not only lack gendered or sexed roles, but may also involve roles that spontaneously switch. Socrates can induce Alcibiades into labor, and Alcibiades can induce Socrates into labor. Although Diotima does not explicitly mention midwifery, her use of imagery of pregnancy and birthing for all humans is compatible with it. In fact, *she* could be seen as a midwife to Socrates on the subject of *eros*.<sup>43</sup>

The *Phaedrus* offers a final example of how Socratic *eros* could be compatible with role reversal and the egalitarian spirit of spontaneous dance. In it, unlike in Xenophon or many other texts of the time, Plato breaks from convention by stating that a younger beloved *can feel anteros for*, or love in response to, a lover (255c-d). That is, the beloved—the one loved—becomes a lover—the one *loving*. This ability to become a lover suggests that these roles are, to some extent, reversible and possibly eliminable. The *Phaedrus* further characterizes this process of becoming as involving confusion. This, I suggest, is a result of a kind of atelic experimentation in which the beloved, going beyond their culture’s binary system of *eros*, “doesn’t fully have in view the end for the sake of which he is acting”—namely, to be in love with this other man.<sup>44</sup> Recall: Socrates points out that the beloved is confused, specifically, about where this erotic feeling is coming from and about its object. A further hypothesis: this confusion in *anteros* is in part *due to its being a moment of becoming a subject*. This point about becoming a subject could be explained in terms of dissolving the activity and passivity framework. It is along these lines that Halperin writes that Platonic *anteros*:

erases the distinction between the ‘active’ and ‘passive’ partner—or, to put it better, the genius of Plato’s analysis is that it eliminates passivity all together; according to Socrates, both members of the relationship become active, desiring lovers; neither remains solely a passive object of desire.<sup>45</sup>

As Halperin assumes, both become active *subjects* in *anteros*. The proposed analogy of a spontaneous, atelic dance, when paired with Diotima’s genderqueer notion of pregnancy and *eros*, can capture how this potentially confusing and open-ended experience may be necessary for making an egalitarian erotic experience *possible*, “natural,” and authentic. While rigid roles, routines, and norms may feel intelligible and productive in both dance and *eros*, the spontaneity and atelic aspect of non-choreographed, experimental dance and *eros* may better get into view this egalitarian possibility for Socrates, Diotima, and us.

I have proposed that the mindset of spontaneous, atelic dancing may provide a model for how *eros* could better give birth to egalitarian possibilities. This is just one instance of how the spontaneous, atelic aspect of *eros* could contribute to a Diotiman birthing process, one that brings about an unexpected and atypical, yet remarkably beautiful, baby. According to Diotima, pregnant people are everywhere. Then, many more dances and births are possible. How do pregnant people dance in law courts, hospitals, boardrooms, prisons, scientific labs, religious

spaces, classrooms, forests, and factories? These are dances for another day, but Diotima certainly thinks her account of love would apply to them. It is up to us to open up these new ways of loving and dancing in order to birth better beauty everywhere.

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#### NOTES

1. On these questions, I have learned much from Martha Nussbaum (“The Speech of Alcibiades,” 177), David Halperin’s generative piece (“Why Is Diotima a Woman?”), and Frisbee Sheffield’s compelling reply (“Beyond Gender”).
2. Halperin (“Platonic Eros and What Men Call Love,” 165–66, 176–77) also contrasts *eros*’s conventional (and ‘masculine’) acquisitive, “pursuit and fight, hunting and capture” sense with Diotima’s creative, non-acquisitive *eros*.
3. See: *pantes anthropoid*, 206c1-2; *anthropoid*, 211e2, 212a1, b7; *thnefes*, 211e3.
4. Sheffield, “Psychic Pregnancy,” 4.
5. Sheffield, in “Beyond Gender,” defends roughly this view in a scholarly context: “Platonic *eros* seems genderqueer insofar as it does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions.” While I draw from her analysis, I am not attempting a full-blooded scholarly defense of her view (or my own) in this more experimental register.
6. Sheffield, “Beyond Gender,” 21.
7. Sheffield “Beyond Gender,” 21, 34.
8. Sheffield, *Plato’s Symposium*.
9. Vlastos, “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato,” and the literature following it.
10. In the *Phaedrus* palinode, Socrates describes some of these very feelings and results of *eros* as madness (*mania*).
11. Luce Irigaray (“Sorcerer Love,” 34–37) is right to emphasize this intermediacy.
12. This would not be a surprising result, given Diotima and Socrates’s speech’s subtle incorporation of elements of previous speeches in the *Symposium*.
13. There is a question whether, or how, Alcibiades’s revery, arrival, and speech—later in the *Symposium*—relate to this “spontaneous, atelic” experience of *eros*. At first pass, he is not a paradigmatic case of what I have in view, but more work is needed here.
14. This may remind one of how the love of sights and sounds is the beginning of the philosophical nature’s love for *being* (*Rep.* V.475d-476a, VI.501d).
15. Here, the dancing and Socrates’s commentary on it seem to function not as a complete break from the paused topic—whether virtue is teachable—but rather as further commentary on it. This strengthens the impression that this dancing plays a philosophical, not just aesthetic, role in the text.
16. Xenophon’s *Symposium*, II.16-17, transl. Bartlett.
17. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates discusses his motivations for learning music and poetry, activities also central to a symposium (60d-61c). Perhaps a complementary task to the one I’m undertaking here would be to trace out the tenets of a Socratic theory of music and (mythic) poetry and then investigate whether they shed light on the Socratic theory of *eros*. However, in Xenophon’s *Symposium*, Socrates’s direct and enthusiastic engagement with the art of dancing—to the point of explaining how he dances—makes dancing a uniquely powerful and direct analogy for exploring his theory of *eros*.
18. Philippus only imitates them after the fact in Bk. II.

19. Within the dance-eros analogy I am drawing, this trait of Socratic dancing points toward the possibility of an autoerotic response and pleasure. This is material for future work.
20. This is presumably due, in part, to Socrates's soul-body dualism, which he also expresses when he says love of the soul is superior to love of the body (VIII.10-13).
21. Xenophon's *Symposium*, VII.3-5, transl. Bartlett; emphasis added.
22. Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades," 196. Perhaps Elizabeth Anderson's "What's the Point of Equality?" would be helpful for future fleshing out of this egalitarian ideal.
23. In fact, we can observe this narrowness in a pejorative description of our very goal—"role reversal"—in the eighteenth century stereotype of the homosexual as an *invert*, as Foucault details: "the image alludes both to the theme of *role reversal* and to the principle of a natural stigma attached to this offence against nature" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 18).
24. In the context of ancient Greek masculine sexuality, Foucault refers to: "the relationship of domination, hierarchy, and authority that one expected, as a man, a free man, to establish over his inferiors" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 83).
25. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*.
26. Certainly, there is a question here about archival injustice on the part of Xenophon, but this at least expresses a common norm or attitude that Foucault also details (*History of Sexuality*, "The Object of Pleasure," 222ff.).
27. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 103.
28. Halperin, "Plato and Erotic Reciprocity," 66.
29. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 46–47, 65–66, 84–85, 129, 155–57, 170–78, 210–11, 215–16; most clearly: "sexual relations—always conceived in terms of the model act of penetration, assuming a polarity that opposed activity and passivity—were seen as being of the same type as the relationship between a superior and a subordinate, an individual who dominates and one who is dominated, one who commands and one who complies, one who vanquishes and one who is vanquished" (215).
30. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 1n, 16, 52, 103.
31. See also Nussbaum's (1986: 173n) discussion of the jokes at the expense of "passive homosexuals" in Aristophanes's *Clouds*.
32. Garcia observes the same association of submission, passivity, and femininity in other historical philosophical texts (Freud, Rousseau), religion, and contemporary radical feminism: "to submit oneself is to put oneself in an inferior position analogous to the inferiority of woman in relation to man" (*We Are Not Born Submissive*, 27–31). She also notes religious texts' explicit affirmation of this association of women with submission: in the Bible, *Eph. 5:21–34* and, in the Quran, *Surah 4, verse 34*.
33. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* II.1.30.
34. Foucault refers to this as a common ancient shorthand (*History of Sexuality*, 47). Garcia helpfully adds "defeated warrior" (*We Are Not Born Submissive*, 22).
35. In the context of exploring feminism's aspiration for equality among genders and sexes, Garcia defines domination as the hierarchical and asymmetric influence of one party over another's action (*We Are Not Born Submissive*, 15–18).
36. Halperin defends this view in a scholarly context ("Why Is Diotima a Woman?" 148–50).
37. Sheffield ("Beyond Gender," 22, 24) quotes the non-binary activist Faucette ("Fucking the Binary," 78) here.
38. While I argue for the transformative potential of Diotiman eros, Halperin suggests a more cynical reading ("Why is Diotima a Woman?" 114): by putting this "feminine" wisdom about eros in Socrates's mouth, Plato has Diotima "emptied" and "entirely used up," all the while *not* being present at the symposium (149). As such, through this device, Plato can appropriate the final, yet to be conquered, feminine frontier of eros into his male-centric philosophical project. While this critique is a powerful reminder of the text's historical context, it is also true that the intellectual legacy of Diotima's words not only lived on in an all-male symposium, referenced throughout antiquity, but have also transcended this context and persisted into the present. The

enduring power of Diotima's language and ideas—the vision of a productive, creative eros that is gender-inclusive—is what has inspired generations of readers to find in the *Symposium* a vision of a more just and egalitarian love. By recovering this vision and expanding upon it, we can honor the spirit of her disruptive voice, even as we acknowledge the complex history of its delivery.

39. Nussbaum, "Speech of Alcibiades," 188. There is precedent for this idea earlier in the *Symposium*: Aristodemus is said to be the greatest erastes of Socrates (173b).
40. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 96.
41. Nussbaum, "Speech of Alcibiades," 189.
42. See *Tht.* 148e-151d. Regarding the parenthetical: at *Tht.* 149bc, Socrates says he knows the art of midwifery is associated with women who can no longer have children.
43. Adjudicating this point would require teasing out the slight differences between the midwifery metaphor in the *Theaetetus* and Diotima's pregnancy metaphor. Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery," would be a good place to start such an inquiry.
44. This is how Agnes Callard (*Aspiration*, 22) characterizes Alcibiades as an aspirant, a helpful association for the experimental and motivational mindset I have tried to get into view here. In some sense, this essay may fill out how Socrates, as an aspirant, came to be a Diotiman.
45. Halperin, "Plato and Erotic Reciprocity," 68.

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## Queering Ethics: Cultivating Queer Sensibility

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In spring of 1998, I sat in my first—and only—English class at Wellesley College. It was my first year in college, and I was on the brink of dropping out. That semester I had carefully selected a survey of gay and lesbian literature in the United States, a course taught by a popular professor. I don't think that I spoke once in class. I mostly listened. My classmates brimmed with confidence, having attended elite high schools of which I had never heard, schools with exotic names. Philips Exeter. Friends Academy. I marveled at their ease in the classroom. A dykey junior with a punk aesthetic once raised her hand and waxed poetic about "dichotomy," a word that I knew the meaning of but which I had never actually heard anyone use. She spoke it like a dirty word. It sounded improbably sexy.

What I remember most about this class—twenty-five years on—is how raucous it was. How much pleasure the raunchy, raw the material held. I had never read the poetry of Cherrie Moraga or Audre Lorde, encountered the cinematic camp masterpieces of John Waters or Russ Meyers, watched the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, read Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, or dug into Leslie Feinberg's classic *Stone Butch Blues*, an early memoir of transgender experience. I remember getting an essay back with a correction. The word "cum" had been crossed out. In the margins, a gentle suggestion about word choice from the professor: "Perhaps 'semen'?" It was the first college course in which I ever received the grade of "A." I struggled with my writing, trying to push it past the bounds of what I had learned in high school.

I never took another English class. I'm not sure why. A few months later, I moved to the Bay Area and worked in retail for several years, transferring to UC Berkeley to finish my degree. I became enamored with philosophy, obsessed with Michel Foucault, a luminous queer figure in his own right. It's noteworthy that, as I turned to philosophy and dug into the analytic canon, queer themes disappeared. Courses weren't offered in queer philosophy. I can't even think of one queer reading assigned beyond Foucault. Not as an undergraduate at Berkeley, not at Oxford where I did a second BA, hoping to learn the ways of analytic philosophy,

not as a graduate student. Fifteen years of education—and almost nothing. So, it's with a sense of irony that I think on, and with, the theme of this issue: "Make Philosophy Queer Again."

Analytic philosophy has never been very queer. To queer philosophy would of course mean expanding the range of topics typically studied by analytic philosophers to include phenomena associated with queer culture broadly understood: sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, masculinity and femininity, stereotyping and discrimination, kink and other queer sexual practices, policies surrounding gender-affirming care, camp as an aesthetic, and others. But queering also requires more—much more.<sup>1</sup> To queer philosophy, we need to cultivate queer sensibility, ways of doing philosophy that deviate from analytic philosophy's dominant norms. The main contribution of this essay is to articulate this sensibility in methodological terms and highlight its transformative potential for analytic ethics.

One way to frame queering projects—in ethics or otherwise—would be to say that they are by, for, and about queer people. That includes lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, intersex people, asexual people, and others. We queers are a diverse group. What connects us is at once tenuous and significant. We deviate from dominant social expectations surrounding gender, sex, and sexuality.<sup>2</sup> The reason that queer philosophy should be done by us, the thought goes, is that we have special insight into queer phenomena—both joys and suffering—due to our lived experiences. Experience gives us certain ways of seeing the world, specialized knowledge, everyday expertise. Also, it generates needs.

As a young person growing up in a rural community, I sat with a lot of negative messaging about queer people. We were dirty, sinful, promiscuous, and just plain wrong. There wasn't a single visibly queer person in my world for a long time. Not in my rural high school, not in my church, not in my little country town on the upper edge of Appalachia. The only things that I knew about queer people were filtered through the AIDS crisis. As a bisexual, I leaned into invisibility throughout my youth. I remember the fear. That people could know, just by looking.

In *Brother to Brother*, an anthology of Black gay male writers published at the height of the AIDS crisis, poet Essex Hemphill describes a parallel experience in the late 1960s. "I searched the card catalogue at a local library," he explains,

and discovered there were books about homosexuality in the "adult" section. . . . What there was for me to read in 1969 was in no way affirming of the sexual identity germinating within me. . . . Nothing in those books said that men could truly love one another. Nothing said that masturbation could be comforting. Nothing celebrated the genius and creativity of homosexual men or even suggested that such men could lead ordinary lives. Nothing encouraged me to love black men—I learned to do that on my own.<sup>3</sup>

Hemphill calls on his audience to create “evidence of being,” authentic depictions of queer lives and love, celebrations of Black genius and creativity, resilience. I love that phrase: “evidence of being.” Analytic philosophy could use some of that canon-bending, life-affirming energy in this historical moment as so many of us struggle against forces that seek to destroy and erase us.

Queer philosophy can bring this energy. I experienced this firsthand writing my new book, *What’s Wrong with Stereotyping?* A tacit premise of this project is that queer life can be a source of philosophical knowledge and inspiration. To understand what’s wrong with stereotyping, I studied the writings of normcore gays in the early homophile movement; radical women of color and working-class lesbians who penned the third-wave feminist classic *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings of Women by Color*;<sup>4</sup> early American AIDS activists of the 1980s and ‘90s who built a life-saving movement around disability rights, racial justice, feminist values, and queer advocacy.<sup>5</sup> When these activists pushed back against homophobic stereotyping, they invoked ethical objections, for example, that stereotyping was rooted in prejudice, was disrespectful, excused violence against them and hurt people they loved, failed to treat them as individuals. These objections articulate explanations of what’s wrong with stereotyping. Making theory accountable to lived experience, I crack open a generative philosophical space, bringing everyday queer people into conversation with analytic philosophers. The result is a radically pluralistic ethics, an ethics of complexity that provides, as Hemphill once put it, evidence of our being: queer ferocity, intellect, beauty.

A friend recently referred to my book project as “sneaky.” It’s a traditional project in analytic ethics—a recognizable type of inquiry, what Sarah Stroud calls “an explanatory project.”<sup>6</sup> There’s a recipe for all such projects, a set of instructions to follow. A philosopher starts with a phenomenon that people typically presume to be wrongful, and then they ask, *why?* Murder, lying, discrimination, stereotyping. Is the phenomenon in question always morally wrong, as often presumed? Is it only sometimes wrong? Philosophical investigation proceeds as the search for necessary and sufficient conditions, for the essence, “the wrong,” of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

Chapter by chapter, I search for the wrong of stereotyping and emerge empty-handed. Stereotyping appears to be wrong, when it is, for a diversity of reasons that vary across cases and cannot be reduced to a single wrong or even to two or three wrongs. Individual cases of wrongful stereotyping also appear to be normatively complex: wrong for a multitude of reasons. This, I argue, is the truth of wrongful stereotyping. It has no essence. The complexity of wrongful stereotyping calls out for radically pluralistic theorizing, theorizing that values the insights of canonical ethical theories but also moves beyond their strictures. I imagine what this could look like. Clusters of wrongs targeting marginalized groups, traveling together, emerging from social environments that sustain these wrongs.

“The straights” are known for their love of bright lines, binaries. A thing is this or that: boy or girl, female or male. By contrast, queer existence destabilizes these binaries and the categories that constitute them. Our existence shows that the world is messier—and more complex—than many people would like to admit. We revel in hot messes. Sometimes we are the hot mess.

Against analytic preferences for neat-and-tidy analysis, I’m here to tell you that being okay with a bit of a mess, even amping up its drama, is philosophically productive. Analytic ethics has played it too straight, for too long. Ethicists are obsessed with unity, principles, cut-and-dried criteria for wrongful actions. Even Aristotle’s ethics fits this description, despite its emphasis on context and seizing the moment. Everything comes down to virtue or vice: kindness, cruelty, bravery, cowardice. When ethicists get their hands on ethically complex phenomena—queer or not—analytic training often gets in the way.

When I first studied stereotyping as a graduate student in philosophy, I was told by more than one senior faculty that my project wouldn’t be fully baked until I identified “the” wrong of stereotyping. A decade later, I see new generations of scholars being imbued with the same reductive ideology. It doesn’t have to be this way. Nor should it be. If ethicists try to extract neat-and-tidy essences from messy, complex phenomena, the result will be a distorted understanding of ethical conduct, the oppressions we face as queer people, and our very selves.

Given our lived experiences, we queers are well positioned to provide counter-norms, earthier “ground bound” ways of practicing analytic philosophy, as Talia Mae Bettcher puts it. Under the weight of oppression,<sup>7</sup> she writes,

the social world one inhabits can be so thoroughly saturated with perverse rationalizations and violent mystifications that up becomes down and down up while everything is turned inside out. I call this perplexity the **existential WTF**.<sup>7</sup>

To cope with “the existential WTF,” we need to explain oppression: to understand how it works, why it feels inescapable at times. And, as María Lugones argued, we also need our theory to be liberatory.<sup>8</sup> For queering projects, these twin goals entail that theorists must highlight lived experience and social structures, testifying to the force of oppression, while also shining a light on queer resistance and joy.

As I wrote my book, I found myself contemplating these imperatives. Is it possible to practice analytic philosophy in a way that promotes liberation—a future oriented, hopeful project—while theorizing the world as it really is? Grasping for answers, I turned not just to queer elders in the United States but also to decolonial theorists like Lugones, theorists of Black liberation, and philosophers of science like Helen Longino and Sandra Harding. Convergences emerged, and methodological principles came into view. I’d now like to share three of them. These principles can—and, I would argue, often should—guide queering projects.

Cultivating queer sensibility, for me, meant putting these principles into practice.

*Methodological Principle #1: The Lived-Experience Principle.* Root your analysis in the lived experience of queers.

For queering projects, this means analyzing what everyday queers tend to think and say about queer phenomena—our prejudices and presumptions, our humor, but also our insights. The principle recommends sniffing out disagreements and conflicts between us, as these can be particularly generative and illuminating. One aspect of implementing this principle is paying homage to queer elders. Because queer people have often been marginalized in our discipline, paying homage will often mean engaging in cross-disciplinary research beyond analytic philosophy and looking to voices outside the academy, especially to activists engaged in liberatory struggle. Beyond its epistemic benefits, the lived-experience principle articulates an ethical imperative. As disability rights activists argue, “nothing about us, without us.”<sup>9</sup>

In *Queering Philosophy*, Kim Q. Hall identifies three methods of queering, all of which broadly fall under this first methodological principle.

The first is “**counter knowing / counter memory.**” Practices of counter-memory involve telling the story of our discipline in a way that shines a light on queer lives and work, resisting their erasure. “An archive,” Hall emphasizes, “is part of an ethical practice of remembering on whose shoulders one stands, those who have made one’s thinking and existence in a field possible.”<sup>10</sup>

Second, there is “**smuggling,**” which refers to the practice of using sources traditionally deemed “not philosophy.”<sup>11</sup> This may be necessary because of the dearth of queer perspectives in philosophy. “While questions and issues of importance to queer and trans people may be discussed in mainstream philosophical texts,” writes Hall, “they are rarely addressed from the perspective of being queer and/or trans in the world.”<sup>12</sup> The goal of smuggling is to create life-affirming work that resists the distortion and devaluation of queer lives and practices.

Third, there’s “**recruitment.**” Queering philosophy in this third sense involves finding intellectual allies who may not identify as queer and bringing them into conversation with us, building connections. Lived experience is not the focus here, but queering in this sense is often rooted in reverberating, overlapping experiences of marginalization related to race, religion, age, socio-economic status, and ability. One focuses “not solely on who authors are but rather on what their work does, the possibilities opened up by their thinking.”<sup>13</sup>

The lived-experience principle suggests that queering projects must proceed carefully. Some queers are intersex. Some, non-binary. Some of us are cis homos. Others identify as lesbians, full stop. Trans men and trans women contend with distinctive forms of oppression, which means that their “takes” on certain issues can diverge. And that’s without even getting into race, class, nationality,

ability, and other overlapping dimensions of difference. Because we are so different, philosophers engaged in queering projects must do the work, as Audre Lorde says, to understand and respect each other.<sup>14</sup> Our interests and experiences can converge, but they can also diverge. The methodological upshot is that theorists must adopt a multi-perspectival approach when using the lived-experience principle, examining not one but many perspectives.<sup>15</sup>

*Methodological Principle #2: The Messy-Kinds Principle.* When pursuing queering projects, one should acknowledge the possibility that the phenomena under investigation may be messy.

My colleague, the philosopher of science Joyce Havstad, distinguishes two varieties of kinds: neat and messy.<sup>16</sup> Neat kinds are analyzable in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Messy kinds are not. Messy kinds exhibit complexity and thus call out for distinctive modelling. Havstad observes that neatness in the natural world is the exception, rather than the rule. Most kinds, including biological and chemical kinds, are messy. As I’ve studied wrongful stereotyping over the last decade, I’ve found it to be messy too: incapable of being reduced to a single wrong or even to an elegant disjunction of two or three wrongs. Perhaps messiness is the rule when it comes to wrongful conduct. Neatness of course is possible, but it should not be presumed at the outset—nor built into the desiderata for an adequate philosophical analysis.

The messy-kinds principle vibes with queer sensibilities and, even more than that, provides a powerful counter-norm to dominant methodological practices in analytic philosophy. Embracing the world’s messiness, its disorder, one can begin to grapple with the world’s ethical complexity. This disposition to sit with the mess and appreciate it for what it is puts us in a better position to analyze not just queer phenomena but all ethically complex conduct.

*Methodological Principle #3: The Sociological Principle.* Look out for beyond-the-individual wrongs and do not sideline them when analyzing wrongful conduct.

A classic way to define ethics is to say it concerns how we should treat each other as individuals. This framing encourages philosophers to focus on individual, directed wrongs. Yet ethical life is inherently social and, hence, political in nature. Group wrongs often intertwine with individual wrongs. If someone intentionally misgenders a trans person, they disrespect the misgendered individual; however, at the same time, they are engaged in a systematic practice of group subordination that robs transgender people of dignity as a class.

These three principles can be used to study phenomena that are not focused on queer life specifically. That includes traditional topics in philosophical ethics such as the agency, personhood, and wrongful conduct. To queer these topics is to look at them through the lens of queer lived experiences, messiness, and with attention to socio-political realities. One embraces the messy and impure, the social, *the real*. In this way, queering projects generate surprising perspectives on subjects at the core of human

experience, subjects that philosophers have studied for millennia: how we should live, what exists, and what we can know.

In closing, I want to return the idea that queer philosophy is done by, for, and about queer people. The methodological principles that I've articulated—and the idea of queer philosophical sensibility—complicate this dictum in several ways and help us to better understand the multitude of forms queering projects may take.

*Philosophy done by us.* The methodological principles discussed above suggest that, as Kim Q. Hall puts it, "being LGBT or Q is no guarantee of desiring or practicing a queering of philosophy."<sup>17</sup> Not only is queer identity not sufficient for queering ethics (or anything else), but it is not necessary either. Straight allies are potentially capable of engaging in queering projects so long as they center queer voices and make philosophical theory accountable to lived experience. Indeed, in the broadest sense, queering projects center marginalized voices of many kinds, not simply those falling cleanly under the LGBTQIA+ rubric.<sup>18</sup>

*Philosophy done about us.* Queering projects involve doing ethics queerly—against the grain, with sensitivity to lived experience, the messiness of moral reality, and the sociological aspects of ethics. Exciting new work in this domain includes Quill Kukla's work on the ethics of sex and kink,<sup>19</sup> Florence Ashley's research on the ethics of gender-affirming care,<sup>20</sup> E.M. Hernandez's analysis of loving perception and gender affirmation,<sup>21</sup> Jules Wong's analysis of trans recognition,<sup>22</sup> Rowan Bell on authenticity,<sup>23</sup> and Talia Mae Bettcher's critique of philosophical notions of personhood, her ethics of intimacy and distance.<sup>24</sup> These projects expand the subject matter of analytic ethics. Just as importantly, they are projects pursued by queer philosophers in a way that reflects queer lived experiences, ethical complexity, and the social and political dimensions of the phenomena under investigation.

Other queering projects in analytic ethics read canonical thinkers against themselves, such as when Helga Varden argues that Kantian ethics vindicates queer love.<sup>25</sup> Other projects—like mine—take aim at the theories themselves. If ethical reality is often messy, as exemplified by the phenomenon of wrongful stereotyping, the big three ethical theories in Western philosophy—virtue ethics, Kantian ethics, and consequentialism—distort moral reality, modeling wrongful treatment in a neat-and-tidy way, when it is anything but.

If traditional ethical theories in the West are too simplistic, and too reductive, where does that leave us, one might wonder? What strategies might ethicists use to model ethical complexity? How might normative ethics, meta-ethics, and applied ethics be transformed by practicing philosophy in accordance with methodological principles that amplify—rather than silence—marginalized voices and embrace a messier, ground-bound view of the world? The future of analytic ethics, I believe, lies in pursuing these questions to their conclusions.

*Philosophy done for us.* We can now see why it's both accurate and too simple to say that queering projects promote queer interests. It's true that queering projects absolutely cannot pathologize and distort us. However, determining what our interests are can be complicated. Our experiences of oppression differ, as do our needs vis-à-vis institutions. A case in point is how medical institutions treat intersex and transgender individuals. Whereas transgender individuals struggle to access desired medical care, intersex people continue to fight against unwanted medical interventions, often performed on infants and children.

Complexity also exists within each queer person. Many of us experience layered oppressions due to race, religion, nationality, age, ability, and other factors. In the Combahee River Collective Statement, Black feminism is articulated precisely in these terms. "Our freedom," they write, as Black, queer, working-class feminists, "would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."<sup>26</sup> Queering projects thus stand in solidarity with decolonizing projects, crippling projects, distributive justice projects, and other liberatory enterprises. Cross-coalitional projects are necessary for our well-being and survival and, if we are looking to the future, for positive change in the conditions of our lives.

Queering projects have the potential to transform philosophical knowledge, including ethical knowledge. But it should also be clear that knowledge is not the only thing at issue here. Queering projects and the philosophical sensibilities that enliven them embody an impulse to shake off disciplinary presumptions that both dampen knowledge and have been used to oppress marginalized groups. By centering marginalized voices—and queer voices in particular—by embracing the messiness of reality, we seek to change the practice of philosophy itself, modifying the "masters tools," as Lorde once put it, so that we can do philosophy in a way that fosters pleasure (not pain), power from below, and solidarity with others in liberatory global struggles.<sup>27</sup>

This work is challenging, but it is also a labor of love. As a parent of a trans tween, I am the one who navigates restrictions on gender-affirming care on my child's behalf. I am the one they called when a classmate outed them in middle school. I was the one who cuddled them as they negotiated body dysphoria as a nine-year-old competitive swimmer. I'm not trans, but I live in solidarity with and love the trans people in my life—and not just my child, many of my colleagues and friends. Because trans people are queers of a certain kind, they are *my* chosen people too. I think if each of us looks around, we'll see that we are connected to vulnerable persons beyond ourselves. These connections fuel the work of queer philosophy and liberatory, world-building projects of all kinds, projects which are under great threat in our moment. Our connections to each other are not merely metaphorical. Doing queer philosophy—queerly—means being together in an embodied way, laughing and crying, dancing and arguing, talking to each other, caring for one another. It means comforting others and being comforted, creating philosophical spaces of refuge and joy that, however ephemeral, are evidence of

our being: that we are here, have always been here, and are going nowhere.

NOTES

1. Though feminist and queer philosophers have been studying these topics for decades, such work has been marginalized.
2. Anyone with a non-normative gender, sex, or sexuality qualifies as “queer” in the broadest sense. Pushing this maximalist view, some theorists claim that everyone—even the straightest among us—is a little bit queer. See K.B. Stockton, *Gender/s*.
3. Hemphill, *Brother to Brother*, xxxv–xxxvi.
4. Anzaldúa and Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back*.
5. Beeghly, *What’s Wrong with Stereotyping?*
6. Stroud, “Lying as Infidelity,” 73–97.
7. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 11. Her emphasis.
8. Lugones, “Towards a Decolonial Feminism,” 742–59; See also Young, “Throwing Like a Girl,” 137–56.
9. Catala, “Nothing About Us Without Us,” 311–31; see also Catala, *The Dynamics of Epistemic Injustice*.
10. Hall, *Queering Philosophy*, 13.
11. Hall, *Queering Philosophy*, 15.
12. Hall, *Queering Philosophy*, 15.
13. Hall, *Queering Philosophy*, 16.
14. Lorde, “Masters Tools,” 110–14.
15. See also Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*.
16. Havstad, “Messy Chemical Kinds,” 719–43.
17. Hall, *Queering Philosophy*, 10.
18. Examples include Hirji, “Oppressive Double Binds,” 643–69; Khader, *Faux Feminism*; Morton “Reasoning Under Scarcity,” 543–59.
19. Kukla, “That’s What She Said,” 70–97; and Kukla, *Sex Beyond Yes*.
20. Ashley, “Gatekeeping Hormone Replacement Therapy,” 480–82; Ashley, “Adolescent Medical Transition Is Ethical,” 127–71.
21. Hernandez, “Gender-Affirmation and Loving Attention,” 619–35.
22. Wong, “Ambivalences of Trans Recognition,” 269–89.
23. Bell, “Being Your Best Self,” 1–20.
24. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*.
25. Varden, *Sex, Love, and Gender*.
26. Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” 63–70.
27. Lorde, “Master’s Tools.”

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Communication Is Queer

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Our moment of political crisis is fueled in part by new weapons of communication. Queer people are among the targets. But queer lives are also a gift with some power to understand these weapons. Communication essentially involves a social infrastructure which analytic philosophy of language has only begun to theorize. Meanwhile, queerness directs attention to this infrastructure because it’s built for and by cis het society. For us queers, it works about as well as straight fashion, and is similarly devoid of imagination. Let’s go full queer eye on the philosophy of communication.

Society shapes the words and concepts available for communication, yes. But, more fundamentally, it shapes *who* we are connected to, *how* we connect, and the values that drive those interactions. Dominant theories like those we find in Grice, Lewis, and Stalnaker analyze how information can flow within a network by established conventions or improvised interpretation of intentions. A

queer eye looks one step prior. We ask, with existential urgency, how do we build networks and develop social practices in the first place? What work has already been done by culture to make some intentions “obvious” and “reasonable” while others are “obscure” and . . . queer? What work does this culture do in determining which conventions and words take off, and which are targeted for often violent resistance by dominant groups?

Our social networks and practices are built in a way that makes marginalized groups less intelligible, and even *unintelligible*. And this benefits dominant social groups. We see each other’s actions through the social norms that prevail in our communities. Social norms are patterns of behavior, likes queuing in a line, which have to be enforced to prevail. They offer an alternative to unmitigated “survival of the fittest” and enable a range of pro-social behaviors like sharing. But social norms also create oppression precisely because social enforcement can be captured by those with greater social power—just think of Elon Musk getting away with blatantly violating basic norms by making a Nazi salute. Social power also enables one to use social norms to disproportionately attract sympathy. Consider again Musk’s ability to garner sympathy for Tesla by saying on his personal social network X/Twitter that their cars are being destroyed by trans people. While others would have been drowned in criticism for misinformation and scapegoating, Musk’s tweets received thousands of mostly positive interactions.

The crucial idea, which I develop in my current book project *Two Faces: How Communication Connects and Harms Us*, is that social norms don’t just shape what we do together, but how we *interpret* each other. Social norms involve tracking what other people like you in “your herd” tend to do in situations like yours. Additionally, they involve tracking which behaviors others in your herd tend to reward or punish with attention, praise, disdain, etc. My main contention is that this is made possible by a suite of *interpretive* and *practical* dispositions. These habituated dispositions allow us to see certain social situations and acts through a certain lens, and instinctively respond with actions of our own. Just think about how we automatically recognize an extended hand in particular contexts as an attempt to shake hands, and how failure to initiate or reciprocate is subject to social sanctions. And one does not just recognize it; one automatically knows what to *do*. Because these behaviors are keyed to what people tend to do, building online herds of similarly behaving people creates an effective way of recruiting those on the fence via social influence. This makes the cultivation of a particular audience on Twitter/X by Musk particularly potent as a means of social influence. It can build a herd while implicitly organizing interpretive and practical behavior around particular group interests.

The fact that people can be expected to follow the norms means that we are habituated to a social environment in which certain intentions are not even considered as options, and so not recognized. And this is part of how powerful groups silence marginalized groups. It is very hard to communicate one’s intentions when those intentions are at odds with or even maligned by those that have captured the means of interpretation: the elites of dominant culture.

This short informal piece illustrates this through three case studies. The first discusses a scene in a queer series, and how it connects to my own transition and engagement with the philosophy of language. The second gives you a glimpse into my life as a trans lesbian, and the social and interpretative barriers I face in everyday life. The third provides a brief sketch of how social norms can be used as weapons of communication by analyzing Trump’s anti-trans campaign ads in the 2024 presidential election. Crucially, these weapons are not about what information is literally or intentionally encoded in a message. Instead, social norms function as weapons of communication when they habituate many people to respond to socially significant cues in harmful ways.

### 1. OVERCOMPENSATING: HOW TO (MIS)READ DESIRE AND WHAT THIS TEACHES US ABOUT THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

A scene from Season 1, Episode 7 of *Overcompensating* tells a story that resonates with many queers (spoiler alert). It also shows how queer experience can illuminate the social dynamics of communication that are hidden by dominant culture.

The protagonist of *Overcompensating*, Benny, has returned home to Idaho during a holiday break. In Benny’s first year at college his persona as the perfect American football hero frat boy has run head-on into the realization that he’s probably gay. He’s yet to kiss another man, and seems to hold out hope that he might not like it. In Idaho, Benny heads to a local bar to see his adoring group of football bros, who hedge every form of warmth with *no homo*. But Benny also encounters his former friend Sammy, a tussled blonde with dazzling green eyes.

The season has teased memories of a fractious encounter between the two. After some awkward chitchat, Sammy says: “I’m really sorry, Benny, that day, I misread things.” And then we finally see the memory in full. After hopping in a car together, Sammy asks, “Is Lady Gaga actually sexy?” Benny replies, “Yes!” and then Sammy looks deep into Benny’s eyes to ask, “Am I sexy?” Benny emphatically responds, “Yeah, dude, so sexy.” They lock eyes, and Sammy leans in for a kiss. At the very last second, Benny shoves him away with a conflicted look and says “What the fuck?!” Although Sammy apologizes, Benny sneers, “F\*ggot,” and storms out of the car.

Cut back to the bar in Idaho. Benny says to Sammy with a sincere expression “You didn’t misread *anything*. I was scared, still am.” Both beaming, Benny and Sammy engage playfully with Sammy at one point saying, “and that would make you a *fag*.” Benny smiles and feigns surprise. They decide to steal away for a kiss in the men’s room during which the viewer sees a montage of Benny’s erotic mental images. This gay sensorium allows us to see everything click into place for Benny with just one kiss. We get to see Benny’s “Yep, I’m gay” moment from the inside.

When Benny and Sammy exit the bathroom, they walk directly into Benny’s group of adoring football bros. One of them asks, “Benny, did Sammy trap you in the bathroom?”

Sammy replies, “that’s so funny Connor, you weren’t saying that an hour ago when my dick was in your mouth.” As Sammy attempts to walk past, Connor grabs him by the arm and says, “You better watch your mouth, f\*ggot.” Benny pushes him off saying, “Don’t fucking call him that!” Connor replies, “What are you a f\*ggot too now, Benny?” Benny then starts a fist fight he is definitely not prepared to finish with a dance-based move his mom taught him earlier that day.

The interaction between Benny and Sammy in the car and the bar shows how intelligibility and interpretation is mediated by dominant culture. In a very real sense, other people were there in the car with them. Watching them. They were telling Benny how to respond, telling him that what he wanted he couldn’t possibly want, and telling Sammy that every piece of evidence he had about Benny’s feelings was wrong. In the bar, when Sammy says he misread things, he is reading Benny through the lens of straight culture. Crucially, this means that Benny couldn’t have refused because what he wanted to do was prohibited, only because it is *normal to reject gay affection*. Benny and Sammy could not communicate their mutual feelings because of the social practices of dominant straight society, and how the norms inherent in those practices shape interpretation.

It is illuminating to attend to how the slur “f\*g” circulates in these scenes. First, Benny deploys it to set a boundary between him and Sammy in the car. Second, Benny and Sammy use it playfully to connect for an exchange of gay affection. Third, Benny’s bros use it to mark out Sammy, and then Benny, to threaten and enact violence. Finally, the bros’ use crosses a line for Benny’s newly awakened gay identity, and makes him do something out of the ordinary: stand up for gay people being bullied. What we see here is that the function of “f\*g” cannot be separated from the group dynamics and concrete social practices within those groups.

Crucially, the use of “f\*g” is interwoven into non-verbal acts which differ dramatically depending on the social group dynamics at play. In the first use, Benny uses it to mark a boundary between him and Sammy. In the second, it draws them together. In the third, it targets Benny and Sammy. But because being gay is now a crucial part of Benny’s identity, he is called to resist.

This difference in reaction can only be captured on a model where the linguistic community is heterogenous, and different groups are *at odds*. Further, it suggests that interpretation involves a habituated response to cues that is extralinguistic—think of Benny’s initial shove, his smiley reaction to ingroup use, and his out-of-character defensive actions when targeted. These habituated responses serve group interests. The first was to sustain heterosexuality. The second was to engage in homosexual affection. The third was to engage in resistance to anti-gay harassment. Crucially, one’s actions are motivated, through these habits, by how one identifies. And this identification comes with a suite of behaviors adapted to furthering interests of a group that generates this identity. Benny’s story is not just about an *individual realization*. It is about how he ended up on the “other side” of social groups engaged in resistance with each other.

If we look to philosophy of language practiced by straight white men like Lewis, Stalnaker, and Grice, we find interpretive tools which neglect social dynamics between groups, and the cultural constraints placed on intention recognition. This tradition struggles to make sense of scenes like the one I described. Lewis views linguistic conventions as patterns of use that prevail in nearly all of the population, so does not account for variation, let alone the way that variation is keyed to group dynamics and extralinguistic practices. Grice accounts for flexible communication via intention recognition, but does not have a theory about how intentional action is interpreted through the lens of social norms, assuming that we can read intentions based on general principles of reasonableness. Stalnaker assumes that all “common ground” can be reduced to shared *information* rather than social practices, and that there just happen to be enough shared values to sustain communication. But what we see above is that values are shared because of coercive social norms, and these shape both what we *do* and how we interpret each other.

This is one example of how the dominance of heterosexual white men in the field shape the questions and theories we center. My personal experience reflects this as well. *I lived in that dominant identity just like Benny*, and uncomfortably dedicated myself to those questions and theories. And they did grip me. But that identity was also a prison cell for me, whose bars were forged by male violence and harassment.<sup>1</sup> Part of my journey to queerness came through an extensive exploration of the possibility that I was a gay man. As an extremely feminine “boy,” this possibility was suggested for me at every turn because it was dominant culture’s best interpretation of that femininity. The problem, of course, was that I hated living as a man, in a man’s body, and did not experience sexual, romantic, or even really platonic attraction to men. As it turns out, I was just gay in a much more creative way. Just like Benny, I could not even interpret my own feelings without a lengthy journey of trial and error.

I finally built a life safe enough to both escape gender prison (i.e. “transition”) and love as Sappho intended. But when I did this, I emerged into a new world where the dominant theories and questions seemed to direct attention away from where it needed to be. To fix our theoretical orientation, I suggest the same gift that I needed to embrace: queerness. So let me share with you the point of view of one trans lesbian.

## 2. CONSUMING THE TRANS UNDERWORLD AND THE LIMITS OF MAINSTREAM INTELLIGIBILITY

I exited the bathroom stall still adjusting my skirt and thick chain belt over my elegantly tattered fishnets. Muffled thumps of techno were making the tiles of this dingy women’s room buzz in tune with the soft yellow neon lights. I locked eyes with a young woman looking like she was dressed for a straight date night at Olive Garden. She froze and blurted, “Am I in the wrong bathroom?” Slowly removing her dagger from my fragile transfeminine heart, I managed against all odds to chirp in an airy feminine tune, “No, honey, you’re good” with a forced smile, eye roll,

and gentle backhanded wave. As I applied lip gloss in the mirror, I saw her demurely slip into the stall. She awkwardly sputtered a peace offering, "oh, I'm definitely in exactly the right bathroom, this club is soooo cool!" I know, my bodily functions slay. Even my earwax serves cvnt.

I huffed out of the bathroom back into this queer-leaning nightclub, welcomed into a glove of gender anarchy. My friend K had just finished playing her set, and I greeted her with an enormous hug and praise. I took the opportunity to exclaim in queer sarcasm, "I think I just saw a straight person!" She parried, "That's so cool! My cousin's best friend's dog sitter is straight!" "We should totally introduce them; they could have kids and slowly grow to hate each other!" I replied. After a few more rounds of banter, I related the bathroom story, and K shared similar tales from her position as a cisgender Black masculine lesbian. Many of these took place on the liberal urban university campus where she is a music professor. At one point, a woman said to her in the women's bathroom, "Sir, I'm happy to have you in here and think it's beautiful you want to become a woman." This tangled gender riddle turned out to be coming from . . . her dean. Many more jokes, hugs, and lavish compliments buried these social lacerations in affection.

Later that night, I retreated outside to cool off. Just as I hugged a friend goodnight and she headed off, a man ducked in offering generic "compliments." I politely feigned a compliment in return: "Your neon bucket hat is a real statement piece." I awkwardly looked away. Ignoring every cue, he said, "Since we're clearly into each other, can I ask you a personal question?" Glaring back, I replied, "Is it too personal to ask a stranger who's definitely not interested?" His toxic resolve only strengthened as he asked, "I mean, if we are going to f\*ck, I need to know, am I f\*cking your a\*s or your p\*ssy?" I declared that I was calling it a night and made a beeline for my car. He furtively groped me and shot me a corny grin saying, "c'mon baby." Over my shoulder, I shot back, "we're never going to f\*ck, Steve!" trying to act tough while locating my pepper spray and car key. "Steve" growled something along the lines of "you shem\*les show up here and then get all bitchy when we give you what you want? F\*ck you!"

Once in my car, I checked the rearview mirror to be sure I wasn't followed. I saw "Steve" smiling and talking to some guy. While I fled a space built for and by people like me, he remained to share laughs with some Dave about his run-in with an exotic, feral tr\*\*ny. After being repelled, my image remained captive, providing subculture allure to the chasers and normals. Welcome to life in the underworld.

When I later told this story to a group of cis women, a newcomer to their group asked in horror, "Wait, why the fuck was he asking an obvious dyke about doing anal?" Excellent question, Linda! But a wild FAQ with Linda ensued, and had her friends hiding their faces in their hands. It became clear that she didn't really know what transgender women were, and definitely did not know that I was one of "them." Affirmation through unintelligibility is sometimes the best I can hope for.

Unintelligibility finds me in the least expected places. The next morning I was with my then two-year-old child E at a playground. At that point, my two kids were organically shifting from calling me "dada" to "mimi," and would often use both. When another child, around four years old, joined mine for rides in a wagon, she heard both terms used. We were fluctuating between fast zooms around the playground and timeouts where we'd make up fairy stories involving the trees and birds we could see. At some point, she turned to me quite urgently and said, "Are you a mom or a dad?" as if the next move of our play depended on it. Riffing on Prince, I said, "I'm not a mom or a dad, I'm something you'll never understand." My two-year-old said, with an eye roll, "She's my mimi parent, and she needs to start pulling the wagon!" The four-year-old said, "right, parent!"

No matter how carefully I present myself, craft my speech, and articulate my experience and desires, I'm interpreted by the marks of a cisheteronormative grid. If I'm lucky, I'm just a woman and a lesbian. If I'm not, I'm some kind of hypersexualized semi-man. Navigating this world of inconsistent intelligibility forces me to grapple with the mechanisms behind this world in a way that I never had to before.

I am in part made intelligible by commodifying my difference, and this difference carries expectations about what I am like and what I do. At the club, the straight woman in the bathroom was simultaneously not able to see me as a woman, but then able to see me as a cool gender transgressor. Despite this allure, and the fact that this image significantly contributed to the appeal of the space, I could not expect to be treated with respect. My encounter with Steve illustrates this precisely, as my transfeminine body is automatically read as a signal of desire to sleep with men. And yet, my bond with the DJ K and my many queer friends in that community will have me going back. In fact, it has us organizing to make that space better for people like us. Our collective identity compels us to resist the dominant group's habituated commodification of our appearance.

Each episode of unintelligibility can be linked to social norms. In the bathroom, the prevalence of dominant culture bathroom norms shaped what this other woman was looking for, and how she responded—her fear of sanction. A parallel misrecognition occurred with my friend K, but her dean responded with a (failed) attempt to openly conform to a trans-inclusive norm. Steve's misreading of my body and interest was likely shaped by "normal ways" of straight men interacting with trans women. In my experience, straight men tend to "interact" with trans women primarily through porn, erotica, and dating apps, rather than everyday life. A trans woman that breaks from these erotic scripts is simply unintelligible to them. For them, any departure from it merits disdain, as I witnessed with Steve. By contrast, my unintelligibility to the cis woman acquaintance was more like indifference. She lacked sufficient fluency in everyday life with trans people, and so she could not interpret how my interaction was shaped by the way trans women are related to by men.

In the final episode playing with a new child, it becomes clear just how pervasive gendered social norms are. The fact that a child of four already had a hard time rolling with play and language that violated these social norms, and felt an urgency to clarify, makes clear how much they infuse our everyday interactions. She seemed to feel like she didn't know how to play with me until she knew how to label me. This illustrates how social interaction draws on habituated dispositions to interpret, and react to socially significant cues.

This section aimed to give you a glimpse of what it's like to travel from the overworld to the underworld. It's infinitely better here, except for the whole fascist rampage that is now targeting us.

### 3. TRUMP'S WEAPONS AND IDENTITY THREAT

During Trump's 2024 U.S. presidential campaign, he spent \$215 million dollars on anti-trans ads. In the final month, he ran an attack ad against Kamala Harris that was very widely watched by the large audiences tuning in to college football. The ad documents Harris's (legally mandated) support for gender-affirming care for federal prisoners, and then it shows footage of Harris with gender-incongruent drag queens like Pattie Gonia who dress femme but maintain facial hair. It concludes with "Kamala is for they/ them, President Trump is for you."

This ad's conclusion assumes a conflict of social groups, and addresses it to anyone outside the "they/them's." It plays on American's understandable resentment of state-supported health care that they likely don't get. But it also activates anti-trans prejudice with targeted precision, in a way that manipulates people's responsiveness to norms that threaten their social identity.

According to the leading empirical theory of anti-trans prejudice, it involves creating an *identity threat*.<sup>2</sup> That is, anti-trans prejudice involves people feeling that the *mutability* of gender categories threatens the reality of their own identity as members of that category. When identity threats are made, people are naturally inclined to defensive measures, just as we saw with Benny and with my queer club community. In those cases, defense is a matter of legitimate self and community protection. But anti-trans prejudice weaponizes the threat to an identity of a dominant culture to resist the progress of a marginalized one. Notice how Trump's ad is crafted specifically to maximize the activation of this threat by using the gender-neutral "they/ them" and images of gender incongruent drag queens to cue the mutability of gender. Further, by highlighting medical transition procedures for trans people, the ad uses the mutability of gender to drive political affiliation without making it the explicit subject matter of the ad itself.

While mainstream philosophy of language and public discourse focuses on the *content* conveyed by people, a queer approach suggests a different emphasis. What habits of interpretation and reaction does a given utterance reinforce? How are those habits caught up in social norms that direct people what to do in particular social circumstances? What values do those social norms promote, and how are different schemes of value connected

to opposing social groups? How are social identities connected to these norms, and how are they weaponized to generate defensive social behavior? To see how this shift plays out, consider briefly social media. While some focus on "content moderation," this focus on content is deeply limited.

The design of current social media platforms drives engagement with social identity threats.<sup>3</sup> Just as with the mixed crowd at a club, the numbers game prevails. When you target everybody with social identity threats, the powerful white cis het majority will be called to defensive measures. I believe we are witnessing a wave of defensive behavior that results when this force is amplified and generated via social media. Any attempt to create a habitable world and inclusive resistance will need to focus not on content, but the social infrastructure behind it. A queer perspective is exactly what we need to do this.

#### NOTES

1. I owe the metaphor of gender prison and transition as a prison-break to Adriene Takaoka, one of my former PhD students, a transition litter-mate, and now a dear friend. It is difficult to disentangle my thinking on these topics from my multi-year, ongoing conversations with Adriene.
2. Melissa R. Michelson and Brian F. Harrison, *Transforming Prejudice: Identity, Fear, and Transgender Rights* (Little Brown and Company, 2021).
3. Max Fisher, *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World* (Little Brown and Company, 2022).

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## The Cisgender Tipping Point

Ding

BARNARD COLLEGE

Cis people puzzle me. Please don't get me wrong—my feminism most definitely includes cis people. I believe that justice requires us to treat cis people's sincere gender avowals as if they are legitimate. I defend cis people's freedom to prefer names and pronouns that reflect their identification with their genital status even though this regularly weirds out trans people. I have no problem with cis people peeing where they like even though this poses real safety risks to trans people in general and trans women of color in particular. Hell, I can even get on board with the inclusion of cis athletes even though they dominate every single Olympic sport out there thanks to what I can only speculate is a biological advantage. Whatever allyship demands of me I'm here for it.

No, when I say that cis people are so puzzling, I'm talking about them as a philosophical problem: What gives cis people the genders they claim to have? What do cis people *mean* that they are cis? What is it like to have a cisgender identity? Why do so many teens identify as cis now? Are cissexuals products of some sort of gender ideology—cissexualism, let's say? Is cissexualism a diagnosable mental disorder? Do we want it to be? Are cis people just whining for attention because they are jealous of us? Could they be a counterexample to our metaphysics of gender?

What if your lesbian partner comes out to you as cis? What if they—my bad, s/he—would like to transition? In fact, why don't more cis people transition? How do cis people cope with the sex imposed onto them at birth? How do cis people know that they like being cis? Do they even like being cis? Is being cis working out for them? *How can they be sure?*

You might think this is all very funny, but I'm not here to fool around. Some of the dearest people in my life are cis, and I'm genuinely worried about cis people's well-being. I'm not alone in this either—even cis people agree with me. "For the love of God, stop burning things down to tell everyone about your kid's penis," pled the inventor of the peculiar cissexual ritual of "gender reveal" as one Southern California ceremony engulfed nearly 23,000 acres in flames. "No one cares but you."<sup>1</sup>

Except practicing cissexuals do seem to care so very dearly about that oddly shaped, vaguely derisible little piece of flesh. We see this existential fixation in a lengthy history of eliminatory transmisogynistic violence from Spanish settlers' systematic extermination of Indigenous trans women "for the glory of God and the benefit of those poor ignorants" to the British Empire's methodical extinction of the Hijra as an irredeemably "unnatural race."<sup>2</sup> And we see its legacy in a cascade of contemporary moral panics over gender, be it the concerted enactment of laws and policies that jointly root out trans modes of being,<sup>3</sup> or the alarming proliferation of bomb threats to trans-affirming schools and hospitals,<sup>4</sup> or the full normalization of the "trans panic defense" and the "rape by sex deception" charge.<sup>5</sup> Be it alt-right influencers lashing out at the "genderless penguin chicks" that "destroy traditional marriage,"<sup>6</sup> or the "gay bomb" in the tap water that "turn[s] the freakin' frogs gay" but in a "not funny" way,<sup>7</sup> or the soy milk that "is gonna fill you full of estrogen" and "flush all that testosterone—which is a word that means white supremacy—out of your body."<sup>8</sup> Be it the #Tradwife movement's fetishization of a white suburban middle-class cishet "baking in heels" Christian womanhood,<sup>9</sup> or an overcompensating manosphere trumpeting "manly tariffs" as the biggest, the greatest, the most jacked "ultimate testosterone boost" for a declining because impotent America,<sup>10</sup> or Real Men threatened by the conceptual possibility of seeing veggie burgers on fast-food menus because "salad is for pussies."<sup>11</sup> Be it the "adult human female" philosopher proud to get over "left-purism" to march with Hitler-saluting, tranny-abhorring neo-Nazis,<sup>12</sup> or a storied tradition of cis feminism punching down at trans women's bodies for a cheap shot at the political and social problem of rape, obscuring and exonerating it as an inherent biohazard of the penis.<sup>13</sup>

All of these intense hang-ups scream for explanation: Without pathologizing, what gives rise to cissexuality as a phenomenon? Are cis-identified men and women doing okay? Is there something we can do to help?

The only way I know how to answer these questions is, of course, introspection. I know what's up with my genders: I came to know them the same way Darwin came to know evolution by natural selection—by inference to the best explanation from empirical data. I got knocked over by Newton's apple when I first experienced ever so clearly

and distinctly a special sense of joy, freedom, and kinship from being in community with the girls rather than boys in school. And then the apples just kept falling, when it somehow made total sense for an early partner of mine to quip that dating me was like dating a lesbian even though neither of us could quite say why. When my fears were seen and understood without needing to be heard by my grad school friend Ke, who then took it upon herself to escort me to the bathroom. When I stopped by the makeshift memorial set up at a Pride rave and heard my heart being twisted into shreds in front of names after names of trans women graffitied onto the wall. When the butch bouncer in Portland on Dyke Nite gave us the daddy-has-your-back-but-you-really-gotta-behave look as they intervened a split second before my newfound lover and I were going to bump into a thorny cactus on the dance floor. When five trans women philosophers in search of post-conference mischief in a Pennsylvania axe-throwing bar grew indignant at the arcade machine telling us that we threw punches like girls and had to prove to the world that girls could punch hard too. When I felt so grateful and lucky to be gifted that unspoken yet palpable trust, tenderness, and care that a trans woman keeps for other dolls as she—a riot of wildflowers in full bloom—tucked her beloved plushie beneath my head before gently laying me down on a windy San Francisco roof like I was some precious gem, our hearts filled with warmth and bliss under the sunset and then the city lights.

Furthermore, I don't exist in my social milieu as a vanilla, garden-variety woman. I know this too from empirical data because I live, breathe, laugh, love, struggle, build relationships, make mistakes, tell dad jokes, move my body, roam the streets, deal with the world, solicit APA drink tickets, wear carabiners as fine jewelry, and relate to my queer siblings as a nonbinary tomboi theory dyke with an em dash problem who can be femme but only for the right twinks. Insofar as these capture some dimensions of the social meaning of sex, they are all my genders too.

Cis people, confusingly, don't tend to have much beyond "I was told I was a boy/girl" to say about their genders, and they seem particularly hard-pressed to articulate the etiology of their cissexuality. Not only are they rarely curious enough to wonder but the few who do rarely go on to identify as cis. The latter is such a familiar phenomenon that sooner or later you start to wonder whether cissexuality is a lifestyle that can really be reflectively chosen. We've even developed an entire vocabulary to talk about it. An egg, from Anglophone trans culture, is a trans person whose protective cisgender *shells* have yet to be *cracked*. It's an ancient cycle of life. "Eggs become chicks, chicks become hens, hens lay on top of eggs," and so ad infinitum.<sup>14</sup>

How many eggs have been laid, and how many of them may never hatch? While for sure not every cis person is an egg, every egg cracked once identified as cis. As my friend Sofia likes to say, we all—and don't forget that cis people are us too—have a gender problem. The question is whether and how we come to grips with it.

So far as I can tell, most cis people put up with being cis for pretty much the same reason that most Americans put

up with being dependent on cars: life is simpler if you just keep your head down, do what the Big Cis asks of you, tell yourself that it's all going to be okay, and never bother to examine it.

The philosopher in me has a tough time accepting this. In her 2007 essay collection *Whipping Girl*, Julia Serano invites cis people on the verge of questioning the nature of their reality to consider a thought experiment: If I gave you ten million dollars on the condition that you transition, would you do it? Serano reports that in her experience the "vast majority" of cis people would turn down the money. When pressed as to why, they would "get a bit flustered at first, as if they are at a loss for words. Eventually, they end up saying something like, 'Because I just *am* a woman (or man),' or, 'It just wouldn't be *right*.'" The ten-million-dollar question is a useful heuristic because it helps the cissexual mind to grasp that trans people who are more than willing to give up everything to transition must be after something even greater—something like "feeling at home in my own sexed body," which Serano calls "the most important gender privilege of all."<sup>15</sup>

The few times I've posed Serano's question to my classes the results have been revealing in a different way. Apart from trans students who are just happy for a free transition fund, a remarkably consistent 40 percent of my cis students would take the offer as well. That's very substantial.

As these things tend to go, most of my students over the years have been cis women, many if not most of them assorted hues of queer, so I don't pretend to have my finger on the pulse of the mainstream cis psyche. What fascinates me is their explanations.

Of course, many would be in it for the money, and many lament how much being male and heterosexual would have going for them in this economy. But my cis students also speak of the excitement, freedom, and sheer fun of trying out unfamiliar embodied gender experiences, as well as all the insider knowledge and practical wisdom that they could pick up along the way. And crucially, they speak of a more accepting cultural climate for trans existence compared to decades ago: to them, ten million dollars now feels enough to offset the material, legal, political, and social hardships of transition.

It's like a cisgender tipping point waiting to happen.

If a good chunk of the cis community would in principle be open to transitioning but is held back by its actual costs under conditions of trans oppression, cis people's contentment with their cissexuality begins to look more tragic than puzzling. The fact that an elaborate system of incentives, deterrents, norms, institutions, practices, myths, and symbolisms works so hard to naturalize, inculcate, and coerce cissexuality only goes to show that it is neither so natural nor so normal indeed.

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Every now and then, there are moments and interactions that leave me wondering if at least some of the cis women

I treasure in my life might be happier living trans lives—if not as trans mascs, then as trans women. It's not rocket science; it's gender metaphysics.

Most assume that to be trans you have to be caught in the middle of some contradiction, whether it's between mind and body (trans people are "trapped in the wrong body"), between individual and society (trans people "transgress gender norms"), or between man and woman (trans people "traverse gender boundaries").<sup>16</sup> To be cis, on the other hand, is to *be*, simply and unproblematically. I have a soft spot for the word "cissexual" because it makes sense of cis people not in terms of their cis self-identifications but by way of how they get there—that is, through this accidentally compliant relationship with a body thought to be sexed straightforwardly as either male or female, no dreaded asterisk attached. It's closer to gender identification *via* genital identification.

So, an entire cissexual institution of trans medicine has appointed itself to the *approximation* of that uncomplicated, nondiscordant generic cis mode of being—a wild-goose chase set up from the get-go to cast a whole people as defective, confused, pathetic, laughable copycats. And so, trans people whose material survival depends on cis-dictated trans medicine play along with it. "Nothing, not even surgery," bemoans Andrea Long Chu in the *New York Times*, "will grant me the mute [*sic*] simplicity of having always been a woman. I will live with this, or I won't."<sup>17</sup>

This conception of what it is to be trans/cis is on full display when even trans-inclusive feminists think of trans women as having been "male" *but now* "identifying" as women. Consider: Why is it insulting to construe lesbians as having been female *but now* identifying as women-loving? Hint: there are so many more reasons than one (call your grumpy neighborhood leatherdyke for an hour-long rant).

I think I can speak for myself that even though being a lesbian certainly involves rejecting cisheterosexual men and flouting compulsory heterosexuality, none of it is ultimately about men and their world and their hang-ups; being a lesbian is about loving women as we do on our own terms, in the ways we know how.

Likewise, to me, even though being a trans woman certainly involves refusing cis manhood and defying compulsory cissexuality, none of it is ultimately about cis people and their world and their hang-ups; being a trans woman is about loving womanhood as we do on our own terms, in the ways we know how.

I make sense of myself as trans in terms of how I've come to womanhood: I was not thrown into it. If I'm honest, it was rather a last resort of sorts, an it's-a-really-long-shot-but-I'm-running-out-of-time kind of emergency measure. It sounds ominous in retrospect, but when in college my cognitive neuroscience professor discouraged us from drinking "because brains are not mature until the age of twenty-five," my first thought was "oh boy I don't know if I'm ready to be around for that long." Then I tried to imagine what that future would look like, and I couldn't see one; so it must be metaphysically impossible.

As the poet torrin a. greathouse writes of trans women, "Some girls are not made, but spring from the dirt: / yearling tree already scarred from its branch's severance."<sup>18</sup> In that way, I'm different from most cis women because I never for once take my womanhood for granted; I cherish it as one of my proudest achievements. I'm also different because my womanhood is dangerous, playful, nuanced, fearless, defiant, tenacious, fun, unapologetic, and just a bit confusing. What's gender-nonconforming about me is not that my gender expression is feminine but how I enact and embody that femininity.

To say that trans womanhood is found rather than given is not to say that trans women are to cis women as adoptive parents are to birth parents.<sup>19</sup> It was Beauvoir who got this right: Yes, women have counted socially as human only because and insofar as we have been accepted as relevantly similar to men. *But that's bad, actually.*<sup>20</sup> The adoptive parent analogy for trans womanhood sorely misses that last critical move. True, under the logic of our transmisogynistic world trans women have counted socially as women only because and insofar as we have been accepted as relevantly similar to cis women: just as men are mystified as the OG humans in whose image women are created, cis women operate in dominant social imagination as the OG women in whose image trans women are created. *But that's bad, actually.*

Cis womanhood did not model for me what womanhood could mean and do, nor did cis women teach me how to survive, never mind thrive, as a woman in this world. It was not until I saw myself in another trans woman, until she wrapped me close in her arms, that I began to think that living as a woman could be a realistic possibility for me. While a romanticized t4t is prone to enable intracommunity "abuse, silence, and expulsion," as Amy Marvin has warned, even the cynics find ourselves tethered at the end of the day to the ethos that "however dangerous they can be, transfeminine arms will not misrecognize us," for they open up a space where, in Florence Ashley's words, "I didn't have to think. I could just be."<sup>21</sup>

Thanks to the irony of a self-identified "gender-critical feminism," it now unfortunately needs to be clarified that when Beauvoir pointed out that no one is born a woman, she meant *especially* no exceptions for cis women.<sup>22</sup> It's worth saying out loud that lots, lots of cis women do take their womanhood to be actively achieved rather than passively inherited. Many even resonate profoundly with trans women's experiences of being alienated from normative womanhood and feel more at home, more like themselves with trans rather than cis femininity. To me that's beautifully trans, and it's all the more telling that cis women who feel a special affinity for trans womanhood are more often themselves marginalized by colonialism, white supremacy, and the abjection of sex workers and gender-nonconforming dykes of color.

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On those dysphoric nights, I sometimes toy with a flipped version of Serano's thought experiment: if I could have been a cis woman, would I have wanted it?

Internalized feelings of "grief, self-loathing, shame, regret" toward being trans torment many of us, and I know girls who would go ten million dollars further in debt for the slightest possibility of having been cis. Chu writes that "being trans is the second-worst thing that ever happened to me," with the worst "being born a boy."<sup>23</sup> This is why I want us to get comfortable thinking about being trans in terms of what it is rather than what it is not. Trans girls are not cis (*phew*). That hurts only if we treat cis women as somehow paradigmatic of womanhood.

I'm not saying that it's easy simply to intellectualize our pain and trauma away. But I do think that we should stop putting cis womanhood on a pedestal. While growing up playing boy-drag (my inner Beauvoir cringes at the idea of being born any way) is easily one of my most excruciating nightmares, being a trans woman is by far the best thing I've ever done: It is the reason that I've not only stuck around but found meaning in life. It has given me the true privilege of a lifetime to love, desire, spoil, adore, and bond with trans women as a trans woman—including, not despite, how cruelly we manage to tear ourselves apart even as we try to look out for each other. And it continues to challenge me to grow as a person in unexpectedly delightful ways.

There's one other part to my reservation: I worry a lot about growing up as a cis girl. Getting by as a girl is tough already; I can't imagine how much more it would take, how much braver I'd need to be, if I had to do it as a cis girl. If you look around, for example, there still doesn't seem to be a model of cis femininity with mainstream intelligibility that passes feminist muster. It's Beauvoir all over again. Under dominant social definitions, there is an irreconcilable tension between being a human and being a woman. You can be free or you can be feminine; the secret third way out is trans femininity.<sup>24</sup>

In the end, I think that if I were cis, I would have no one but trans women to look up to as my role model for how to live—and I mean *live*—in our messed-up world as a woman. Yet we don't get to entertain that possibility unless we are willing to construe trans women as the paradigmatic women, as women from whom "cis women have a lot to absorb and learn." As Torrey Peters and Avery Trufelman put it in conversation, "there's an opportunity for exchange and an opportunity for healing for both cis women who are maybe looking for new ways to think about their gender that can be liberating to them that trans people have had to develop, and certainly trans people need the resources that cis people have."<sup>25</sup>

A liberating model of masculinity is even harder to come by. My cis masc friends blush at my eagerness to peruse the masculinity shelves at bookstores, and I sympathize with them. As awkward as it is to read with a straight face Jordan Peterson go on and on about the "dominant," "top," "large," "powerful," "daddy" heterosexual male "lobster equivalent of *Fifty Shades of Grey*"—for whom apparently a "female (lobster) will disrobe, shedding her shell, making herself dangerously soft, vulnerable, and ready to mate"<sup>26</sup>—the real challenge is to come up with a nontoxic alternative masculinity that is nonetheless gender-affirming.

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Trans together with dyke cultures have long wrestled with this problem. Here too, cis people could have so much to learn from us, if only they were willing to hear us speak on our own terms rather than filter our words through their gender ideology.

The philosopher Rowan Bell recently informed me that if the whole masculinity business didn't pan out, he would probably be fine being "a slutty and also super catty amab femboy."<sup>27</sup> I say paws-up for that. A brilliant insight from Bell's treatment of gender authenticity is precisely that we can't build an alt-masculinity from scratch but must in some way recycle, refurbish, resignify, and repurpose elements and styles from existing masculinities in order for our alt-masculinity to make sense as a competing model of *masculinity*, however radical our alterations may be. That's a major constraint, and in practice it often ends up the case that what is *authentically* masculine will have to come apart from what is *ethically* masculine, creating a real practical dilemma for all masculine folks—trans and cis—because as trans existence has repeatedly demonstrated under eliminatory violence, an inauthentic life may not be worth living.

This is some tough stuff. So is trans masc as well as trans fem masculinity. "What is distinctive about trans and GNC people is not the gendered practical dilemma we face," Bell reminds us, "but rather the work we do to navigate it."<sup>28</sup> For trans mascs, passable performance of normative masculinity functions as a mechanism of not only gender affirmation but also violence prevention in a cisheterosexual world. It still does not follow that one can't pick and choose. Stressing that "how we embody masculinity, manliness, and manhood is a matter of existential choice," Jacob Hale advises that we do have the agency to "write creatively on context-sensitive paper. . . . In some contexts, such as an ftm gathering, doing drag or even just over-the-top nellie camping is often read as a powerful refusal of [normative] manhood."<sup>29</sup>

More treacherous waters, as usual, need to be navigated by trans women butches and tomboys, for whom normative masculinity is outright deadly. One of the most surprising things I've learned from being on E is just how much more comfortable I've grown to be with masculinity. "It is presumed that only the most feminine of *men* transition into women," grumbles a collective of trans philosopher-dykes. "You transitioned because deep down, in your heart of hearts, you're a girly girl. That stopped me for years." The issue is that not even within trans fem worlds is there a livable niche for trans fem masculinity. "Some of us tomboys trans gals femme up," they write. "I certainly did. But often it is not all the way, nor do we want it to be. Further, many of us are at least partly, if not mostly, motivated to do so to avoid being yelled at in bathrooms, and accosted on the street."

And so women, as usual, find a way. "There are butches, and futches, and high femmes who can fix your motorcycle for you. We are not cis women, and cis women are not all femmes. We must stop pretending either of those things are true. Don your leather, put your girlfriend's cock in a cage, and take a ride on your new yellow and black Kawasaki."<sup>30</sup>

This could all be fun and games were it not for the fact that cis people *are* a most curious lot. Enough ink, including in a new *Being Trans in Philosophy* zine, has been spilled critiquing the modus operandi of cis philosophizing on trans people and trans bodies—in particular, the objectification of trans women (often a fantasized one, often named "Alice") into mere conceptual games for the bemusement of a seminar room falsely presumed to be causally, constitutively, and morally insulated from the real world.<sup>31</sup>

Little has changed, except that the trans-inclusive feminist philosophy that's grown out of it has functioned to further marginalize trans philosophical scholarship by segregating trans metaphysics from a general metaphysics of gender.

Here's an example of what I mean. In a provocative response to Kate Manne's famed *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Nora Berenstein interrogates the book's perplexing project of giving an explicitly "ameliorative, intersectional" analysis of misogyny that deliberately leaves out *transmisogyny*.<sup>32</sup> Manne explains that her account—of *the* logic of misogyny, no less—does not address such "a deeply important, indeed urgent, issue" only because "it seemed evident to me I didn't have the requisite authority to do so."<sup>33</sup> Whether or not that's true,<sup>34</sup> Manne's claim is undercut by the fact that she not only "still considers herself well-positioned to offer a *unified* account of misogyny" but exercises the requisite authority to "include various lengthy discussions of *misogynoir*."<sup>35</sup>

The omission costs Manne, of course, as it renders her treatment of misogyny ultimately counterproductive to understanding and dismantling *transmisogyny*: *transmisogyny* works characteristically by denying normative womanhood to trans women, not compelling its unwilling performance, as Manne's analysis would predict. We end up then with trans philosophical work on *transmisogyny* pigeonholed on one hand into its own special literature to be lip-serviced and cis philosophical work on *cismisogyny* passing on the other as the metaphysics of *misogyny simpliciter*.

The segregation of trans philosophy occurs too in gender metaphysics proper, which so far has treated trans metaphysics as a special metaphysics of gender identity rather than a general metaphysics of gender identity *simpliciter*. Thus, while trans people's genders have to be made intelligible by the concept of gender identity, cis people's genders just *are*. Thus, while trans people's genders are legitimized only by considerations of feminist politics, cis people's genders *are* legitimate as a matter of course. Thus, while trans people's genders capture one among several dimensions of what gender is, cis people's genders *are* what gender is.

The best justification I've seen for this double standard is a worry that the concept of gender identity may not, as Katharine Jenkins puts it in her recent book, "do the explanatory work that we've historically asked the idea of 'gender' to do for us."<sup>36</sup> The confusing referent(s) of "we"

and “us” aside, Jenkins and I are on the same page about this, which makes the gender identity framing of trans metaphysics all the more frustrating.

Ray Briggs and B. R. George observe in their *What Even Is Gender?* that the very choice of *gender identity* as “our” framework to make sense of trans people “emerged from cis people’s need for a way to think and talk about trans people that was not too *difficult* for the established order . . . and did not require its ‘normal’ inhabitants to face uncomfortable questions about themselves and their way of life.”<sup>37</sup> Making this history plain, E. M. Hernandez and Rowan Bell trace the modern concept of gender identity to the pathologizing sexological research and medical establishment of the 1960s and home in on its ideological role, inherited uncritically by cis-centric gender metaphysics, in hacking “cis intelligibility at the expense of trans self-understanding.”<sup>38</sup>

The way I take this line of argument is a dilemma for any work that conceptualizes trans people and our genders on cis-centric terms: Either a view gets the cultural imperialism and pathologizing function of gender identity as a conceptual apparatus or it does not. Which way it is makes no practical difference; trans people get spoken over all the same.

What could the metaphysics of gender look like if it were to begin and end with lived trans lives on trans people’s own terms? Talia Bettcher’s now-received answer is that it would need to be “ground-bound” as opposed to “pristine.” For Bettcher, pristine philosophizing about trans issues treats trans people as a mere object of intellectual fascination. Such a “free-floating” philosophy of trans phenomena starts out unironically with no understanding of how trans lives are in fact lived but is ready to take everything down with it. It tells itself that it has no point of view which is the neutral which is the unbiased which is the critical point of view. And it relies on intuitions about trans people without asking to whom these intuitions are intuitive.

Trans philosophy, Bettcher argues, in turn puts trans people on the philosophizing subject “side of theory” by starting from a philosopher’s “embeddedness in trans subcultures—including my familiarity with trans discursive and nondiscursive practices there.” It operates under a “presumptive validity of trans identities” so that at least something “can get off the ground.” And it seeks to offer “life-affirming, rather than suicidal, philosophical illuminations” on being trans in a world keen on killing us.<sup>39</sup>

That’s all well and good, but let’s face it: We trans girls are a greedy and bratty bunch. Getting ground-bound trans philosophy off the ground is a solid first step, not the final destination. We gotta bitch for more, and while we’re at it, we may as well turn the tables already.

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It was after all not until Adrienne Rich turned the tables on heterosexuality in 1980 and transposed “Why do lesbians love women?” into a question of “Why do straight women not?” that dykes finally learned to speak in our voices from

a subject position in sexuality theory. It was an ingenious move: instead of arguing that lesbians should not be excluded or marginalized, Rich opted to demonstrate the broad “continuum” of “profound emotional impulses and complementarities drawing women toward women” that have always already characterized women’s intimate, passionate “friendship and comradeship” with and among one another. On Rich’s analysis, what needs explanation is not why any women would love women (*Don’t we all? Why wouldn’t we all?*) but what has managed to “redirect” other women toward men.<sup>40</sup>

Rich’s offensive strategy has paid off far beyond the ivory tower, for example, in the form of a widely circulated 2018 Google Doc—“The Lesbian Masterdoc” to those in the know—designed to help baby queers to navigate the enduring question “Am I a lesbian?” The legendary thirty-one-page text has benefited a generation of dykes growing up on Anglophone sapphicnet by gently and accessibly introducing them to the concept and reality of compulsory heterosexuality (or “comphet,” as the cool gals and bois say), complete with a worksheet featuring a nuanced list of comphet’s “signs” in lesbians—meant not to create another superficial BuzzFeed quiz but to invite “an investigation into why so many of these things resonate with you. Is it because you have a specific taste in men or because society has conditioned you to want this?”<sup>41</sup>

Lately, lesbian feminist inquiry into the mysteries of heterosexuality has even illuminated straight lives in return. Jane Ward’s hilarious yet earnest *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* extends lesbian feminist theory to re-envision a “deep heterosexuality” to enable “straight men to like women so much, so deeply, that they actually really *like* women.” The key to this—say it with me now—is “the wisdom of the dyke experience,” from “some basic instruction on how to treat women” all the way to grad seminars on how “to desire, to fuck, and to show respect at the same time” when “boys’ and men’s desire for girls and women is expressed within a broader culture that encourages them to also hate girls and women.”<sup>42</sup>

Catharine MacKinnon, the godmother of radical trans feminism,<sup>43</sup> has recently said that trans people are the reason that “for the first time in over thirty years, it makes sense to me to reconsider what feminism means.”<sup>44</sup> Thirty-nine years ago, it was MacKinnon’s work that laid the analytical foundation for the U.S. Supreme Court’s unanimous holding that sexual harassment constitutes a form of sex discrimination redressable by law.<sup>45</sup> MacKinnon succeeded in this too by turning the tables: sexual harassment, on MacKinnon’s approach, is to be conceptualized not from the standpoint of what perpetrators imagine themselves to be doing but in terms of “what their conduct means *to women*”—like “what *really* happens to women” in the concrete material “reality of women’s lives,” as grasped from “women’s experience on women’s own terms” rather than “some male vision of” it.<sup>46</sup>

I think it is long past time that we turn the tables against cissexuality as well.

We find ourselves today at a precarious political and theoretical crossroads. The ongoing institutionalization of a wave of trans-antagonistic arguments and sentiments globally into tangible laws and policies has marked the end of a troubled era of trans-visibility-turned-moral-panic following *Time* magazine's 2014 proclamation of a "Transgender Tipping Point."<sup>47</sup> In the decade since, feminist theorizing on trans issues has tried and failed to defend trans people's mechanical "inclusion" in existing social institutions and philosophical conceptions of gender embodiment. In retrospect, this is a defensive and reactive stance which has sought to make trans lives make sense first and foremost to a dominant political and cultural world, not to trans people on trans people's own terms.

If trans exclusion is lavender scare pivoted and trans inclusion queer assimilation gentrified, then perhaps going on the offensive and turning cis people into a philosophical puzzle may just be what the gender metaphysician ordered.

Instead of merely affirming trans people's genders, let's analyze them as the paradigmatic center. Instead of allowing trans subcultural intuitions and experiences merely to count, let's privilege them epistemically and metaphysically. Instead of granting cis people's genders simply as a matter of course, let's see what happens if we problematize, interrogate, and complicate them. Instead of scratching our heads all day over why and how trans people are trans, let's ask why and how cis people believe they are not. And instead of humoring cis people and feeding them a comforting fairy tale sugarcoated with gender identity, let's support them in facing up to the truth that they too transition into the genders they are—not by passive socialization but through *active* self-construction.

Let's keep in mind that cissexuality is compulsory but help cis people to claim and own their agency under oppression. Let's revise and expand *our* gender concepts to include cis people. Let's make protest signs for women *and* cis women's rights. Let's think of cis men as having been assigned male at birth *but now* identifying as men. Let's acknowledge, as Peters dares to, that the future is "a world where everyone has to choose their gender," where "everyone will be trans" not just "in some squishy philosophical way. I mean that we're all gonna be on hormones. Even the cis."<sup>48</sup> Such is life after all: one way or another, we *all* live on hormones; the question is how come some cis people have the luxury of thinking that they do not.

Let me be clear: I'm not saying that we should peer-pressure the cis to get on gender-affirming hormones and be merry—it turns out that they already are. I'm also not saying that we should go make fun of cis people, drive them out of public spaces, take away their health care, round them up from the streets, or do physical harm to them like transphobes do to us—we are better than all that.

What I am suggesting is that if the history of radical feminism is any guide, there may be unimaginable analytical power and political opening to be gained by similarly turning the tables on cissexuality, by theorizing it as a culturally and historically specific phenomenon that requires special

explanation on trans theoretical terms, using lived trans experiences as our paradigms.

It is difficult to believe this, when the thunder is loudest and lightning scariest. But storms have come and passed and come and passed. The sky will clear, and only trans girls are forever.

\* \* \*

Living on the other side of philosophical debate and scrutiny is uncomfortable. Trust us, trans people know it firsthand. But none of this is ultimately about comfort.

Naomi Scheman, who can be reliably spotted at trans philosophical talks and conferences, has shared with many of us just how much she loves—and just how much she feels liberated by—breathing, listening, thinking, laughing in spaces where she loses paradigmatic status and finds herself on the margin. Naomi is special, as we know, but being "so close to the paradigmatic center" is indeed "a very bad position to see how the apparatus works, to get a feel for how diverse forces could push and pull one in different directions" when one's "body, socialization, desire, and sense of self" all conspire to lead one down the same prearranged narrow path. "Clearly what I needed to do was to problematize my own gender identity," she concludes. "Easier said than done."<sup>49</sup>

Trans people had picked ourselves to pieces long before the first word about us got printed in some fancy philosophy journal. It is now cis people's turn to pick up a mirror and do the same. May they find courage and counsel in our experiences. The metaphysics of gender is at a cisgender tipping point.

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## Visibility and Passing: What Do Our Bodies Owe to Our Politics?

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The topic of this issue is "Make Philosophy Queer Again." But what does it mean to make philosophy queer in the first place? Perhaps in the same way that "social philosophy" simply means philosophy about society and social life, "queer philosophy" simply means philosophy about queers.

On the other hand, a significant amount philosophical theorizing about queers appears to not be *itself* queer philosophy. Instead, this philosophy represents a thoughtless recreation of the very cultural mythologies that oppress us. Though Kant was doing philosophy about queers when he called homosexuality one of the three "crimes of the flesh against nature," he was not doing queer philosophy.

In keeping with standpoint theory, perhaps queer philosophy is philosophy about queer topics, written by queer philosophers. However, queer people are not

immune from queerphobia. In an article about the history of the word "Queer," Dr. Molly Clarke cites a 1934 letter which appears to be an early case of queer people using the term to self-identify.<sup>1</sup> In the same letter that Cyril Ceour de Leon identifies himself and another man as queer, he writes, "Sometimes I wish that I was still normal as queer people are very temperamental and dissatisfied."

Though I cannot give a full account of what it means to make philosophy queer, this paper points at a necessary condition: queer philosophy should center differences not only between queer and non-queer people, but also the spectrum of difference among queers. This paper is about my own experience with a subset of philosophy written by queers about queer topics that fails to itself be queer philosophy because it failed to attend to this spectrum of difference.

My first exposure to the metaphysics of gender was on Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube in the 2010s. The subcultures I was part of were dedicated to "discourse" about social issues. Populated by self-righteous teenagers, these platforms hosted fights about, among other things, what it takes to be trans: Does it require a gender dysphoria diagnosis? Does it require perfect adherence to gender stereotypes? How much gender-affirming care must one need/want before one's identity is "valid"? Do we all have to want to "pass" at the end of our transition?

Predictably, these subcultures were both nasty and cliquish. "Transscum" was used as an epithet for anyone who insisted that medically diagnosable gender dysphoria was necessary for legitimately identifying as trans. Transscum often argued that the purpose of medically transitioning was to go "stealth," or to ultimately be able to hide one's status as a trans person. "Transtrender," on the other hand, was used as an epithet for people who rejected the necessity of gender dysphoria. A common, sloganized rebuttal to transscum was, "Why do you think that I have to hate myself to be trans?" These labels took on almost slur-like status, and some of us ironically embraced the terms as identity labels.

The transtrender position came with skepticism about the importance of "passing." In the context of this debate, a person passes when they are regularly assumed to be a cisgender member of the gender category that they claim. For example, a trans woman passes when she is regularly assumed to be a cis woman. From the transscum perspective, legitimate gender dysphoria *entailed* a desire to pass. From the transtrender perspective, a fixation on passing was evidence of unresolved self-hatred, internalized transphobia, or internalized sexism.

In my late teens, having marinated in this culture, I was a loud and proud transtrender. I identified as gender fluid, and I experienced incongruous gender feelings—like wanting to wear makeup (but in a drag way) or wanting to wear a tie (but in a butch way). I could imagine a happy life both with and without hormone replacement therapy, and I was generally ready to take anyone's self-identification at face-value, no questions asked. More importantly, I associated passing with invisibility, in part because my own identity was *predicated* on visibility. There's no way

to authentically go stealth when you do not identify with a binary gender. These features coalesced into my own ambivalence about the value of passing. I took it to be, at best, a kind of pitiable assimilationism.

By the time I was an undergraduate, the social landscape had changed significantly; famous transscum influencers like Blaire White had vocally embraced neo-conservatism and rejected feminism. This gave the transscum position a bad reputation and gave me an unearned degree of confidence in my own beliefs. I was attending a little liberal arts school where the cost of being visibly trans was quite low, genderfluidity was seen as the default, and we were all quite proud of ourselves for *really* understanding Judith Butler. All things considered, I began my career in philosophy feeling quite smug about my intuitions.

But this wouldn't last. I met (ex) transscum counterparts in real life—one of whom is now my partner, G. In all the ways I wasn't, he was the Platonic ideal of a transgender man. G had identified and acted as a stereotypical man since he was about four years old. There wasn't a single Gender Dysphoria diagnostic criterion in the DSM that he did not meet. Even in our peaceful, inclusive, liberal arts bubble, G's comfort and happiness was predicated on passing as and being affirmed as a man in a strictly binary sense. This was the first time I realized that my own view was not singularly intelligent—nor was the opposing view obviously problematic.

I also began to realize that the trenches I served in as a keyboard warrior in my teens posed interesting metaphysical questions about what it means to be a member of a social category like "trans": The central gender claims that G and I make are not only profoundly different, but sometimes conflicting. Different features ground and legitimize our identities, we find different things gender affirming, and we differ about the centrality of medical care to our happiness. Are G and I both transgender? If so, how can it be that we are both members of the same category based on such different identity claims?

This curiosity led me to trans philosophy and trans social theory, and ultimately to the shocking realization that the transscum/transtrender discourse looked eerily similar to academic debates on trans identity. Philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher describes this as a metaphysical debate between two models for understanding trans people relative to cis people: the "wrong-body" model, which loosely matches the transscum position, and the "beyond the binary" model, which loosely matches the transtrender position. On the "wrong-body" model, trans people are more or less cis people who happen to be born in a body that needs to be medically reconstructed to match their genders. On the "beyond the binary" model, trans people exist outside of the gender binary, regardless of where they are in their transition.<sup>2</sup>

My "beyond the binary" allies affirmed many of my prior beliefs, including my early take that passing was simple assimilationism. In an extended comparison between transitioning and the "marriage" turn in gay politics, lesbian Chicana theorist Charrie Moraga writes,

Queers too can become good, law-abiding, tax-paying, and legally married male and female citizens for whom biology lines up perfectly with social gender construction, and "queer liberation" becomes passé. I imagine this is the hope, but is this what the gay, lesbian, feminist, and queer movements struggled for—cultural erasure?<sup>3</sup>

Like me, these critics associated queer culture and queer resistance with visibility and radical difference along several axes. What could the desire to pass be besides a desire to become invisible and to assimilate to cisheterosexist norms?

In fact, some "beyond the binary" theorists took the critique of passing much further than us transtrenders did online. Not only did they reject gender dysphoria as a necessary condition for being trans, but they also criticized *merely existing* as a passing trans person. Sandy Stone, a transgender feminist critic, argued that the desire to pass was both morally and metaphysically wrong. She writes that

Transsexuals who pass seem to be able to ignore the fact that by creating totalized, monastic identities . . . they have foreclosed the possibility of authentic relationships. Under the principle of passing . . . relationships begin in lies.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, according to Stone, refusing to pass was part of embracing one's proper social location as a trans person. She writes further that, "For a transsexual, as a transsexual, to generate a true, effective and representational counterdiscourse is to speak from outside the boundaries of gender."<sup>5</sup> In other words, our obligations to morality, politics, and the truth hang on a refusal to pass.

The "beyond the binary" model solved the metaphysical problem that interested me. Why does there appear to be a paradox in G and I claiming the same gender category on different grounds? Well, because G's gender claims to binary identification are inauthentic and wrong. The "beyond the binary" model suggests that there *is* no paradox after all. The differences between our gender claims can be explained by doubting the legitimacy of G's.

At another time in my life, I may have been able to stomach this conclusion. After all, it privileges my own self-conception. However, the stakes of such a distasteful conclusion were now personal. I was unwilling to accept a metaphysics on which only one of us made sense. I decided that for our theorizing to go forward, we need a metaphysics which can acknowledge the differences between G and I without flattening them.

Now I am ready to defend an even stronger claim: people like me, who are visibly and openly trans, are *better off* in a world with people like G, who pass. The realization that began breaking down my own intuitions has both personal and philosophical importance: the way that I make sense of myself may be radically different from the way that someone who looks superficially similar to me makes sense of themselves.

To introduce some precision to this observation, I will borrow a conceptual tool from philosopher Robin Dembroff. They argue for a distinction between two ways we may critically encounter norms: existential and principled destabilization. Dembroff writes that “critical” social groups engage in *existential* destabilization of some norm if that group destabilizes the norm *by virtue of their bodies and selves*. For example, trans people *existentially* destabilize the norms that link sex and gender. On the other hand, *principled* destabilization entails a political commitment. It means you believe, on principle, a norm should not exist and engage in political action to actualize that belief.<sup>6</sup> For example, when feminists engage in political activity in favor of the liberation of women, they engage in principled destabilization of misogynistic gender norms.

Dembroff speaks in terms of groups, but we can extend this terminology to include individuals. An individual existentially destabilizes a norm if they do so by virtue of their selfhood. They principally destabilize a norm if they resist the existence of that norm on principle.

Individuals and groups can also *restabilize* norms. Restabilization is simply the opposite of destabilization. For example, misogynists principally restabilize the norms asserting that men have more social value than women. On the other hand, a straight person existentially restabilizes heterosexuality norms.

Of course, that does not entail that this straight person is homophobic. This is important: the norms we restabilize on principle may also be the norms we existentially destabilize, and vice versa. Take the straight person from the previous example. I have said that they existentially restabilize heterosexuality norms. They may, at the same time *destabilize* heterosexuality norms *on principle* by engaging in political activism, speaking out, donating to queer nonprofits, or otherwise expressing their political commitment.

The opposite may also be true. Consider the trope of the homophobic queer: someone who has queer desires or engages in queer sex while simultaneously believing that everyone ought to be heterosexual. This person destabilizes heterosexuality norms *existentially* at the same time that they *restabilize* those same norms on principle.

The observation that the existential and principled destabilization of a norm come apart is important for understanding arguments against passing. In general, arguments against passing take the following form:

1. We ought to be destabilizing cisheterosexism.
2. Passing entails existentially restabilizing a significant number of oppressive cisheterosexist assumptions.
3. Existentially restabilizing oppressive cisheterosexist assumptions impedes destabilizing cisheterosexism.
4. Therefore, we ought not pass.

Presumably the first premise is true. The second premise seems necessarily true; if a trans woman wants to be

presumptively (cis) female, she will likely need to shave her body, wear her hair long, train herself to use stereotypically feminine speech patterns, etc. Perhaps she can get away without restabilizing *all* of the norms. She might get away with being openly lesbian and if she’s too tall, she may *have* to wear flats instead of heels. Still, it would be impossible to pass without existentially restabilizing a significant number of them. Thus, passing is predicated on existentially restabilizing norms that oppress both trans and cis women.

The problem with this argument is premise three. Were we unable to distinguish between existential and principled destabilization, premise three would look tempting. However, the two are importantly different. I could want *for myself* to pass as a presumptively (cis) woman at the same time that I genuinely believe that no woman should feel like she *has* to do what I have to do in order to pass. In fact, this is also compatible with me believing that women *shouldn’t ever* do those things, but that I fail at this duty because, for example, I am a bad feminist. Once we have the principled/existential distinction, it becomes unclear why we should accept premise three.

In fact, premise three begins to look distinctly unattractive now that we have framed it without reference to cis-ness or trans-ness. Consider the third premise as if it were a mandate: we ought not existentially restabilize *any* oppressive cisheterosexist assumptions. This would appear to yield the absurd result that cis people have the obligation to medically transition. After all, one of those cisheterosexist assumptions asserts that our bodies ought to align with our genders in a specific kind of way. Thus, for premise three to get off the ground, we would have to address hypocrisy concerns: Why would there be a unique duty not to pass as presumptively cis for trans people and not for cis people?

Moraga and Stone both gesture at different principles that could explain such a duty. For her part, Moraga’s assimilationist worry suggests that queer people *as queers* have a unique duty to keep the culture alive. If we are able to transition into people for whom biology and gender “line up,” the only people who can continue queer traditions will disappear into heterosexual normalcy. Paradigmatic queer embodiments like “stone butch” may disappear as the butches become men, contributing to an overall normalizing effect that diminishes the cultural vibrancy of queer communities.

Moraga’s worry has turned out to be unfounded as a matter of fact. Many trans people still existentially destabilize the heterosexuality norms and the appearance norms that Moraga is worried about. If Moraga is losing butch daughters to testosterone, she is also gifted butch daughters by estrogen. Trans people (including those who pass) are just as capable as cis people of “keeping queer queer.”<sup>7</sup>

Stone, on the other hand, argues that speaking from “within the gender binary”—passing—is politically undesirable because it is *lying*. Unlike cis people, trans people have a unique duty to avoid passing because doing so is uniquely inauthentic.

But what's actually happening when trans people "pass"? Colloquially, being trans means coming to identify with a gender category other than the one you were assigned at birth. In general, this involves moving from one social category to another (e.g., from the social category "male" to the social category "female"). Earlier, I said that passing roughly means being regularly assumed to be a cisgender member of the gender category you claim. But what does it mean to be presumptively cisgender?

One way of cashing it out is in terms of presumed history: being presumptively cisgender means having a presumptively stable gender history, where trans people *actually* have a more complicated gender history. Indeed, Stone urges trans people to "take responsibility for *all* of their history," instead of erasing their gender-dissonant past.<sup>8</sup> This is part of where the deception charge comes from. We assume that we can read people's history from their presentation and secondary sex characteristics. Stone merely asks trans people to disclose their gendered history from the start so that, even if they appear to be cisgender men or women, they are honest about their complex history.

But there's something importantly wrong with this account, and it has to do with critical role of the word "assumption." It isn't passing trans people that are deceptive, it is our own assumptions about passing trans people that are false—namely, that they must be cisgender. We generally do not ask people—cis or trans—to disclose their gendered history because we assume we can read it from whatever parts of their bodies are visible. It is this assumption that should trouble us.

This is a manifestation of a more general assumption that I call the "undeniable difference" assumption. The undeniable-difference assumption is grounds for a swath of queerphobic myths that queer people *by their nature* will fail to adhere to the norms that police gender, sex, and sexuality. We see this assumption working in the background when people accuse queers of hypersexuality and pathological nonmonogamy, or when queerness is described as a mental disorder.

In anti-trans discourse, the undeniable-difference assumption most often manifests as the claim that "We can always tell," an anti-trans slogan that has become so popular, it has its own hashtag on X. This slogan is invoked to motivate discrimination based on the apparently irrevocable difference of trans bodies. Notice that this is a claim about passing. "We can always tell" literally means "You will never pass."

"We can always tell," has become more than just a slogan. Many anti-trans measures, like bathroom bills and sports bans, are predicated on the assumption that there are enough immutable visible differences between so-called "biological males" and "biological females" that these bills need not specify enforcement mechanisms.

Of course, the undeniable-difference assumption is false. *We cannot always tell.* The mere existence of trans people who pass is evidence that the undeniable-difference assumption is false. As further evidence, consider the

recent proliferation of cis women who are misidentified as trans and publicly harassed. Prevalent examples include Olympian boxer Imane Khelif, who was public accused of being transgender by prominent anti-trans activists, hockey star Madison Packer, who was forcibly removed from the women's bathroom at a Florida night club, and Liberty Hotel guest Ansley Baker, who was accused of being male by another bathroom user and subsequently escorted out by security.

The undeniable-difference assumption is so pervasive that it generates bizarre cases where trans people pass even *when they do their best not to*. For example, in response to the UK Supreme Court decision requiring trans people to use the bathrooms associated with assigned sex at birth, TikTok user Adum, a transgender man with a full beard, posted a self-facing video showing his top surgery scars and text that read, "Guess I'm using the women's bathroom from now on. But congrats on keeping 'men' out of women's restrooms I guess." In the comments of that video, cisgender people overwhelmingly assumed that Adum was claiming to be a transgender woman and was assigned male at birth (AMAB). Comments on the video included, "Simple, use the bathroom that corresponds to your biology. Why is this so difficult," and "a mango can never be an apple."

It would be counterintuitive to say that Khelif, Packer, Baker, and Adum were being deceptive by posing as AMABs. Instead, each were subject to applications of the undeniable-difference assumption that turned out to be false.

The same is true in general; passing trans people are not actively deceiving anyone, they are simply going along with assumptions that others make. Thus, a trans person passing does not entail that they are being deceptive. If passing and deception are not necessarily connected, trans people do not have a unique duty to avoid passing.

Articulating the undeniable-difference assumption makes the way for my final point: Why are those of us who are visibly trans better off with passing trans people in our coalition? Why should we think that passing has any kind of unique political power?

I cannot existentially destabilize the undeniable-difference assumption. I am undeniably different. I proudly and visibly fail to behave as gendered people ought to. I wear my scars outside. I have (they/them) in my bios and signatures. I wear women's clothes with a flat chest. In fact, as I have said, my identity is predicated on visibility because it is not possible for me to be both recognized and private. Anyone interested in bolstering the undeniable-difference assumption with concrete evidence should feel free to look in my direction.

G, on the other hand, can and does existentially destabilize this assumption. He behaves as men ought to, for the most part (he has retained his exuberant criticism of sexist behavior in other men, which is often seen as opposed to proper maleness). People look at G and they *cannot* tell. G is undeniably *the same*, in almost all socially relevant ways, as cisgender men.

Even though G's social position appears less radical than mine, or even looks assimilatory, he existentially destabilizes at least one cisheterosexist assumption that I cannot: the undeniable-difference assumption.

Furthermore, as I have shown, the assumption that G existentially destabilizes is extremely politically relevant. It undergirds the logic of anti-trans policies like bathroom bills and sports bans. Without people like G, these laws would not be so obviously nonsensical; *no one* thinks that G should use women's restrooms or play on women's sports teams, despite what these bills suggest. Trans people, including those that are visibly or openly trans, are all better off in a political landscape where people like G exist.

Any metaphysical model that demands sameness from queer individuals intolerably narrows the spectrum of represented differences. It takes the "queer" out of queer philosophy. The "difference" in queerness is not only about differences from the established norm, but also about differences *among those who are different*.

**NOTES**

1. Clarke, "'Queer' History."
2. Bettcher, "Trapped in the Wrong Theory."
3. Moraga, "Still Loving in the (Still) War Years / 2009," 188.
4. Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back," 262.
5. Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back," 262.
6. Dembroff, "Beyond Binary," 13.
7. Moraga, "Still Loving in the (Still) War Years / 2009," 184.
8. Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back," 232.

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**THE QUEER AGENDA**

**READING RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Cassius Adair and Aren Aizura, "The Transgender Craze Seducing Our [Sons]"; or, All the Trans Guys Are Just Dating Each Other," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (2023). This article is a study in a successful response to transphobic attacks in

such a way that does not reify essentializing myths about the trans experience. The authors make the exciting suggestion that it is exactly what appears to be socially dangerous about transness (from the cisgender perspective) that makes transness beautiful and good. (Scout Etterson)

- Matt Andler, "What Is Masculinity?" *Synthese* (2023) Don't we all want to know? (Nico Orlandi)
- Talia Bhatt, "The Third Sex" (in her *Trans/Rad/Fem* Substack, 2024), offers a probing critique of the cultural-imperialism-passing-as-anticolonialism that characterizes much of current Western academic engagement with South Asian trans womanhood. (Ding)
- Rowan Bell and E.M. Hernandez, "Much Ado about Nothing: Unmotivating Gender Identity," *Ergo* (forthcoming), shows how a resistant trans philosophy can be grounded in trans culture. (Willow Starr)
- Nora Berenstain, "Structural Gaslighting" (in *Gaslighting: Philosophical Approaches*, 2025), fills even a hopeless pessimist like me with optimism about the future of feminist epistemology after epistemic injustice. (Ding)
- Talia Mae Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy* (2024). This world-building, deeply metaphysical book will blow your mind. Bettcher does justice to the dual of imperatives—articulated by Lugones and others—of analyzing oppression while providing a pathway to liberation. (Erin Beeghly)
- B Camminga, *Transgender Refugees and the Imagined South Africa: Bodies Over Borders and Borders Over Bodies* (2019). Because we need to decenter the global north. (Nico Orlandi)
- Ding, "Pregnant Persons as a Gender Category: A Trans Feminist Analysis of Pregnancy Discrimination," *Signs* (2025), shows how a resistant trans philosophy can be grounded in trans culture. (Willow Starr)
- Ding and Willow Starr (editors), *Being Trans in Philosophy Zine* (2025). It is a crucial intervention in the current state of the profession. It gives me hope and inspiration. (Talia Mae Bettcher)
- Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality, Vol. 4* (2021). This final volume was only recently (and posthumously) published in French and even more recently in English. I'm not into hagiography, but you can't not watch the last episode of the series. (Joshua Kramer)
- Manon Garcia, *We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives* (2018). By drawing on the concept of alienation, Garcia tackles a

core dilemma in feminist (and LGBTQ+) thought: how to, on the one hand, reject that women are *naturally* submissive and, on the other hand, not erase the pleasure and preference they feel when actively submitting (specifically) to men. The book's methodology is a unique blend of history of philosophy (a close reading of Beauvoir, as well as Hegel, the phenomenologists, and others) and contemporary feminism (Spivak, Haslanger, Butler's reading of Beauvoir), and her analysis of submission, passivity, domination, and liberation from oppression are critical and relevant for LGBTQ+ theories of sex and love. (Joshua Kramer)

- E. M. Hernandez, "Gender-affirmation and Loving Attention," *Hypatia* (2021). Hernandez is a beautiful writer who seamlessly weaves lived experience into ethical analysis of what we owe to others. (Erin Beeghly)
- Cameron Domenico Kirk-Giannini, "How to Solve the Gender Inclusion Problem," *Hypatia* (forthcoming). I am not sure that we can (and should try to) define "woman" in a way that evades all inclusion problems, but, if we can, it is going to be along these lines. This paper gives us an answer to those who insist that trans-inclusiveness requires us to offer a workable definition! (Caro Flores)
- Sophie Lewis, *Enemy Feminisms: TERFs, Policewomen, and Girlbosses Against Liberation* (2025). A thoroughly researched, stylishly written, insightful new history of feminism focusing on its dark sides, from imperialist feminists to suffragettes turned fascists to contemporary TERFs and whore-phobic feminists. This book challenged me to rethink the potential bad politics that can emanate from feminism and it helped me place contemporary transphobia in a broader context. (Caro Flores)
- Resa-Philip Lunau, "Epistemic Domination and 'Gender Identity Fraud' Prosecutions," *Social Epistemology* (2024). It's an important departure from epistemic analyses of trans oppression which focus exclusively on hermeneutical and testimonial injustice. (Talia Mae Bettcher)
- Hilary Malatino, *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience* (2019). Liberatory trans scholarship makes a critical mistake if it ignores the experience and insights of intersex theorists. This book is an excellent introduction to this body of work and the author makes it clear how relevant the two disciplines are to each other. (Scout Etterson)
- Amy Marvin, "The Circulation of Trans Philosophy," *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* (Fall 2024), is her second state of the union of trans philosophy, and is as sharp and prescient as ever. (Ding)
- Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted* (2020). For a new vision of how things could be. (Nico Orlandi)
- Caro de Robertis, *So Many Stars: An Oral History of Trans, Nonbinary, Genderqueer, and Two-spirit People of Color* (2025). A moving, sweet-spirited anti-individualist biography of queer and trans elders of color in the Bay Area. Read it for philosophically rich insights on identity, language, gender, sexuality, community, and solidarity, and share it with allies. (Caro Flores)
- Mirha-Soleil Ross (editor), *Gendertrash from Hell* (2025 re-edition). This newly edited and re-released 'zine from the '90s is essential for thinking through what a resistant trans culture looks like. (Willow Starr)
- Abdellah Taïa, *An Arab Melancholia* (2008). This is the first LGBTQ+ autobiographical novel published in Morocco. It makes (painfully) concrete the ways in which some forms of religion and oppressive ideology co-opt commonsense, traditional philosophies of action and mind to inform contemporary metaphysics of gender, sex, and sexuality, even for minorities. (Joshua Kramer)
- Jules Wong, "Ambivalences of Trans Recognition," *Hypatia* (2025). Wong leans into the messiness of "clocking" and trans recognition, bringing personal experience to bear on questions of categorization and stereotyping. (Erin Beeghly)

**TOPICS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION**

**METAPHYSICS OF GENDER, SEX, SEXUALITY, BODY PARTS, ETC.**

- Analyses of sexuality that don't focus exclusively on sexual orientation. To put it differently, analyses that don't take nontrans, vanilla, ableist perspectives for granted. (Talia Mae Bettcher)
- Greater focus on gender presentation, appearance, and expression rather than exclusive focus on gender identity. Greater focus on phenomenology of trans experience. (Talia Mae Bettcher)
- Genders and gender categories beyond the three usual suspects. How many headaches could we save if we centered our analysis on dykes, dolls, butches, bitches, tomboi femmes, gender disasters, pregnant persons, caregiving persons, and more? (Ding)
- The phenomenology of embodied prosthetics, including prosthetic genitals. For example, what distinguishes the prosthetic front organ when it is an extension of a woman's clitoris for a lesbian from the prosthetic front organ when it is a transgender man's penis? In what sense is a prosthetic embodied? What do we owe to each

other's non-bio components (or unwanted bio components)? (Scout Etterson)

- Reclaiming biology! How can we combat anti-trans violence by doing substantive investigations into how we can classify physiological or biological sexes? Given that some components of biological sex (notably secondary sex characteristics, external genitalia, and hormonal levels) are mutable, can/should we develop a classification of physiological sex sensitive to that? What is the ontological status of body parts (sex or not) resulting from human intervention? (Scout Etterson)
- What is a metaphysics of shared (sexual) action, mind, and agency that opens up the *possibility* of two active agents acting together? (Joshua Kramer)

### QUEER HISTORY AND METHOD

- Queering normative ethics and meta-ethics. What do queer perspectives bring to normative ethics and meta-ethics? (Erin Beeghly)
- Pluralistic explanation and queer experience. How might explanatory pluralism be used to amplify queer voices and build coalitional solidarity? (Erin Beeghly)
- The history of second-wave feminism: all the spontaneous theorizing, all the radical pluralism, all the little-known figures and movements that together make the second wave so vibrant and so exciting. (Ding)
- Concepts and conceptual frameworks in substantive law. Courts spend an awful lot of time analyzing the legally relevant meanings of terms from "water" to "disability" to "violence" to "fish"; it's very clear that they are struggling, and this is something that philosophers have actually been training for. (Ding)
- What is our ancient, conceptual baggage? What are the histories of our concepts? Once we know them, how can we think beyond them? (Joshua Kramer)

### EPISTEMOLOGY, LANGUAGE, ETC.

- The intersection between epistemology and aesthetics: aesthetic values and inquiry, perspectives, games, etc. A hot recent research agenda, and a very queer intersection—yet queer examples and starting points are only timidly present. (Caro Flores)
- Propaganda, moral progress, and political polarization. Much of the work on these topics is lifeless, and done by those who are not the current targets of a campaign to segregate and annihilate LGBTQ+ people from public life. (Willow Starr)

### ETHICS AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- How do we skillfully combine attention to the distinctive challenges faced by queer communities with broader political aspirations that can defeat fascism? (Caro Flores)
- Often, ancient "rule-ruler" paradigms still crop up in the bedroom and romantic, erotic fantasies. People "submit" to another in various guises or idioms. It is not coincidental that this paradigm has both a sexual and socio-political connotation. The sexual and socio-political confirm each other through various feedback loops—from sexual and romantic fantasies to familial and civic structure. Taking this line of thought as a hypothesis, we might ask: How do our fundamental metaphysics of collective action—including sexual action—undergird broader social and political systems and vice versa? Can we think outside of this political paradigm of opposition, conflict, rulership, and mutually exclusive agency? What are the principles of a good non- or less-hierarchical political system? Do we need a "ruling" element in a collaborative system? (Joshua Kramer)
- Ethical non-monogamy and polyamory. (Nico Orlandi)
- The shape and direction of non-assimilationist politics. (Nico Orlandi)

## CALL FOR PAPERS FOR 2026

*APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy* invites APA members to submit philosophical essays, book reviews, short notes, and interviews, conversations, and more experimental writing formats for publication in the fall 2026 edition. Members at all career stages and kinds of employment are encouraged to submit. We especially welcome submissions from LGBTQ+ people of color and from trans people.

Members should submit a short pitch (2–3 paragraphs) summarizing their piece, illustrating its tone and voice, and making the case for its interest to a wide audience of philosophers and/or LGBTQ members of the public.

The theme of the 2026 issue is Resistance and Solidarity. Pitches should relate to this theme, broadly conceived. Approaches from all areas and traditions of philosophy will be considered. Topics can be approached in a variety of formats (in addition to argumentative pieces, personal essays, reviews, short notes, interviews and conversations, among others, are welcome). Potential topics include (but are by no means limited to) the following:

- LGBTQ+ perspectives on the nature of solidarity or of resistance
- Paths for resisting the oppression of LGBTQ+ people in the current political situation
- Organizing within the university
- Epistemic or linguistic aspects of LGBTQ+ resistance

- Understanding everyday acts of resistance and solidarity
- The aesthetics of LGBTQ+ political movements
- Emotions and LGBTQ+ resistance and solidarity
- The potential and pitfalls of LGBTQ+ practices of resistance and solidarity online

### DEADLINES

The deadline for submission of pitches is January 30, 2026. If the pitch is provisionally accepted, the deadline for a full draft of the piece is March 31, 2026. The editor (and perhaps an additional referee) will provide comments by April 30, 2026, with a final version due by May 31, 2026.

### FORMAT

Pieces should be between **1,000–4,000 words**, with shorter notes welcome as well. The maximum limit is 6,000 words, and is only acceptable in exceptional cases. Pieces should be reasonably accessible to nonspecialists, and can be considerably more informal, essayistic, funny, irreverent, or narratively driven than a philosophy article (think here of pieces of the sort published in *n+1*, *The Point*, *The Drift*, or, closer to our disciplinary home, *The Philosophers' Magazine*, *The APA Blog*, or *Aeon*). No footnotes or endnotes should be included except for (ideally very few) references, which should appear as endnotes.

### CONTACT

Submit all pitches by email and direct inquiries to Carolina Flores, Editor, *APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy*, florescaro@pm.me.

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## CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

**Talia Mae Bettcher** is a professor of philosophy at Cal State Los Angeles. She is the author of the recently published *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy*, among many other articles in trans philosophy including “Evil Deceivers and Make Believers: Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion” (*Hypatia*, 2007), “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance” (*Signs*, 2013), and “What Is Trans Philosophy?” (*Hypatia*, 2019).

**Erin Beeghly** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Utah, a proud bi-sexual, parent to an amazing trans tween, and partner to the poet and writer Joshua Rivkin. Her book *What's Wrong with Stereotyping?* is an exercise in queering ethics. She is currently working on a trade book called *Playing with Stereotypes, Playing with Fire* that explores subversive, creative ways to use stereotypes as well as a second project called *Modelling Ethical Complexity*, which argues for more complex, messy, and down-to-earth ways of practicing ethics.

**Ding** (they/she/my love) is inextricably trapped in the messy political philosophy and social metaphysics of gender. By the time you read this, they will have passed the cactus-dueling portion of their dissertation defense at the University of Arizona and moved to Brooklyn to teach at Barnard College. Meanwhile, catch her red-handed on Bluesky @not.dingherself.com and read her recent paper

analyzing pregnancy discrimination on trans feminist terms in the spring 2025 issue of *Signs*.

**Scout Etterson** (they/them) is a PhD candidate at Arizona State University where they study social metaphysics, especially the metaphysics of gender. They got their BA in philosophy from Bard College in New York, but grew up in the woods of Duluth, Minnesota. Five of their planets are in Sagittarius (including three out of the big three) so they look forward to fulfilling their astrological destiny by becoming a professional philosopher one day.

**Carolina Flores** (she/they) is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at UC Santa Cruz. Caro mostly writes about resistance to evidence in its many guises, ranging from delusions to identity-protection to the role of narratives and social media. They are working on a part-family-history part-philosophy book proposal about ignorance during Portuguese fascism/colonialism. Caro loves copying the haircuts of teenage boys, alternating between flamboyant outfits and dressing like a mid-century Marxist academic, Charli XCX, ranting about housing justice and what the internet should be, and parading an analog camera around, among other irritating pursuits.

**Joshua Kramer** is a philosophy PhD candidate at the University of Pittsburgh and teaches cognitive science and philosophy at Barnard College and Columbia University. He focuses on questions in mind and science in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and contemporary cognitive science, as well as the metaphysics of action and some aesthetics. He is writing his dissertation on the metaphysics, psychology (*eros!*), and politics of learning and knowing in ancient Greek philosophy. In addition to philosophy, Joshua likes watching Giannis Antetokounmpo's Milwaukee Bucks, hiking mountains, talking with friends and strangers about politics, running on Chicago's Lake Shore trail, waiting for cacti to grow, and reading on the beach.

**Nico Orlandi** is Professor of Philosophy at UC Santa Cruz and Senior Fellow at the Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities at the University Alliance Ruhr. Nico loves good music, the amazing philosopher Carol Hay and their daughter Rebecca (aka bug), as well as their incredible community in San Francisco, Boston, and Berlin. Nico does not love cinnamon, oatmeal, and Halloween.

**Willow Starr** is an associate professor of philosophy at Cornell University, where she teaches about food, AI, words, gender, and why dominant culture is a plague. She resides with her wife, kids, and cats in Ithaca, but is also a chaos fairy that can be found at raves, play parties, protests, and anywhere queers cause trouble to get free. She and her collaborator Ding co-edited issue #0 of the 'zine *Being Trans in Philosophy: We Are Not Trans in a Theoretical Way*, because we think our discipline shouldn't be a stepping stone for fascist transphobes whose toxic fumes repel people actually committed to understanding gender.