

# Trans Feminism: Recent Philosophical Developments

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## Abstract

This article introduces trans feminism as an intersectional analysis of sexist and transphobic forms of oppressions as well as current and historical feminist and trans conflicts over the inclusion of trans women. The first half examines recent feminist philosophical efforts to provide an analysis of the concept *woman* that is inclusive of trans women. The second examines recent responses to trans-exclusive feminist positions. The article concludes with an assessment of the current state of trans feminist philosophy and outlines challenges for the future.

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## 1. Introduction

The term ‘transfeminism’ was coined by U.S. activists Emi Koyama and Diana Courant circa 1992 (Stryker and Bettcher). It’s now also alternatively written ‘trans feminism’ or ‘trans/feminism’ in English. While the roots of the notion reach back far earlier, Koyama’s ‘Transfeminist Manifesto’ (2003 [2001]) is generally regarded as a foundational articulation. She sees it as ‘primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond’ that ‘stands up for trans and non-trans women alike, and asks non-trans women to stand up for trans-women in return’ (2003, 244). The notion has subsequently been popularized through the work of Julia Serano’s enormously influential *Whipping Girl* (2007). The term is also used in different ways in a global context. For example, ‘*transfeminismo*’ can work as a replacement for ‘queer’. In particular, it ‘might also be understood as a reaction against the theoretical excesses of first-wave white Anglo queer theory, whose poststructuralism promoted an abstract concept of political subjectivity’ and, indeed, ‘English as an imperialistic language’ in Spain and some parts of Latin America (Espineira and Bourcier, 90).

Unfortunately, the discipline of philosophy has been extremely slow to register trans feminism as an explicit point of departure. Even within feminist philosophy, development has been tiny relative to the veritable explosion of interdisciplinary trans studies over the past two decades. To be sure, there’s been work within feminist philosophy. And at present, there appears to be something of an emerging literature. The goal of this article is to chart some of these most recent discussions of trans issues within feminist philosophy. In particular, I focus on analytic feminist philosophy as practiced predominately in the U.S.A. and U.K., focusing largely on the analysis of gender concepts.

While feminist discussion of trans issues is certainly far broader than this (Bettcher 2014), this focus is worthwhile for several reasons. First, as there has, up to this point, been a dearth of writing in the area, it is important to note what appears to be fairly significant recent developments. Second, the invalidation of trans identities is a central issue in trans politics, and the analytic work of feminist philosophers may be able to shed valuable light on it. Finally, as these investigations

into gender concepts and meanings appear to take the English language for granted, it will be worth considering it within a larger context to see its limitations: I invite the reader to consider what follows with this ever in the back of their mind. Before proceeding, I outline some of the basic concepts and issues that pertain to trans feminism.

## 2. Preliminaries

As outlined by Koyama (2003), trans feminism centralizes the concept of ‘intersectionality’, originally introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw. The idea is that (i) there are multiple forms of oppression that are often inseparably intermeshed and (ii) once we focus on privilege as well as oppression, we can see the intermeshing of racism and sexism, say, even when there appears to be no intersection at all. For example, while it may appear that racism has nothing to do with the kind of sexism to which white women are subjected, racism is highly relevant insofar as they’re racially privileged.

Trans feminism explicitly proceeds from the recognition of the intersections of sexist and transphobic oppressions. Although this would appear to centralize trans women, since trans men are also vulnerable to sexism, transphobia, and the interblending thereof, trans feminism would be ill-advised to exclude them from its purview. Moreover, there’s a danger in centralizing the intersection of sexism and transphobia in ways that then marginalize other forms of oppression/privilege (e.g. racist and classist oppression/privilege).

Unfortunately, there’ve been impediments to proceeding from a genuinely intersectional framework. Trans studies and politics (at least in the U.S.A.) emerged in response to versions of feminism that were expressly hostile to trans people (particularly, trans women). Janice Raymond’s *Transsexual Empire* (1979) is one of the most influential examples of this. Recently, conflicts between trans and non-trans feminists over the inclusion of trans women in women’s spaces have escalated in the U.S.A. and U.K. The so-called ‘Trans Exclusive Radical Feminists’ (‘TERFs’) or ‘Gender Critical Feminists’ have insisted upon the exclusion of trans women from women’s spaces while denying such exclusions are transphobic. To say the conflicts have been heated is an understatement. As Lori Watson observes:

The dispute between some self-identified feminists and trans persons, trans women especially, and trans supporting feminists has erupted into a full-scale ideological war. Once at the level of conflict, officially undeclared, we have moved into the territory of ‘you are either with us or against us,’ with real threats against real people – from both sides (248).

The upshot is that besides the intersectional trans feminist approach, there is also an interactive approach, one that raises questions about the relationship between feminist theory/politics and trans theory/politics viewed as historically and politically distinct. While there’ve been discussions that explore the intersections (see Bettcher 2007; McKinnon 2014), for the most part, recent philosophical discussions of trans feminism have proceeded in this second way.

## 3. *The Trans Woman Question: Feminist Philosophical Accounts of ‘Woman’*

In feminist philosophy, it’s often been thought important to answer the question ‘What is a woman?’ in order to delimit the purview of inquiry. Since feminism is concerned with the oppression of women, goes the thought, it should be able to determine *whose* oppression is at stake. Let’s use the term ‘purview concept’ to capture this idea. Stephanie Kapusta has recently argued that there’s an acceptability criterion on feminist philosophical accounts of the purview concept.

In particular, she argues, accounts that would lead to the ‘misgendering’ of some group of trans women, if broadly implemented in society, are unacceptable from a trans political perspective.

For Kapusta, misgendering includes the use of gender terms that exclude or marginalize trans people. Misgendering deployments also include associated descriptions intended to explicate the meanings of gender terms. Kapusta argues that the misgendering of trans people inflicts psychological, moral, and political harms and that such deployments are always morally and politically contestable by trans people.

In light of this, she critiques two feminist philosophical accounts of the purview concept. Linda Martín Alcoff’s account which centralizes the relationship of possibility to biological reproduction rules out most trans women, if not all, Kapusta argues. Family-resemblance analyses, which specify clusters of salient features, while eschewing necessary and sufficient conditions for membership, marginalize trans women at best (since they will lack many of the cluster features) and outright deny them womanhood at worst.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, there have been feminist analyses of *woman* that expressly proceed from a pre-theoretical commitment to the view that trans women *are* women and *had better* count as women for feminist purposes (many have involved appeals to family-resemblance). In this vein, two other approaches have recently come into prominence. An ameliorative approach, originally developed by Sally Haslanger, asks what concept feminists *should* aim to get people to use in light of *their goals* of ending sexist oppression (the ‘target concept’). The second approach, semantic contextualism, looks to ordinary uses of the term ‘woman’.

### 3.1. AMELIORATIVE ANALYSES

Katharine Jenkins offers a critique of Sally Haslanger’s own ameliorative analysis and defends her own. While Haslanger recognizes gender terms are used in many ways, she adopts a ‘focal analysis’ in selecting one – hierarchical social classes – as primary. Roughly, she says one *functions* as a woman in some context just in case one is subordinated on the basis of presumed female sex (i.e., the female biological role in reproduction) in that context (Haslanger 235) and that one is a woman just in case one typically (‘regularly, and for the most part’) functions as a woman (234). Such an account is revisionary since a woman not so subordinated wouldn’t count as a woman.

Jenkins shows Haslanger’s account leads to the exclusion of some *trans* women. Only trans women typically subordinated on the basis of presumed female sex will count, either because they’re read as non-trans women or because they’re taken to have altered their bodies in ways relevant to biological sex. This excludes trans women presumed biologically male – either because they don’t present publicly as women or because their presentation is viewed as pretense – as well as trans women regarded as women on the basis of gender identity rather than presumed biological sex.

Nonetheless, Jenkins endorses the ameliorative project: if trans women are included among the ‘we’ of the ameliorative project (‘ameliorative agents’, she calls them), the goals of respecting trans women’s gender identifications will be among those adopted by the group (15). The problem, she argues, is the *focal* nature of Haslanger’s account. Thus, Jenkins defends an ameliorative account with branching target concepts, gender-as-class and gender-as-identity. She argues both are equally important in providing a feminist account of oppression.

Notably, however, Jenkins’ appeal to gender-as-class will be inadequate in capturing the phenomenon of misgendering, since it builds subordination and privilege on the basis of presumed biological role *right into* that appeal. While trans women are often viewed as really men on the basis of presumed biological sex, they’re often not accorded many privileges on that basis. This means misgendering should be explained not by appeal to the *ameliorative* concept of gender-as-

class, but rather a *descriptive* analysis of how gender concepts are typically deployed in daily interactions. To the extent that Jenkins' account is designed to capture all forms of oppression within a feminist purview, it's insufficient. And this, in turn, raises more general questions about the scope of work allocated to the purview concept: aside from outlining a feminist purview, it may be an open question what other work it is supposed to accomplish.

### 3.2. SEMANTIC CONTEXTUALISM

The second approach (introduced above) harbors concerns about the revisionary aspect of ameliorative analysis. For example, Jennifer Saul notes that 'feminists need to communicate successfully both with each other and with those who are not (yet) feminists, feminists should want to avoid large-scale misunderstandings wherever possible' (197).<sup>2</sup> In light of this, Saul turns to an analysis of the meanings of gender terms as they're actually deployed in ordinary practices.

She argues that political intuitions can have an impact upon one's philosophy of language. In particular, she argues that the commitment to doing justice to trans women's claims can impact one's analysis of the meaning of 'woman' (a consequence she acknowledges is rather surprising from the perspective of mainstream philosophy of language). She argues against an account of 'woman' in terms of biological sex on the grounds that it wouldn't do justice to self-identifying claims of trans women (particularly, those who have not had surgical procedures).

So Saul proposes a semantic contextualist analysis as a possible solution according to which there are multiple contexts which determine multiple membership-determining features. There are contexts in which the relevant feature for correct application of the term 'woman' involves 'sincerely self-identifying as a woman' (201), and there are other contexts in which the relevant feature involves 'having XX chromosomes' (203). Thus, whether a trans woman counts as a woman depends on which standards are relevant in a given context. Saul raises problems with this account, however. One concern is that it does justice to trans women in only a trivializing way, since claims that trans women are not women are also true in certain contexts. Indeed, claims Saul, questions around trans women using women's public restrooms, for example, will have to be settled by extra-semantic moral and political considerations.

Esa Diaz-Leon has recently refined Saul's contextualist account to address this concern by distinguishing between 'attributor-contextualism' and 'subject-contextualism'. In the former, factors relevant to determining context depend on the person making the claim and include the attributor's own beliefs about relevant standards. In the latter, the relevant factors principally concern the 'objective' features of the context in which the *subject* of the claim is located. Diaz-Leon argues for the latter, claiming that 'the relevant standards at issue in a context are those *that are relevant for practical purposes* (where these are broadly conceived to include theoretical, prudential, moral, political, and even aesthetic values).' Thus, the moral and political considerations that Saul deems extra-semantic are included within the analysis of how the contextually shifting term 'woman' operates. With regard to the use of public restrooms, argues Diaz-Leon, trans women will count as women, since identity rather than biological sex is most relevant for those practical purposes, and anti-trans claims ('She's not a woman') won't be true after all, since their beliefs aren't relevant to the assessment of the claim.

While a full discussion of the view is beyond our scope, it's worth noting some concerns. First, insofar as this account allows for contexts in which trans women don't count as women, it's vulnerable to Kapusta's concerns about the misgendering implications of feminist philosophical accounts. The context Diaz-Leon (p. 247) offers as an example in which biological sex determines membership (the medical screening for vaginal disease) is precisely the type that Kapusta cites as contestable (p. 508–9). To be sure, Diaz-Leon recognizes that the relevant contextual moral and political considerations in such a medical context *may* determine that trans

women are women even in that context. But, given the force of Kapusta's concerns, it's difficult to imagine *any* context in which misgendering would be acceptable. This would require that 'sincere self-identification' be the sole determining feature in all contexts, undermining the account as contextualist. Such an analysis would also strain credibility as an account of the *actual* meaning of 'woman' as ordinarily used in the mainstream. It would, rather, seem more like an ameliorative analysis.

Second, while biological sex may not be practically relevant in cases of restroom use, there are other germane cases in which it appears to be – for example, sexual relations. Unfortunately, it's precisely such contexts that often yield the greatest violence against trans women (along with misgendering and accusations of 'deception'). Many trans women with 'penises' regard themselves as women entering into heterosexual relations with men. However, it will be challenging to see how their beliefs are vindicated in subject-contexts that, on the face of it, would determine them as men or at least as 'not women' on the basis of the relevance of biological sex.

### 3.3. TRANS OPPRESSION AND MULTIPLE MEANINGS

One of the things this discussion suggests is that more attention must be paid to the *oppressive force* of certain transphobic discursive practices and the semantics that inhere therein. One strategy to accommodate this oppressive force can be found in my 'multiple meanings' account (2013, 2014). I recognize that sometimes 'woman' can be used in ways that are expressly non-inclusive or marginalizing of trans women (typically in mainstream society) and that it can also be used in trans-friendly cultures in ways that centralize trans women as paradigms of womanhood. That is, I argue, terms such as 'woman' have multiple meanings that are under political contestation. Drawing on the work of María Lugones, I situate these multiple meanings and the underlying social practices sustaining them in multiple, but overlapping, 'worlds of sense'.

Like contextual accounts, this account allows that under some interpretations, trans women do not end up counting as men, while in others they do. It is different, however, in identifying the invalidating or marginalizing interpretations *as inherently oppressive* and the solidly inclusive ones *as resistant*. The position is also more extreme than a contextualist account in claiming that the relevant difference doesn't concern the variability of contexts in determining the extension of the term, but rather, a difference in 'worlds of sense' in which the term 'woman' has multiple contested meanings and discursive practices. In trans-positive worlds, trans women are constructed as women in all possible contexts, while in worlds that are oppressive to trans people, in any given context, trans women are at best constructed as marginal women.

It is worth noting that one of the benefits of the multiple meanings account is that it allows for the possibility that English terms can also have 'second order' non-English meanings that contest that taken for granted status of English (Bettcher, 2014). That is, terms like 'trans woman' may be used by speakers in ways that recognize the forced translational work being done as well as dissonances between the non-English meaning and the English ones. In this way, certain discursive practices (even ones that resist trans oppression) can be shown oppressive to the extent that they presuppose English as default and then foreclose the possibilities of resistant, non-English meanings. It is difficult to see, by contrast, how the other accounts could accommodate such a phenomenon.

At any rate, recognizing the existence of oppressive (transphobic, sexist, racist, linguistically hegemonic) discursive practices along with practices that contest them has some notable consequences with regard to the two other approaches described above. First, any purview concept will necessarily be ameliorative to the extent that it departs from dominant oppressive discursive practices. Any further project of bringing about an actual change in existing discursive practice (a rather difficult enterprise for academicians alone!) would need

to be sensitive to and partially guided by the revisionary practices that already exist ‘on the ground’. Second, any analysis of ordinary discursive practices would need to be clear whether it was drawing from already existing resistant practices or oppressive ones. And merely drawing from resistant practices alone would be insufficient: it would be theoretically and politically important to understand the oppressive discursive practices in order to combat them. In my view, a broader, intersectional analysis would be required to understand such practices.

#### 4. *The Trans Woman Question: ‘Woman’ as a Resistant Term*

As discussed in Section 1, in the U.S.A. and U.K., there’s been a history of feminist hostility towards trans people and, in particular, trans women. There are two approaches to this stance. The first is to simply refuse to engage in a conversation: asking whether trans women *are* women may be to take up a political terrain that already concedes too much from a trans perspective (namely, that trans identities are open for such invalidation, while others are not) thereby yielding an unacceptable starting place for trans feminist theorization. That said, to the extent that arguments have been provided by feminists who exclude trans women, it may be important to engage with their arguments in order to show where they go wrong. This is the second approach. Both approaches clearly have political value – and which approach is adopted may depend on one’s specific goals at the time.

##### 4.1. TRANSPHOBIC FEMINISM AND PROPAGANDA

Rachel McKinnon has recently engaged with anti-trans feminists by examining what she calls ‘TERF propaganda’ in light of Jason Stanley’s work on the general topic of propaganda. In doing so, she adopts the first approach (or, perhaps, takes the second approach as having reached successful completion). She writes, ‘I take it as now well established that trans women *are* women. Full Stop. Thus the flawed ideology ... at the heart of this propaganda is that trans women are men.’

McKinnon argues that while ‘TERF’ propaganda conforms to Stanley’s account in that it is a false ideology (designed to justify the dominance of some group), it can also be used to pose a challenge to Stanley’s account. Stanley argues that propaganda can be used to convince an oppressed group that their state is warranted. Drawing on feminist standpoint epistemology, McKinnon rightfully points out, however, that it’s unlikely that oppressed groups will fall prey to the propaganda since ‘they *live* the alternative ideology and *develop* it themselves.’ It’s more likely, she argues, that others will adopt it, since they may well lack epistemic access to this alternative ideology, and in their positions of relative power, make decisions that are ultimately harmful to the oppressed.

A good example provided by McKinnon is the claim of some transphobic feminists that trans women are sexual predators who effectively rape women by entering women’s spaces (such as women’s restrooms or women’s music festivals). Such a claim is easily empirically falsifiable. As a matter of fact, trans women don’t use the restroom to spy on other women or to threaten them with rape; they use it to pee in a safe environment. Certainly, trans women are generally not tricked into thinking that they have predatory motives. However, as McKinnon correctly suggests, there is a real concern that the uninformed public will accept such propaganda as truth and work to legislate against trans women’s access to women’s public restrooms.

More controversially, McKinnon cites as an example of false ideology, anti-trans feminists’ claims that ‘TERF’ is used by trans women as a slur against them. She rightfully notes that the term did not originate with trans women themselves and that therefore any anti-trans

feminist claim that trans women developed the expression to use against them is false. Part of the issue, however, concerns whether the expression continues to be used as a mere abbreviation for a description of a position (i.e., Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminist) as it was originally coined or whether it has also acquired a derogatory use. The issues here are delicate – consider the expressions ‘Republican’ or ‘liberal’. While these terms originated as mere descriptions of political positions, in some contexts, they can obviously be *used* as put-downs. One important question is how frequently they *are* used that way. And the question appears pertinent regardless of whether the term now formally constitutes a slur or not.

At any rate, it’s not a good expression to use if one wants to have a conversation (i.e. adopt the second approach). Thus, Watson writes of ‘TERF’: ‘I avoid that term because I want to address those who disagree with me on terms that will allow for open and honest listening, and labeling, as such, often shuts down those pathways’ (p. 252). It’s clear that the term ‘TERF’ has at least become offensive to those designated by the term and this raises questions around its use in such contexts. Consider, for example, that ‘tranny’ had originally possessed an affirming, empowering use among trans women – at least in some trans communities, in much the way that ‘queer’ has been used for empowerment. Nonetheless, the term has also become highly offensive to many trans people, and the fact that it is still used by some trans people in an affirming way doesn’t change the fact that it is offensive to others. In light of this, it seems reasonable to refrain from its use in ‘mixed company’. With regard to ‘TERF’, it seems that caution should at least be deployed in case one wants to have a conversation across deep difference. This seems particularly important since much of trans politics is deeply committed to the importance of self-naming and respect for self-identities.

#### 4.2. FEMINISM AND RESISTANT DEPLOYMENTS OF ‘WOMAN’

Both Lori Watson and I have recently adopted the second approach by attempting to *respond* to arguments designed to exclude trans women from ‘woman’. Unlike the highly theoretical arguments discussed in the first section of the paper, part of Watson’s argument is experiential – she writes as a non-trans woman who usually passes as a man and, consequently, is familiar with some of the double-binds and harassment that trans people face with regard to restroom use, for example. She doubts anti-trans feminists would expect her to change her identity or her sex to conform with the way the world reads her. Yet, she argues, this is precisely the expectation they place on trans women: ‘live your life as a socially recognized man, make your body and gender conform’ (250–1).

Importantly, Watson confronts the argument that because trans women have not been socialized as women/girls since birth, they don’t have the necessary conditions for counting as women. Here, the argument can best be understood to concern *resistant* feminist uses of ‘woman’. That is, in light of their experiences with sexism and the oppressive notions of ‘womanhood’, feminists have attempted to politically re-deploy the term in resistant ways. Indeed, in some cases, alternative terms such as ‘womyn’ were introduced to flag such resistant departures.

In my view (2016), the basic idea behind the argument is that the self-identifying use of a term in resistance to oppression is political and semantically constrained. Consider a white woman with no history of experiencing racial oppression who claims the identity ‘woman of color’. Not only would this be appropriative, it isn’t clear what content the self-identification would even have since the very meaning of the resistant term is given by a history of oppression *to which it is a response*. Similarly, goes the argument, trans women who claim ‘woman’ have not had the history of sexist oppression to which such a resistant identification could emerge as a response.

Part of the concern is that many trans women have received early male socialization. This yields a worry that they have ‘male privilege’ and are hence excluded from resistant uses of

'woman'. (Already the expression 'male privilege' is problematic, it would be better to simply ask whether trans women have certain privileges as a consequence of their being trans.) Watson rightly argues that trans women rarely have any male privilege *conferred upon them* once they transition. Those who pass as non-trans are on the receiving end of male privilege, not the enactors of it. And trans women who don't pass as non-trans, even if they're viewed as 'really men', scarcely find that they receive any male privilege. The question is whether receiving male socialization earlier is somehow disqualifying. One worry that Watson considers is that such socialization will yield a masculine psychology that takes male privilege for granted. Watson rightly argues that this is an unsubstantiated empirical claim: 'As such, all we may be dealing with here is a hasty generalization possibly premised upon confirmation biases. But no doubt plenty of people can be jerks, being trans\* doesn't immunize a person from any of the behaviors, we all as humans, display at one time or another.' (253)

The question, however, is whether early male-socialization de-legitimizes the resistant uptake of 'woman'. And Watson rightly notes that many trans women will have experienced their socialization with great discomfort – an experience they rejected and reject, so that appeal to male-socialization is already problematic. However, insofar as part of male privilege involves simply avoiding some of the unhappy features of female socialization (e.g. early girlhood sexualization), while avoiding this is a privilege, it's also something that no trans women (or any other rational person) should regret not having experienced.

In answer to the question whether the failure to have girlhood experiences of sexism, at least among some trans women, means that 'woman' cannot be resistantly claimed, Watson points first to the diversity of women's experiences with socialization – particularly as inflected by distinct forms of intersecting oppressions. Trans women's experience of socialization may just be one of many. This point can be extended, as Koyama argues, by pointing out that the assumption that all women's experience be homogeneous is inherently racist insofar as it eschews the diversifying impact of intersecting oppressions upon women's experiences (2006).

Second, Watson argues that the question is not what relation trans women bear to other women, but 'to men, to the forms of male power that function to subordinate women on the basis of sex'. Trans women are oppressed due to their sex in a multitude of transphobic ways, she points out. And '[i]f subordination on the basis of one's sex is central to the social and political meaning of woman, and it is,' argues Watson, 'then what can possibly be the response to denying that trans women are precisely in this position?' (252).

On the face of it, this seems to echo Haslanger's position discussed in the previous section and would also seem to lead to the consequence that trans men are also women (in a political sense), since they're likewise subordinated on the basis of sex.<sup>3</sup> However, I take Watson to be making the point that shared history of gender oppression licenses the uptake of resistant terms in a variety of complicated ways. Her claim is that the argument above fails on the grounds that trans women *do* have an experience of gendered subordination that precisely licenses that uptake.

The argument is a powerful one. However, one concern is that in blending together multiple forms of gender-based oppression under a common umbrella, distinctive forms of gender-based oppression are erased. Indeed, if not handled with delicacy, such a move could lead to the reduction of trans oppression to the oppression of women. And this would foreclose the possibility of examining how various forms of gender oppression can intersect with each other. Pressing in this way, however, also runs the risk of re-invigorating the argument: if trans women experience socialization as males and manage to escape some of the damages of girlhood, then is it not the case that they are foreclosed from claiming the category 'woman' *in resistance to a lifetime experience of sexist oppression?*



I have argued that terms like ‘woman’ can be given different resistant deployments to different sort of oppression (2014, 2016). Consider, for example, that ‘woman’ has been used in highly racialized ways that either exclude women of color as central paradigms or marginalize them in other ways. In such a case, claiming womanhood in a resistant way may, in part, be responsive to racial oppression rather than sexist oppression (or to both). Similarly, I claim, ‘woman’ can be claimed in resistance to abusive mainstream gender practices that give rise to the particular nature of trans oppression (2016).

My account of oppression centers on the invalidation of trans identities as specifically situated within an appearance/reality contrast (e.g. ‘really a man, disguised as a woman’, ‘really a woman, living as a man’) and the related double-bind of being regarded as deceptive or else as merely pretending (2014, 2016). In my view, this invalidation arises from organized gender practices (in particular, the constitution and negotiation of gendered intimacy and interpersonal distance) in mainstream society.

Trans claims to be women and men, I argue, can be seen as resistant insofar as they’ve been disconnected from these abusive practices. The very struggle of trans people to be regarded by others in ways conforming with their identities (and even their struggles to embrace their own identities) is invariably informed by this appearance/reality contrast and the deceiver/pre-tender bind: trans oppression is deeply intermeshed with the entire process of transition, including coming out to oneself in the first place (Bettcher, 2017). Consequently, it seems to me, the very work of transition is, of necessity, resistant – resistant in a way that provides for the possibility of claiming ‘woman’.

Crucially, however, I have also argued that these invalidating practices are deeply intermeshed with sexism and racism (2007, 2014) as well as surgical violence against people with intersex conditions (2016). In other words, the specific practices of oppression to which trans redeployments of ‘woman’ are directed afford *complex* resistant redeployments that are responsive to highly local, *intersectional*, forms of oppression. This strongly suggests the importance of recognizing that resistant trans redeployments of ‘woman’ are scarcely univocal, but rather, polyvocal.

## 5. Conclusion

Much of the emerging literature in trans feminist philosophy, in particular, the work being done by non-trans feminists, has centered on ‘the trans woman question’ (i.e., are trans women *women*? And if so, how?). While the work is certainly important, one danger confronting this focus, particularly as discussed in the second section, is that the real-life hazards which trans people face may be overshadowed by a preoccupation with a trans-inclusive semantic or conceptual analysis. Consider, for example, that because both Jenkins’ ameliorative approach and Diaz-Leon’s contextualist approach do so much work trying to include trans women within the purview concept, they are largely inadequate in understanding the transphobic nature of prevalent mainstream discursive practices that exclude them. But one wonders, once we have found the right way to include trans women within the purview concept, are we *done* because we’ve ‘solved the puzzle’? Or is there more work to do? And if so, what *is* that work? And *who* is going to do that work? Depending upon how these questions are answered, trans women are at grave risk of becoming mere counter examples in a purely theoretical enterprise that has very little to do with understanding and combating transphobic oppression.

One of the central tensions here concerns the type of questions that trans women raise for feminist theorizing. On the one hand, the leading question may be: ‘What impact does the existence of trans women have on feminist theorizing, and in particular analyses of the purview concept?’ This question makes most sense when posed from a perspective that has

already been preoccupied with purview questions well before trans people appeared on the radar. On the other hand, and this is emphasized in the work of Kapusta, and McKinnon, and myself, the leading question may be: ‘How should we understand and address transphobia? And how might this require a re-thinking of feminism?’ Such a question typically arises when one has had the experience of negotiating transphobia and has a strong stake in addressing it. In this respect, Watson’s approach is notable; while she undertakes the ‘trans woman question’, she does so from an intimate experience with analogous invalidation, and she aims to contest the exclusion of trans women through argumentative means. That is, her goal is primarily political (combating trans exclusion), rather than primarily conceptual.

What types of motivations will guide these feminist philosophical investigations in the future? Will feminist philosophizing become a truly *trans* feminist philosophizing? If so, how will it engage (or not engage) with transphobic versions of feminism? To what extent will trans feminist philosophy centralize the intersections of multiple oppressions, including race, class, and linguistic hegemony? And at what point will it become more self-conscious of its global locations? At present, all of this remains to be determined – and some of it seems a long way off. But given the increasing discussions around trans issues in feminist philosophy, this much is clear: the answers are beginning to take shape.

### Short Biography

Talia Mae Bettcher is a professor of philosophy at California State University, Los Angeles, and she serves as the department head. Some of her articles include ‘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*, 2014a), and ‘When Selves Have Sex: What the Phenomenology of Trans Sexuality Can Teach about Sexual Orientation’ (*Journal of Homosexuality*, 2014b). With Ann Garry, she co-edited the *Hypatia* special issue ‘Transgender Studies and Feminism: Theory, Politics, and Gender Realities’ (2009). With Susan Stryker, she co-edited the *Transgender Studies Quarterly* forthcoming special issue ‘Trans/Feminisms’ (2016). She is currently at work on a monograph entitled *Personhood as Intimacy: A Trans Feminist Philosophy*. Bettcher has also been involved in Los Angeles trans community organizing for over fifteen years and serves on the newly established Transgender Advisory Council for the City of Los Angeles.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> There have been many different family-resemblance accounts of ‘woman’ defended in the feminist philosophical literature. For a list of some, see Kapusta (2016).

<sup>2</sup> See Mikkola (2009) for a full articulation of this argument.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Ann Garry for this point.

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