

The Philosophy of Sex

*Contemporary Readings*

*Sixth Edition*

Edited by Nicholas Power,  
Raja Halwani, and Alan Soble

UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA LAS VEGAS  
LIBRARY

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.  
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

## FOURTEEN

# Trans Women and the Meaning of "Woman"

Talia Mae Bettcher

*In this chapter, Talia Mae Bettcher argues that two dominant models of transsexuality—the "Wrong Body Model" and the "Transgender Model"—are misguided. She provides the beginnings of a third model, a multiple-meaning view, which allows those trans people who wish to fit into the binaries of "man" and "woman" to do so without being pathologized. She argues that instead of starting with the mainstream or dominant meanings of the gender terms "man" and "woman," we ought to take equally seriously their meaning and usage in trans communities. Thus, expressions such as "trans woman" do not simply refer to controversial instances of "woman," and being a trans woman is not a strange type of woman, but a woman, period. This approach enables trans people to avoid accommodating themselves to the dominant usages of gender terms; they thereby reveal, at the same time, the political hegemony of the way these binaries are understood.*

Talia Mae Bettcher is professor of philosophy at California State University, Los Angeles. Among her articles are "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion" in *Hypatia* (2007) and "Trans Identities and First-Person Authority" in Laurie Shrage, ed., *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity* (2009). She coedited *Hypatia's* special issue *Transgender Studies and Feminism: Theory, Politics, and Gender Realities* (2009). She is also the author of *Berkeley's Philosophy of Spirit: Consciousness, Ontology, and the Elusive Subject* (2007). This essay is reprinted, revised, with the permission of Talia Mae Bettcher and the American Philosophical Association, from *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues* 10:2 (Spring 2011): 2–5.

There is a familiar view of transsexuality that speaks of women trapped inside male bodies and men trapped inside female bodies. On this view—let's call it the "Wrong Body Model"—transsexuality is a misalignment

between gender identity and sexed body. At its most extreme, the idea is that one's *real sex*, given by internal identity, is innate. It is on the basis of this identity that one affirms that one has always *really* belonged to a particular sex and has a claim to the surgical procedures that bring one's body into alignment with one's identity.<sup>1</sup> However, one of the problems with this account is that it naturalizes sex and gender differences in a troubling way. Christine Overall remarks, for example, "On this theory, gender is reified, at least for some individuals. As a member of the social group 'women,' I find this idea frightening."<sup>2</sup> As a (trans) woman and as a feminist, I find this idea frightening, too.

There is another view, explicitly political, that has developed over the past twenty years, which says that trans people challenge the traditional binary between man and woman. Because, on this view, trans people do not fit neatly into the two categories "man" and "woman," mainstream society attempts to force trans people into this system in order to make it appear that there is a sharp dichotomy between men and women (when trans people show that there is not). The medical establishment is but one way in which society makes trans people disappear. The forces of oppression aim at invisibility, and the strategy of resistance is to come out and make oneself visible.<sup>3</sup> On this view—let's call it the "Transgender Model"—it is not trans people who are the problem but society itself. One of the difficulties with this account is that many trans people don't view themselves as "beyond the binary" at all but as either men or women. Thus, the Transgender Model seems to invalidate the self-identities of some transsexual people.<sup>4</sup>

Due to problems with both models, I am interested in providing an alternative account that relies on a multiple-meaning view (it is not quite yet a model rivaling the above two, but the beginnings of one). Specifically, my aim is to develop an account that accommodates trans people who see themselves as situated in a binary category while avoiding the pathologization and naturalization of gender identity.<sup>5</sup> I aim to probe deeper into the Wrong Body Model and the Transgender Model and to use the results of this investigation to eventually develop a model both more plausible and more accommodating to the experiences of trans people. In this essay, I make a few preliminary moves in that direction.

My claim is that we can understand the gender identities of (at least some) trans people who situate themselves in a binary category to stand in a "meaning conflict" with more mainstream conceptions of what and who they are. Both the Wrong Body Model and the Transgender Model err in adopting what I call a "single-meaning position"; that is, they assume that a gender term has one meaning only. This leads them to presuppose the dominant meaning of gender terms while erasing resistant ones. Moreover, by presupposing the dominant meanings, both accounts end up accepting the marginal status of trans people. This leads them to try to justify the view that trans people are who they say they are. This is

a bad place to start trans theory and politics, I argue, since non-trans people do not need to justify who they say they are in the same way: to accept this asymmetry is to effectively yield political ground from the very beginning. On the contrary, once we accept resistant, subcultural meanings, there is no need to defend the self-identifying claims of trans people. Instead, the power relations by which trans identities are institutionally enforced from without become fully visible.

My work is informed by my own experience as a (white) trans woman living in the trans activist subcultures of Los Angeles. There we've developed different gender practices (including the use of gender terms such as "woman" and "man") that do not always accord with more mainstream ones. It is my methodological starting point to take such practices seriously. As philosophers, we often rely on our intuitions about language use. This case is no different. It is just that my knowledge concerns a subculture that may seem foreign to some. My starting point is that in analyzing the meaning of terms such as "woman," it is inappropriate to dismiss alternative ways in which those terms are actually used in trans subcultures; such usage needs to be taken into consideration as part of the analysis. This is certainly the case when the question precisely concerns whether a trans person *counts* as a woman or a man.

#### THE SINGLE-MEANING POSITION

Consider a form of transphobia I call "the basic denial of authenticity." A central feature of it is "identity enforcement," whereby trans women are identified as "really men" and trans men are identified as "really women" (regardless of how we ourselves self-identify). Often this kind of identity enforcement (particularly through pronoun use) occurs repeatedly and runs against the trans person's own frequent requests to be treated otherwise. It can appear in mundane interactions between a trans person and a store clerk (e.g., repeated references to a trans woman as "sir") to cases in which a trans person is "exposed" as "really a man/woman, disguised as a woman/man" and subjected to extreme forms of violence and murder.<sup>6</sup>

Now consider the self-identifying claim "I am a trans woman." Frequently, in dominant cultural contexts, the expression "trans woman" is understood to mean "a man who lives as a woman." Is this a case in which an individual merely misunderstands the meaning of the expression? No, because that meaning is accepted by many people and, indeed, often by the media, law enforcement agencies, domestic violence and homeless shelters, and so forth. Yet when I use that expression ("I am a trans woman") in trans subcultures, it simply *does not* mean that. So it is fair to say that identity enforcement does not merely concern whether a gender category expression applies to a person but also what an expres-

sion even means. The enforcer thinks (in the case of the trans woman) that the category "man" applies while the category "woman" doesn't. So the enforcer thinks that if "trans woman" is truthfully said, it can't possibly mean that the person is a woman (and isn't actually a man). Instead, it must mean that the person is merely *pretending* to be a woman. "Trans" would flag something involving pretense and would perhaps have the force of "fake" (as in "fake woman").

There are two ways one might respond to the enforcer. The first involves accepting the single-meaning position; the second involves accepting the multiple-meaning position. In the single-meaning position, "woman" is taken to have a fixed meaning; it is taken for granted that there is *one* concept. The dispute between the enforcer and the trans woman hinges on whether the concept "woman" applies or doesn't apply to her. On this view, "trans" would qualify the term "woman" (taken in the standard meaning) as a particular kind (one who had been assigned male sex at birth, perhaps, who became a woman later). The disagreement concerning the meaning of "transgender" ("fake" versus "transitional") would then hinge on the correct applicability of the term "woman" (or "female"). So to the enforcer, "trans woman" means "man living as a woman" while to the trans woman, "trans woman" means "woman assigned to the male sex at birth." This obviously raises difficult questions about how we ought to analyze terms such as "woman" and "man."

Most people would define "woman" as "adult female human being" and "man" as "adult male human being," thereby considering the differences as biological. Yet many feminists have argued that "woman" picks out a *social* kind, role, or status.<sup>7</sup> If so, that would require an alternative analysis of "woman." Of course, even if we accept a biological definition, we would still have the difficulty of defining "female" and "male" because there are multiple features involved in sex determination (including chromosomal karyotype, gonadal structure, genital structure, reproductive capacity, and hormone levels), not to mention cases in which these features come apart. For example, a person with complete androgen insensitivity syndrome will have XY chromosomes and internal male gonads but a female phenotype. In such cases it may be very difficult to tell whether the person is male, female, or neither. Indeed, it seems plausible that there is no fact of the matter in such cases.

One way to accommodate this multiplicity of features in the single-meaning position is to take gender terms as expressing family resemblance concepts. An analysis of such concepts would not involve specifying their necessary and sufficient conditions but listing their various overlapping features (or family resemblances). This list would include the multiple features above. And one could easily add more cultural features to the list as well, thereby addressing the feminist insight that

there is a significant social component to gender categories like "woman."

With this type of account in hand, one could show that at least *some* trans women meet enough of the conditions required for the application of the category "woman." One might point to hormone levels, surgically altered genitalia, and so forth to defend a claim to womanhood. The enforcer, by contrast, might point to karyotype and birth genitalia in order to defend a verdict of manhood. In such a conflict, the stakes concern which criteria are to weigh more in applying "woman." Notably, however, this strategy does not yield the kind of certainty one wants to validate a trans person's identity claims; at bottom we probably have a factually undecidable question. A trans woman in this case is, far from being a paradigm of womanhood, merely a marginal instance.<sup>8</sup> Whether she counts as a woman would depend on pragmatic and political considerations (concerns about *how best* to draw the line or about which criteria to use and how much weight they have). One might argue that in such hard cases it is best to consider self-identification (rather than karyotype) as decisive.<sup>9</sup> But that decision is not determined by a simple analysis of the concept "woman" but by the view that, in difficult cases, it is better to let people self-identify rather than pick a gender term for them. Despite the fact that the Transgender Model seems to ignore the self-identities of some transsexual people, it actually seems to *get it right* in positioning a postoperative trans woman problematically with respect to the binary. If a postoperative trans woman counts as a woman at all, it is not because she is a paradigmatic woman but because, while problematically positioned with regard to the binary categories, she is, owing to political considerations, *best viewed* as a woman.

The case is grimmer when we consider trans women who have not undergone genital reconstruction surgery and, particularly, those who have not undergone *any* bodily changes at all (hormone therapy, "top surgery," and the like). In terms of governmentally issued IDs, a trans woman who has not undergone *any* medical intervention is likely to not be allowed any changes (so her documentation will consistently say "male"). In cases of public sex segregation, including public change-rooms, domestic violence shelters, homeless shelters, shared hospital rooms, jail and prison housing, and same-sex searches by police officers and other security officials, she is likely viewed as "really male." To be sure, gender presentation may help secure that claim to womanhood. But that might not be enough. Certainly, it seems very hard to see how a trans woman could claim to be a veritable woman on the basis of gender identity *alone* (without such presentation). It even seems unclear how she can be recognized as "in-between" or "problematically positioned" with regard to the categories as the transgender model says. On the contrary, she would probably count as a "man" (just as the enforcer claims). The prob-

lem with the single-meaning position, then, is that it does not appear to do justice to trans people's self-identifying claims about their gender.

### SEMANTIC CONTEXTUALISM

We can understand this disagreement differently if we understand it in terms of a more robust conflict over the very meaning of the term "woman." Already we have had to allow that the term "trans" means something different to the enforcer and to the trans woman: to the former it means "fake" and to the trans woman it might mean "transitional."<sup>10</sup> In the multiple-meaning account I propose, the same is true in the case of the term "woman." In order to bring out the details of my account, I contrast it with a view that is superficially similar to it, namely semantic contextualism. According to semantic contextualism, the extension of "woman" changes depending on the context. Jennifer Mather Saul considers a definition according to which "*X is a woman* is true in a context C [if and only if] X is human and relevantly similar (according to the standards at work in C) to most of those possessing all of the biological markers of female sex."<sup>11</sup>

On this definition, the term "woman" operates as an indexical: its content is determined by the specific context in which it is used since the standards for correct application of the concept contextually vary. However, despite this variability of content, the meaning of "woman" is still fixed in the sense that there is a single rule-governed way in which the content is determined. By analogy, while the indexical "I" changes its referent when different people utter it, the indexical still has a fixed "meaning" insofar as the referent is determined by the rule: "I" refers to the person who utters it."<sup>12</sup> Because of this, I consider contextualism to endorse a single-meaning position.

In the account Saul considers, there can be a context C1 in which the relevant similarity (for correct application of the term "woman") involves "sincerely self-identifying as a woman" and another context C2 in which the relevant similarity involves "having XX chromosomes."<sup>13</sup> Thus, whether a trans woman counts as a woman depends on which standards are relevant in a given context. One of the benefits of this view is that it makes it possible for *any* trans woman (regardless of whether she has undergone medical procedures) to count as woman. It does this by allowing for contexts in which the standard of self-identification is salient in determining correct applicability. It also has the advantage that when trans women count as women in context C1, they do so for metaphysical reasons, that is, for reasons owing to the semantics of the term "woman" and the facts that obtain in the world of that context rather than for political reasons or decisions.

Despite these advantages, however, the account has problems. One major worry Saul raises with this account is that while it allows a trans woman to assert something true when she says, "I am a woman," it trivializes her assertion. For the enforcer is *also* correct. Explaining the worry, Saul says:

The reason the trans woman's claims are true, on the contextualist view, is simply that there are a huge range of acceptable ways to use the term "woman" and the trans woman's way of using "woman" isn't ruled out . . . What the trans woman needs to do justice to her claim is surely not just the acknowledgement that her claim is true but also the acknowledgement that her opponent's claim is false.<sup>14</sup>

A second, related worry is that in questions concerning whether a trans woman is a woman, there does not seem to be room for metaphysical disagreement. First, note that this question is going to have to be context sensitive. That is, the question whether a trans woman is a woman must be relative to a given context. So the question comes down to which standards are applicable in a given context (say, for example, the context of restroom use). But the only way to make sense of the dispute is to see it as a political one. That is, the only way to arbitrate the dispute is by appealing to political and moral facts. Meditating on the word "woman" is probably not going to yield an answer. As Saul explains, "On my view of 'woman,' I cannot argue that the lawmakers are making a mistake about how the word 'woman' works. But what I can do is argue that they are morally and politically wrong to apply the standards that they do."<sup>15</sup> While trans women can claim womanhood as a metaphysical fact (relative to a context), in cases of controversy over which standards apply in a particular context, their status as women is once again decided by the political rather than the metaphysical.

Consider two additional concerns. First, there are no similar consequences for most non-trans women because most non-trans women are going to count as women *on almost any reasonable standard* (e.g., self-identification, karyotype, and reproductive capacity). Because of this, there is far less room for somebody to truthfully deny her womanhood (relative to some context). And in cases of dispute over which standards are relevant, most non-trans women count as women regardless of which standards are selected. That is, the question whether non-trans women count as women need not be decided by political decision (largely because the need for a decision would not arise). Most non-trans women would count as women across all or most contexts ("transcontextually"). In this sense, most non-trans women would count as paradigms of "woman." By contrast, trans women would not count as women transcontextually since there are obvious contexts when they do not count (e.g., when karyotype is salient), and so there are cases in which it is controversial

whether trans women are women (it is controversial, that is, which standards to apply).

The second, related worry is that there will be certain contexts in which some trans women *do* count as men due to the fact that they have an XY karyotype, or a penis, or testes. A variation of an example Saul considers is the use of "woman" and "man" by the American Cancer Society when testing for prostate cancer. If it is decided that men of a certain age should be tested, then all trans women who are of that age would count as men in that specific context. The difficulty is that the trans women might not count themselves as men at all in *any* context, or they might not consider their prostates to undermine their claims to (trans) womanhood. Indeed, I know many trans women, for example, who are content with their "male genitalia." However, many do not consider them *male* genitalia in the first place, but the sort of genitalia congruent with transgender femaleness. Similarly, I know many trans men who have no interest in phalloplasty and who consider their genitalia (transgender) *male* genitalia. Often, what happens is that the social meaning commonly associated with a body part is, in a subcultural context, completely changed. In light of this, a trans woman might reasonably complain that testing for prostate cancer cannot be viewed in terms of testing only men (or males). Such a claim, she might argue, is transphobic in that it erases the existence of trans women by treating them as nothing but (non-trans) men. Instead, once trans women are taken seriously, the testing ought to be framed in terms of testing both non-trans men and trans women of a certain age. More simply, the testing could be done on *people* with prostates. That testicles, penises, XY karyotype, and prostates count as *male* in the first place is precisely what trans subcultures are *contesting*.

#### THE MULTIPLE-MEANING POSITION

As there are different gendered practices in different cultural contexts, the conflict over meaning exhibits itself in the contrast between dominant or mainstream culture and trans subcultures. This includes the practice of gender attribution. So a trans person can count as "really a man" according to dominant cultural practices while counting as a woman in friendlier trans subcultures.<sup>16</sup>

It is a fact that in some trans community contexts, the meanings of gender terms (such as "woman") are altered and their extensions broadened. This is a two-step process. First, "trans woman" is taken as a basic expression, not as a qualification of the dominant meaning of "woman." This means that whether someone is a trans woman does not depend primarily on questions about the applicability of the terms "man" and "woman." Recall that on the enforcer's view, "trans woman" means "fake

woman" because "woman" does not apply to the individual (despite her "trying to pass herself off" as one). By contrast, on the family resemblance view, being a "trans woman" depends on one's counting as a woman *simpliciter*. On that view, it seems that only some trans women would count (and marginally so); as we saw above, trans women would have at best a mixture of family resemblance features and so would at best count as difficult cases. As to contextualism, there are at least two possibilities. The first is that when a trans woman does not count as a woman she also does not count as a "trans woman" (i.e., transitional woman). The second is that "trans woman" means "fake woman" in some contexts and "transitional woman" in others.

When I say that "trans woman" is basic I mean that it does not route through the question whether "woman" applies or not; that is, the criteria for the correct application of "trans woman" do not depend on the criteria governing the application of "woman." The criteria are roughly equivalent to the criteria governing "male-to-female trans person." Crudely, a person counts as a trans woman if she was assigned to the male sex at birth, currently lives as a woman, and self-identifies as a trans woman (or as a woman).<sup>17</sup> This means that "trans woman" applies *unproblematically* and *without qualification* to all self-identified trans women. For example, even if a trans woman has no surgical or hormonal changes in her body (while "living as a woman"), she can still count as a paradigm instance of "trans woman."

The second step is that being a trans woman is a sufficient condition for being a woman. "Woman" is then taken to apply to *both* trans and non-trans women (where "non-trans woman" is a person who counts as a woman but who does not count as a trans woman). We thereby end up with entirely new criteria for who is a woman (specified in the criteria for counting a person as a trans woman). And we end up with an extension of "woman" different from the one that refers to only non-trans women (and to trans women who have just enough features to be argued into the category). Indeed, we end up with a notion of "woman" on which a trans woman is a paradigmatic (rather than a borderline) case. Thus, the expression "non-trans woman" operates in the way that "woman" used to operate. "Woman," by contrast, now operates in such a way that it applies to trans women unproblematically. The same shift can occur with terms such as "female" and "male." Subculturally, what *counts* as male and female is broadened. So we can have trans women/females with penises and trans men/males with vaginas (although it is not clear even that terms such as "penis" and "vagina" would always be used in such cases). In such a context, a vagina would not necessarily be female and a penis would not necessarily be male.

The worry with this account is that it also (like the semantic contextualist approach but in a different way) trivializes the claims of trans women (and men). One might say, "Of course you're a teapot, if by 'teapot' we

mean 'human being.' And *of course* you're a woman if by 'woman' we mean 'man who lives as a woman.'" The account, however, is no verbal trick but tracks a difference between cultural practices of gender and the relation of these practices to the interpretation of the body and self-presentation. Whether one is viewed as a "gender rebel" depends on interpretation. If one were viewed as a man, then one's gender presentation would be read as a form of "gender bending" if one wears a skirt. But if the same person were viewed as a woman, then her gender presentation would not be construed as misaligned with her status. The key is whether genitalia are viewed as necessary to one's normative gender status. Since in trans subcultural practices they are not, then in trans subculture a normative social status is reassigned in a very real way: what would count as gender non-normative (in the mainstream) is entirely normative (in the subculture).

This affects the way sex is segregated. To be sure, in trans subcultural formations there is no control over institutions (such as jail housing and strip-search requirements). But there can certainly be control over the way bodies may be subject to different privacy and decency boundaries. For example, "normally" a man's chest is not subject to taboos against nudity, but in trans subcultures, it might be read as a woman's chest or at least a chest that is subject to such taboos.

So this conflict of meaning is undergirded by a conflict in gender practice. And this gendered practice informs (and is informed by) a basic conception (or narrative) of how the world is composed of various different types of gendered people. There is a genuine dispute concerning two competing visions of gender. And the taken-for-granted assumption that the dominant cultural view is the only valid one can be seen as a kind of cultural arrogance bolstered by institutional power.

Consider someone who lives as a woman, sees herself as a woman, and has been sustained in a subculture that respects her intimacy boundaries, only to find that she is subject to violence because she is "really male." She goes through mainstream institutions (hospitals, jails) where she is housed as male, searched as male, and turned away from a shelter as male. This invalidation is not only of an individual's self-identity but also of an entire life that has been lived with dignity in a competing cultural world.<sup>18</sup> My point is that this conflict over meaning is deeply bound up with the distribution of power and the capacity to enforce a way of life, regardless of the emotional and physical damage done to the individual.

The multiple-meaning view allows us to avoid the difficulties that plague the family resemblance account, for according to my view, all trans women count as women and do so paradigmatically, not marginally. And trans women count as women not owing to a political decision that arises as a consequence of their status as "difficult cases" but owing to the metaphysical facts that accord with the very meaning of the word

"man" and "woman" as deployed in trans subcultures. That is, from the perspective of trans subculture, the enforcer who denies that a trans woman is a woman would be *making an error* every bit as much as if he were to call a non-trans woman a man.

My view also avoids some of the difficulties that plague semantic contextualism. This might not be obvious since the multiple-meaning account might seem to be merely a version of it, given that it seems I have only added a new context-relative standard. In particular, one might worry that this account is open to the following objections that suggest its similarity to semantic contextualism. First, while it is true that from the perspective of trans subculture the enforcer is incorrect in denying that a trans woman is a woman, it is also true that from the perspective of dominant culture he is correct. Since the trans woman cannot claim that the enforcer's view is false, her self-identity claim is trivialized. In this way, the account is similar to semantic contextualism. Second, the decision regarding which perspective to take (the dominant or the resistant one) is a political one. So whether a trans woman counts as a woman is again a political decision. By contrast, a non-trans woman will count as a woman regardless of such political decisions; there is an asymmetry. Again, this is a problem that also plagued semantic contextualism. Replying to these objections helps show how my account differs from contextualism. I start with the first objection.

First, a trans woman can reject the entire dominant gender system as based on false beliefs about gender and gender practices that are harmful and even oppressive.<sup>19</sup> That is, while she might agree that she is not a woman in dominant culture, she can reject, on philosophical grounds, the entire system of gender that dominant cultures circulate. To see this, consider the following analogy. According to an evangelical account of "sinner," I would count as one. But it does not follow that I am one even though I might meet all the criteria of the evangelical account. In rejecting the claim that I'm a sinner, I'm rejecting the entire picture of the world in which that term has its definition fixed. Similarly, a trans woman can reject as false the claim that she is "really a man" by rejecting the entire system of gender in which that claim is true (on the grounds discussed above). This move does not work in the case of semantic contextualism, of course, since a trans woman who fails to accept that there are some contexts (e.g., karyotype-salient contexts) in which she is not a woman is simply wrong. On the multiple-meaning view, a trans woman can say that she is a woman in *all* legitimate contexts because those contexts in which she is not a woman occur in a dominant culture that has been rejected for the reasons mentioned above. She can argue that the very belief in contexts in which she counts as a man (for example, a context in which genital structure is relevant) rests on the assumption that penises *are* male and is therefore grounded in a vision that marginalizes trans women from the start.

Once we accept this response, we obviously also need to recognize that the shift in usage is *far more radical* than the mere introduction of a new contextually relative standard. It makes more sense to speak of a transformation in meaning or concept than to speak of a new contextually relative standard. Put another way, there are actually two concepts and two meanings of "womanhood." The two concepts (and the two meanings) are related in that the latter is the result of changes performed on the former. One starts with a particular concept and then expands it, for example, to include something that wasn't included in it before. This makes sense if we think of gender concepts as determined, in part, by underlying gender practices and conceptions of what a gendered world is. Once practice and conception seriously change, one can plausibly argue that the concepts change as well.

This allows us to reply to the second objection: we need not think that trans women only count as women on the basis of a political decision while non-trans women do not. Given that we can now speak of two concepts of "womanhood" (a dominant one and a resistant one), the question, "Are trans women really women?" does not get off the ground. Instead, we need to disambiguate the two concepts. A preoperative trans woman might be a woman-R ("woman" in the resistant sense) but not as a woman-D ("woman" in the dominant sense). She would be a woman-R and fail to be a woman-D not as a matter of political decision but metaphysically speaking. The political question, instead, concerns *which* concept we should take seriously, and this is connected to the larger question regarding which gendered vision of the world (if any) we commit to. Notably, these questions do not arise because of trans women counting as "difficult cases." And these questions *also* confront non-trans women. A non-trans woman who self-identifies as a woman-D can be seen as taking up a political stance that marginalizes trans women by endorsing a transphobic gendered view of the world. Or a feminist project that proceeds with the concept woman-D could be viewed as anti-trans. In my account, the worry is not that non-trans women alone count as paradigmatic women. The worry, rather, is that a non-trans woman can avail herself of a concept (that is part of a larger gendered vision of the world) that marginalizes trans women. When a non-trans woman accepts this concept about what counts as a woman-D, this is the effect of privilege, not of it being the case that she is a paradigmatic woman while trans women are not.

So the multiple-meaning account I have outlined is not a variant of semantic contextualism, for it can *solve* the problems that confronted that account. Insofar as it squares with the reality of trans subcultural usage while addressing these problems, it seems to be the best account for our purposes. And by taking the multiple-meaning account seriously, we can now see some basic problems with both the Wrong Body Model and the Transgender Model.

## STARTING POINTS FOR TRANS STORIES

This distinction between the single-meaning and multiple-meaning positions reveals something important about starting points in trans politics. Consider the question (among some non-trans feminists) whether trans women do or do not count as women. In raising such a question, trans women are viewed as difficult cases with respect to the category "woman." In this way, the inclusion of trans women in the category of "woman" is something in need of defense (unlike the taken-for-granted inclusion of non-trans women). Notably, this asymmetry, which places the womanhood of trans women in jeopardy, arises only if we assume the dominant understanding of "woman." If we assume a resistant understanding of "woman," no question arises since trans women are exemplars of womanhood. While it might sometimes be a useful strategy to assume a dominant understanding of "woman" in order to defend the inclusion of trans women (as difficult cases), an unquestioned assumption of the dominant understanding is a bad starting point in trans politics and theory. It ignores resistant meanings produced in trans subcultures, thereby leaving us scrambling to find a home in the dominant meanings, those meanings that marginalize us from the get-go.

Consider an analogy. When I teach an undergraduate course in the philosophy of gender, I examine arguments that purport to show the immorality of "homosexuality."<sup>20</sup> I try to show students why these arguments are unsound because it is important to debunk the (bad) arguments that harm lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual (LGBT) people. However, in a graduate seminar in LGBT studies, I would not engage this issue because this would play into the hands of a heterosexist cultural asymmetry that places homosexuality in moral jeopardy while leaving the moral status of heterosexuality unquestioned—a questionable political starting point.

Similarly, it is a questionable political starting point to accept as valid the dominant understanding of gender categories that situate trans people as, at best, problematic cases. To be sure, it might be a useful strategy to adopt the dominant understanding in particular situations. But I worry about any theory designed to illuminate trans oppression or resistance that unreflectively accepts a dominant understanding of categories.

In the Wrong Body Model, one counts as a woman-D (at best) to some degree and with qualification, so long as an appropriate authority recognizes one as possessing the right gender identity and one undergoes, as much as possible, a transformative process to conform to the dominant concept of woman. A dominant understanding of the category is presupposed and an asymmetry is tacitly accepted whereby trans membership in the category requires justification. As a consequence, trans people who do not value genital reconstruction surgery are taken not to have the

right gender identity, and they are delegitimated as “mere” cross-dressers. A result of the Wrong Body Model’s affiliation with dominant meanings is that trans people who live their lives with dignity in different subcultural worlds of meaning are simply kicked to the curb.

The Transgender Model also marginalizes trans people. It presupposes a dominant understanding of the categories “man” and “woman” under which trans people fit only marginally or as difficult cases not easily categorized. Here, a trans person would be—at most—legitimized as a (marginal) woman through somehow arguing that she meets enough of the dominant criteria of membership. Similarly, a trans person could be legitimized as “in-between” by showing under which dominant categories the person falls and does not fall. In both cases, the dominant understanding is presupposed and the position of trans people vis-à-vis the categories is justified by pointing to the criteria of membership in *these categories* (unlike non-trans people who are accepted as paradigmatic of the dominant categories and therefore in no need of justification). Once we take resistant meanings seriously, however, it is no longer clear why a trans person who sees herself as a woman is only marginally so at best. And it is far from clear why certain bodies count as in-between. Once trans men and trans women are taken as paradigms of concepts like “man” and “woman,” it becomes doubtful that their bodies are problematic or in-between. Perversely, then, the Transgender Model, like the Wrong Body Model, ends up dismissing the lived lives of trans people.

#### FINAL REMARKS

As I have framed it, there is a different and expanded notion of womanhood in trans subcultures. Although I have spoken as if there is only one understanding, this is misleading because trans subculture is generally replete with multiple and sometimes conflicting accounts of gender. After all, it is hard to be trans and avoid thinking a little bit about what a woman is, what a man is, what gender is, and the like. Gender terms (“trans,” “transgender,” “transsexual,” “woman,” etc.) simply won’t stay put. Instead of understanding “trans woman” as a subcategory of an expanded category of womanhood, trans women may *also* be conceptualized as in-between with respect to the traditional categories where they do not count as women *simpliciter* (i.e., as non-trans women) who *are* seen as part of the binary. It is just not obvious how trans people are going to understand the term “woman” when they self-identify (or do not self-identify) with that term.

Such variability is not an “anything goes” approach. In trans subcultures, the use of these gender terms is subject to some constraint. Moreover, there is a fairly common linguistic practice. Claims about self-identity in (some) trans subcultures have the form of first-person, present-

tense avowals of mental attitudes (e.g. “I am angry at you”).<sup>21</sup> This means that the shift in meaning involves not only an expansion of the category but also a change in use, reflected in the grammar of first- and third-person assertions. It is no longer merely a question whether the category is truthfully predicated of the object in question. Instead, there is a first-person, present-tense avowal of gender. For example, the claim “I am a trans woman” may be an avowal of a deep sense of “who one is” (that is, of one’s deepest values and commitments). And as such, this is the prerogative of the first person alone where defensible avowals of gender are presumptively taken as authoritative. Fundamental to this practice is the idea that gender categories do not merely apply (or fail to apply) on the basis of objective criteria but are adopted for personal and political reasons. For example, the category “trans woman” might be avowed or disavowed because the category does not speak to “who they are,” because it does not fit or feel right. Alternatively, it might be avowed or disavowed on solely political grounds. Insofar as such considerations are fundamental to the very practice of gender attribution in these contexts, it is easy to see why this is such a shift from the dominant practice of gender attribution, which operates independently of such considerations. The shift makes room for the multiplicity of meaning by allowing first-person authority over both gender avowal and the very meaning of the avowal.

The point I have defended in this essay is that accounts that take for granted singular, fixed meanings of gender terms cannot plausibly provide a liberatory theory. Not only do such accounts go wrong by failing to square with the actual reality of the situation, namely the fact that central terms are used in trans contexts in multiple and contested ways; they actually undermine trans self-identifications by foreclosing the possibility of this multiplicity. These accounts do so, in part, because they aim to justify the categorization of trans people by appealing to the dominant meanings. This, I have argued, implies an acceptance of a marginalizing asymmetry between trans and non-trans people from the beginning. To provide a satisfying account of trans phenomena, gender marginalization cannot be accepted as a starting point. The demand for justification and the demand for illumination are not the same. We need new accounts, I believe, that don’t begin with a *justification* for trans self-identity claims but that follow subcultural practice in taking the presumptive legitimacy of such claims for granted. This requires *recognizing* the multiplicity of resistant meanings rather than *acquiescing* to the dominant culture’s erasure of them. In my view, it is the only way to yield illuminating accounts of trans phenomena that do not proceed from transphobic starting points.<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

1. For some examples, see Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 150–51. Not all transsexuals have endorsed this view.

2. Christine Overall, "Sex/Gender Transitions and Life-Changing Aspirations," in *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, edited by Laurie Shrage (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11–27, at 14. The worry is that culturally determined gender behavior, beliefs, and attitudes are often very harmful to women. So it is troublesome to treat them as natural or as essential because it makes them seem unchangeable and even suggests that this "is how it is meant to be."

3. This account glosses over significant differences among thinkers such as Kate Bornstein, Leslie Feinberg, and Sandy Stone. See Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 1993); Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, edited by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 280–304. However, this account captures the general idea frequently assumed in discussions of trans issues. For a more in-depth discussion of the transgender paradigm, see Talia Mae Bettcher, "Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues," <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-trans>, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta (accessed March 10, 2012).

4. It is possible for variants of the Transgender Model to appeal to the notion of an innate gender identity. However, social constructionism about gender has definitely figured very prominently in this model.

5. By "naturalization" I mean that something cultural is treated as "natural" (that is, as independent of culture). In this case, I mean that gender identity is treated as innate. By "pathologization" I mean that something nonpathological is treated as though it is pathological.

6. For a more detailed account of the basic denial of authenticity, see Talia Mae Bettcher, "Appearance, Reality, and Gender Deception: Reflections on Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Pretence," in *Violence, Victims, and Justifications*, edited by Felix Ó Murchadha (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 175–200.

7. For a detailed discussion of the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory, see Mari Mikkola, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender," [plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta (accessed March 10, 2012).

8. For this style of approach, see C. Jacob Hale, "Are Lesbians Women?" *Hypatia* 11:2 (Spring 1996): 94–121; John Corvino, "Analyzing Gender," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 17:1 (2000): 173–80; Cressida Heyes, *Line Drawings: Defining Women through Feminist Practice* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Jennifer McKittrick, "Gender Identity Disorder," in *Establishing Medical Reality: Essays in the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Biomedical Science*, edited by Harold Kincaid and Jennifer McKittrick (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 137–48.

9. See Corvino, "Analyzing Gender," 179, for this type of view.

10. I say "might" because I argue below that different trans women can mean different things by the expression "trans woman."

11. Jennifer Mather Saul, "Politically Significant Terms and the Philosophy of Language: Methodological Issues," in *Out from the Shadows: Analytical Feminist Contributions to Traditional Philosophy*, edited by Sharon L. Crasnow and Anita M. Superson (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2012), 195–216, at 201. Saul does not accept this account but uses it to develop the methodological point that very different considerations can inform analysis when the term is politically significant. For example, in analyzing "woman," Saul thinks that it is important to do justice to a trans woman's self-identity claims. Such intuitions are not easily explained away as they might be when we are not thinking of politically fraught cases precisely because so much more

seems to hinge on them. She then suggests that this is relevant to philosophers of language more generally. My point is less methodological, although I'm obviously concerned to take the claims of trans women seriously. My proposed account does justice to trans women's self-identity claims in a way that a semantic contextualist account does not. Besides, I do draw on trans subcultures' use of gendered language as crucial data in my analysis of gender terms. Taking seriously how trans people use the terms is often overlooked in analyses of these types.

12. My formulation of the rule is obviously too simple. But that doesn't matter for my purposes.

13. Saul, "Politically Significant Terms," 201, 203.

14. Saul, "Politically Significant Terms," 209–10.

15. Saul, "Politically Significant Terms," 204.

16. I am largely indebted to C. Jacob Hale for this type of view. See his "Leather Dyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex without Men and Women," *Social Text* 52/53, 16:3–4 (1997): 223–36.

17. It is also possible to recognize somebody as a trans woman despite the fact that she has not yet "transitioned" and does not yet self-identify as a woman (or a trans woman) in case this person eventually transitions. Explaining this is actually quite tricky, however, so I won't worry about it in this paper. I am grateful to Jennifer Saul for pressing me to think about this more.

18. The notion of "world" originates in the work of María Lugones. My understanding of cultural conflicts over meaning is informed by her view. See her "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 2:2 (Summer 1987): 3–19.

19. Here are some examples. One false belief is that gender terms only have single (dominant) meanings. Another is that all people are either "naturally" male or female. And, of course, there are many others that involve treating cultural phenomena as "natural" manifestations of gender. By "harmful gender practices" I mean to include those practices that involve treating trans people with violence and those that are sexist and sexually violent. For a discussion of these practices see Talia Mae Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 22:3 (Summer 2007): 43–65.

20. I have worries about the term "homosexuality" as it derives from a sexological framework in which same-sex sexuality is viewed as pathological.

21. For development of this view, see my "Trans Identities and First Person Authority," in *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, edited by Laurie Shrage (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2009): 98–120.

22. Parts of this essay were published as "Without a Net: Starting Points for Trans Stories," *American Philosophical Association LGBT Newsletter* 10:2 (Spring 2011): 2–5. I am grateful to the editor, William Wilkerson, for his comments. I am also grateful for the extremely helpful feedback by Raja Halwani and Nicholas Power in finalizing this version of the essay. I would also like to thank Jennifer Saul for her (always) insightful and constructive comments.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Clearly explain the differences between the single-meaning position and the multiple-meaning position. Explain also the variations in the single-meaning position. Compare and contrast these views with your own prior and pretheoretical understanding of your own sex or gender.

2. What is semantic contextualism? How does it differ from the multiple-meaning view, and why does Bettcher reject the former and accept the latter?
3. Think, in relation to semantic contextualism, what would count as a context. That is, how are we to identify and individuate contexts? Is this a problem that, in addition to the problems mentioned by Bettcher mentions, threatens the view?
4. Should the usage of gender terms in trans communities be taken, as Bettcher argues, on a par with the usage in mainstream communities? Imagine what Bettcher would say in response to the answer, "No, it should not, because trans communities are minorities."
5. How would Bettcher reply to the "anti-social-constructivist" objection that nothing about the world is implied by a word just because people mean something specific by that word? For example, suppose that some people use "rabbit" to mean "squirrel." Should we take this meaning seriously? How would such cases differ from how gender terms are used in trans communities?
6. Is deciding to accept subcultural meanings as being as equally valid as mainstream meanings a political decision? Investigate how the answer to this question affects Bettcher's view, according to which "trans women count as women not owing to a political decision."
7. Trace the implications, for her overall argument, of Bettcher's claim, made at the end of her essay, that trans communities use gender terms in "multiple and contested ways."