Reimagining Transgender

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Abstract: Transgender often is understood either as an identity, or else as the full spectrum of gender nonconformity. In this essay, I advocate for recentering transgender on the experience of costly and willful gender deviance.

I Know What I Am

In his ethnography, *Imagining Transgender*, David Valentine (2007) describes his experience of interviewing "fem queens" in the Meat Market District of New York City. Going into these interviews, Valentine expected that most of the queens would consider themselves transgender, and avail themselves of community services that specifically serve transgender communities. He soon discovered that, while some did, many others embraced alternative self-descriptions. Consider Valentine's interview with Anita, a twenty-four year old Puerto Rican queen:

DV: Do you know what this term 'transgender' means?
Anita: No.
DV: You never heard it before?
Anita: No.
DV: Um, but, OK do you know what transexual means?
Anita: Transexual means a sex change right?
DV: Uh, yeah. You don't consider yourself to be transexual?
Anita: No.
DV: No, OK. But, and do you consider yourself to be a woman?
Anita: I consider… yes, yes, but *I know what I -- I know what I am,* but I… I… you know, I treat myself like a woman, you know I do everything like a woman. [...]
DV: You… do you consider yourself to be gay then?
Anita: Yes! [...]
DV: Even though you live as a woman.
Anita: Yes.

DV: Right, OK.
Anita: I know I'm gay and I know I'm a man.[1]

In this exchange, we see Valentine, a scholar of gender and sexuality, struggle to understand and be understood by Anita. Although Anita—who began feminizing hormones in adolescence—lives as a woman and goes by 'she', she does not categorically reject her originally prescribed gender. Anita does not assert that she is not a man. To the contrary, Anita still considers herself a man; she is a "gay…man", she tells Valentine, who "knows what she is".

That last piece, in particular, is the starting point for this essay: whatever words or categories Anita uses to describe herself, she knows what she is. I resonate with this insistence. Until I was in my mid-twenties, I did not have the requisite concepts or epistemic communities to categorically reject womanhood. Until then, I begrudgingly reported to those who asked—and many did—that I was a girl. I accepted this definition, prescribed to me by my family, church, and broader society, as immutable and inevitable. Rather than place myself outside of it, I carved out spaces to exist within it. As a kid, this meant calling myself a tomboy; later, I tacked the word butch onto woman or lesbian. But the hermeneutical tools at my disposal—and those I wanted to deploy—changed over time. Today, if asked, I will report that while I am a man to some and a woman to others, I am neither to myself. I now call myself transgender, but only as shorthand for a personal history, both painful and joyous, of extreme gender deviance. Over the years, and despite the various categories and labels that I've deployed in my struggle for intelligibility, I have always felt, like Anita, that I know what I am. Or, to be more precise, I have always known that my happiness required pursuing desires that deeply conflicted with the gender norms imposed on me. And so I have chosen, sometimes instinctively and sometimes deliberately, to actualize—or attempt to actualize—those forbidden desires.

Those who live out significant forms of gender deviance know that this choice always is accompanied by a demand for justification—an interrogation that, as Gayle Salamon (2009, 227) writes, is at once "both politics and ethics". People around us urgently feel the need to know why we have rejected their natural, normal, or ordinary way of being in favor of something weird, disgusting,

[1] Valentine (2007, 114-115).

unnatural, or queer.[2] The response, "I know what I am" will not satisfy. For the demand is that *they* must know what we are, and come to know using only linguistic and conceptual frameworks already familiar to them.[3]

That task is an impossible one. Culture's prevailing hermeneutical tools were not designed for those who are compelled to follow their internal compass deep into the territory of gender deviance. Faced with this justificatory demand, we do what we can. We stitch words and concepts together in an attempt to make ourselves understood, or else invent new words altogether. For this reason, you'll find a wide array of self-affixed titles among us. We are trans men and trans women, we are transmasculine and transfeminine, we are butches and femmes and bois and queens, and so many other things besides. But beneath this explosive bouquet of labels, we share something in common. We all desire to live in ways that deeply conflict with the gender norms that we were prescribed, and in our pursuit of happiness, we have chosen to bear the cost of following those desires. We are willfully gender deviant, but in the same sense as we willfully draw breath: we choose to do so, but doing so is compulsory for our well-being.

In this essay, I want to advance the thought that this experience of consequential and willful gender deviance is at the heart of transgender. My focus is on the term transgender as a noun rooted in a verb: it is a concept that concerns the treacherous pursuit of gender transgressive desire.[4] For largely grammatical reasons, this emphasis leads me to often use transgender as an adjective that modifies experience, as in the phrase 'transgender experience'. But in using this phrase, I mean to signal lives that are characterized by shouldering what Lauren Berlant (2012, 45) describes as the "costs of not acceding to normatively sexualized life narratives". Similarly, when I talk about transgender people, I do not mean people who have adopted a particular self-articulation or explicit identity; instead, I mean to signify a heterogenous group that is unified around

[2] Berlant (2012, 44): "[P]eople are schooled to recognize as worthwhile only those desires that take shape within the institutions and narratives that bolster convention and traditions of propriety. They learn, further, to be afraid of the consequences when their desire attaches to too many objects or to objects deemed 'bad'." See also Sedgwick (2008).
[3] See Bettcher (2009, 110): "[I]f [a trans woman] is not avowing genital status, [a non-trans-friendly person will wonder] what is she doing and why? Indeed, since gender presentation is no longer taken to communicate genital status, this ignorance does not merely concern what she is doing with words, it concerns all gendered behavior and self-presentation."
[4] Chu (2017)

transgender experience. In taking this view, I diverge from the popular idea that transgender is foremost a personal attribute—specifically, an attribute of identity that each of us either is or is not, has or does not have. My approach also is distinct from the sometimes suggested idea that transgender covers the entire spectrum of gender nonconformity. There certainly is such a thing as transgender identity, but not all who share in transgender experience share in transgender identity. And while no one is perfectly gender conforming, not everyone has transgender experience.

Here, with apologies, I need to insert a methodological aside. Philosophers who take up a question of the form 'What is X?' sometimes assume that an answer should delineate X's boundaries. This can result in proposals that purport to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for something being X or an instance of X. For example, philosophical analyses of personhood or free will are often articulated in the form 'Something is a person if and only if…' or 'Someone has free will if and only if…' I have multiple concerns with this methodology.[5] For present purposes, my most pressing worry is that this methodology is ill-suited for an inquiry into transgender, which I do not think has knowable, definitive, or fixed boundaries. This exploration calls for a different approach. In particular, I believe that it calls for us to consider the work that we ask transgender to do, and describe the core meanings suggested by that conceptual labor.[6] The essay before you is an exercise in this method. My goal is to examine what meaning lies at the center of transgender, not to demarcate rules governing this notion's borders. My hope is that, in so doing, this method will illuminate who belongs at the center of transgender politics, whatever you think about its borders.

What I have to say is limited in scope. I will offer considerations in favor of the idea that transgender centers the experience of costly and willful gender deviance, distinct from both transgender identity and gender nonconformity. I won't provide a complete philosophical picture of willful gender deviance, or a schema for determining when that deviance is costly. I will not speculate on why, for some, flourishing requires the dangerous pursuit of gender deviant desires, nor will I comment on the important connections between transgender and related notions from the past such as transsexual, transvestite, or invert.[7] As

[5] Dembroff (2020), 12.
[6] See Haslanger (2012) for further discussion of this methodology.
[7] Meyerowitz (2004); Stryker (2008); Halberstam (2018); DeVun (2021).

for the historical and cultural scope of transgender, my only view is that wherever we find costly and willful gender deviance, there we also find transgender. This approach maintains that transgender is a powerful political tool that can unite people with shared needs, even across many differences. Whatever language and concepts we mix, match, and produce to answer others' demands for justification, we know what we are.[8]

Transgender Experience & Transgender Identity

The proposal that transgender centers the experience of costly and willful gender deviance differs from the increasingly prevalent idea that transgender is the same thing as *being* transgender, understood as an identity that everyone either has or does not. Transgender, on this meaning, is less a matter of social experience, and more a matter of self-conceptualization or self-articulation. On a particularly common version of this idea, someone is transgender just in case that person categorically rejects the gender that they were originally prescribed—that is, if they explicitly refuse classification within the gender category that they were placed into during infancy.[9]

This meaning produces what is now a widely-accepted binary:

Transgender/Cisgender: Anyone who explicitly rejects membership in their originally prescribed gender category is transgender, and anyone who does not is cisgender.

This binary is rooted in an all-or-none perspective—you either explicitly reject your initial gender classification, or you do not. If you do, then you have a transgender identity; if you do not, then you have a cisgender identity.[10]

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[8] I believe that Talia Bettcher (2009, 98) had the same point in mind when she argued that trans people have "first-person authority over their own gender". Our nonconforming features are expressions of internal awareness about what is required for our personal health and well-being. As a result, we have first-person authority over the personal necessity of that nonconformity, say what you will about the 'natural' and the 'normal'. See also Baynton (2001).

[9] We can get a better grip on categorical disidentification with help from Katharine Jenkins's (2018) idea of norm relevance. To categorically disidentify with your prescribed gender is to experience the norm 'you should be categorized as a man' or 'you should be categorized as a woman' as not relevant to oneself. It occurs when people explicitly resist this norm—typically, by assertions like, "I am not a man/woman".

[10] Cailin O'Connor (2019) argues that binary taxonomies can make human coordination more efficient, but quickly create entrenched and self-perpetuating social divides between the two groups. See also Darwin

I doubt that self-articulations always are so clear as to fit a binary, but I won't here dwell on my qualms with discrete demarcations of transgender and cisgender identity. Some people have explicit self-articulations that reject their prescribed gender category; others do not. These identities—and the differences between them—are real and culturally significant. But this binary is asked to do additional work: it is presumed to provide information about social, economic, and political welfare. Practically speaking, transgender and cisgender serve as shorthand to illuminate which people do and which people do not experience marginalization and harm due to their willful gender deviance.[11] Although defined in terms of identity, these categories are taken to entail certain social experiences, with transgender identity in particular serving as a proxy for what I'm here calling transgender experience.

There is some reason to think that this proxy is acceptable. Categorically rejecting your prescribed gender is extremely taboo; it is itself a costly form of willful gender deviance. We are forbidden from articulating self-conceptions that fundamentally conflict with what those around us take to be an unshakeable and unquestionable truth about us—that we have always been and always will be male (or female), and so a boy/man (or girl/woman).[12] The act of categorical disidentification challenges a dominant ideology that insists that gender classification is not prescribed, but rather an immutable fact of the body. When confronted with people with transgender identities, those in the grip of this ideology face three possibilities: people with transgender identities are deceptive, they are delusional, or gender is not an immutable fact of the body.[13] Because many are unable or unwilling to consider the final possibility, people with trangender identities are frequently marginalized and victimized. This harm is compounded by the fact that transgender identity usually arises out of deviance from additional key gender norms, such as those of embodiment,

(2020, 358). I am not claiming that this is the only use of 'transgender' that would create a transgender/cisgender binary; my point is that it is an actual and widespread use that is largely responsible for creating this binary.

[11] Or, at least, which people are or are not likely to experience this discrimination.

[12] I use male and female here to refer to features believed to make someone a man or a woman within a given social context. What features those are changes across time and place. See Herdt (2020), Meyerowitz (2004).

[13] Bettcher (2007) has extensive discussion of the "evil deceiver or make-believer" trope about those with transgender identities. This trope is actively weaponized within academic philosophy—see, e.g., Stock (2019) and Byrne (2020).

presentation, or sexual and romantic behavior. Given that these forms of deviance are costly as well, they add further reason to think that transgender identity closely correlates with transgender experience.

But consider the reverse. Is transgender experience reliably accompanied by transgender identity? It is here that I start to doubt the wisdom of using identity as a proxy for experience. A sole emphasis on transgender identity overwrites people—like Anita—who are disadvantaged for their gender deviance, but who do not categorically reject their prescribed gender. When confronted with someone like Anita, the transgender/cisgender binary splutters and implodes. To call her cisgender practically communicates a weighty falsehood: that Anita does not experience severe discrimination due to her gender deviance. To call her transgender misrepresents her self-understanding, and amounts to a condescending declaration that we—whoever 'we' are—know better than her what she is.

When we reduce transgender to transgender identity, or assume that transgender experience always goes hand-in-hand with transgender identity, we forget that the conceptual and linguistic tools at someone's disposal—and those they want to deploy—differ across groups. What's more, they differ in ways that frequently track historical, geographical, racial, and class differences. Desire and the articulation of desire are shaped and directed—even if not determined—by the material and cultural conditions that we inhabit. As Dean Spade (2015) and Valentine (2007) point out, ignoring this variability has serious costs in the context of organizations and social services designed to aid transgender communities. When these organizations reduce transgender to transgender identity, Valentine writes, they "cannot account for the experiences of the most socially vulnerable gendervariant people". They end up further marginalizing the very people that they intended to serve.

The same is true in feminist and gender justice movements. From local meet-ups to grassroots political groups, dangerous exclusion comes with flattening transgender into transgender identity. This flattening not only limits people's access to necessary resources, it also places a transgender/cisgender wedge between gender deviant people who do and those who do not categorically disidentify with their prescribed gender, creating the dangerous illusion that these groups have separate interests and goals. Now, in particular, is not a time for unnecessary division. The global right's war against gender deviance is only

furthered when we undermine bases of political solidarity across those who suffer for their willful deviance, whether or not that deviance includes transgender identity.[14] Our shared, defiant pursuit of desire is political on its own, as it creates space for collective challenges to widely assumed scripts of the good and right relations of gender and sexuality.

This place of unity is well-known in transgender communities. From our own histories and relationships, we are well aware that the term cisgender is inapt to describe someone like Anita. For this reason, we appeal to other words, seeking alternative ways to signal our shared deviance. Not so among anti-trans actors. Whether in the service of gendered nationalism, so-called gender critical feminism, or plain old homophobia, those who direct their rage at transgender people repeatedly leverage the spectre of the transgender/cisgender binary in order to pit gender variant people against each other. They reduce their own gender politics to this binary, and obsess about transgender while ignoring or outright exacerbating pressing feminist issues like reproductive justice, domestic violence, and universal education and healthcare. Meanwhile, they accuse transgender scholars and activists of doing these very things. This—like most anti-trans rhetoric—is projection all too typical of abusive dynamics. Bearing these projections is but one of many costs common to transgender experience.

Transgender and Gender Nonconformity

Centering experience in our understanding of transgender is not a revisionary project. "When it comes to gender and sexuality," Berlant (2012, 3) writes, "there are no introductions…only reintroductions." What I'm advocating actually is a return to the past—a reintroduction with some clarification. The original meaning of transgender within theory and activism lacked a singular focus on identity. Instead, transgender was understood in much broader terms that emphasized the expanse of gender nonconformity and gender variance. Far from trying to fit these experiences into a binary, early champions of the term 'transgender' stressed that gender deviance comes in colorful and diverse shapes, and that it is a fool's errand to try to define them within strictly delimited boundaries.

[14] Corredor (2019).

Jack Halberstam (2018, 8), commenting on this early meaning, writes that the term 'transgender' originally arose in order to serve a particular need: the need for a word that would refer to the "many lived forms" of gender variance, including both those who use medical technologies to alter the body and those who do not. Susan Stryker (2008, 19) echoes this in her now classic book *Transgender History*:

[T]he term ['transgender'] implies movement away from an initially assigned gender position. It most generally refers to any and all kinds of variation from gender norms and expectations… What counts as *trans*gender varies as much as gender itself, and it always depends on historical and cultural context. It seems safe to say that the difference between gender and transgender in any given situation, however, involves the difference between the dominant or common construction of gender and a marginalized or infrequent one.

Transgender, Stryker tells us, points to "movement away" from prescribed gender, characterized by nonconformity with the imposed gender norms of a cultural context. This dynamic description implies that transgender is better understood as a process than as a thing—a doing that individuals undertake to various degrees, and in various ways. Taking similarly inclusive views, Julia Serano (2016, xii) writes that transgender concerns a "broad coalition of gender diverse people (as originally intended)", Leslie Feinberg (1997, x) uses the term to talk about those who "traverse, bridge, or blur the boundary of the gender expression they were assigned at birth", and Riki Wilchins (2017, 58) uses transgender to talk about anyone who "transgresses gender". Despite variation across these descriptions, a clear theme emerges: transgender implies nonconformity with prescribed gender norms.

This is often called the "umbrella meaning" of transgender. Although the identity-based meaning is common in the public sphere, the umbrella meaning prevails within trans and queer studies today, particularly within humanistic disciplines. This meaning has its critics, in no small part because it can be easily interpreted as the view that transgender covers entire spectrum of gender nonconformity. But problems with that interpretation arise once we take into account that everyone, to some degree, in some way, does not perfectly conform to gender norms. As men and as women, people are told they ought to have bodies that look certain ways and that do certain things; that they should walk and talk in certain ways and never in others; that they should love and desire

certain people and act disgusted by others; that they should have certain emotions and never feel or express others; that they should enjoy certain foods and mock others; and so on and so on. The sets of traits that make up norms for men and women are gerrymandered and extensive, as well as fluctuating and contested. They are beyond anyone's attainment. Combing this with the umbrella meaning, Rebecca Reilly-Cooper (2016) concludes (albeit sarcastically) that "every single one of us is transgender".

Reilly-Cooper's quip is largely based on the observation that, because the umbrella meaning points to a spectrum, it gives us no clear cut-off between transgender and not-transgender. And it's true: transgender does not have fixed or precise boundaries. In fact, I think the project of trying to give it some is pernicious. But this isn't unique to transgender, and it doesn't mean that the notion must apply to everyone. We know, for instance, that there is a difference between rich and not-rich, even though we can't find a clear or universal line dividing them.[15] So too, we can know that there is transgender and not-transgender, even if transgender is a spectrum. All the same, Reilly-Cooper has a point: if we are going to distinguish between these things, we do have to say more about what this spectrum is beyond mere nonconformity.

To arrive at a more targeted meaning, I think we need to start with the purpose of transgender, and work backwards from there. What practical and epistemological work is this notion asked to do? We've already looked at one kind of work it does, which is the work of self-articulation outside your originally prescribed gender category. This work can be done with the notion of transgender identity, which only applies to those who explicitly disidentify with this prescribed category. That narrow meaning of transgender is not subject to Reilly-Cooper's critique, but for reasons I've discussed, it cannot do the primary work that we ask transgender to do: identifying those who are vulnerable to material disadvantage because of their willful gender deviance.

What meaning or use serves this purpose? Or, put differently, what meaning do we presuppose whenever we deploy the term transgender for this purpose? Transgender identity cannot be the answer, since many who suffer for their willful gender deviance do not embrace transgender identity. Taking

[15] Similarly for being old, being thin, being bald, etc. See Sorensen (2018) for an overview of the philosophical literature on vagueness, and see Barnes (2010) for a framework for *ontic* vagueness in particular. I remain neutral, here, as to whether transgender is ontically as well as semantically vague.

transgender to include the full spectrum of gender nonconformity does have merits. This extremely broad notion pressures or even dissolves the illusion that transgender experience is alien to 'normal' people—a medicalized dysphoria that most could never even begin to understand. The narrative is both distorted and destructive. No one can fully understand another's experience; that much is a truism. But anyone who has been punished for breaking the unattainable expectations of manhood and womanhood has a toehold to at least partially understand transgender experience. In the threadbare sense of experiencing any receiving retribution for failure to meet any gendered expectations, then, I agree with Reilly-Cooper that everyone is transgender.

But while an umbrella that covers everyone may be helpful for illuminating the universal experience of gender policing and pain, it is not particularly valuable when it comes to efficiently communicating information about those who face severe retaliation for their gender deviance. This lesson is not unique to transgender. Disability, for example, also is a matter of degree, but commonly deployed uses of disability do not include the full spectrum of everyone who has experienced any disadvantage due to any physical or intellectual incapacity or impairment. These uses are contextual and flexible, but restricted: they retain a distinction between disability and non-disability for the purpose of highlighting the immediate and often dire needs of those who experience significant costs due to incapacity or impairment.[16] So too, I think, in the case of transgender. While transgender *can* be used as Reilly-Cooper suggests, actual use of this term is rooted in social and political advocacy, and for good reason. Transgender is a glue that binds together those who are stigmatized, marginalized, abused, or otherwise subject to significant harm because they pursue gender deviant desires. This experience is had by some, but not all. It does not require transgender identity, but it also is not found across the full spectrum of gender variance. Like disability, it is contextual and degreed, but not universal. This restriction is not to place differential value on certain forms of gender deviance, or to erase the importance of more limited means of gender exploration or defiance. It is rather to build awareness about and solidarity between those who are in pressing, practical need of advocacy and civic protections.[17]

[16] Barnes (2016)

[17] In 2021, seventy-nine anti-trans measures—most targeting trans health care or trans kids and their parents—were introduced in US state legislatures. In 2021, the number increased to one hundred forty-seven, and 2022 is on track to continue this pattern.

In addition to this practical point, there is yet another reason why transgender is distinct from mere nonconformity. While gender nonconformity concerns any divergence from cultural gender ideals, transgender specifically emphasizes *willful* divergence. This willfulness emphasizes pursuing deviant desires away from cultural paradigms of manhood and womanhood, and not mere mismatch with these paradigms. There are many ways to miss a target. You might aim at it and miss, or you might aim at it and then be thrown off balance. Some bad actor might move the target as soon as you shoot. These all differ from aiming away from the target, just as unchosen gender nonconformity differs from willful gender deviance. There are many ways—costly ways—that people do not conform to gender norms for reasons entirely outside their control. Where these norms say, for example, that men ought to be physically fit and able to financially support a family, many disabled men and men in poverty are gender nonconforming. Where they say that women should have straight hair and light skin, many women of color are gender nonconforming. Where gender norms are (e.g.) raced, classed, and abled, there is no practical separation of gender variance from race, class, and ability variance. But, with that said, I do not think all gender variance is transgender variance. Transgender, I believe, primarily has to do with transgressions that are expressions of will—variance that flows from desire.[18]

What these transgressions look like and how they are received depends on factors like race, ability, and class.[19] As Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore (2008, 12) write:

Any gender-defined space is not only populated with diverse forms of gendered embodiment, but striated and cross-hatched by the boundaries of significant forms of difference other than gender, within all of which gender is necessarily implicated.

But, even with this nuance added, I think that the focus of transgender remains on deviance that arises from desire. Transgender appears when we defy what we were told to be, because we want to be—and know that we are—something else. It isn't tied to specific nonconforming traits, because it is not about the particular traits we have; it is about the consequences of valuing and reaching

[18] Butler (1990); Vasvári (2006); Foucault (2012).
[19] Snortion (2017); Smith & Hutchison (2014); Cohen (1997).

for nonconforming traits. It occurs when we choose gender defiance, and not as an "effect of helplessness before [our] own sexual and gender orientation".[20] Transgender entails assertion of self.[21]

Not that willful deviance is the whole of transgender experience. Almost everyone has, at some point, defied gender norms. Maybe you're a man who occasionally paints his fingernails, or a woman who stops shaving her legs in the winter. Maybe you explored non-heteronormative desires in college, or decided that marriage and children weren't for you. In some contexts, these actions may result in negative consequences, but they may or may not be systemic or significantly disadvantageous consequences. Even once we narrow our focus to willful deviance, we find again a wide spectrum that comes in many forms and degrees. Given the work we ask transgender to do, we need to narrow in a bit further—focusing not on any willful gender deviance, but on willful gender deviance that carries significant costs. By adding the element of consequence, we arrive at a notion of transgender better suited to identify the social and political dynamics that result in systemic harms targeting those who pursue gender deviant desires.[22]

The scope of this costly and willful gender deviance is flexible. How we understand it will—and, I think, should—depend on the context under consideration, as well as background assumptions about what is relevant to the conversation. And, because gender norms and the mechanisms for enforcing them vary widely across time and place, so too do the details of transgender experience. There is no individual feature that is common among all people with transgender experience. At the same time, some gender norms are more stringently enforced than others. For example, norms of what reproductive features men and women should have, their sexual behavior, and their aesthetic presentation (hair length, clothes, etc.) often are among the most brutally enforced gender norms. Where this is the case, transgender stereotypes represent people who deviate from these norms; those who, statistically speaking, are likely to be heavily penalized as gross gender abberrations.

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[20] Wilchins (2017, 55)

[21] Willful gender deviance is related to what I call 'agential identity' in work with Cat Saint-Croix (2019), or externally actualized desires to relate to others in certain ways. Willful gender deviance actualizes desires of this sort that conflict with prescribed gender relations.

[22] See Dembroff (forthcoming) for a metaphysics of systemic injustice.

Context is essential when we talk about transgender. Both costliness and gender deviance are fundamentally relational notions that do not have fixed thresholds or forms. In refocusing transgender on the experience of costly and willful gender deviance, I am not providing a new litmus test for transgender, or gesturing at a threshold that divides transgender from non-transgender experience. My focus is on what lies at the center of transgender—and so, who should be centered within transgender politics—not the demarcation of its boundaries.[23] The minute we begin to ask who "really" has transgender experience is the minute we turn away from this center to fixate instead on the borders.

Final Thoughts

I've endorsed distinguishing transgender identity from transgender experience, and transgender experience from gender nonconformity. I've also suggested that, given the work we ask transgender to do, this notion should be centered foremost on transgender experience. This experience is both a doing and a reaction to that doing; it points us to those who suffer consequences because they pursue the actualization of their gender deviant desires.

Those caught in the web of anti-trans ideologies might distort this picture, and claim it to show that transgender experience is self-destructive, or that transgender people would be better off if they pursued conformity rather than deviance. But this perspective insidiously warps the reality of trangender experience. Willful defiance of gender norms often is the only passageway between the Scylla of dissociation and the Charybdis of self-destruction.[24] It is a costly path, yes, but it may be the sole alternative to existentially worse outcomes. Transgender people are exponentially more likely to be victims of sexual and domestic abuse, to be marginalized from the workforce, to lack access to health care or social safety nets, and to be victims of violence.[25] But our pursuit of gender deviant desires is not the pursuit of self-destruction. It is rather the pursuit of pleasure, ease, and presence in our bodies and in our relationships. It is the pursuit of happiness. Far from a harbinger of woe, transgender is a testament to the magnetism of self-realization, and of the

[23] Scheman (1997)
[24] Mock (2014); McBee (2014); Tobia (2019); Feinberg (1993)
[25] James, et al. (2016)

intimate connection between self-realization and human flourishing. The desire to be what we know that we are is powerful—for some, it is more powerful than the most viciously enforced paradigms of who and what we ought to be.

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