

Philosophy Meets the *Gendertrash from Hell*

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“You don't look like a poet. You look more like one of those people they're always writing about in the Times.” - Samuel R. Delany, [Dhalgren](#).

The discipline of philosophy is both professional and playful. It plays at deceiving and make-believing about what it is.

This is a confrontational start for an essay, but it is illustrative of confrontation. In 1993, Kiwi wrote about a confrontation with a philosopher for the zine [Gendertrash from Hell](#). The zine series, created by Canadian activist-artists Xanthra Phillippa and Mirha-Soleil Ross, featured essays, guides, poetry, art, critical analysis, personal ads, cartoons, and eulogies for dead friends across four issues from 1993-1995.

In the second issue, Kiwi describes attending a keynote by philosopher Elizabeth Grosz at the 1993 Queer Sites conference in Toronto. Lamenting that the “Queer” in “Queer Sites” excluded trans people, Kiwi takes Grosz’s presentation as exemplary of 1990s academic trans exclusion.

From Kiwi’s vantage point, Grosz was a philosopher with only a cursory scholarly or interpersonal understanding of trans people, posing as an expert with epistemic authority while not even aware of the nascent term “transgender.” As reported in *Gendertrash from Hell 2*, Grosz described transsexual woman etiology as a series of “fantasmatic relations to what they imagine women to be,” using this to explain away suicides as a case of realization that lived womanhood cannot align with the fantasy of womanhood. All the while, Grosz used her paid platform to express worries about vaguely getting “into trouble” with [unnamed others](#).

Kiwi concluded that Grosz's response "was enough to make a transgender throw up."

From the perspective of Kiwi and other *Gendertrash from Hell* contributors, it was Grosz who had a fantasmatic relation with what she imagined trans women to be. Trans woman suicides needed to be linked with the concrete situation of violence and social exclusion experienced by trans women, including suspicious situations where the police dismissed deaths of trans women as suicide rather than murder [without further investigation](#). In contrast, academics could get paid to daydream about the lives of trans women while safely elevated above them through social class and prestige, excepting occasional moments of confrontation and anxiety about getting "into trouble." Though [bad feelings](#) between philosophers and trans people were mutual, the former could be mostly separated from the latter by a wall of class access.

Confrontations are often marked as milestones within trans studies scholarship. Sandy Stone's 1987 essay "[The Empire Strikes Back](#)" is often narrativized as an inaugural text of trans studies. It confronts Janice Raymond, an academic who was publishing [Mary Daly-style](#) mytho-poetic analysis directly about Stone and her [work with Olivia Records](#). In 1995 at a Lesbian and Gay History conference, Susan Stryker [confronted](#) Gay Liberation Front veteran Jim Fouratt by remarking, "I'm transsexual, and I'm not sick. And I'm not going to listen to you say that about me, or people like me, any more." Trans scholars continue to discuss the meaning of these confrontations, as Cameron Awkward-Rich does when thinking about transness alongside maladjustment in his book [The Terrible We](#).

In contrast with Grosz's fantasmatic trans woman, *Gendertrash from Hell*, along with the intellectual and artistic works that [emerged from its scene](#), tended to link transness with social class. Decades earlier, Sylvia Rivera [fought her way to the stage](#) at a Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally to critique the "middle-class, white club" that often excluded trans people and street queens from the 70s gay liberation movement. Almost a decade later Emi Koyama would [elaborate](#) that trans exclusion in feminist organizations often depended on a social ontology of womanhood that brackets out differences in race and social class among women.

As part of a social group that was in transition from unshakeable associations with criminality, madness, sex work, drugs, tabloids, seedy undergrounds, and debased frivolity, Koyama emphasized that white privileged trans people must avoid throwing away others as a bargaining chip for inclusion.

Another writer for *Gendertrash from Hell*, Canadian feminist sociologist Viviane Namaste, [carried forward the spirit of confrontation](#) while continuing to emphasize the erasure of poor trans people, trans sex workers, and trans people living with HIV/AIDS by comparatively privileged academics. Her [main focus](#) was the 1990s rise of gender theory and queer theory, through which academically enfranchised scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz and [Judith Butler](#) could cast the lives of poor trans people as mere abstractions for working through their own projects of gender/sex ontology or performativity. Matthew Cull [has recently framed](#) Namaste's transsexual critique as a philosophical commitment to non-ideal theory in parallel with Charles Mills' [critique](#) of political philosophy as a kind of fanfiction about social agreement that erases the perpetuation of racial, class, and gendered [violence](#).

Namaste's approach centers social class, linking the invisibilized condition of transsexuals with [economic precarity](#), susceptibility to violence as a policing of gender in public space, disposability, the stigma attached with sex work, [police brutality](#), and a lack of services for trans people with HIV/AIDS. This [focus on material exclusion and concrete needs](#) became a prominent theme within the largely unexplored trans blog scenes of the 2000s. In Anne Tagonist's [confrontational 2009 essay](#), she insisted, "Trans women need, more or less in order: decriminalization, housing, education and employment. As in, not being swept off the street, not being banned from shelters, yes being allowed in GED classes, and, well, employment. Can you provide these?"

The academic workplace presents many problems for trans people even when employed. During August I was one of over 800 attendees at the [2nd International Trans Studies Conference](#) at Northwestern University. One frequent conversation that I had with other trans scholars was about feeling lonely and isolated in academic jobs. Although the current [bloom](#) in [trans studies grants and](#)

[jobs](#) appears to mark a moment of success for trans studies in the academy, each of us have to navigate our outward appearance, expressions, reactions to slights, and displays of emotions to a tiring degree within professional spaces even when tactically disrupting these social scripts.

Dan Irving, a scholar of trans underemployment and unemployment, [argues](#) that the difficulty of maintaining employment and the persistent stress of being trans in the workplace can be partly explained by perceptions of trans workers as unable to fulfill the demands of neoliberal service work. Under post-Fordist service economies, workers are expected to cultivate an outwardly pleasant appearance and embodiment that appeals to customers, clientele, co-workers, and employers. Because workers are also human, this involves the suppression of negative feelings and negotiating expressions of self that are considered inappropriate conduct in the workplace. Trans workers stick out in such workplaces because they are perceived as going against the demands of workplace propriety. Non-normative gender expressions run counter to good feelings, such gender self-cultivation distracts from proving one's worth as an employee, and workplace cohesion is disrupted when coworkers feel aggrieved by their proximity with gender alterity. Trans people in the workplace always risk getting into trouble.

[While presenting at the Trans Studies Conference](#), Irving described persistent patterns of trans people putting in extra work to manage the feelings of those around them while having their workplace consistently disrupted by patterns of exclusion, isolation, diminishment, and disposability that are difficult to communicate with others. These patterns can be understood within the broader sphere of what Irving calls "affective economic justice." Although trans people are now increasingly found within the academy, perceptions of trans people in the workplace are likely to carry over into the philosophy workplace as well, structuring work experiences, employment decisions, and the ongoing impacts of stress and loneliness.

A cursory glance at the state of philosophy provides more reasons to associate the discipline's emphasis on propriety and class status with affective employment

injustice against trans people in the workplace. Although demographic information about trans participation in philosophy programs is incomplete, [surveys](#) have indicated that fewer than 1 percent of intended philosophy majors and philosophy Ph.D. recipients self-identified as transgender or non-binary. Such statistics indicate it is likely that philosophers, [like most of the public](#), are unlikely to personally know a trans person as a coworker or in general. In addition to a lack of personal familiarity with trans people, studies indicate that philosophy as a discipline may be among the worst for academic mobility, with [mentor impact and mentee impact strongly correlated](#). Philosophy's emphasis on prestige and propriety still likely impacts the life of the discipline, meeting with the longstanding framing of gender alterity as constituting a [“dangerous class” or “social scum”](#) or [“sewerized identities.”](#) It is this framing of transness that is reformed into confrontation through the language of “gendertrash from Hell.”

In 2009 Naomi Zack reflected on the relationship between academic philosophy and the [social ontology of the freak](#). As with Irving, Zack argued that trans people are likely to experience exclusion within professional philosophy because the choice to live as openly trans and to transition goes against expectations of gender, class, race, and disability propriety within the discipline. She wrote about her friend Daseia Cavers-Huff, a non-trans tenured professor working at Riverside Community College, and the consistent exclusion that she experienced in philosophy due to her race, her openness about her class background, her size, her dress, her exuberance, her disability, and her uncompromising displays of interdisciplinary brilliance. Zack uses the essay to confront professional philosophy and its failure to mourn Cavers-Huff's death, marking a persistent disdain and cowardliness towards those considered “freaks” within the discipline. She concludes that philosophy must reckon with its institutional and interpersonal character as a workplace that gossips about, shuns, excludes, and isolates people who openly live distasteful lives.

The history of confrontation between [trans people and philosophy](#) challenges us to think more deeply about the historical relationship between philosophy as a workplace and trans people as an excluded and stigmatized social class. This

complicates extreme positions held by some philosophers who insinuate that the leakage of transness into polite society happened through an imposition by vague moneyed interests. Kathleen Stock [imagines](#) this partly involved a “top down” agenda “coming from elites,” which “literally came from Tumblr” through privileged teens and then was laundered by academics attempting a “power grab” of a distinctly “bourgeois” character. Conveniently, her own situation as an academic and philosopher in weaving this narrative remains unconsidered. Similarly, Slavoj Žižek [frames](#) “transgenderism” as an imposition of “the business community,” “big capital,” and “big business.”

A longer history of the relationship between philosophy and trans people, as I have attempted to restore in this brief essay, demystifies or at least deeply complicates such accounts. To better understand the relationship between trans people and philosophy, we must read not only [the trans person](#) but also the cis person back into philosophy. It is only by studying how philosophy encounters trans people that the discipline can wake up to the meaning of its own fixations and distortions.

A longer history of philosophers encountering trans people indicates that the discipline must reckon with an active exclusion of trans people from academic workplaces rather than a tale of trans people suddenly appearing in the 2010s and causing a crisis of incremental and [eternally novel](#) professional inclusion. How were most philosophers raised to think of trans people? What kinds of [media](#) or [jokes](#) about trans people did they grow up with? How many trans people do philosophers know interpersonally and [in what context](#)? Rather than an exercise of putting the trans person perpetually on trial - ethically, ontologically, socially/politically, and epistemologically - philosophy must endeavor to better understand the cis philosopher, their quirks, and inconsistencies. Such a consideration lies not solely within the history of a philosopher’s ideas, but their internalized performance of workplace norms, professionalism, and prestige.

As for [my own work](#), dear reader, I am writing a book where I chronicle the many ways that cis people become obsessed with what they [imagine](#) trans people to be

and then grow frustrated when their [expectations fail to match reality](#). I may [get into trouble](#) but at least the confrontation will be interesting!