

# The Circulation of Trans Philosophy: A Philosophical Polemic

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## **Abstract**

This essay argues that trans philosophy, and perhaps philosophy more broadly, should be understood according to the interplay of social, material, and emotional circulations. It opens by bridging insights from underemployed library work during the COVID-19 pandemic with Sara Ahmed's analysis of the circulation of emotions in relation to texts and archives. The first major section diagnoses Martha Nussbaum's confusing analysis of "the new trans scholarship" to establish that trans philosophy is differentially circulated across the discipline of philosophy. The second major section argues that trans philosophy can be understood through the interplay of four different circulations: (1) trans philosophy as creating a space; (2) trans philosophy as the trans question; (3) trans philosophy as the gender wars; and (4) trans philosophy as the trans cult. I conclude that trans philosophy is a field that has yet to clearly form as it continues to twist and multiply according to affect, professional dynamics, political intrigue, who gets thrown away, and who is granted the space, time, energy, and money to write and publish.

My companion polemic, "Philosophy Meets the *Gendertrash from Hell*," can be found here: <https://blog.apaonline.org/2024/10/16/philosophy-meets-the-gendertrash-from-hell/>

"I can keep digging. I could pull us down to the center of the earth." — *Celeste*

## **1. FOREWARNED TO A CENSORED ESSAY**

I began writing this in 2019 while editing my essay “A Brief History of Trans Philosophy,” during which I removed all comments that could be dismissed as overly negative and placed them into a separate document. I tend to limit myself by strategically navigating the association between trans women and meanness, negativity, narcissism, delusion, vanity, dishonesty, brittleness, jealousy, anger, contagion, divisiveness, pettiness, resentment, wantonness, oversensitivity, melancholy, deceptiveness, unprofessionalism, and destructive irrational bad feelings, so my document became the garbage bin behind my outward professional self-presentation. I repeatedly returned to this document, filling it with my discarded, edited out, and self-censored comments, while my disposed-of negativity took on a life of its own. Most of this refuse was given shape when I thought I had been permanently discarded from academic philosophy and trans cultural-professional scenes before becoming academically undead in 2021. Though I am lucky to now be employed with a living wage, excellent colleagues, and a vibrant local arts scene, I still remain contingent. Part of this contingency is a choice, since I am pursuing a tenure-track job that balances access to friendship and community, access to basic ongoing trans medical care, the likelihood of local bans on such care, and affordability of housing.

This longstanding position of estrangement and negativity has given me an opportunity to think about the practice of philosophy beyond stories of passionate or dispassionate legends, conceptual and argumentative innovations, an incremental set of literatures, and a merit-based sequence of publications and hires. Instead, in this essay I focus on philosophy and academic studies more broadly as a set of complicated circulations.

I understand circulation alongside multiple senses. First, I am considering the work of librarians. Working in-person at a small public library during the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was primarily stationed on the basement level where books were sent after they had finished their life as New Books on the main floor. Although some were still checked out, a significant amount accumulated dust on the shelves, waiting out their time until a circulation check would lead to their final resting place (usually a dumpster). I found kinship with the afterlife of books as I sat in a basement, removed from circulation on the academic job market, transferring from minimum wage job to minimum wage job and wondering if I’d ever get checked out again. This perspective additionally evokes circulation of the breath, as someone who inhaled COVID-19 early on and

recovered from its longer-term effects on the job, gradually learning how to breathe and think again during the following two months.

Considering philosophical literatures from the perspective of library circulation highlights how philosophy spreads. First, the life of philosophical work is not only related to the content of ideas and arguments but also the material vessels, various forms of labor, and social contacts through which these ideas circulate. Some texts live a rich life beyond their authors, getting checked out and remaining in circulation as part of the longer-term life of the discipline. Other texts lose their momentum and fall forgotten, while still others never reach much circulation at all. While circulation may increase or decrease with luck, a significant factor will be the influence that an author is able to leverage to make their work likely to be read. The story of circulation is a story of social position and academic prestige. While merit may be a significant factor in this process, a meritorious argument will remain unread if there is not an initial impetus to pick it up off the physical or electronic shelf and spend the necessary time working with its contents. For this reason, philosophers utilize contemporary tools such as keywords for search engine optimization and algorithms to further enhance the likelihood that their work will receive attention within a vast pool of knowledge and cultural production. Hence, philosophy and specific emerging fields such as trans philosophy are part of a political economics and ecology that differentially circulates various works over time.

A second sense of circulation that motivates my analysis appears in the work of Sara Ahmed. Ahmed is primarily interested in what emotions do: how emotions “circulate between bodies” and how emotions such as hate or disgust “stick” to specific bodies and objects.<1> For Ahmed, the social circulation of emotions generates the affective value of bodies and objects, with increased circulation leading to an increased affective valence.<2> For example, the circulation of speeches in the UK that deploy words such as “flood” or “swamped” becomes the circulation of fear and anxiety as attached to the bodies of potential asylum seekers.<3>

Ahmed primarily works through “the emotionality of texts,” through which “texts name or perform different emotions.”<4> However, Ahmed also briefly suggests that collections of texts such as archives can have their own affective life through contact with an author such as herself. Ahmed writes,

An archive is an effect of multiple forms of contact, including institutional forms of contact (with libraries, books, web sites), as well as everyday forms of contact (with friends, families, others). Some forms of contact are presented and authorised through writing (and listed in the references), whilst other forms of contact will be missing, will be erased, even though they may leave their trace. Some everyday forms of contact do appear in my writing: stories which might seem personal, and even about 'my feelings'. As a 'contact writing', or a writing about contact, I do not simply interweave the personal and the public, the individual and the social, but show the ways in which they take shape through each other, or even how they shape each other. So it is not that 'my feelings' are in the writing, even though my writing is littered with stories of how I am shaped by my contact with others.<5>

Ahmed thus indicates that texts and archives, through contact, can become part of the complex life of emotions in circulation. In this essay I consider trans philosophy to be shaped by such a circulation of affect, contact, and political meaning.

Before discussing the circulation of trans philosophy in the profession it will be helpful to indicate how the above discussion of circulation can help us better analyze the material and emotional life of texts. We can begin this by considering a comment on the CFP for this very issue of *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy*. While this may seem like an unusual place to start for an academic peer-reviewed essay, it indicates the informal life of the discipline and how trans-centered framings of trans philosophy are frequently encountered by non-trans practitioners as a path of faulty inquiry, a problem to be solved, or an approach that should be mocked for daring to take up space in a scholarly venue. The mundane and sensationalized repetition of such framings contributes to the social experience of doing trans philosophy. Additionally, this comment was shared on the official APA News and Announcements page, and hence the comment is conveniently linked directly with a verified APA account. Joseph L. Lombardi writes,

Usually, philosophers have an interest in presenting both sides of an issue (perhaps, even a professional duty to do so); with the best arguments they can find for each. The title used for the topic that might be doing this makes it hard to believe that this is going to be done: "Trans resistance in times of anti-trans backlash." There are those who may hold that each adult man or

woman (if I may use those terms for those with and without a y-chromosome) has a right to decide what happens in and to "his"/"her" body (my pronouns), but may not think it a good idea for anyone to undergo the hormonal and surgical procedures that are involved; that perhaps other approaches, including the possibility of psychotherapy, might be less invasive. Will any of these possibilities be explored in these papers? I didn't think that "colonoscopy" would be involved (the "colonality of cisgender").<6>

First, Lombardi came into contact with the CFP through its material circulation, most likely reaching him through an electronic means. Second, the way that Lombardi has come into contact with the topic of trans people and their relation to philosophy leads him to think not only that there are two distinct sides, but also that "both sides" must always be hosted ("perhaps") for the sake of "professional duty." Lombardi understands the title "Futures of Trans Philosophy" to be contrary to such a framework, and it is his contact with this title that moved him to comment based on his conflicting sense of the topic. Lombardi proceeds to make a vague gesture towards "psychotherapy," which Lombardi takes to be both "less invasive" and mutually exclusive compared to "hormonal and surgical procedures," indicating further ways that Lombardi has come into contact with ideas of trans life and trans medicine. By engaging with the CFP, Lombardi is attempting to recirculate its aim of collecting works on trans philosophy through his vision of how this should professionally proceed.

Most intriguingly, Lombardi misspells "coloniality" as "colonality" to conclude his supposedly professional intervention with a poop joke. While he performs academic neutrality through cumbersome caveats and asides, Lombardi's "colonality" joke helpfully signals a deep affective register to his response. As a scholar of humor, it strikes me that he may be indulging in mirth, attempting to recirculate the CFP by means of humor and ridicule. Such a reading potentially recasts his entire comment as parody, passive aggression, resentment, or some combination thereof. Additionally, Lombardi's emphasis on colons, colonoscopy, and poop may be an attempt to recirculate the CFP in relation to disgust through scatological references or cultural disgust over associations between queer and trans people and anal sex. While I am unable to pin down exactly where Lombardi tried to aim his comments, they do involve an attempted recirculation of the CFP at both a material and affective register.

In what follows, I will use the first section to draw out the contradictory circulations of trans philosophy found in recent writing by Martha Nussbaum, and then expand upon four specific circulations of trans philosophy in the second section. It is only through an attention to these complex circulations that we can grapple with the future of trans philosophy. By analyzing this piece, first, I will explain what I take to be Nussbaum's main claims about "the new trans scholarship." I then draw out contradicting circulations of trans scholarship from Nussbaum's musings on the field by focusing on the depth of the transition memoir, the situation of trans freedom, and the legacy of trans tolerance. I conclude with the modest claim that trans scholarship in philosophy seems to circulate in contradictory ways. Identifying this differential circulation will allow me to expand upon four different circulations with more detail.

## **2. THE PROFESSOR OF PARITY AND THE NEW TRANS SCHOLARSHIP**

The initial place I will focus on to draw out the differential circulation of trans philosophy is a recent series of essays in which philosopher Martha Nussbaum discusses trans scholarship with the comparably prestigious trans economist Deirdre McCloskey. Because it involves a published mutual correspondence rather than a distanced pseudo-engagement such as Peter Singer's curated lectures and journal of controversial ideas (i.e., transgender persons), Nussbaum's engagement stands out as an unparalleled meditation on the state of trans philosophy as a field by one of philosophy's living legends. It is also, as I will point out, a site of deep contradiction.

### *2.1 NUSSBAUM TO NEW TRANS SCHOLARSHIP*

In her short essay "Identity, Equality, Freedom: McCloskey's *Crossing* and the New Trans Scholarship," Martha Nussbaum weighed in on the field of trans philosophy as part of a celebration of trans economist Deirdre McCloskey's new edition of the 1999 transition memoir *Crossing*. In so doing, Nussbaum provided some reflections on the big questions of trans philosophy, critiqued the illiberalism of the new trans scholars, and brought trans philosophy into conversation with the meaning of the trans memoir. Though Nussbaum's essay is both brief and published as a celebratory correspondence, I will rudely jump into the conversation—after all, there is good precedent for barging in after Kathleen Stock herself jumped into *TSQ* meta-commentary a few years ago.<7>

To begin her laudatory essay, Nussbaum stresses that McCloskey's now-updated memoir is the standard to which contemporary feminist and transgender scholarship should aspire when considering the nature of gender, womanhood, and trans womanhood or manhood specifically. Nussbaum emphasizes that through its "subtlety and its multifaceted wrestling with the self," McCloskey's memoir comparatively makes articles in journals "look flat," since they lack the depth of soul projected through the memoir form.<8> Nussbaum then considers work on trans existential identity by Talia Bettcher, "one of the most influential and interesting trans scholars," as having a comparative (but understandable) lack of subtlety in describing the particulars of an existential urgency to question and change one's identity in the context of transition.<9> Nussbaum concludes that the memoir style rather than the writings of a trans philosopher gets to the heart of explaining the trans self.

Despite the initial edge that Nussbaum gives to McCloskey's account of her gender journey, she continues to point out that both trans scholars and scholar-memoirists (again understandably) lack a compelling attempt to theorize the mysterious urging etiology of transition. Where "the new trans scholarship" may do a better job, with reference to Robin Dembroff and Catherine Saint-Croix's discussion of agential identity, is in depicting transness in the context of "some sort of commitment to make [one's] self-identification externally available to others."<10> Relating Bettcher's focus on existential identity to this theme, there seems to be a more satisfying alignment between the new trans scholarship and McCloskey's memoir.

Unfortunately, the problem of identity-with-others brings the new trans scholarship to what Nussbaum casts as its egregious problem, most apparent in the response to Rebecca Tuvel's *Hypatia* essay "In Defense of Transracialism." Referring to this as "one of the ugliest and most illiberal examples of 'cancel culture,'" "a true disgrace to philosophy," and "pc craziness," Nussbaum diagnoses a big picture failure of the new trans scholarship to foster a wider tolerance for border crossings.<11> This failure of tolerance highlights McCloskey's outstanding legacy. According to Nussbaum, McCloskey is "a genuine defender of liberal freedom of speech," who "doesn't want to cancel anyone; she wants to think through the mysteries of life, and she favors listening, not

canceling.”<12> Again, the score is in favor of the memoirist-economist and not the philosophers.

This purported failure of tolerance extends to a larger gap in the “particularly central and interesting” literature of new trans scholarship in contrast to McCloskey’s late 90s memoir, involving a failure to think about freedom. Nussbaum emphasizes that what McCloskey has achieved through her journey of *Crossing* is freedom “in the classical liberal sense” and in the sense of existential liberation as “the freedom to be oneself in the world.” In contrast to the illiberalism of the new trans scholarship, McCloskey stands out by centering personal freedom to change without punishment or scorn.<13>

Nussbaum ends her toast to McCloskey and the old ways of trans narrative by focusing on the limits of McCloskey’s decades-old memoir. Specifically, Nussbaum critiques the silence about power differentials between men and women in *Crossings*, asserting, “[Deirdre] has joined the community of women, so she needs to be in solidarity with them and fight injustice.”<14> Nussbaum concludes the essay with optimism that McCloskey’s work is helpful for these goals even if not explicit about them, pointing towards a future area for McCloskey to consider and perhaps even for the new trans scholarship as it corrects its past wrongs. Hopefully one day trans thinkers will read feminism and invest in proper liberalism so that trans scholarship will truly take off!

## 2.2 NEW TRANS SCHOLARSHIP TO NUSSBAUM

The first dynamic of contradictory circulation that I will point to in Nussbaum’s account is the power of the transition memoir to unfold the existential complexities of trans identity. As mentioned earlier, Nussbaum appeals to McCloskey’s autobiographical style as a more compelling device for describing the composition of a trans life than Bettcher’s peer-reviewed prose.<15> In this context, it is useful to consider how a trans memoir from the late 1990s is intended to circulate compared with a trans philosophy essay. An entire life is more than one can fit in a single book, let alone within a readable one, so a memoir consists of a narrative that can be marketed and distributed. The narrative device of a trans memoir is thus potentially skewed even as it professes to reveal, and frequently truncated to tell a particularly palatable story to a mostly non-trans audience. For this reason, the phenomenon of enticing yet



consumable trans subtlety through the memoir form became a significant object of critique for certain schools of mid-2010s trans literary criticism. They argued that older trans memoirs were filtered through a desire to satiate a non-trans public's interest in transition at the expense of a deeper engagement with trans experience and collective meaning.<16>

Initially it may seem unfair to hastily dismiss older styles through reference to newer styles, much like it would probably be unfair to hastily dismiss a newer body of scholarship through an appeal to older scholarship without significant argumentation. However, it is worth comparing how Janet Mock's *Redefining Realness* from 2014 provides a narrative shift compared to McCloskey's 1999 memoir. Mock narrates her experience as a young trans woman finding herself in the context of Hawaiian identity, economic precarity, and developing her freedom through interactions with other trans and gender diverse people.<17> In comparison, McCloskey's account is mainly focused on the process of her transition, the resulting fallout, and her integration into society with some caveats. Generally this includes isolation from other trans people.<18> These are all understandable potential limits of a late 1990s trans memoir and for the trajectory of McCloskey's life within a 1990s U.S. social/political situation, but it calls our attention to the fact that this experience is particular and historical rather than universal. The classic liberal freedom offered in McCloskey's new Afterword to *Crossing* and praised by Nussbaum, that of the freedom to independently change your appearance, change your life, keep your upscale professional job, and maintain an expensive loft in downtown Chicago may not seem like precisely the kind of freedom towards which many in trans scholarship and beyond are aiming. For example, if I were to theorize trans freedom I would not be solely interested in a freedom of individual crossings. Instead, I think trans freedom must center the capability to have a collective life in public space, which is precisely what makes trans freedom so difficult because the entrenched ideological and institutional arrangement has insisted that we are a threat to public and professional spaces. Furthermore, this interaction in public space must include the capability to interact with other trans people rather than the imposed deep stealth of past gender clinics.<19>

This contrast draws out an element of Bettcher's work that Nussbaum glosses over. Bettcher's analysis of how trans people negotiate existential identity is grounded in observations of trans people expressing identity among other trans

people within particular trans communities. Bettcher is philosophically interested in how trans people among other trans people claim and enact their identity with each other, rather than constricting herself to a universalized situation of identity that is filtered for people unfamiliar with trans experience who endeavor to understand trans others.<20> In contrast, such a meditation on the meaning of identity in the context of interactions with particular trans people over a long period of time is lacking from *Crossing* or its new Afterword. Considered further, the value of depth as attributed to McCloskey in contrast to Bettcher seems to not be so straightforward or value neutral, and we may even hesitate when Nussbaum favors the trans memoir over all other approaches in trans scholarship, each weighed according to her interest. McCloskey herself suggests that Nussbaum's interpretation is skewed by focusing too much on McCloskey's relationship with women's clothes.<21>

Nussbaum's evaluation hinges upon a circulation of McCloskey's text as capable of a depth unattainable by the new trans scholarship. And yet, McCloskey's style of memoir simultaneously circulates as lacking in depth because of its historical situation as a consumable tell-all that courts the attention of non-trans audiences. In this context, it is useful to consider Nussbaum's fascination with the mystery of trans etiology, since this seems to motivate her deployment of the text in relation to the new trans scholarship.<22> As a contrast, much of 2010s trans literary criticism sought a more grounded and collective account of trans experience that is not tethered to such non-trans fascination. In this context, Bettcher's emphasis on a grounded and connected practice of trans thinking circulates as the deeper account rather than as austere inattention to etiology. Such a dynamic reveals the complicated and often contradicting ways of circulating a trans text or body of scholarship.

Second, it is worthwhile to consider Nussbaum's insistence that McCloskey has never been associated with the kind of "canceling" engaged in by the new trans scholarship. Granting McCloskey a pedestal over "a larger portion of the trans scholarly community," Nussbaum emphasizes that she tolerates differences and refuses to shut down or silence positions and persons that she disagrees with.<23> Compare this with a characterization of McCloskey's actions by Alice Dreger from 2008 in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*:

But all of the noise of the accusations did what I suspect Conway, James, and McCloskey hoped: It distracted attention from the book's message—

that Blanchard’s theory of MTF transsexualism was right—by apparently killing the messenger. Indeed, much as Bailey would prefer not to admit it, in their leadership of the backlash against *TMWWBQ*, Lynn Conway, Andrea James, and Deirdre McCloskey came remarkably close to effectively destroying J. Michael Bailey’s reputation and life.<24>

To add some context for those who are not familiar with a topic of central interest in 2000s public trans discourse *du jour*: Dreger was objecting to efforts by McCloskey, engineer and computer scientist Lynn Conway, and others to criticize and seek consequences for J. Michael Bailey’s book *The Man Who Would be Queen*. In a letter written to Northwestern University in 2003, McCloskey and Conway made a formal complaint that the book was the result of unethical research practices designed to cook up a pseudo-scientific classificatory system that would be used to defame gender variant people.<25> This also marks a key context in which McCloskey worked in concert with other trans people. In response, Dreger characterized McCloskey’s actions as an illiberal attempt to censor Bailey and ruin his life.

Through Nussbaum and Dreger we receive two different circulations of McCloskey’s reputation, both as someone who would never cancel anyone and as an inexcusable killer of theories and destroyer of researchers’ lives. McCloskey is not directly associated with a vague phenomenon called “cancel culture” in the way of the new trans scholarship, but this would have been impossible because the phrase “cancel culture” had not yet been recirculated from its earlier social justice activist context into a phrase of media and state frenzy.<26>

Though the challenges presented by McCloskey et al. against the Bailey book are different from those presented against the *Hypatia* essay, it is worthwhile to consider McCloskey’s own understanding about the relationship between freedom of speech and complaints. McCloskey wrote,

“The big issue” for you is free speech. In what way have I or anyone else in this debate abridged anyone’s free speech? We aren’t the government. It’s just confused to identify published complaints by private citizens about someone—justified in this case, but let’s for the moment set the issue of the merits aside—with censorship or some other governmental act in violation of “free speech.” ... In what does our great power lie? Professor Bailey, like us, is a senior, tenured professor. We objected to his work and to his behavior, through our writings and through channels. What exactly is

the exercise of “great power” there? Isn't this power called “the power of the pen,” and isn't that exactly the “free speech” you believe you are so courageously defending?<27>

Here we have several different circulations of tolerance, cancel culture, vulnerable and destroyed lives, the power to oppress, and freedom of speech in relation to the same person. In one account McCloskey is the tolerant listener and measured critic who never cancels because she is not associated with the new trans scholarship and its *Hypatia* letter, critiques, and cacophony. In another account McCloskey is the intolerant close-minded complainer who offers incendiary and unjustified threats because she is associated with the Bailey letter, critiques, and cacophony. And in yet another account McCloskey's letter, critiques, and cacophony comprises exactly that free speech which she is accused of threatening, all located in the sphere of free and open discussion without government intervention.

Vis-à-vis McCloskey, trans liberalism and trans illiberalism circulate differently in different contexts. Again, this makes referring to McCloskey's work as a standard by which to judge “the new trans scholarship” vexing without further precision. It also raises questions about the means through which the illiberalism of “the new trans scholarship” itself has circulated. Does all trans scholarship in philosophy and beyond risk such illiberalism, or is it only particular projects, or simply a specific blunder? Referencing a vague quantity of participants makes it unclear who was at fault and why, what precisely constituted an excess, and what the comparative balances of freedom and capability were like in the various trans scholarship controversies of the past and beyond. Diagnosing the “new trans scholarship” in such a fashion is perhaps a dismissive smear, though I would hesitate to call it defamation (I'm not very litigious).

Additionally, Nussbaum's characterization of this amalgamated “new trans scholarship” seems to be arrested on one moment from four years before she published the essay that does not include the many ways that trans philosophy has expanded its circulation throughout the profession beyond the *Hypatia* situation. For example, definitions of new trans scholarship in 2024 potentially include Kathleen Stock, Holly Lawford-Smith, Tomas Bogardus, and Alex Byrne, with Stock standing above the rest as a bona-fide Orderly public intellectual in the UK. This new trans scholarship is certainly interested in questions of transness and freedom, as well as the meaning of gender and trans manhood and

womanhood. Would Nussbaum consider them to be fulfilling the mission of freedom, not fulfilling it, or something else? Is this emerging set of characters a justified response to the illiberal PC crowd of the new yesterday? Stock and McCloskey are even directly connected, having both taught and debated at the University of Austin Summer School.<28> Although Nussbaum's silence on the newest of the new trans scholarship could be circulated as yet another slight against them, it stands out to me that it also could be a hesitancy or a lack of spotlight that permits the freedom to pass by unconsidered. Each of these interpretations may circulate differently according to one's limited understanding of Nussbaum as scholar and person.

Nussbaum's confusing characterization of trans philosophy illustrates that trans philosophy is circulated differently in different contexts. In the second section I will track four specific ways through which this circulation occurs, concluding with a futurebound fifth suggestion.

### **3. FOUR CIRCULATIONS OF "TRANS PHILOSOPHY"**

To better understand trans philosophy in its circulations, it is helpful to begin by consulting influential essays in the field. In "What is Trans Philosophy?" Talia Bettcher describes a practice of philosophy that emerges from everyday trans experience as it is "shot through with perplexity [and] shot through with WTF questions."<29> In this context, trans philosophy stands out as a distinct process through which trans people philosophize without the formal institutional channels and hazing rituals of academic philosophy. Already rooted in this place of WTF, Bettcher sees the potential contributions of philosophy as "primarily constructive, positive, illuminating, and orienting," providing a means to clarify the tumultuous everyday experiences of living a transed life.<30> Drawing from the resources of this "ground-bound" social location, Bettcher asks, "What else does one have to draw on that could provide the worldly perception necessary for life-affirming, rather than suicidal, philosophical illuminations?"<31> How do you theorize about your life and the life of a community without killing it in the process?

For Bettcher, a trans philosophy proceeds from an awareness of "pretheoretical sociality among trans people," and an "embeddedness in trans subcultures" that includes intimate familiarity with "trans discursive and nondiscursive

practices.”<32> Trans philosophy frequently centers questions about violence and responses to violence, but is not fully trapped within this necropolitical loop<33> because it is also concerned with the collective life of trans thinking. In Bettcher’s view, the meaning of trans philosophy and any practice of philosophy that focuses on the meaning of trans phenomena, which I will further distinguish below, is shaped by the work that it does. This includes the questions that philosophy asks, the cultural understandings that philosophy includes or brackets out, and the ends that philosophy serves.<34> Considering the historical and political situation of such thinking is not simply a political distraction from the real meat and potatoes of philosophy, but instead part of reaching a deeper understanding of how philosophy is and ought to be practiced.

Alongside her ground-bound conception of trans philosophy, Bettcher acknowledges that philosophers have often been tempted to refer to trans experience as a resource for other philosophical endeavors, through a mistaken approach she calls “pristine philosophy;” this results in “philosophizing trans” rather than trans philosophy.<35> Such a perspective mines trans experience from afar, masks intuitions borrowed from dominant culture as necessary universal intuitions, and brackets out life and death matters of importance to trans people.<36> Bettcher thus emphasizes that trans experience is taken up in different ways within the discipline of philosophy. In what follows, I will build on Bettcher’s account to explain four of the ways through which trans philosophy circulates.

### *3.1 TRANS PHILOSOPHY AS CREATING TRANS SPACE*

The circulation of “trans philosophy” has shifted with the politics of the past few years, nurtured by the politics of trans life and the practice of philosophy from decades prior. Building on Bettcher’s description of a ground-bound practice of philosophy in connection with other trans people that can clear a distinct space for inquiry,<37> I think of my participation starting in 2015 and beyond with trans philosophy conferences and publications. These were the moments when many of us moved from isolated scholarship to a more collective sense of our work in this profession. In the mid to late 2010s I found that these conferences and journal issues created a space where trans scholars and non-trans scholars interested in doing scholarship *with* trans people as welcomed colleagues could share their ideas and meet each other in physical or virtual space. Creating these

rare interpersonal spaces of discussion also forges social architectures to support trans philosophy, trans philosophers, and trans thought more broadly. Such a practice goes against the grain of most philosophy departments that will likely never hire any kind of trans professor, let alone to do the work of trans philosophy.

In this context, the circulation of trans philosophy, as indicated by Bettcher, is a space of collective, but not uncritical or coddling, care and community building. It also centers a production of writing and thought that is frequently more attuned to the minute and complex details of everyday trans life than other spaces can afford. ***The first circulation of trans philosophy is the circulation of a space where trans philosophers as colleagues participating in philosophical deliberation can have their lives and ideas centered, or at the very least respectfully taken into account, supporting the development of a robust ground-bound philosophy.*** I attribute to this definition some flexibility, as the tools, methods, and topics of this trans philosophy have yet to be established, especially as there are so few tenured trans philosophers who can receive job security and a living wage for their research. The precarious condition of academia and its job market, the comparatively low number of trans people seeking professional philosophy degrees and appointments, and the even lower number of trans people who can sustain themselves long-term in professional philosophy highly impacts this area of study and its future, if there is to be one.

### 3.2 THE TRANS QUESTION

The circulation of trans philosophy in a second sense extends long before the moment of the 2016 trans philosophy conference, and is likely to continue into the following decade, surviving the ongoing crumbling of academic institutions and their adaptations into austerity or direct tools of anti-trans statecraft. I first encountered this style of trans philosophy in person during an undergraduate course on the history of philosophy in 2008. I had come out as trans as a teenager but was generally not open with my classmates about being trans during college, so I was known by many of my peers and professors as a non-trans woman. In academic philosophy this was itself an ordeal that was fortunately mitigated by an explicitly feminist undergraduate philosophy department. The class centered on the ship of Theseus puzzle, considering the questions of (1) does replacing rotting planks in Theseus's famous ship eventually make it a fundamentally different ship,

and (2) if so, when did it become a different ship? Another undergraduate student, extending his curiosity from the ancients to more contemporary questions of personal identity and technology, asked if a man who undergoes a sex change to become a woman should now be considered a fundamentally different person. The professor handled the resulting discussion about as well as any professor given an unexpected question outside their area of expertise by a brainstorming student could be expected to do. It struck me while sitting in the classroom that I was suddenly reconfigured by my peers as some distant object of curiosity, displaced as both student and puzzle.

Due to the relatively few opportunities to actually meet trans people and learn about us in the profession, this practice continues to be the main circulation of trans philosophy in our area of work, its media coverage, its professional chatter system, and its formal networks. That is, when the words “trans” and “philosophy” are collected together in the profession of philosophy, it tends to be the focus on trans people as an object of curiosity, fascination, conjecture, study, debate, and analysis—which Bettcher emphasizes is a political situation rather than philosophy simply running its neutral course. Here, I take up the phrasing of “the trans question” both to connect this circulation with the insights of Viviane Namaste on research ethics<sup><38></sup> and to highlight the increasing circulation of a phrase<sup><39></sup> that frames a group of people as a problem to be solved, subjugated, or eliminated. ***The second circulation of trans philosophy is the continued entrenchment of a space where non-trans philosophers can have their questions, concerns, and curiosity centered and elevated over trans people, who are primarily a questionable object of debate and should not interfere with this debate due to inherent bias. Trans people may be allowed to engage but only on the terms set by non-trans people, well-intentioned or otherwise.***

This circulation of trans philosophy has largely been handed off to the self-identified gender critical philosophers and other professionals jumping on deck to correct the leakage of trans into mainstream philosophy. In this context, we can consider the rise of *The Journal of Controversial Ideas*, which has benefited from the magnification of the trans debacle and typically devotes several essays to its version of trans philosophy in every issue. Excluding editorials, about 34% of the journal’s essays discuss the topic as of this writing. Where once there was a history of debate between trans and trans exclusionary scholars that led to the development of trans studies as a field and a reconciliation with feminist



philosophy, now there is an ahistorical version of Bonnie Mann who never updated her views about trans exclusionary separatism, along with a pristine landscape largely devoid of Sandy Stones, Susan Strykers, and Emi Koyamas.<40> Likewise, discussions about the supposedly baffling attractiveness of trans people can avoid researching how medical transition usually works by framing it as purely external or exogenous rather than as interactive with an endogenous human endocrine system.<41> Even when this is acknowledged, critics can make grandiose claims that exogenous hormones are qualitatively different if they do not achieve comparable results in merely one year, which is an even weaker appeal when considering that hormones are typically slowly raised to full dosage over that time period.<42> The continued magnification of gender critical and transgender-curious scholars through appeals to being silenced and their cancellation in the form of a demand for subscription has largely overshadowed the first circulation of trans philosophy. Compared to media and academic coverage of the *Hypatia* controversy, or the institutionally sanctioned giant neon sign of the “erased” gender critical philosophers, the development of trans philosophy centering trans people has received comparatively little interest—with interest meaning not just attention but also money.

Mainstream philosophy has largely ignored the subject of trans people or placed us into footnotes until the mid-2010s, but now that it has become of professional interest it must be defended as a subject area for non-trans philosophers (meaning *real* philosophers) to define. Prestige and propriety still count as first philosophy, so perhaps one or two trans people will be able to enter the conversation if they have a position at, say, Yale. Earlier demands that trans philosophers create a literature to establish that trans perspectives are properly philosophical later become demands that trans philosophers stop oppressing non-trans philosophers by expecting them to engage with it. Even responses and criticisms focused on gender critical philosophers, though well-meaning and appreciated, tend to be tethered to this second circulation of trans philosophy, further entrenching the silence around the supposedly totalitarian approach of trans-centered philosophy. In this context, the WTF questions of trans philosophy are gutted of their innards and removed from their living context to be displayed like preserved beetles in a museum. Trans identity, anti-trans violence, trans community, trans rights, trans participation in public life, and trans history now become perpetually novel defendants in the courtroom of philosophical inquiry, to the benefit of Mediums, Quillettes, and Elseviers alike.

### 3.3 THE GENDER WARS

The tension between these two meanings of trans philosophy has led to a third understanding of trans philosophy as primarily a continuous source of drama, unruliness, strife, and breakdown. ***We arrive at the third circulation of trans philosophy as a heated and uncomfortable philosophical calamity.*** When the second circulation of trans philosophy displaces the first circulation of trans philosophy, the third circulation of trans philosophy is often chosen by uncertain, wary, or unfamiliar participants in the profession who do not want to explicitly weigh in on what is now framed through the contradictory metaphors of “the trans debate” and “the gender wars.” This framework may also refer to the stress and turmoil faced by gender critical philosophers and trans philosophers, with the former increasingly arranged under the heading of threatened academic freedom, and the latter increasingly lumped together as manipulative appeals to emotion, bias of standpoint, and a threat to academic freedom. The third meaning of trans philosophy can motivate engagement or disengagement, including responses such as trying to intervene in the tone of the discussion through a vague open letter from afar, lamenting the civility or tone among peers online and offline, staying “neutral” in public while justifying this to affected colleagues in private through reference to the heated lack of agreement, or more indirectly ghosting colleagues and students who are inconveniently tarnished by their proximity to the firepit. Conflict, regardless of the context, comes to be read as abuse or as authoritarianism.<43> From a vantage point far away, trans philosophy can be framed as a total meltdown situation to be avoided or stoked for professional convenience. Engage or disengage at your leisure.

### 3.4 THE TRANS CULT

The re-eclipsing of trans-centered philosophy by non-trans trans philosophy, with the production of the third circulation of trans philosophy as calamity, has an unbalanced impact on the continued political economics of trans philosophy. Trans philosophy is not an apolitical subfield, although the second circulation of trans philosophy depends on a one-sided framework of depoliticization to shield itself. Instead, trans philosophy takes on intensified political forms as it is elevated into a publishable academic enterprise at the same time that academic austerity dips the scholar’s professional robes further into the paper shredder. Ceaseless

controversy, chaotic and inflamed by the continued tendency of professionalized philosophers sticking their heads under the earth of the *φροντιστήριο* at the first sign of trouble, is displaced onto the body of the trans person and hence the trans scholar as the source of unwanted turmoil.<44> ***This feeds into a fourth circulation of trans philosophy as an irrational, inflamed, and potentially dangerous ideology beckoned by trans people, perhaps even in the form of a conspiracy, lobby, or cult.*** Objecting to getting characterized as a dangerously insane threat to society that should be removed from public spaces is now a vexatious complaint by a mob fueled by powerful interests, while objecting to getting called a bigot is now a courageous grassroots defense of protected beliefs from ideologically captured and hostile work environments. Trans people in general can now be dismissed as “*those people.*”<45> An anonymous comment on a posted excerpt from Alex Byrne’s *Trouble with Gender on Quillette* reads, Personally I'm tired of the whole trans thing - it leaves me, well, tired out, disinterested. "Disinterested" in the sense that whatever slight interest I might once have had - along with compassion - has kind of been pounded out of existence by the repetitious (ceaseless?) drumming on this topic. I wish it would just go away, and I feel like I wish these folks would just go away.<46>

*These folks* are the perpetually unexamined ones who have never been brought to account and who ultimately aim to dismantle Galileo’s telescope and salt over the common ground of public understanding. The trans cultists are inherently unruly, biased, subjective, and emotional, uniquely resilient to the light of nature and the correspondence between statements about the world and its clear and distinct truth. They are also dangerous in shared spaces and should be avoided when possible. Did you hear they occasionally write inflammatory and unprofessional polemics?

How does the profession proceed when trans philosophy is suddenly in demand but trans philosophers embody the unruliness of heated conflict? The inertia for the discipline, which is already unable to sustain any of its practitioners, is simple: let the trans philosophers wither away. Ignore the prevalence of transphobia in the institutions that materially produce the life of the academy; better yet, conjure a dichotomy between any mention of transphobia and freedom of inquiry; even better, promote open discussion by bracketing out considerations of transphobia in philosophy as “cruel and abusive.”<47> Elevate the silenced non-trans philosophers of trans philosophy through the chatter network of blogs, give

them prestigious lectures and publications in places that would never touch the work of trans scholars, and give them secure jobs and promotions and titles. Above all, never stop describing them as silenced or scrutinize what “silenced” or “canceled” means. When a gender critical scholar leaves the academy it is world-historical and when a trans scholar leaves it is unremarkable.

Align the work of non-trans philosophers in philosophy with the metaphors of repairing or sobering the controversy, clipping the unruly dandelions. Tether all discussions of open inquiry to an abstract “right” to hold any academic debate without acknowledging that trans scholars are not and have not historically been sustained by the academy, and without questioning to what extent the abstract right to hold any academic debate is rendered meaningless by such conditions. Deploy vague and unfalsifiable accusations of “identity politics,” “virtue-signaling,” “moral grandstanding,” and unreflective or insincere “wokeness” gone too far to obscure the material insecurity of the voices you are overriding. Never question scholars you agree with on these grounds. Hold inconsistent views about swearing, mocking, and their relationship to abuse and so-called “professionalism.” Above all, do not examine yourself—examination is for others!—do not interrogate your stakes, do not seek consistency, and do not investigate the representations of trans people that may have influenced your view of us prior to the mid-2000s or 2010s. Allow the discussion of trans people to continuously refresh itself on your terms, the trans person hoisted up as a forever emerging figure of outsider tension approaching the rational professional philosopher who has no history with transphobic institutions or culture. When trans philosophers ask why you do not engage with their work to the same extent you might with other philosophers, stand the meaning of “gatekeepers” upside down while comfortably seated inside your academic office. Repeat this with the phrase “safe space.”

There is a smaller scope to the multiplication of trans philosophy that could get us caught in the illusion that transphobia in philosophy lies on a horizontal field, as if another open letter or another outraged blog post blasting outraged “wokesolds” will roll the stone of discourse to a desired incline. Such back-and-forth reactive participation is understandable when focused on exposing bigotry and its sophistry, but continues to eclipse trans philosophy in the first sense without materially supporting its continued work. We thus risk playing into the constant reset that trans philosophy is institutionally subjected to under its

conditions of precarity and the ways this discipline can coast on an easy one-sided process of examination.

#### 4. FOREWORD TO MORE TRANS PHILOSOPHY

In this polemic I have focused on circulation as a means of evaluating the complexity within which trans philosophy is currently situated. Building on some co-written meditations with Cassius Adair and Cameron Awkward-Rich that we undertook in the context of trans studies,<48> I take trans philosophy to be a field that has yet to clearly form as it continues to twist and multiply according to affect, professional dynamics, political intrigue, who gets thrown away, and who is granted the space, time, energy, and money to write and publish. By continuing to sort through these nebulous dynamics, I hope to better understand how to navigate trans philosophy in its circulation as what Talia Bettcher calls ground-bound philosophy, a means within which trans people can create at least one space where we are listened to, respected, and permitted relationality as connected with deep thinking. This is the future and the sense of freedom that I seek even if it turns out that philosophy as an institutionalized profession or the academy is not the best location for such work.

Retiring from the polemic style, I am drawn again to Bettcher's emphasis on ground-bound philosophy, which is where I think the most exciting kernels of trans thinking happen. The best response to uneven circulations of trans philosophy in the profession is our own circulation of care and support on the ground, in the spaces where love of wisdom and love of mutual aid intersect. We are at our best when we don't let this discipline make us too defensive, when we're having good conversations with friends over coffee, and when we don't get too hung up on establishing this thing we're doing as "real philosophy" (which is a losing game). In this context ***I propose a continued fifth circulation of trans philosophy, which is trans and non-trans philosophers doing what we can to support trans thought within and beyond the academy, taking action for trans people to be better housed, fed, less constrained by violence and threats from the state, less disposable, and welcomed to conversation.***

#### NOTES

<1> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, 4 and 14.

<2> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, 45.

- <3> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, 46.
- <4> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, 13.
- <5> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, 14.
- <6> Lombardi, August 25 2023.
- <7> Stock, *Material Girls*, 9.
- <8> Nussbaum, "Identity, Equality, Freedom," 271.
- <9> Nussbaum, "Identity, Equality, Freedom," 277.
- <10> Nussbaum, "Identity, Equality, Freedom," 278.
- <11> Nussbaum, "Identity, Equality, Freedom," 278-279.
- <12> Nussbaum, "Identity, Equality, Freedom," 279.
- <13> Nussbaum, "Identity, Equality, Freedom," 279-280.
- <14> Nussbaum, "Identity, Equality, Freedom," 281.
- <15> Nussbaum, "Identity, Equality, Freedom," 277.
- <16> See Cross, "Know & Tell" ; Plett, "Rise of the Gender Novel" ; Fleischmann & Peters, "T Clutch Fleischmann and Torrey Peters on Trans Essays."
- <17> Mock, *Redefining Realness*.
- <18> McCloskey, *Crossing*.
- <19> Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back."
- <20> Bettcher, "Trans Women and the Meaning of 'Woman,'" 235.
- <21> McCloskey, "On Agreeing with Martha Nussbaum," 3.
- <22> Nussbaum, "Identity, Equality, Freedom," 277.
- <23> Nussbaum, "Identity, Equality, Freedom," 279.
- <24> Dreger, "The Controversy Surrounding The Man Who Would Be Queen," 412.
- <25> McCloskey and Conway, "Deirdre McCloskey and Lynn Conway File Formal Complaint with the Vice-President of Research of Northwestern University regarding the research conduct of J. Michael Bailey."
- <26> See brown, "we will not cancel us."
- <27> McCloskey, "McCloskey's Back-and-Forth with Seth Roberts on the Bailey Controversy." I am thankful to Jackie Ess for first introducing me to this quote.
- <28> University of Austin, "Stock & McCloskey Debate Issues of Sex, Gender, & Identity."
- <29> Bettcher, "What is Trans Philosophy?" 651
- <30> Bettcher, "What is Trans Philosophy?" 651-652.
- <31> Bettcher, "What is Trans Philosophy?" 656.
- <32> Bettcher, "What is Trans Philosophy?" 656.
- <33> See Snorton & Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics."

- <34> Bettcher, "What is Trans Philosophy?" 660.
- <35> Bettcher, "What is Trans Philosophy?" 652.
- <36> Bettcher, "What is Trans Philosophy?" 656-657 and 659.
- <37> Bettcher, "What is Trans Philosophy?" 660.
- <38> Namaste, "Undoing Theory."
- <39> See Butler, "Labour Must Clarify Its Policy on Transgender Issues to Win the Next Election."
- <40> Phelan & Lawford-Smith, "Feminist Separatism Revisited" ; Mann, "For a *Critical Radical Feminism*" ; Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back" ; Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix"; Koyama, "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?"
- <41> Halwani, "Sex and Sexual Orientation, Gender and Sexual Preference," 3.
- <42> Stock, *Material Girls*, 74.
- <43> Schulman, *Conflict is Not Abuse*; DuFord, *Solidarity in Conflict*.
- <44> For more on philosophers and the φροντιστήριον / *phrontistḗrion* consult *Clouds* by Aristophanes. Aristophanes, *Aristophanes 1*.
- <45> Joyce, "Wine with Women," 4:12-5:58.
- <46> Anonymous, January 2024.
- <47> 12 Leading Scholars, "Philosophers Should Not Be Sanctioned Over Their Positions on Sex and Gender."
- <48> Adair, Awkward-Rich, & Marvin, "Before Trans Studies."

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