

Abstract: This paper explores trans poetics as a way of doing trans philosophy. I begin by giving an overview of the current state of trans philosophy. I then give examples of other literatures wherein poetics is taken to be philosophically robust. After giving a brief history of trans poetics, I turn to the poetics statements and poetry of three trans poets—D’Lo, Ching-In Chen, and micha cárdenas—featured in the 2013 anthology *Troubling the Line*. I show how poetry is often uniquely able to capture the ambiguity of the WTF of trans experience in ways that differ from philosophical argumentation. I conclude by suggesting that poetics might move us away from a potential politics of suffering in trans philosophy to a politics of liberation.

Keywords: Trans Philosophy, Trans Poetics, Feminist Philosophy, Meta Philosophy,

Transgender

Transitioning Texts and Genre Reassignment:

Trans Poetics as Trans Philosophy

In an important sense trans philosophy didn’t exist at all, perhaps as recently as five years ago. Back then, I would have described my own research as situated at the intersections of disciplinary feminist philosophy and the inter- and multidisciplinary field of trans studies. The expression “trans philosophy” wasn’t quite available, or at least, it didn’t say very much. Perhaps that seems remarkable now.

—Talia Mae Bettcher, “What is Trans Philosophy?”

Trans of color poetics are a gesture of solidarity animated by a poetic ambiguity that make them more capacious. The formation “trans of color” reveals the limitations of the Western medical definition of transgender and calls for solidarity beyond its bounds.

—micha cárdenas, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media*

Trans Philosophy (What is it? What Could it be?)

With the upcoming publication of the edited collection *Trans Philosophy: Meaning and Mattering*, as well as a slew of conferences and panels dedicated to philosophical perspectives on trans issues it seems as though the discipline of philosophy is undergoing a paradigm shift with respect to trans scholarship. While earlier efforts, such as the 2009 publication of *You’ve Changed: Sex-Reassignment and Personal Identity*, were met with some modicum of success

and fanfare, it was not until the last few years that primarily trans scholars doing a particular mode of philosophy started to receive any uptake. Perhaps in hindsight the 2019 publication of Talia Mae Bettcher's piece "What is Trans Philosophy?" in *Hypatia* will go down as a watershed moment for trans philosophy specifically and minority philosophies more generally.

In her piece, Bettcher returns to the oft-asked question "what is philosophy?" giving an ancient query a contemporary spin. Bettcher circumnavigates giving an authoritative answer that would preclude other possibilities by arguing that we can identify trans philosophy by its *methodology*.¹ Bettcher claims that trans philosophy ought to be mobilized by what she terms a *ground-bound* approach. Bettcher posits trans existence as a constant navigation of the everyday WTF—presumably short for "What the Fuck?" Strange experiences that defy conventional reasoning are common for trans people. Bettcher insists that to do trans philosophy in a way that is both ethical and accountable to those communities impacted by questions of transphobia, gender, and oppression, one must take a bottom-up approach, beginning with an elusive or perhaps frightening experience and applying the tools of philosophy to illuminate salient factors about the situation. Bettcher contrasts this with what she calls *pristine philosophy*, which takes common sense everyday occurrences and through philosophical contemplation renders them more complex. Perhaps Bettcher is posing too strict a dichotomy here. One might imagine situations where both approaches to philosophy are at play.

Here I am reminded of Eva Hayward's 2008 theorization of her own sex reassignment surgery, "More Lessons from a Starfish." Hayward performs what she calls a *critical enmeshment* to explore the theoretical implications of medical transition. She begins with her own WTF experience of "wounding" her body only for her flesh to be reassembled and transformed into a new configuration. Hayward draws our attention to generative cuts, thinking

with the figure of the starfish. When a starfish loses one of its rays, a new one grows in its place. Some species of starfish are even able to grow an entirely new body from a single severed ray. While Hayward draws on her own experience, she ultimately draws conclusions about disability and animality arguing that some wounds may be healing, and some cuts (re)generative. While the deployment of the starfish to explore her own medical transition would appear to be in line with Bettcher's ground-bound approach, the applications to critical animal studies and disability theory seem to be more pristine in character.

Nevertheless, Bettcher's drive to consider ground-bound philosophy as sufficiently rigorous is compelling. Here I am not interested in establishing a canon of trans philosophy or giving a definitive account of how to engage in trans philosophy that would foreclose other possibilities. Rather, if we are to take Bettcher's call for a ground-bound praxis seriously, we might consider alternative modes of engagement in addition to philosophical argumentation so as to illuminate many different facets of trans experience. For example, Bettcher (2014) herself identifies multiple modes of being and understanding oneself as trans that appear to be at odds with one another. Bettcher focuses on two kinds of models for understanding trans subjectivity.

The first, "born in the wrong body" models, seem to stipulate an essential internal sense of gender as serving an explanatory role in trans subjectivity. That is to say that under such models one is born trans, and merely discovers this fact. The second, "beyond the binary" models, seem to suggest that there is no internal sense of gender, and that trans/gender liberation ought to call for a rejection of binary models of gender. In this account, one *cannot* be "born in the wrong body," as there is no such thing as a "right" body. This is not to dismiss the medical needs of trans people—such as access to hormones and surgery—rather it is to deny the

ontological assumptions about gender and bodies that underpin “born in the wrong body” models.

While Bettcher provides preliminary suggestions for how we might reconcile both kinds of models, the law of non-contradiction is axiomatic to standard philosophical argumentation. As such, any attempt to reconcile both models using philosophical argumentation would necessarily involve resolving any contradictions that might emerge. Curiously, this approach would be at odds with ground-bound philosophy, which takes seriously the first-person experiences of trans people. In other words, we ought to take the experiences of trans people who understand themselves through both “born in the wrong body” and “beyond the binary” models. Philosophical argumentation would have us choose between ontological assumptions about gender and bodies, rather than accept the contradictions that can and do emerge when exploring trans experience. This claim is concordant with scholarship (Mills 1994; Dotson 2012; Dembroff 2020) that explores the limits of standard philosophical argumentation when applied to the experiences of marginalized groups. Put simply, philosophical argumentation as such struggles to understand or clarify these experiences.

If we wish to answer a plethora of philosophical questions surrounding trans experience, we should consider adopting a multitude of philosophical tools. As such, we might consider poetry and poetics—especially as written by trans people—to be a viable way of engaging in Bettcher’s ground-bound approach. Poetry and poetics are *especially* promising tools given that they allow for the possibility of contradictions. While philosophical argumentation might have difficulty understanding the contradictory nature of trans experience, poetry and poetics are well suited to the task.

In a revealing passage from the *Poetics*, Aristotle draws out the philosophical potential of poetry:

The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history (1451b2-3).

In Aristotle's account, any scholarly subject can be written in verse without losing its essential distinction as a subject.² History in the form of an ode is still history, and Herodotus no more a poet than Sappho a historian. Accordingly, what makes poetry differ from other subjects is its capacity to explore possibility. It is this quality, Aristotle claims, that grants poetry philosophical status. Imagining alternate states of affairs is not unique to the domain of thought experiment. Poetry too has the ability—when done well—to bring the reader to new worlds of understanding. With Bettcher's articulation of trans philosophy as a ground-bound approach to illuminate the complexities and contradictions of the WTF in mind, I put forward trans poetics as a potential method of trans philosophy.

The work of trans poetics serves as multifaceted critique: it is political, philosophical, and aesthetic. Framing trans poetics *as* trans philosophy provides us with a more diverse set of tools with which to interrogate the WTF of trans experience. This is not a novel argument; philosophers have long argued for alternative modes of reasoning (Zwicky 1992; 2003; Diamond 1982; Dotson 2012), and contemporary poets have deployed philosophical argumentation in their work (Awkward-Rich 2016; 2019; Salah 2013; 2017; Chen 2009; 2017). We also see this uptake in trans studies (Bey 2020), and the history of feminist philosophy (Rich 2016; Daly 1978; Lorde

2007). However, the notion that poetics can be a way of engaging in philosophical inquiry bears repeating.

In this article I argue for the use of trans poetics as trans philosophy drawing on both the poetics statements of a cluster of trans poets and related philosophical literature. I organize my inquiry around the work of poets featured in *Troubling the Line* (2013), an anthology of trans and genderqueer poetics and poetry touted as the first major work of its kind.

I begin by discussing the history and possibility of poetics as philosophical inquiry before tracing the emergence of trans poetics as a distinct form from its early expressions through to the development of trans of color poetics as articulated by cárdenas. Next, I offer three examples of trans poetics as trans philosophy by exploring ambiguous experiences in the WTF. Here I make two claims: first, poetics is uniquely suited to analyze ambiguity. As poetry is subject to reasonable interpretation, it is possible to embed multiple, perhaps even contradictory meanings in a single stanza. In some cases, poetry can even disrupt intelligibility and nearly obfuscate meaning entirely. The WTF can be frightening, ambiguous, and sometimes there are no concrete answers. Through its embrace of ambiguity and impossibility, trans poetics is capable of dealing with this dilemma and would see it as a feature and not a bug. Second, by considering the influence of trans of color poetics we can address contexts wherein race and gender are equally salient. As trans of color poetics is a coalitional formation inspired by analytics like *women of color*, it can address an important concern that Bettcher expresses: a focus on trans oppression might occlude other forms of marginalization—such as racism. Trans of color poetics takes as a given the imbrication of race and gender such that any conversation about one necessarily includes the other. I conclude with a few brief thoughts about other avenues through which we might engage trans poetics as trans philosophy.

Poetry and Poetics

Articulating a definition of “poetry” that encompasses all manners of form, style, and tradition is far beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, we might work backwards and define poetry as being a kind of art that is produced through poetics. The task then becomes defining poetics, of which there are many different schools and traditions. We might take “poetics” to be the conceptual tools and compositional strategies deployed by poets in the construction of poetry. These range from general tools such as the use of simile, metaphor, or meter, to specific tools and strategies such as trans poetics’ use of gaps and postcolonial poetics’ themes of grappling with the colonial encounter. While my focus is on the construction of poetry, poetics often has a broader usage as a dynamic movement of relations that has the capacity to generate possibilities through the creation of art, poetry, and community. Following cárdenas, it is this second sense in which I use the term. Despite the focus on poetry, my view is not incompatible with a more expansive understanding of other forms created through trans poetics—such as visual or performance art—as also being philosophically robust.

In this section I explore several forms of poetics that conceptualize the transformative power of poetry as a project that is—at least partially—philosophical in nature. Exploring poetic philosophical traditions by Black, Caribbean, Latin American, and Islamic thinkers serves as a twofold exercise. First, doing so provides the reader with a grounding for poetics *as* philosophy, which becomes relevant when I articulate *trans* poetics as *trans* philosophy. Second, by focusing on traditions outside of the Western/Anglo-European philosophical canon I provide a critique of disciplinary philosophy’s hesitance to include poetics as a form of philosophical inquiry as also being rooted in Eurocentrism.

In *Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*, Donna Jones (2012) points to the centrality of poetry in the works of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor in advancing the philosophical project of the Négritude movement. Though differing in specifics, Césaire, Senghor, and their contemporaries expressed a vitalist philosophy of a shared racial identity and an exit from colonialism through their poetics. On Jones' account, Césaire believed that "Truth is held to be beyond the discursable though within the reach of the poetic" (155). In particular, Jones cites Césaire's "Poésie et connaissance"—here translated as "Poetry and Cognition"³—as articulating a generative critique of Bergson by way of surrealist poetry. It is also worth noting the influence of Négritude on contemporary Black philosophical thought (Appiah 1993; Shelby 2005; Thiam 2014; Wilder 2015). According to Chike Jeffers (2016), since the early 2010s Négritude has seen a resurgence in the English-speaking world amongst Black scholars and philosophers of race more generally. In light of this renewed interest, explorations of poetics as engaging in philosophy are perhaps timely.

Elsewhere in Black thought Caribbean philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant posits a philosophy of difference that is dynamic and fluid (1997). Critical of Négritude, Glissant rejects shared identity in favour of an ontology that exhibits what he terms "opacity." Subjects are not transparent or knowable in-themselves—or perhaps even to-themselves—rather, they are unknowable in their totality such that the Other exists in utter alterity. Relationality between subjects, between the self and the world, is possible through what Glissant terms a poetics of Relation, that "...remains forever conjectural and presupposes no ideological stability. It is against the comfortable assurances linked to the supposed excellence of a language. A poetics that is latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible" (32). It is through poetry—as a mode of philosophical engagement—that we might come to grapple with

the opacity of the world and of the Other and construct new imaginaries that are liberatory in nature.

In addition to postcolonial thinkers such as Césaire and Glissant, in Latin America Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz has been hailed as “the first feminist of America” due to the philosophical commitments that characterize her poetry. Notably, she argued for a new conception of the soul and for an understanding of women as autonomous subjects. According to María Luisa Femenías, Sor Juana “appeals to metaphors and everyday vocabulary to reconcile philosophy and rhetoric, syntagm and content, negative awareness and evidence, intuition and argumentation, form and quest for the truth” (2005, 144). The poetics of Sor Juana serve as a philosophical toolkit through which she mobilized a search for knowledge. Femenías points to Sor Juana’s poem *First Dream* as an exemplar of her robust philosophical poetry. Similar to the work of Descartes, Sor Juana takes a rationalist approach to the pursuit of knowledge.

Furthermore, Sor Juana illuminates tensions between the contemporary conception of the general epistemological subject and the construction of women as epistemological subjects thus combining her approach with a proto-feminist philosophy (Femenías 2005). While Sor Juana’s rationalist exploration of the soul exists entirely in verse, we might think that this is not too unlike the narrative prose deployed by Descartes himself, which in turn differs from the geometric method of Spinoza. While Descartes and Spinoza are commonly featured on philosophy class syllabi, Sor Juana remains a frequent omission. It is my claim that we ought to take all three of these approaches to writing as being equally appropriate with respect to philosophical investigations, with an emphasis on the poetic approach due to its particular exclusion.

Elsewhere, in Islamic thought, poetics is used extensively in theological and philosophical domains. The work of Sufi poet and philosopher Afd'al al-Dīn Kāshānī is especially relevant as his Sufi philosophy is largely articulated through his poetry. According to William Chittick (2001), Afd'al's philosophy "is especially clear in his letters, his poetry, and his two lists of philosophical maxims, all of which offer explicit directives on moral and spiritual practice." (5). Afd'al differentiates between two modes of knowing: one relating to the intellect and the other relating to "taste." Intellect as a mode of knowing involves logic and reason, whereas taste as mode of knowing is more phenomenological in nature and involves direct experience with aesthetic venues such as poetry or music. Afd'al considers the latter to be a more comprehensive and inclusive way of knowing. While having taste implies having intellect, the converse does not hold. On this account, poetry and poetics are *better* ways of achieving philosophical insight than mere argumentation. While I do not wish to make as strong a claim as Afd'al and his followers, I argue that trans of color poetics is *uniquely* able to address issues in trans philosophy, such as the ambiguity of trans experience. I now provide a brief overview of trans poetics and its specific tools and strategies.

Trans Poetics and its Practitioners

If poetry is the aesthetic object, and poetics is the method and theory by which the object is produced, then trans poetics concerns the poetic approach of trans poets to trans poetry.

According to Rebekah Edwards, trans poetics denotes

the art and the labor of transgender poets, and it refers to diverse interpretative and compositional strategies attentive to relational movements between/across/within linguistic, embodied, affective, and political domains. (2014, 252)

While the past decade has seen in surge in the production and circulation of poetry by trans authors, trans poetics as a distinct style of writing can be traced back further. Trish Salah, for example, flags work done by in the early 2000s by writers such as Nathanaël and kari edwards (2009). Elsewhere, Trace Peterson maps the conditions of possibility and the constraints on existence and writing of trans poetics by examining the work of Samuel Ace and Max Wolf Valerio in addition to edwards, noting “a struggle with intelligibility in relation to authorship, readership, and literary history, as well as some odd, shared coincidences” (2014, 523). On Peterson’s account, Ace, Valerio, and edwards share at least three common aesthetic dimensions constitutive of a trans poetics. First, their poetry is not autobiographical with respect to trans identity. Unlike earlier forms of trans writing, which favored an autobiographical style (Morris 1986, Hunt 1978, Richards 1983), Ace, Valerio, and edwards obfuscate direct reference to trans identity and blur the lines between the author of the poem and the constitutive “I” of the speaker. Second, we observe a deconstruction of the self and a movement towards fictionality and anti-realism. It is such that this flavor of trans poetics resists the construction of a stable self in favor of deterritorialized flows in search of new possible lines of flight. Finally, all three of the aforementioned poets deploy “gaps” in their writing, transforming the poetic structure of the poem through the use of unorthodox line breaks and experimental syntax. While trans poetics is not a homogenous endeavor, these three aesthetic components serve as recurring themes in trans poetry produced from the early 2000s to the present day.

The influence—both positive and negative—of radical lesbian feminism is also at play in the codification and legibility of trans genre in a broader sense. Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) and Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire* (1979) set the terms of debate between radical feminism and an as of yet unarticulated trans feminist theory during the 1980s. Notable replies to

Raymond and medical discourses of transsexuality came with a call to explore different *genres* of trans. Both Susan Stryker (1994) and Sandy Stone (1992) call for aesthetic modes of resistance. In the case of Stryker, the identification with Victor Frankenstein's monster creates the preconditions for the affective performance of "transgender rage." By becoming the monster and giving her a voice, Stryker is able to uncover narratives that had been rendered subaltern through the imposition of clinical, psychoanalytic, and radical feminist narratives. Cameron Awkward-Rich (2016), among others, have since brought the monstrosity of transsexuality into conversation with dominant constructions of Blackness as inhuman.

Stone, who had been a prominent member of radical lesbian communities such as Olivia Records, adopts a different approach. In 1992's "The Empire Strikes Back," Stone urges transsexuals to forgo "passing" as non-trans and thereby refusing to operationalize the radical potential of transness in favor of writing oneself into discourses of transsexuality as *post-transsexual*. We might consider the gender outlaws of the mid to late 90s such as Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg as instances of what Stone had in mind, as the new formulation of "transgender" developed in this era would seem to map onto Stone's post-transsexual. Furthermore, by writing oneself into narratives surrounding trans embodiment, alternative possibilities—such as a distinctly trans poetics—have become possible. Furthermore, early trans poets and Stone herself have a shared philosophical referent in Gloria Anzaldua (1987), whose work on fluidity and transgressing fixed identity categories permeates the landscape of trans scholarship, broadly conceived.

More recently micha cárdenas (2022) has articulated what she terms *trans of color poetics*.⁴ Like women of color before it, trans of color is a coalitional frame unfixed from identity and capable of forming networks of solidarity—in this case with gender formations that exist

outside the purview of Western medical discourses that assist in the construction of “trans” as a totalizing analytic. Trans of color poetics are one example of what cárdenas calls algorithmic analysis. Algorithmic analysis parses the individual operations of any given framework and allows us to see how they work individually and as a group. For example, intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), which explores how structures of domination intersect to form unique forms of oppression might consist of an operation called *intersection*. Applying the intersection operation to the systems of anti-Black racism and misogyny yields an analysis of the specific oppression faced by Black women—sometimes called *misogynoir*. Algorithmic analysis should not be understood as a replacement for analytics like intersectionality, but rather an extension of those frameworks.

In her application of algorithmic analysis to trans of color poetics, cárdenas identifies what she sees as three distinct operations. These are *the cut*, *the shift*, and *the stitch*. The cut isolates the individual components of a problem to assess how they function. The shift examines the movements and flows of subjects of inquiry from transparency to opacity. The stitch is a coalition operation that ties together scattered elements such as concepts, actions, and social movements. These three operations work together to produce a trans of color poetics that underscores the epistemic insight held by those who live at the intersections of marginalization. While trans of color poetics as articulated by cárdenas is distinct from but related to trans poetics as articulated by Peterson, I bring the two into conversation in my analysis of trans poetics as trans philosophy.

While according to this account *Troubling the Line* is far from the first instantiation of trans poetics, it serves as a contemporary compendium for the articulation of a conversation between the newly named trans philosophy and trans poetics. Collecting the work of 55 different

authors, *Troubling the Line* consists of poetry and poetics statements in trans and genderqueer styles. We might consider transitioning this text to the genre of philosophy, or perhaps reassigning the genre of philosophy to the domain of poetics. In what follows I draw on the work of D'Lo, Ching-In Chen, and micha cárdenas to make three interlocking arguments for the use of trans poetics *as* trans philosophy.

Ambiguity in the WTF

It is not the case that philosophy in the form of prose or treatise has never grappled with ambiguity. There is a long history of philosophers writing about ambiguity, experience, gaps, and sense making. We might think of the existentialists and their influences and interlocutors as being engaged in similar projects, with Simone De Beauvoir's 1947 book *The Ethics of Ambiguity* serving as a salient example. Furthermore, these thinkers often engaged philosophy through alternative modes of writing—Jean-Paul Sartre wrote *No Exit* as a play and Albert Camus wrote *The Stranger* as a novel. Here one could make a parallel argument that drama and literature also shed unique light on philosophical questions.

What I will argue is that when it comes to questions of ambiguity in trans philosophy, pertaining to trans experience, trans poetics and poetry is uniquely able to capture the salient features of such ambiguous experiences in concise and illuminating ways. While we might be able to glean similar insights through the use of rational contemplation and logical prose, poetry can capture complex contradictory ideas in intelligible ways in merely a few stanzas.

I now turn to a cluster of poems and poetics statements in the anthology *Troubling the Line*. In addition to being trans, the poets around which I have decided to frame my inquiry are also all people of color. As such, they are often working within multiple poetic traditions,

including postcolonial and Black poetics. I make this choice for two reasons: first, as scholars such as C. Riley Snorton (2017) have pointed out, race and gender are co-constitutive and historically—if not also metaphysically—linked together on a fundamental level. For any discussion of gender to be thoroughly explored, race ought to be considered alongside and as part of gender. Second, as Audre Lorde (2007) argues, in contexts of oppression where discursive tools and frames are owned by dominant groups, for marginalized people to speak requires more poetic imagination to bring to language the truths of experience. We might think of this as poetry emerging from positionality. While anyone who is marginalized has access to these epistemic insights, those who exist at the intersections of oppression have even greater access. While the role of race can and should be discussed in the context of white trans poets, it is this second reason that leads me to highlight the work of trans poets of color. In my analysis of D’Lo, Ching-In Chen, and micha cárdenas I bring into conversation trans poetics and trans of color poetics—mobilizing the operations of the cut, the shift, and the stitch—to explore cases of ambiguity in the WTF.⁵

In his “Poetics Statement” (Tolbert and Peterson 2013), D’Lo discusses both his understanding of himself as having a “queer body” and his use of writing as a pedagogical tool. On the subject of writing, he explains, “It is the tool I use to connect *to* people, to connect my audiences to *other* people, and to empower my community to liberate themselves from close-mindedness” (122). Thus, D’Lo sees writing as a method by which to connect people in ways that might not otherwise be possible. It is also a way to celebrate his and other queer bodies, trans bodies, racialized bodies, bodies that do not pass as non-trans. By turning to D’Lo’s poetry, we can come to vicariously experience the ineffable qualia of genderqueer life.

In “Growing’s Trade Off” (Tolbert and Peterson 2013), D’Lo explores his relationship to gendered embodiment and normative assumptions about his body and his social role(s). In doing so, D’Lo articulates the ambiguities and contradictions of being a boy who learned how to be a woman, subsequently rejecting the identity of man in favor of transgender. He begins the poem with a contemplation of loss: “Since I have started using male pronouns, / I have come to miss the communities of “she”.” (115). Despite his involvement with feminist and women’s communities—D’Lo credits coming out as trans as an act that strengthened his feminist commitments—the use of he/him pronouns creates a distance between himself and the world of the she/her. He continues to describe his movement from she to he throughout the poem, paying attention to the ways in which he participated in womanhood: “This boy learned how to be a strong woman” (116). Through experience and socialization D’Lo comes to understand what being a woman means to him.

His use of he/him pronouns comes with a caveat: irrespective of pronouns, D’Lo rejects male and female identities in favor of a uniquely transgender identity. On this reading, D’Lo was a boy who used she, a woman who used he, and a transgender person for whom pronouns are a political statement. In sharing a narrative of his life D’Lo is at once embracing the contradictions present in the WTF and providing a critique of the hegemonic binarism present in society in general and women’s spaces in particular. If we are to avoid essentialism surrounding gender, D’Lo would seem to have a place in feminist spaces. And yet, his use of so-called male pronouns, rather than unfixing linguistic referents from stable categories, appears to reinforce a quasi-feminist notion of sexual difference. The transgender as articulated by D’Lo is unthinkable in instances of feminist theorizing that rely on clear distinctions between male and female in order to function. However, by embracing the ambiguity of identity, we can come to understand

D’Lo as a boy, a woman, and transgender with no clear temporal partitioning with respect to these identities. If we are to adhere to a ground-bound approach, then we ought to believe that D’Lo’s testimony maps onto his gendered way of moving through the world. It strikes me that trans poetics, rather than philosophical argumentation—which relies on the law of non-contradiction—is uniquely situated to explore the ambiguity and contradictions of the WTF.

We might also consider how D’Lo’s assertion of occupying multiple genders throughout his life intersects with discourses of Blackness. Scholars have argued that the conditions of slavery rendered Black people, especially Black women, as ungendered through their construction as property (Davis 1981; Spillers 1987). Thus, for D’Lo to embrace any gender is a radical act of resistance against white supremacy. Furthermore, D’Lo troubles racist colonial constructions of gender as static with clearly defined untraversable boundaries through his rejection binary gender and his insistence on fluid pronoun use. In this way D’Lo can be understood as enacting what Marquis Bey (2017) calls “the Blackness of Trans*-Ness and the Trans*-Ness of Blackness.” Bey argues that Black and trans as paraontic forces are linked through their fugitive capacities to provide the preconditions for creative movement and ability to cause ruptures yet avoid capture. D’Lo’s political use of pronouns and his embrace of a transgender identity outside rigid gender binaries generate possibilities for resistance against racism and transphobia—and their intersection—while obfuscating the legibility of his identity under such structures.

By deploying the poetic operation of the stitch, we can see that D’Lo’s disparate facets of identity come together to create networks of solidarity with Black, trans, feminist, and women’s liberation movements. For example, by virtue of being a Black boy who learned to be a Black woman who then asserted himself as a Black transgender feminist D’Lo challenges the notion

that movement between identities is fixed or limited, stitching together threads of collective liberation through his movements. While it might be the case that D’Lo’s multiplicity is illegible from the perspective of philosophical argumentation, a poetic reading reveals both a unity of self through his contradictions and a web of solidarity through his relations.

Elsewhere in the anthology Ching-In Chen plays with the Japanese poetic form of the *zuihitsu* to explore both a randomness that is not random, and a subjectivity without telos. A *zuihitsu* is typically composed of both personal accounts and fragmented ideas in conversation with each other that grow outwards like a fungus in all directions. On Chen’s account, the intersubjective insights buried within the *zuihitsu* differ from those one might associate with a formal essay. Chen writes: “...you must know the secret, there is no poem to speak of, it is a way to attain a life without boundaries” (105). Poems are not merely static objects of knowledge, rather they are dynamic horizons where new subjectivities are constantly navigated and negotiated. Chen is genderqueer themselves and articulates the affects of genderqueer embodiment through their remixing of the *zuihitsu*.

In “noah: a reassembled *zuihitsu*” (Tolbert and Peterson 2013), Chen offers a sense in which the form of the poem expresses its contents. An unnamed interlocutor, perhaps the *zuihitsu* itself, observes the subject, who may or may not be Chen: “**She caught me watching her.** You told me you had no word for who I was/ **It came so naturally to me.** / I hoping you would define me, map my body with grids” (104). It is unclear how many subjects are at play in these lines. “She”, “her”, “you”, and “I” give us a cluster of four voices depending on how one reads the poem. Reading the bold lines back-to-back produces a reading wherein watching a “her” comes naturally to the “me,” although “she” is aware of the watching. We might read this as the “I” of the poem mimicking a “her” with regards to gendered embodiment. This mimicking is

always observed by another, and thus comes across as uncanny and on display. The “you” having no word for the “I” is suggestive of the “I” differing from the “you” or the “her” in terms of gender—hoping to be defined by the “you” but always escaping its grasp. A genderqueer individual assigned female at birth might seek out women to understand their own relationship to gender yet be unable to map themselves onto such an experience. This process is always incomplete, or in Chen’s words “permanently unfinished” (104). Genderqueer experience can sometimes be captured—though it would elude such moves as capturing—through a contradiction such as being permanently unfinished, both complete and never ending. Thus, the form of the poem gives us greater insight into experiences that are themselves fluid and subject to multiple interpretations in ways a formal essay cannot.

However, it is not only gender that is permanently unfinished, as the poem could just as easily be read as being about race in addition to being about gender.⁶ When read this way, race also exists as a dynamic process subject to change depending on the spatial-temporal context in which one finds oneself. Thus, race becomes fluid and contextual rather than fixed and permanent. Such a metaphysics of race helps to undermine white supremacist ontologies that both place whiteness on top of a racial hierarchy and reproduce notions of racial purity. For if race is contextual, there cannot be any fundamental essence upon which to base notions of racial purity. Furthermore, in this account, the constructed nature of race disrupts the logic of racial hierarchy by exposing it as a political structure, rather than a metaphysical truth.

One might also notice that the aesthetics at play in Chen’s poetry coincide with the three common features of trans poetics that Peterson articulates. It is unclear which voice, if any, belongs to Chen, and the identities of the other interlocutors are equally obfuscated. Narrative is deployed in an imaginative sense—Chen is not merely disclosing their experiences, rather they

use the form of the *zuihitsu* to explore word association and possibilities. The use of “gaps” and experimental syntax is self-evident and can be understood as Chen partitioning sections of the poem that prefigure new pathways and branches of thought. We can also conceive of this move as being an enactment of the poetic operation of the cut. By separating the constitutive parts of the poem—and of identity—Chen is able to show the reader various modes of understanding race and gender that in turn reveal new possible paths of resistance.

Finally, I turn my attention to the work of *micha cárdenas* and a sense in which poetry expresses an ambiguity that is dynamic and unfolding. In her “Statement on Poetics” (Tolbert and Peterson 2013) *cárdenas* describes both herself and her poetics as being permanently in transition. On her account, poetic writing is “...a space where [she] can mix many layers of experience and ideas together and allow for a flexible slippage between them” (396). As a mixed race, transgender genderqueer femme, *cárdenas* experiences her various identities as overlapping and flexible. While her poetry is not reducible to expressions of her identity, there is a sense in which the fluidity of her sense of self and the fluidity of her poetry are mutually reinforced. In her writing *cárdenas* also strives to break free from the oppressive logics of the present day by deploying a science fiction ethos wherein we can imagine more just futures. Her poem “net.walkingtools.Transformer” (Tolbert and Peterson 2013) uses programming language to explore gender, embodiment, and subjectivity. Various strings of data express information related to “genderDesired,” “genderGiven,” “oldName,” and “newName,” among others. Gender and technology collide to articulate possible trans futures.

In “Becoming Transreal” (Tolbert and Peterson 2013), *cárdenas* imagines a future now where nanotechnologies rewrite the subject’s body to their desired ends. The narrator describes her body as a *pharmacopoeia*—nanotech produces drugs that transform the subject and that can

be harvested for future use. Such technology is framed as illegal, and thus the narrator and her partner exist in a fugitive relation with the state. The narrator describes the effects of the drug prometrium as constructing a “female desire” in the subject. Although taken to mean an attraction to men, the narrator finds herself slipping from pansexual to lesbian identification. She retains an “M” on her passport, despite it now being legal to change it to an “F.” The story ends with the narrator and her partner lying naked on the beach together, unconcerned for the moment with the dangers of the world.

In its presentation of science fiction body hacking, “Becoming Transreal” also elucidates the everyday navigation of danger that trans and gender variant people undergo—more so if they are also people of color. Both the narrator and trans people in our world exist as liminal figures unintelligible to dominant discourses of gender. While a marker of “M” on her passport might act to construct and confuse the narrator as male in certain contexts, an “F” would obscure her identity as well. Transgender genderqueer femme cannot be captured by the binary logics of male-to-female transitions. In some way, albeit ironically, having an “M” on her passport may be truer to her character as fugitive to the state than an “F” would be. This is not to say that she is closer to male than to female. Rather, in being *further* from male than from female, occupying a legal status of male acts as a subversive genderfucking towards the state.

Furthermore, the act of resisting legibility by the state can be read as an act of resistance toward racist oppression. As people of color are disproportionately the subjects of state violence, refusing to be understood by the state as a person of color serves to undermine its racist targeting of (trans) people of color. In some ways this is akin to rejecting the use of facial recognition technology. Rather than embrace a discourse of inclusion that would increase the efficacy of facial recognition technology on people of color, one could take the more radical position that

such technology should not be used at all. Here we can see the poetic operation of the shift being used to render the narrator as illegible. Thus, the narrator shifts from transparency to what Glissant (1997) would term “opacity”—the ontological status of having oneself be unknowable to others in one’s entirety. Opacity here is both an ontological state and an ethical move that resists the totalizing gaze of dominant oppressive structures such as racism. Layers of ambiguity within the piece allow for multiple interpretations which together provide a fuller picture of gender, race, identity, and transition, contradictions and occlusions included.

While poetry can be translated into the language of academic writing and philosophical argumentation to a degree, I have demonstrated that what can be said in a single stanza often requires multiple paragraphs of essay style writing to properly unpack. Not only is poetry capable of holding contradictions and ambiguity in tensions: it also has the benefit of being more concise in its language. A single phrase can act as a multiplicity, with various paths of intersecting and divergent meanings available to the reader. A question remains: trans poetics serves as a salient method by which one can interrogate the WTF, but is its insight limited to experiences which are unnerving or traumatizing? Perhaps through poetics we can imagine a different starting place from which to undertake our investigations in trans philosophy.

Ways Toward Freedom

In “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities” (2009), Indigenous scholar Eve Tuck urges the reader to consider how they engage in research surrounding marginalized communities. Too often, Tuck notes, research begins from a politics of pain and suffering. Exploring trans subjectivity solely through the lens of transphobia and gender oppression only serves to reproduce such violence through what Tuck terms *damage-centered research*. Starting from a

place of suffering both elides meaningful acts of resistance and forecloses possible liberatory futures. Turning to the ground-bound method of trans philosophy, we can see this dynamic at play when we begin with experiences that are strange and disturbing. However, this need not necessarily be the case. Tuck presents us with what she terms *desire-based research*. Such frameworks, Tuck asserts, are “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (416). Given the previous examples, trans poetics and its sibling analytic trans of color poetics would seem to be capable of exploring subjectivity and expression in alignment with those goals.

While Bettcher presents ground-bound philosophy as a methodology, it is also a political imperative.⁷ Taking the lived experiences of trans people as the starting point for philosophical investigation a priori places trans people as subjects who engage in philosophy, rather than objects of inquiry for philosophers to dissect. As such, trans philosophy in its ground-bound form is also a call for the collective liberation of trans people. As a method of analysis, trans poetics—more so than other methods—is able to both make sense of the ambiguities present in the WTF and point towards avenues of resistance against transphobic oppression and its various intersections.

Perhaps we might consider trans poetics as being capable of transforming what we take trans philosophy to be doing. In addition to feelings of fear and confusion, we might also explore moments of solidarity, resistance, and joy—such as the community D’Lo creates between oppressed groups as a moment of solidarity, the dynamic metaphysics of race and gender that Chen presents as possibilities for challenging oppressive structures as a moment of resistance, and the imagining of possible trans futures through the collision of gender and technology in the work of *cárdenas* as a moment of joy.

Furthermore, we can recall the following line from Chen: “You told me you had no word for who I was/ **It came so naturally to me.**” (Tolbert and Peterson 2013, 104). Despite the “you” having no word for the “I,” it comes naturally to the “me.” There are two ways of reading these lines that are relevant to the point at hand. First, we can read them as suggesting that the dominant “you,” cannot comprehend the marginalized “I” or “me.” Relatedly, the dominant mode of analysis in philosophy—argumentation—struggles to comprehend marginalized existence—in this case the lives of trans people. And yet, to the “me,” such an understanding comes naturally. The parallel here is that trans poetics, as articulated by trans people, has no difficulty in illuminating the contradictions of trans life.

Second, we can read the lines as expressing solidarity, resistance, and joy. Naming oneself despite being illegible—and doing so with ease—is a multifaceted action. It is a joyous act of self-determination and understanding. It is also an act of resistance to the “you” who has no words for understanding and thus refuses to understand. Finally, it is an act of solidarity, a call to others who are similarly illegible to dominant discourses. Two lines are all it takes to display the multiplicitous ways in which trans poetics grapples with the contradictions inherent to trans experience. Trans life is at once defined by moments of fear and confusion as well as moments of solidarity, resistance, and joy.⁸

Thus, in addition to better illuminating the contradictory nature of trans experience, trans poetics might also be able to shift us from a potential politics of suffering to a politics of liberation. At the very least it can hold the two in tension in ways that other approaches—such as philosophy argumentation—cannot seem to do. While we ought to continue to interrogate the “What the Fuck,” we might also begin to explore the “Ways Toward Freedom.”

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Notes

1. Talia Mae Bettcher, telephone conversation with author, June 16, 2022.
2. Readers should take this to be a claim about the historical relationship between poetry/poetics and philosophy as a discipline, rather than an endorsement of Aristotle's philosophical system.
3. This is also sometimes translated as "Poetry and Knowledge."
4. Here cárdenas draws heavily from Glissant (1997) in articulating her conception of poetics.
5. While we should not a priori take the poet and the narrator of a poem to be equivalent, especially as trans poetics often refuses explicit confessional narratives about trans experience, my analysis contains some slippage between the poet and the narrator in

cases wherein I read poetics statements and poetry together. This is most evident in my analysis of D’Lo’s work.

6. This should not be read as a claim that race and gender are always, or even often, analogous.
7. Talia Mae Bettcher, telephone conversation with author, June 16, 2022.
8. While my focus has been on the specificity of trans life, we might think that all life is constituted by such contradictions. In addition to trans poetics as trans philosophy, we might consider poetics of many kinds as philosophy simpliciter.

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