

*Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy.* By TALIA MAE BETTCHER.  
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2025. Pp.xi + 318. Price £19.99.)

In his landmark 1910 study *The Transvestites*, Magnus Hirschfeld reported:

Some time ago there was a story in the newspaper told by a child, which gives some food for thought [...] A country minister on a walk discovered a five-year-old boy bathing in a brook with some small girls. After he was scolded, what did the candid toddler reply? “I did not know, sir, that they were girls. They did not have any clothes on.” (‘Selections from *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress*’ in Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 34)

The boy’s response is striking because it reveals he had not yet learned something the minister would have taken for granted, namely that in their world there existed ‘a representational relation between gender presentation and sex’ (p.19). This representational relation is still with us, and in fact is key to explaining both trans oppression and trans gender phoria (that is, ‘[g]ender dysphoria, euphoria, and like experiences in between these extremes’ (p.259)); so argues Talia Mae Bettcher in her impressive new book.

Bettcher argues that this representational relation is key to explaining trans oppression because it is key to explaining ‘easily the most prevalent and ubiquitous threat to most trans people today’ (p.17), namely reality enforcement. Reality enforcement is ‘a form of misgendering characterized by an appearance-reality contrast whereby a trans person is viewed as *really* a so-and-so *disguised* as a such-and-such’ (p.18), and hence as engaged either in deception or in make-believe. The result is a dangerous double-bind: ‘either risk exposure as a deceiver or else come out as a make-believer’ (p.18). Here a trans person’s gender presentation (understood as “appearance”) is taken to misrepresent their sex (understood as “reality”) – or in other words

to misrepresent their 'genital status' (p.19). Were you to be asked about your genital status, you would surely consider this invasive (compare Sam Berstler (2023), 'Bad Question!' in *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 51(4): 413-449). Yet trans people find themselves effectively punished for refusing to engage in truth-telling about their genital statuses via their gender presentations. It follows that the representational relation between gender presentation and sex figures centrally in a system that is 'inherently abusive' (p.19).

Bettcher calls this hegemonic system the 'folk system of interpersonal spatiality' (p.33). By interpersonal spatiality Bettcher means 'the capacity of all sensory and discursive encounters between us to admit of closeness and distance' (p.38). If I provide someone with novel sensory and/or informational access to some part of me then I become closer to them, and if I gain novel sensory and/or informational access to some part of someone then they become closer to me. A condition of possibility on the creation of intimacy is thus that there be parts of ourselves which others do not typically access. This is secured through the normative regulation of access by interpersonal boundaries, where violating a boundary on access to a part of someone violates their privacy (compare Julie C. Inness, *Privacy, Intimacy, and Isolation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)). Interpersonal boundaries are subject to moral and temporal orderings Bettcher calls 'strips' (p.44); the particular strip that proceeds from clothedness to nakedness Bettcher calls the 'physical strip' (p.91). Within the folk system of interpersonal spatiality there are two physical strips: the male strip and the female strip. In both strips, the boundary regulating access to genitalia is morally-speaking the weightiest and hence typically the last to be traversed. Yet knowing which of these strips someone is subject to requires knowing their genital status. Hence the folk system relies on the representational relation between gender presentation and sex to facilitate the communication of information about genital statuses 'in violation of the very boundaries it lays down' (p.100).

Bettcher then argues that trans gender phoria consists in ‘largely irregular modalities of one’s awareness of oneself as an object for others – vulnerability, self-collection, shame, and dignity – that arise in ways inappropriate to the folk system’ (p.134). Here Bettcher’s particular focus is on trans experiences of self-recognition in which viewing oneself in the mirror leaves one with ‘a sense of rightful self-collection’ through which one appropriates the gender presentation there displayed ‘to oneself as one’s own’ (p.141). Such an experience of self-recognition – far from being ‘deluded’ – is in fact ‘profoundly perceptive’, insofar as what is grasped is in part the sheer contingency of the folk system and the representational relation between gender presentation and sex on which it relies (p.142). As Bettcher movingly puts it: ‘we understand that whether this moment ends, is relegated to mere pretense, depends only on how we are received, how we are recognized, and that this is a contingent matter of the social’ (p.142). Trans gender phoria in this way turns out to be essentially resistant to trans oppression.

*Beyond Personhood* is a remarkable achievement almost twenty years in the making. The unified account of trans oppression and trans gender phoria has considerable explanatory power. In particular, the account of gender presentation as representational and not merely performative surpasses Judith Butler’s ‘beyond-the-binary account’ (p.107) of trans oppression in explaining why trans people are liable to be met with ‘the charge of deception or pretense’ and not merely ‘the charge of imitation’ (p.116). Likewise, the account of trans self-recognition surpasses the popular ‘wrong-body model’ (p.121) of trans gender phoria in explaining phoria’s attachment to ‘proper’ (clothed) appearance and not only to ‘intimate’ (unclothed) appearance (p.134). Along the way Bettcher is notably unafraid to swallow ‘bitter pill[s]’ (p.64), such as that in the dominant “world” of sense (call it the dominant form of life) ‘trans women are *constituted* as men and trans men are *constituted* as women’ (p.64) – emphasizing that what ‘bestows full centrality, full womanhood or full manhood, upon us’ (p.65) are instead trans subcultures composing resistant “worlds” of sense.

This is not yet even to mention what eventually emerges as the book's true ambition, namely to show that 'the folk system of interpersonal spatiality is a crucial feature of what María Lugones calls the "colonial/modern gender system"' (p.177) – and hence not only that anti-trans violence has a specifically colonial history (compare Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (London: Verso, 2024)), but also that the organization of interpersonal space has been central to the oppression of the 'colonized and enslaved' (p.185). Here Bettcher draws on her background as an Early Modern scholar to argue that Locke's conception of personhood played an important justificatory role in the rise of this system – doing for Locke something similar to what Charles Mills once did for Kant (see *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), Ch.6 'Kant's *Untermenschen*'). *Beyond Personhood* thus has much to offer readers from a wide variety of philosophical backgrounds; but it is likely to prove especially meaningful to trans readers, whose everyday sense of 'perplexity' (p.5) is liable to be richly illuminated.