**Program for a Transgender Existentialism**

by Penelope Haulotte

Trans theory is characterized in part by the apparent tension between discursive analyses of cisgender society and phenomenological descriptions of trans experience. Foucaultian discourse analysis takes the form of an examination of how cisgender society constructs trans subjects as objects of medical, criminological, and political discourses, while phenomenology attends to a systematic description of first-person experiences. Henry Rubin long ago pointed out that the danger of discourse analysis is that it risks reducing the particular experiences of trans people to mere effects of a discourse, as is apparent in Bernice Hausman’s claim that transsexuals are defined by the demand for sex reassignment surgery or in the cisgender tendency to interpret trans people as “dupes of gender.” [[1]](#footnote-1) While traditional inquiry into the history of philosophy proposes an interminable opposition between phenomenology and discourse analysis, Rubin’s alternative suggestion is that within the domain of trans studies that they fulfill complimentary dimensions of investigation. Discourse analysis and phenomenology converge in trans studies because they are submitted to the same ethical and political imperative: the systematic development of the trans[[2]](#footnote-2) archive.[[3]](#footnote-3) Both discourse analysis and phenomenology as methods in trans studies are directed toward the development of a genuinely *trans* history, perspective, and theory, with special methodological consideration toward the way that this perspective is misunderstood or obscured by dominant frameworks within cisgender society. In what follows, I provide a brief reconstruction of two major interventions in trans phenomenology, demonstrating that each is carefully concerned with distinctly archival considerations, but I further argue that each project remains incomplete because of an incomplete bracketing of medicalized cisgender concepts. I then propose a brief alternative program aimed at the full suspension of cisgender categories that I call transgender existentialism.

Edmund Husserl discovered phenomenological description through what he called a certain kind of bracketing procedure: some assumptions, the sum of which he called the “natural attitude,” had to be ‘neutralized’ or ‘put out of action’ to reveal the salient phenomena for description.[[4]](#footnote-4) The essential precondition to opening the domain of phenomenology is closing the world of natural objects and representations. Phenomenological description therefore characterizes itself through a neutralization of certain assumptions, prejudices, and explanatory strategies, which are so various and deeply ingrained that a systematic procedure is required for their complete suspension. Trans phenomenology retains from classical phenomenology the idea that phenomenology is characterized by a certain bracketing procedure but differs entirely as to the motivation for the suspension and the nature of the attitude suspended. Hence, trans phenomenology is not merely the application of a classically given method to a new object of investigation. Rather, by bracketing cisgender categories, trans phenomenology is a politically motivated, qualitative transformation of the very contours of phenomenology itself.

This transformation is responsible for certain inevitable misunderstandings of trans phenomenology’s corpus, method, and technique from the perspective of the classically trained cisgender phenomenologist. To begin with, the attitude suspended is completely different: rather than bracket the natural attitude the trans phenomenologist brackets what I will call the *cisgender attitude,* that is, the cultivated disposition to organize society based on mandatory gender identifications. Just as the natural attitude for Husserl was deeply ingrained and so in need of a systematic procedure for the thoroughgoing suspension of such an attitude, so too a systematic method is required in trans phenomenology but set to completely different purposes. Trans phenomenology has a distinctively emancipatory aim: to clarify trans forms of life, not through further specification of the categories of cisgender society, but through an intimate return to *trans experience* itself. The corpus of trans phenomenology – the set of texts utilized as the source material for the phenomenological investigation in question – seems completely anarchic from the classical cisgender perspective: gone are the traditional analyses of chairs and desks, of space and time, and the readings and re-readings of Proust, in favor of an uneasy blending of statements concerning the self in poetry, literature, theater, photography, and zines, using an apparent hodgepodge of techniques from psychoanalysis, to queer theory, to decolonial theory and beyond. The difference in source material is related to the differences in bracketing and technique. The promise of trans phenomenology is therefore intimately bound up with the possibility of producing a discursive regime where the attitude of cisgender society is completely suspended.

This dynamic underlies Jay Prosser’s approach to trans phenomenology in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality. Second Skins* is regularly considered to be one of the pioneering works in trans phenomenology despite the fact that he makes no use of any traditional phenomenological concepts and that the only comment about phenomenology in the book is negative.[[5]](#footnote-5) Nonetheless, what is manifestly apparent in *Second Skins* are the archival considerations of trans phenomenology: the text concerns itself with trans stories, and especially the stories that trans people tell about themselves, and the intricate and highly complex means by which these narratives are distorted by a cisgender frame. The questions motivating his work are the following: What is our history? Who are our dead? Where is our literature? Where may we be seen, heard, or understood by one another? How do we come to misunderstand and misrecognize one another? This is the basis of his opposition to queer theory. For Prosser, queer theory utilizes the figure of the transsexual as the apotheosis of disrupting normative gender categories.[[6]](#footnote-6) But what are the effects of reducing the transsexual to a mere trope of a broader notion of queerness? If queer theory approaches the transsexual for their use in disrupting normative gender categories, what does the transsexual make of themselves? How might they move differently or beyond the purview of a cisgender queer theory?

For Prosser the eidetic structure of the trans subject stems from a certain narrative coherence: trans subjects are those who undergo the experience of “living in the wrongly sexed body.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This condition – which we may refer to as *gender dysphoria* –structures the lives of trans people into a relatively coherent set of events: there is the unhappy childhood, the horrific years of puberty, uncomfortable mirror scenes, the conflation of one’s transness with queerness, the epiphany, the *arch* confessional moment of recounting one’s narrative for the doctors, the beginning of transition, hormones, surgery, sex reassignment surgery and closure. The shared narrative admits of some permutation: some will die before they receive sex reassignment surgery and genuine healing, others will never successfully navigate the medical establishment, and finally, there is the troubling category of “transgender,” those members of the trans community who do not quite fit his ‘wrongly bodied’ model. As Prosser’s narrative recounting might suggest, trans phenomenology is for him rightly considered *transsexual* phenomenology.[[8]](#footnote-8) The essential nature of trans experience is the central motivating dynamic of living in the wrong body. The notion of trans people who would willingly elide this body modification provide a fundamental problem for Prosser’s account.[[9]](#footnote-9) On his view, this is the effect of another archetypal transsexual experience: the conflation of trans(sexual) experience with queer experience. For Prosser, living outside or beyond the gender binary is a largely unfortunate effect of living in the wrong body. Part of his polemic with queer theory involves establishing the superiority of the analytic of sex over gender: for Prosser, what trans people experience is a wrongly *sexed* body, not an inadequate form of gender expression, and so the conflation of transsexual and cisgender queer interests has the effect of masking important dimensions of trans experience.

The next intervention in trans phenomenology I will investigate stems from a pair of books by Gayle Salamon: *Assuming a Body: Rhetorics of Materiality* and *The Life and Death of Latisha King: A Critical Phenomenology of Transphobia. Assuming a Body* provides an alternative phenomenology of embodiment than we find in Prosser while *The Life and Death of Latisha King* utilizes the resources of critical phenomenology to interpret the trial of Brandon McInierny, a cisgender teenager who murdered his trans classmate Latisha King. In essence, Salamon seeks to reverse the priority of the sex/gender analytic as it is utilized by Prosser. Salamon points out that both Prosser and Hausman ultimately maintain that transsexual subjectivity is defined chiefly by the demand for sex reassignment surgery, and that Prosser concludes with cisgender society that we are in some way our genitals.[[10]](#footnote-10) This is the qualitative shift at the core of Salamon’s analysis: what Prosser indexes to “sex” is better understood through the conceptual framework offered by “gender.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The emancipatory potential of demands for gender reassignment surgery does not stem from a “correction” of living in the “wrong” body, but from the heightened capacity of gendered expression offered by the availability of such surgeries. Similarly, in her interpretation of the trial of Brandon McInierny, Salamon points out that Latisha was interpreted as an aggressor and the violence she suffered justified largely in part because of her non-normative gender expression.[[12]](#footnote-12) Salamon claims that a new trans phenomenology would not simply accept cisgender society’s categorization of sex, but to try to show how this appeal to sex is in fact an effect of gender.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The central problem of Salamon’s trans phenomenology concerns the unity and distinctiveness of trans experience. If being trans is not living in the wrongly sexed body, what is it, exactly? Consider Salamon’s reinterpretation of gender dysphoria. For Salamon, gender dysphoria is dissatisfaction with gender expression that is experienced by both cis and trans people alike.[[14]](#footnote-14) This follows a tendency common to queer and trans theory to claim that queer cisgender people also experience gender dysphoria because they experience dissatisfaction with the existing gender system.[[15]](#footnote-15) Through an oblique and circuitous pathway Salamon actually returns to the original thesis of queer theory: that the central political category for thinking about non-normative gender identity is queerness and that being trans is a mere modification of being queer. Moreover, this seems to be the result from her critical phenomenology of transphobia: that transphobia is rooted primarily in a phobic reaction to non-normative gender expression. It is hard to understand given the conceptual apparatus put forward by Salamon what political function a distinctively *trans* phenomenology can fulfill if there is not a shared political situation that can attest to the urgency of such a project or demonstrate its own internal coherence. If Salamon’s framework is true, more than a rapprochement between queer theory and trans theory, trans theory appears absorbed back into queer theory.

This review of the debate between Prosser and Salamon allows us to note several features about the contours of trans phenomenology as it has progressed up to this point. In each case, what is at stake is a suspension of cisgender concepts, schemes, and attitudes to produce a genuinely *trans* archive, but one which remains nevertheless incomplete, for the central theoretical apparatuses used by each are outgrowths of cisgender medical categories. For while Prosser attempts to identify the distinctive coherence of a trans form of life, he is forced to think of this life as almost entirely defined by the parameters dictated by a cisgender medical establishment and paradigmatically describes ‘successful’ transsexual transition. For Prosser there is a phenomenological essence of transsexual experience. Yet, if Prosser’s analysis remains too confined to a certain sequence of narrative events tied to specific corporeal experiences, Salamon’s turn to gender does little help. For as trans theorists and historians such as Jules Gill-Peterson have analyzed at length, the contemporary notion of gender is essentially an outgrowth of an epistemological crisis concerning the unity of various “sexed characteristics,” and therefore belongs to the same discursive order as sex.[[16]](#footnote-16) The turn to gender ultimately does not alleviate the epistemological problems of sex but displaces them into psychology and it becomes difficult to see within the apparatus of gender how transgendered experience is not simply one non-normative modality among others.

Escaping this dialectic of embodiment requires a radical rethinking of the unity of trans experience. The problem is that ultimately both Prosser and Salamon tacitly adopt a cisgender orientation toward the question of trans identity by posing the unity of trans experience in some shared positive characteristic or narrative coherence.[[17]](#footnote-17) The recognition of this fact results in the continual oscillation between the claim that there is an essence to trans identity (Prosser) and the denial of the coherence of such an identity (Salamon). Transgender existentialism proposes that trans people have an *existential* rather than *eidetic* unity, in other words, what trans people share is a unity of situation*,* project, and responsibilityrather than resemblances between properties, bodies, or experiences. This perspective on embodiment was originally opened by Simone de Beauvoir: “the body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Ifand whenthere is a resemblance between our psychic, somatic, and narrative experiences as trans people, it is the resultof a more essential underlying shared project. This would allow us to reclaim the concept of gender dysphoria from the *DSM* and cisgender society in the name of trans theory: gender dysphoria describes the *situation* of alienation and unfreedom experienced by trans subjects in cisgender society. Here, through a certain suspension, a medicalized category can become a political one. If Prosser overstates the unity of trans experience and Salamon understates it, transgender existentialism sees the unity of trans people as essentially precarious and the result of our shared collective resolution. This is to claim, in essence, that there is a certain political responsibility that is one of the only universally shared features across trans experience, though of course it is an essential possibility of human experience to live in bad faith about such a deep responsibility. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s terms, when we choose to transition, we are defending a distinctive vision of human freedom that entails a concomitant *revolutionary* political consequence: the project of trans people requires upturning the very situation (cisgender society) that is the source of their unity. Similarly, Leslie Feinberg once claimed in a true moment of proletarian lucidity that the political responsibility of the trans liberation movement extends infinitely, to genuine liberation for everyone.[[19]](#footnote-19) The neutralization of cisgender society must extend beyond armchair of the phenomenologist, into the material neutralization of cisgender society, which is to say, into the streets.[[20]](#footnote-20)

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1. In fact, much of early trans theory attempts to correct this tendency, from the “posttranssexual” perspective announced by Sandy Stone to Jay Prosser’s neo-transsexual perspective examined in more detail in this piece. For Rubin’s analysis of Bernice Hausman, see (1998: 265). For Prosser’s critique of Judith Butler’s analysis of Venus Xtravaganza in *Bodies that Matter,* see Prosser (1998: 45-48). The historiographical problem concerning the agency of trans people in the discourses that oppress them remain today and was raised recently by Jules Gill-Peterson’s *Histories of the Transgender Child*: one major contribution of her work is her demonstration that trans subjects were not merely objects of medical, clinical, and psychological discourses, but also frequently close collaborators (2018: 11). All these results problematize the standard picture of trans people as the playthings of autonomous structures. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Andrea Long Chu (2017: 145) is the first to my knowledge to explicitly draw the connection between trans phenomenology and the development of a trans archive, especially through the dialectic between Jay Prosser and Gayle Salamon examined below. This dialectic was later commented upon by Talia Mae Bettcher (2020: 330-332), reaching largely aporetic conclusions. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Foucault defines the archive in the following way: “By [archive] I do not mean the sum of all texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past… On the contrary, it is rather the reason why so many things, said by so many men, for so long, have not emerged in accordance with the same laws of thought, or the same set of verbal performances, of what could be deployed in the order of the mind or in the order of things… In short, why, if there are things said – and those only – one should seek the immediate reason for them in the things that were said not in them, nor in the men that said them, but in the system of discursivity, in the enunciative possibilities and impossibilities that it lays down. The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.” This sense of historiographical inquiry into the order of thingsthrough an interrogation of the archiveswas further developed in the examination of the political function of the archive by Saidiya Hartman in “Venus in Two Acts,” which was later explicitly utilized for trans historiography by C. Riley Snorton in *Black on Both Sides*. One way of describing trans theory is an attempt to understand and then neutralize the historical *a priori* of cisgender reason. For Foucault’s definition of the archive, see (1972: 129). For Hartman’s use of the Foucaultian notion of the archive, see (2008: 10). Finally, for C. Riley Snorton’s application of this emergent paradigm to trans studies, see (2017: 7-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Husserl provides his paradigmatic articulation of the natural attitude in (2014: 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Prosser (1998: 79) contrasts the merely visual dimension of phenomenology with the postural schema provided by Freudian psychoanalysis. It is unclear whether phenomenology has the limitations Prosser ascribes to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Prosser famously writes: “What Butler does not consider is to what extent—and on what occasions—transgendered and transsexual subjects and methodologies might not wish for inclusion under the queer banner... There is much about transsexuality that must remain irreconcilable to queer: the specificity of transsexual experience; the importance of the flesh to self; the difference between sex and gender identity; the desire to pass as ‘really gendered’ in the world without trouble; perhaps above all, as I explore in my next chapter, a particular experience of the body that can't simply transcend (or transubstantiate) the literal” (ibid, 58-59). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Prosser famously defines his position in these terms: “My contention is that transsexuals continue to deploy the image of wrong embodiment because being trapped in the wrong body is simply what transsexuality feels like. If the goal of transsexual transition is to align the feeling of gendered embodiment with material body, body image—which we might be tempted to align with the imaginary—clearly already has a material force for transsexuals. The image of being trapped in the wrong body conveys this force. It suggests how body image is radically split off from the material body in the first place, how body image can feel sufficiently substantial as to persuade the transsexual to alter his or her body to conform to it. The image of wrong embodiment describes most effectively the experience of pretransition (dis)embodiment: the feeling of a sexed body dysphoria profoundly and subjectively experienced” (ibid, 69). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Prosser frames his position very explicitly: “While I value the possibilities for affiliation transgender has brought (between queers, feminists, and the ‘gender community’), I am still skeptical about what that ‘post’ in posttranssexuality signifies. I continue to find unrealistic and question the political implications of claims that somatic transitions project gender identity beyond the body in a way that reveals that sex does not matter” (ibid, 204). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This point is made in Bettcher (2014: 388): “Many of us have not undergone genital reconstruction surgery, and many of us do not want to; however, some of us have, and some of us do… For the most part, we believe our genital configurations don’t undermine facts about who we are.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Salamon therefore groups Hausman and Prosser’s work together as suggesting a return to the real of the body in the demand for sex-reassignment surgery (2010: 84-85). This contrasts with Prosser’s claim that Butler and Hausman resemble one another. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. She claims that theorizations based in a simple opposition between a material embodiment and ‘queer’ theorizations of the same is to “domesticate gender as it is lived and deny its considerable complexity, which often outpaces our language to describe it” (ibid, 73). She concludes from this that “The body is always subtended by its history” (ibid, 78). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. She claims, for example, that “gender was read through the expression rather than the materiality of the body. Latisha King’s gender was read through her gestures, her comportment, her movement. But at several crucial moments during the trial, gender was also discerned *from* and determined *by* objects.” (2018: 136) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In fact, the specific rhetorical strategy has a storied history in these debates. Foucault famously claims that a proper understanding of sex requires a conceptual shift from the repression of sex to the deployment of sexuality (1978: 114). Judith Butler then in *Gender Trouble* reenacts this trope with a twist (they even use the previous quotation as an epigraph for the book): they argue that sex is an effect of gender (1990: 34). One aspect of Prosser’s desire to delineate queer and trans interests stems precisely from this reduction, which he sees as fundamentally antithetical to trans(sexual) interests, which are rooted immediately within sex (1998: 60). Salamon responds to Prosser’s rejection through a further resurrection of this style of claim: sex is once again an effect of gender (2010: 40-41). Later, however, in her work more immediately related to trans historical work, she too will encounter the problematic conflation of these terms as antithetical to the construction of a trans archive: “Much of what happened during this trial hinged on a confusion between gender identity and sexual orientation” (2018: 4). But the question of *how* to coordinate these terms goes in each case unanswered. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The continuum model of gender dysphoria is discussed and apparently endorsed by Salamon (ibid, 164-165). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Robin Dembroff (2019: 61). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Gill-Peterson: “…the emergence of gender was responsible for the attempted reduction of transition to a binary model… The irony is that the very medical paradigm that would finally permit institutional medical transition and gender reassignment in the United States on a large scale would also dramatically curtail the types of trans people eligible for such treatment and the forms of medical support that they would be allowed to access.” (2018: 126) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I believe this is reflected in their tendency to use Freudian psychoanalysis as the basis for their theories of gendered ego constitution. By contrast, I believe that gender transition can only be fully understood as a kind of *existential project,* and as a result the first-personal terrain of phenomenology is more appropriate than third-personal clinical psychoanalysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Beauvoir introduces this formulation to characterize the point of view she understands to be taken on by Heidegger, Sartre, and herself. See (2011: 46). In fact, this perspective (and quotation) was cited directly and explicitly rejected by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* as problematically western and Cartesian (1990: 12). From the transgender existentialist perspective, this was a mistake that has resulted in depoliticization. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “So, what are the goals of trans liberation? There is not one single answer. If you ask me, the aim should not fall a yard short of genuine social and economic liberation for everyone.” (1998: 135) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Sartre frequently reflects on the relationship between freedom and responsibility, but for a paradigmatic formulation, see “Existentialism is a Humanism” where Sartre claims that “as diverse as man’s projects be, at least none of them seem wholly foreign to me since each presents itself as an attempt to surpass limitations, to postpone, deny, or come to terms with them. Consequently, every project, however individual, has a universal value” (see Sartre 2007: 42). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)