

Program for a Transgender Existentialism

PENELOPE HAULOTTE

Abstract Trans theory is characterized in part by the apparent tension between discursive analyses of cisgender society and phenomenological descriptions of trans experiences. While traditional inquiry into the history of philosophy proposes an interminable opposition between phenomenology and discourse analysis, Henry Rubin's alternative suggestion is that within the domain of trans studies these methods are complementary. 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 archive. 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 of the way that this perspective is misunderstood or obscured by dominant frameworks within cisgender society. In what follows, the author provides a brief reconstruction of two major interventions in trans phenomenology, demonstrating that each is carefully concerned with distinctly archival considerations. The author further argues that each project remains unfinished because of an incomplete bracketing of medicalized cisgender concepts. The article then proposes a brief alternative program aimed at the full suspension of cisgender categories that the author calls transgender existentialism.

Keywords trans phenomenology, Jean-Paul Sartre, Leslie Feinberg, Simone de Beauvoir

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 by the cisgender tendency to interpret trans people as "dupes of gender."¹ While traditional inquiry into the history of philosophy proposes an interminable

1 opposition between phenomenology and discourse analysis, Rubin's alternative
2 suggestion is that within the domain of trans studies that they fulfill complimen-
3 tary dimensions of investigation. Discourse analysis and phenomenology con-
4 verge in trans studies because they are submitted to the same ethical and political
5 imperative: the systematic development of the trans² archive.³ Both discourse
6 analysis and phenomenology as methods in trans studies are directed toward the
7 development of a genuinely *trans* history, perspective, and theory, with special
8 methodological consideration of the way that this perspective is misunderstood
9 or obscured by dominant frameworks within cisgender society. In what follows,
10 I provide a brief reconstruction of two major interventions in trans phenome-
11 nology, demonstrating that each is carefully concerned with distinctly archival
12 considerations, but I further argue that each project remains unfinished because
13 of an incomplete bracketing of medicalized cisgender concepts. I then propose a
14 brief alternative program aimed at the full suspension of cisgender categories
15 that I call transgender existentialism.

16 Edmund Husserl discovered phenomenological description through what
17 he called a certain kind of bracketing procedure: some assumptions, the sum of
18 which he called the "natural attitude," had to be "neutralized" or "put out of action"
19 to reveal the salient phenomena for description.⁴ The essential precondition to
20 opening the domain of phenomenology is closing the world of natural objects
21 and representations. Phenomenological description therefore characterizes itself
22 through a neutralization of certain assumptions, prejudices, and explanatory
23 strategies, which are so various and deeply ingrained that a systematic proce-
24 dure is required for their complete suspension. Trans phenomenology retains
25 from classical phenomenology the idea that phenomenology is characterized by
26 a certain bracketing procedure but differs entirely as to the motivation for the
27 suspension and the nature of the attitude suspended. Hence trans phenome-
28 nology is not merely the application of a classically given method to a new object
29 of investigation. Rather, by bracketing cisgender categories, trans phenomenol-
30 ogy is a politically motivated, qualitative transformation of the very contours of
31 phenomenology itself.

32 This transformation is responsible for certain inevitable misunderstand-
33 ings of trans phenomenology's corpus, method, and technique from the per-
34 spective of the classically trained cisgender phenomenologist. To begin with, the
35 attitude suspended is completely different: rather than bracket the natural atti-
36 tude, the trans phenomenologist brackets what I will call the cisgender attitude,
37 that is, the cultivated disposition to organize society based on mandatory gender
38 identifications. Just as the natural attitude for Husserl was deeply ingrained and so
39 in need of a systematic procedure for the thoroughgoing suspension of such an
40 attitude, so too a systematic method is required in trans phenomenology but set

1 to completely different purposes. Trans phenomenology has a distinctively eman-
2 cipatory aim: to clarify trans forms of life, not through further specification of
3 the categories of cisgender society, but through an intimate return to trans expe-
4 rience itself. The corpus of trans phenomenology—the set of texts utilized as the
5 source material for the phenomenological investigation in question—seems com-
6 pletely anarchic from the classical cisgender perspective: gone are the traditional
7 analyses of chairs and desks, of space and time, and the readings and rereadings
8 of Marcel Proust, in favor of an uneasy blending of statements concerning the self
9 in poetry, literature, theater, photography, and zines, using an apparent hodge-
10 podge of techniques from psychoanalysis, to queer theory, to decolonial theory,
11 and beyond. The difference in source material is related to the differences in
12 bracketing and technique. The promise of trans phenomenology is therefore
13 intimately bound up with the possibility of producing a discursive regime in
14 which the attitude of cisgender society is completely suspended.

15 This dynamic underlies Prosser's (1998) approach to trans phenomenol-
16 ogy in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. *Second Skins* is regularly
17 considered to be one of the pioneering works in trans phenomenology, despite
18 the fact that he makes no use of any traditional phenomenological concepts and
19 that the only comment about phenomenology in the book is negative.⁵ None-
20 theless, what is manifestly apparent in *Second Skins* are the archival considerations
21 of trans phenomenology: the text concerns itself with trans stories, and especially
22 the stories that trans people tell about themselves, and the intricate and highly
23 complex means by which these narratives are distorted by a cisgender frame. The
24 questions motivating his work are the following: What is our history? Who are our
25 dead? Where is our literature? Where may we be seen, heard, or understood by one
26 another? How do we come to misunderstand and misrecognize one another? This
27 is the basis of his opposition to queer theory. For Prosser, queer theory utilizes the
28 figure of the transsexual as the apotheosis of disrupting normative gender cate-
29 gories.⁶ But what are the effects of reducing the transsexual to a mere trope of a
30 broader notion of queerness? If queer theory approaches the transsexual as useful
31 in disrupting normative gender categories, what does the transsexual make of
32 themselves? How might they move differently or beyond the purview of a cis-
33 gender queer theory?

34 For Prosser the eidetic structure of the trans subject stems from a cer-
35 tain narrative coherence: trans subjects are those who undergo the experience of
36 "living in the wrongly sexed body."⁷ This condition—which we may refer to as
37 gender dysphoria—structures the lives of trans people into a relatively coher-
38 ent set of events: there is the unhappy childhood, the horrific years of puberty,
39 uncomfortable mirror scenes, the conflation of one's transness with queerness, the
40 epiphany, the arch confessional moment of recounting one's narrative for the
doctors, the beginning of transition, hormones, sex reassignment surgery, and

1 closure. The shared narrative admits of some permutation: some will die before
2 they receive sex reassignment surgery and genuine healing, others will never
3 successfully navigate the medical establishment, and, finally, there is the trou-
4 bling category of “transgender,” those members of the trans community who do
5 not quite fit his “wrongly bodied” model. As Prosser’s recounting might suggest,
6 trans phenomenology is for him rightly considered transsexual phenomenol-
7 ogy.⁸ The essential nature of trans experience is the central motivating dynamic
8 of living in the wrong body. The notion of trans people willingly eliding this
9 body modification provides a fundamental problem for Prosser’s account.⁹ In
10 his view, this is the effect of another archetypal transsexual experience: the con-
11 fflation of trans(sexual) experience with queer experience. For Prosser, living
12 outside or beyond the gender binary is a largely unfortunate effect of living in
13 the wrong body. Part of his polemic with queer theory involves establishing
14 the superiority of the analytic of sex over gender: for Prosser, what trans people
15 experience is a wrongly *sexed* body, not an inadequate form of gender expres-
16 sion, and so the conflation of transsexual and cisgender queer interests has the
17 effect of masking important dimensions of trans experience.

18 The next intervention in trans phenomenology I will investigate stems
19 from a pair of books by Salamon: *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of*
20 *Materiality* (2010) and *The Life and Death of Latisha King: A Critical Pheno-*
21 *menology of Transphobia* (2018). *Assuming a Body* provides an alternative phe-
22 nomenology of embodiment than we find in Prosser, while *The Life and Death of*
23 *Latisha King* utilizes the resources of critical phenomenology to interpret the trial
24 of Brandon McInerney, a cisgender teenager who murdered his trans classmate,
25 Latisha King. In essence, Salamon seeks to reverse the priority of the sex/gender
26 analytic as it is utilized by Prosser. Salamon points out that both Prosser and
27 Hausman ultimately maintain that transsexual subjectivity is defined chiefly by
28 the demand for sex reassignment surgery, and that Prosser concludes with cis-
29 gender society that we are in some way our genitals.¹⁰ This is the qualitative shift
30 at the core of Salamon’s analysis: what Prosser indexes to “sex” is better under-
31 stood through the conceptual framework offered by “gender.”¹¹ The emancipa-
32 tory potential undergirding demands for gender reassignment surgery does not
33 stem from a “correction” of living in the “wrong” body, but from the heightened
34 capacity for gendered expression. Similarly, in her analysis of the trial of Brandon
35 McInerney, Salamon points out that Latisha was interpreted as an aggressor, and
36 the violence she suffered was justified largely in part because of her non-normative
37 gender expression.¹² Salamon claims that a new trans phenomenology would not
38 simply accept cisgender society’s categorization of sex, but would try to show
39 how this appeal to sex is in fact an effect of gender.¹³

40 The central problem of Salamon’s trans phenomenology concerns the
unity and distinctiveness of trans experience. If being trans is not living in the

1 wrongly sexed body, what is it, exactly? Consider Salamon's reinterpretation of
2 gender dysphoria. For Salamon, gender dysphoria is dissatisfaction with gender
3 expression that is experienced by cis and trans people alike.¹⁴ This follows a ten-
4 dency common to queer and trans theory to claim that queer cisgender people
5 also experience gender dysphoria because they experience dissatisfaction with the
6 existing gender system (see Dembroff 2019: 61). Through an oblique and circui-
7 tuous pathway, Salamon actually returns to the original thesis of queer theory: that
8 the central political category for thinking about non-normative gender identity is
9 queerness and that being trans is a mere modification of being queer. Moreover,
10 this seems to be the result from her critical phenomenology of transphobia: that
11 transphobia is rooted primarily in a phobic reaction to non-normative gender
12 expression. It is hard to understand, given the conceptual apparatus put forward
13 by Salamon, what political function a distinctively trans phenomenology can
14 fulfill if there is not a shared political situation that can attest to the urgency of
15 such a project or demonstrate its own internal coherence. Salamon's framework,
16 if correct, posits more than a rapprochement between queer theory and trans
17 theory; trans theory itself appears reabsorbed into queer theory.

18 This review of the debate between Prosser and Salamon allows us to note
19 several features about the contours of trans phenomenology as it has progressed
20 up to this point. In each case, what is at stake is a suspension of cisgender con-
21 cepts, schemes, and attitudes to produce a genuinely *trans* archive, but one that
22 remains nevertheless incomplete, for the central theoretical apparatuses used by
23 each are outgrowths of cisgender medical categories. For while Prosser attempts
24 to identify the distinctive coherence of a trans form of life, he is forced to think
25 of this life as almost entirely defined by the parameters dictated by a cisgender
26 medical establishment and paradigmatically describes "successful" transsexual
27 transition. For Prosser there is a phenomenological essence of transsexual expe-
28 rience. Yet, if Prosser's analysis remains too confined to a certain sequence of
29 narrative events tied to specific corporeal experiences, Salamon's turn to gender
30 does little to help. As trans theorists and historians such as Gill-Peterson have
31 analyzed at length, the contemporary notion of gender is essentially an outgrowth
32 of an epistemological crisis concerning the unity of various "sexed characteris-
33 tics," and therefore it belongs to the same discursive order as sex.¹⁵ The turn to
34 gender ultimately does not alleviate the epistemological problems of sex but dis-
35 places them into psychology, and it becomes difficult to see within the apparatus
36 of gender how transgendered experience is simply one non-normative modality
37 among others.

38 Escaping this dialectic of embodiment requires a radical rethinking of the
39 unity of trans experience. The problem is that ultimately both Prosser and Sal-
40 amon tacitly adopt a cisgender orientation toward the question of trans identity

1 by posing the unity of trans experience in some shared positive characteristic or
2 narrative coherence.¹⁶ The recognition of this fact results in the continual oscil-
3 lation between the claim that there is an essence to trans identity (Prosser) and the
4 denial of the coherence of such an identity (Salamon). Transgender existentialism
5 proposes that trans people have an existential rather than eidetic unity; in other
6 words, what trans people share is a unity of situation, project, and responsibility
7 rather than resemblances between properties, bodies, or experiences. This per-
8 spective on embodiment was originally opened by Simone de Beauvoir (2011: 46):
9 “The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the
10 outline for our projects.”¹⁷ If and when there is a resemblance between our psy-
11 chic, somatic, and narrative experiences as trans people, it is the result of a more
12 essential underlying shared project. This would allow us to reclaim the concept of
13 gender dysphoria from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*
14 and cisgender society in the name of trans theory: gender dysphoria describes the
15 situation of alienation and unfreedom experienced by trans subjects in cisgender
16 society. Here, through a certain suspension, a medicalized category can become
17 a political one. If Prosser overstates the unity of trans experience and Salamon
18 understates it, transgender existentialism sees the unity of trans people as essen-
19 tially precarious and the result of our shared collective resolution. This is to claim,
20 in essence, that there is a certain political responsibility that is one of the only
21 universally shared features across trans experience, though of course it is an
22 essential possibility of human experience to live in bad faith about such a deep
23 responsibility. In Sartre’s terms, when we choose to transition, we are defending
24 a distinctive vision of human freedom that entails a concomitant revolutionary
25 political consequence: the project of trans people requires upturning the very
26 situation (cisgender society) that is the source of their unity. Similarly, Leslie
27 Feinberg (1998) once claimed in a true moment of proletarian lucidity that the
28 political responsibility of the trans liberation movement extends infinitely, to
29 genuine liberation for everyone.¹⁸ The neutralization of cisgender society must
30 extend beyond the armchair of the phenomenologist, into the material neu-
31 tralization of cisgender society, which is to say, into the streets.¹⁹

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34 **Penelope Haulotte** is a PhD student in philosophy pursuing a Women, gender, and sexuality
35 studies certificate at the University of New Mexico. Her research bifurcates in two directions. Her
36 dissertation project, tentatively titled “Harmony and Disquietude,” investigates the impact of
37 the legacy of eighteenth-century Leibnizianism on the shape of German idealist philosophy.
38 Her other project primarily concerns phenomenological interventions into trans theory. Fol-
39 lowing the publication of this issue, Penelope joined the team at *Transgender Studies Quarterly*
40 as the Editorial Assistant for the journal.

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Notes

1. In fact, much of early trans theory attempts to correct this tendency, from Sandy Stone's "posttranssexual" perspective to Jay Prosser's neo-transsexual point of view examined in more detail in this piece. For an analysis of Hausman, see Rubin (1998: 265) For a 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 remains today, and was raised by Jules Gill-Peterson's (2018: 11) *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. All these results problematize the standard picture of trans people as the playthings of autonomous structures.
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 Prosser and Gayle Salamon examined below. This dialectic was later commented on by Talia Mae Bettcher (2020: 330–32), reaching largely aporetic conclusions.
3. Michel Foucault (1972: 129) 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 things through an interrogation of the archives was further developed in the examination of the political function of the archive by Saidiya Hartman (2008) 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. See Hartman's (2008: 10) use of the Foucaultian notion of the archive and C. Riley Snorton's (2017: 7–14) application of this emergent paradigm to trans studies.
4. See Husserl's (2014: 9) paradigmatic articulation of the natural attitude.
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.
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

- 1 remain irreconcilable to queer: the specificity of transsexual experience; the importance
 2 of the flesh to self; the difference between sex and gender identity; the desire to pass as
 3 'really gendered' in the world without trouble; perhaps above all, . . . a particular expe-
 4 rience of the body that can't simply transcend (or transubstantiate) the literal" (58–59).
- 5 7. Prosser defines his position in these terms: "My contention is that transsexuals continue
 6 to deploy the image of wrong embodiment because being trapped in the wrong body is
 7 simply what transsexuality feels like. If the goal of transsexual transition is to align the
 8 feeling of gendered embodiment with material body, body image—which we might be
 9 tempted to align with the imaginary—clearly already has a material force for transsex-
 10 uals. The image of being trapped in the wrong body conveys this force. It suggests how
 11 body image is radically split off from the material body in the first place, how body image
 12 can feel sufficiently substantial as to persuade the transsexual to alter his or her body to
 13 conform to it. The image of wrong embodiment describes most effectively the experience
 14 of pretransition (dis)embodiment: the feeling of a sexed body dysphoria profoundly and
 15 subjectively experienced" (69).
- 16 8. Prosser (1998: 204) frames his position very explicitly: "While I value the possibilities for
 17 affiliation transgender has brought (between queers, feminists, and the 'gender com-
 18 munity'), I am still skeptical about what that 'post' in posttranssexuality signifies. I con-
 19 tinue to find unrealistic and question the political implications of claims that somatic
 20 transitions project gender identity beyond the body in a way that reveals that sex does
 21 not matter."
- 22 9. This point is made in Bettcher (2014: 388): "Many of us have not undergone genital
 23 reconstruction surgery, and many of us do not want to; however, some of us have, and
 24 some of us do. . . . For the most part, we believe our genital configurations don't under-
 25 mine facts about who we are."
- 26 10. Salamon (2010: 84–85) therefore groups Hausman's and Prosser's work together as
 27 suggesting a return to the real of the body in the demand for sex reassignment surgery.
 28 This contrasts with Prosser's claim that Butler and Hausman resemble one another.
- 29 11. She claims that offering a theorization based on a simple opposition between a material
 30 embodiment and "queer" theorizations of the same is to "domesticate gender as it is lived
 31 and deny its considerable complexity, which often outpaces our language to describe it"
 32 (73). She concludes from this that "the body is always subtended by its history" (78).
- 33 12. She claims, for example, that "gender was read through the expression rather than the
 34 materiality of the body. Latisha King's gender was read through her gestures, her com-
 35 portment, her movement. But at several crucial moments during the trial, gender was
 36 also discerned *from* and determined *by* objects" (Salamon 2018: 136).
- 37 13. In fact, the specific rhetorical strategy has a storied history in these debates. Foucault
 38 (1978: 114) famously claims that a proper understanding of sex requires a conceptual shift
 39 from the repression of sex to the deployment of sexuality. Butler (1990: 34) then in *Gender*
 40 *Trouble* reenacts this trope with a twist (they even use Foucault's framing as an epigraph
 for the book): they argue that sex is an effect of gender. Prosser's (1998: 60) 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. Salamon (2010: 40–41) responds to Prosser's rejection through a further resurrection of
 this style of claim: sex is once again an effect of gender. Later, however, in her work more
 immediately related to trans historical work, she too will encounter the problematic con-
 fflation of these terms as antithetical to the construction of a trans archive: "Much of what

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- happened during this trial hinged on a confusion between gender identity and sexual orientation” (Salamon 2018: 4). But the question of how to coordinate these terms goes in each case unanswered.
14. The continuum model of gender dysphoria is discussed and apparently endorsed by Salamon (2018: 164–65).
 15. See Gill-Peterson 2018: 126: “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.”
 16. 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.
 17. Beauvoir introduces this formulation to characterize the point of view she understands to be taken on by Martin Heidegger, Sartre, and herself. In fact, this perspective (and quotation) was cited directly and explicitly rejected by Butler (1990: 12) in *Gender Trouble* as problematically Western and Cartesian. From the transgender existentialist perspective, this was a mistake that has resulted in depoliticization.
 18. “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” (135).
 19. Sartre frequently reflects on the relationship between freedom and responsibility, but for a paradigmatic formulation, see *Existentialism Is a Humanism* where Sartre (2007: 42) 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.”

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