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Trans Phenomenology: A Merleau-Pontian Reclamation of the Trans Narrative

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Abstract

Transgender identities have historically been faced with erasure by the cisgender community, particularly through being forced to use cisgender terminology to define their own non-conforming experiences. This systemic cisgender inscription upon transgender identity is seen clearly through Bernice Hausman's medicalizing reading of transgender narratives, leading her to falsely conclude that transgender individuals perpetuate the cisgender binary. I argue that Hausman's analysis denies trans individuals the right to speak for themselves, thus denying them the agency of creating their own narratives. In the wake of this particular form of gender violence, the transgender community must create their own method of narrative construction and analysis. By rereading gender into Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussion of sexuality, I create a *trans phenomenology* as a way to read and analyze trans narratives. Focusing on Merleau-Ponty's description of sexuality as reciprocally reflecting existence through his case study of the "silent, heartbroken girl," I argue that through narrative, we see that gender, too, reciprocally reflects existence. Applying this framework to rereadings of trans narratives, I not only show how gender is truly *lived*, but offer a uniquely *positive* account of transgender identity by focusing on *individuals'* own descriptions of themselves, thereby reclaiming the trans narrative on trans terms.

Transgender identities have historically been faced with erasure by the gender-conforming (or cisgender) community, particularly through being forced to use cisgender terminology to define their own non-conforming experience. This systemic cisgender inscription upon transgender identity is seen clearly in Bernice Hausman's attempt to describe transgender narratives as perpetuating gender norms, ignoring the fact that trans individuals are forced to define themselves through cisgender definitions. The invisibility, dehumanization, and ultimate inability to speak on one's behalf in the language of one's own unique gender is a certain type of oppression upon transgender individuals. In the wake of this oppression, the transgender community must create their own method of speaking about their multiplicity of experiences. By rereading

gender into phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work where he describes sexuality as fully reflective of and reflected in existence, I construct and then apply a specifically *transgender phenomenology* to trans narratives. Through this method, I not only show through these narratives how gender is truly *lived*, but offer a uniquely *positive* account of transgender identity by focusing on the *individual's* own descriptions of themselves, thereby reclaiming the trans narrative on trans terms.

Feminist theorist Bernice Hausman stands in a long line of oppressive medical analyses of transgender narratives. The need for the trans phenomenology that I will later create is motivated by the way in which Hausman inscribes her own medicalizing and gender essentialist language onto transgender narratives. In her work "Body, Technology, and Gender in Transsexual Autobiographies," she views trans narratives as feeding into and being fed by medical discourse, propagating gender stereotypes (Hausman 335). Hausman claims that transgender identities "compromise the official understanding of 'gender' as divorced from biological sex," while in reality it is this difference which is at the heart of the transgender experience (336).

For Hausman, the "plausible history" story allegedly developed *by* transgender individuals to be approved for gender-reassignment surgery perpetuates a single, totalized "official history" (336). This "official history" describes the trans individual as having the "wrong body," a conception which perpetuates non-ambiguous, gender-stereotyped norms within trans identity (Hausman 335). As such, she argues that the trans "obsession" with surgically altering their anatomy to align with an identity means that they are more concerned with the gender binary than cisgender individuals (Hausman 338). She further calls gender-affirmation surgery "cross-sex identification," confusing gender affirmation with a pathological desire to be "the other sex" within a cisgender binary (Hausman 336). She uses medicalizing and pathologizing terminology like "condition" or "phenomenon" to describe the trans experience, demonstrating a commitment to using a cisgender binary to describe the trans experience (336). While Hausman expresses a wish to move transsexualism out of its medicalization, she does so by placing the blame of this medicalization on transgender individuals rather than the cisgender medical criterion to which trans individuals must adhere. Her medical focus on the body is reductive, making it appear as if one's account of one's gender lies only in their surgical transformation rather than the way they describe and account for themselves. In fact, in reading transgender narratives as perpetuating medical gender stereotypes, Hausman actually further medicalizes and pathologizes the trans experience, counterproductively taking up the position she seeks to refute.

We can turn to Hausman's own readings of well-known trans narratives to see the way in which she employs this gender binary, as well as furthers the embodiment of transgender individuals that reduces gender identity to bodily descriptions rather than descriptions of identity. Hausman reads sections of famous transwoman Jan Morris'

autobiography *Conundrum*, attempting to use it as a depiction of a pathological obsession with the body. Morris writes,

“[...] [Gender] is the essentialness of oneself, the psyche, the fragment of unity.

I was born with the wrong body, being feminine by gender but male by sex, and I could achieve completeness only when the one was adjusted to the other.

All I wanted was liberation, or reconciliation--to live as myself, to clothe myself in a more proper body, and achieve Identity at last.

I had reached Identity.” (qtd. Hausman 350).¹

In this, Hausman reads the words “wrong body” and, rather than accounting for the context of the narrative and what Morris herself is trying to convey about her own identity, reads this as a simple and reductive pathological statement in which she unambiguously wants to become a cisgender woman (Hausman 350). She sees this as demonstrative of a pathology, of “transsexualism as a disorder spun out in dazzling detail” and suggesting that because Morris does not mention physiological, but rather spiritual and psychological, “causes” for her transsexualism, she is more ready to uphold a gender binary than those who follow the heteronormative pairing of sex and gender (350). Reading only sections depicting their surgery, Hausman claims that there is a “discontinuity between the story of surgical sex change and the story of already being the other sex,” and in arguing so, further employs the cisgender binary rather than reading an account of one happening to use surgery as a way to affirm their own identity (Hausman 357).

Hausman’s claims come not simply from a refusal to recognize the cis inscription that occurs prior to trans narrative and oppressively envelops it, but from an active employment of a cisgender binary to describe transgender experience, which is necessarily outside of this binary. And so, where she reads trans narratives as perpetuating cis stereotypes, she should really be recognizing the oppression that has forced trans narratives to take up cis language and definition. Through her misreading of trans narratives and the way in which she misplaces the blame of medicalization onto trans individuals instead of the medicalized cis inscription which clouds authentic narrative, Hausman effectively denies trans individuals the agency of their own narratives, instead suggesting “that it is technology and not narrative [or the transgender individual themselves] that ‘makes’ the transsexual” (Prosser 134). She thus denies that trans individuals have the right to speak for themselves, and denies them the agency of creating their own narrative.

¹ From Morris, Jan, *Conundrum* (1974).

Moreover, analyses such as Hausman’s ignore the most telling aspect of trans narratives—that trans narrative is an act, and one of trans individuals accounting for themselves, bearing witness to their lives, and is thus a strong reflection of one’s identity. Indeed, as transgender male and theorist Jay Prosser suggests, “narrative is a reflection, above all, of our capacity to represent ourselves” (134). As an act of self-identification, of bearing witness, what analyses of trans narratives must do then, quite simply, is to actually *read* the narratives.

Hausman flaw was describing the trans experience through all but trans narratives, even when reading and analyzing trans narratives. Medical discourse, and reading medical discourse too heavily into trans narratives keep these narratives from being read with focus on individuals describing themselves. Further, I criticize Hausman’s dismissal of the fundamental attributes of narrative that make trans narratives such a powerful tool of gender affirmation. Trans narrative is a form of self -creation, a site of self-affirmation, and ultimately an act that affirms and produces agency. These attributes of narrative are not only fundamental to the lives of transgender individuals, but at the heart of the trans experience. The authorial power of trans narratives has been lost by Hausman’s medicalizing and dismissive readings, and must be regained through a new methodology created on trans terms.

In what follows, I create a *trans phenomenology* through rereading gender into Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of sexuality in his work *The Phenomenology of Perception*. I argue for this trans phenomenology as a way to read and analyze trans narratives in their own light and on their own terms. I focus on Merleau-Ponty’s description of sexuality as wholly reflecting existence without being reduced to the body, through his case study of the “silent, heartbroken girl” in order to argue that gender, too, is not reducible to the body and that it is wholly reflected *in* and wholly reflective *of* identity. I argue that this reciprocally reflective existence is fully realized in trans narrative, and that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is a method by which this becomes clear. Through understanding the reflective existence of the girl without a voice, we can understand why the trans community so desperately needs one. In creating a trans phenomenology with trans-affirming criteria, I lay the groundwork for a method by which to reread trans narratives that can subvert current, medicalizing discourse such as Hausman’s.

A method for reading trans narratives must be akin to the trans experience itself. As such, it must firstly and most fundamentally, show trans lives as *lived* and thus livable, to paraphrase Naomi Scheman (qtd. Jacob Hale’s Rules). Further, a methodology must offer a *positive* account of gender as a lived experience, irreducible to the body, rather than a medicalized problem of having the “wrong body.” Finally, it must leave room for individuality and self-creation, as the trans experience is unique and not bound together by strict “official history” but operates through self-creation. A trans phenomenology via Merleau-Ponty must take on these criteria.

Merleau-Ponty's case study within his account of sexuality of the "silent, heartbroken girl" presents a clear image of identity as having a reciprocal relationship with existence itself. One's identity is not just a part of their existence, but their existence reflects their identity, and their identity creates their existence. A methodology which does not reduce the self to mind nor body is particularly useful to counter medicalized discourse, which focuses on the body as comprising one's identity without consideration of what this body reflects. For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is not simply a biological function or internal state represented or reflected in the body, but a point of grounding and of action (184). Sexuality does not just occur within the body, but rather is fundamentally and reciprocally reflected by existence in the body.

We can see an example of this reciprocally reflective existence in Merleau-Ponty's case study of a girl who, heartsick, loses her ability to speak. For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is as fundamental a bodily function as one's ability to speak; her aphasia, a bodily condition, does not simply occur as a reflection of her heartbreak, but rather, her heartbreak, fully reflected in and reflective of existence, is aphasia (186). He makes it clear that her loss of speech is not simply a reflection of her heartbreak; it is not a mere representation. In fact, "the sign does not only convey its significance, *it is filled with it*" (Merleau-Ponty 186, italics mine). And because of this "being filled with," that is, because the significance is vital to the sign itself, her symptom is not a reflection but is the relation between herself and others, her past and her present, in fact, all of the "fundamental dimensions of existence" (Merleau-Ponty 186). And so, sexuality for Merleau-Ponty wholly reflects existence, and is wholly reflected *in* existence.

When we apply this discussion of sexuality to an account of gender non-conformity, we get a clearer view of the non-reductive self-creation required by transgender individuals. For, in the phenomenological sense, gender is not merely a route of expressing one's personal identity. Gender is fully synthesized in our experience, in our daily lives, it is reciprocally expressed in existence: *I express my existence through my gender, but my gender expresses my existence*. Both sustain and permeate one another, affecting and *effecting* each other. And indeed, the body "can symbolize existence because it realizes it and is its actuality," but this means not that the mind is the body, but rather that the transgender body in the world is also the transgender self in the world (Merleau-Ponty 190). In simpler terms, we don't simply live *with* a gender, we *live* gender. By getting away from the focus on internal states and the idea of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty is able to view the body not as simply an expression of the mind, but as being the site of experience, as shaping our internal state as much as it expresses it (185).

When we say then that gender and sexuality are lived, we do not simply mean that we *have* a gender or a sexuality that is expressed in our lives and our bodies. We mean that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two—we live out our genders in such a

way that we *affect* them, and they in turn affect us (Merleau-Ponty 183-5). Similarly, sexuality is not simply a part of our existence, or even a mode of expression or a “manifestation of personal existence” (185). Rather, it fully permeates existence, and is involved in the body and life in such a way that one’s body and psyche “are involved in a relationship of reciprocal *expression*,” such that the loss of the girl’s sexuality is her loss of voice, and the repression of one’s gender, or the reduction of it, implicates the loss of one’s identity, or ability to describe it. (Merleau-Ponty 185).

Gender can be read here in the same context as sexuality because of the similar ways in which they are reflected in and reflective of the self. One’s gender is fully represented in one’s body, particularly due to the cisgender conflation of gender and anatomical sex. Gender is also fully represented in the ways in which one constructs their identity, particularly in terms of self-reference. One’s gender is truly lived in a similar way to sexuality, reflecting one’s identity while also constructing it through language, fashion, behavior, and particularly the ways that one describes themselves. In fact, we might view this reflecting and reflective-existence as a mark of identity affirmation. We can then view the positive, body descriptive trans narratives not as signs of gender stereotypes and cis inscription, but as the site where this reciprocally, reflectively existent, self is truly realized.

Further, if one’s gender is wholly reflected in and reflective of existence, and one of the main ways gender is expressed and constructed is through the way in which one describes themselves, then we might also view narrative as the site at which not only our trans phenomenology, but identity, is fully realized. Trans phenomenology then is the means by which we can positively view this reflective form of gender affirmation. The implications of this non-reductive, reflectively existent concept of gender as a methodology for describing the transgender experience is that self-creation, self-definition, and autobiography are able to be central, as gender cannot be reduced to medicalized language nor external language that a cisgender society might try to impose upon it. And so, through a trans phenomenology created through rereading Merleau-Ponty, we can reread trans narratives in a new, positive light, without reducing the self-described lived experiences of trans individuals to a totalized “official history,” “wrong body,” or any other stereotype. In fact, we can read the trans narrative quite simply through reading it as is, by focusing on what is actually being said. Trans narratives can thus exist on their own terms.

Applying this trans phenomenology to trans narratives allows us to give positive, trans rereadings of trans narratives which Hausman reads past and silences with her cisgender, medical inscription. Looking back on some of Hausman’s examples, particularly that of Morris’ narrative, we see descriptions of oneself after gender-affirmation surgery not as descriptions of the “wrong body” being “corrected,” but of

one's identity being positively reflected through whatever choices the person has made as an agent.

Hausman, as previously discussed, sees our previous excerpt of Morris' as succumbing to a pathological obsession with obtaining a cisgender body. But, in light of trans phenomenology's demonstration of self-reference as reflective of identity, what's actually being said here, beyond the discussion of physical transformation? For we know that at the time Morris wrote *Conundrum*, trans studies, and certainly not our more sex-liberating gender studies, had not yet developed, meaning that the only accounts of gender identity we truly had were necessarily cissexed. I believe that we can be charitable to Morris, recognizing society's past ignorances that she too was led to believe, and instead truly reading her narrative for what she is actually trying to say, rather than nitpicking a historical and lesser issue as Hausman does. While we may give credence to Hausman's view in that we do want to move the trans narrative out of the cisgender categories it has been oppressively held in, we want to do so by giving the trans community a voice, not by speaking for it, as Hausman does.

Quite simply, Morris describes having a feeling of being herself, having unity and agency that she did not when she was not free to express herself, both physically and emotionally, as she pleased. Yes, there is an explicit reference to having the "wrong body" here, but I find this much less interesting than the way in which Morris depicts the intricate role of identity as reflected and reflective of the body and existence. Once she transitioned, she became "herself". This is not merely to say that she received a properly sexed body, and was now this body. That is what Hausman's analysis amounts to. Rather, in this we can see something far more intricate and important being described—the mark of identity agency and affirmation. This is not just a body; this is a self.

Let's look at another section of Morris, which Sandy Stone in her work *The Empire Strikes Back* also references as medicalized and gender-essentialist. Here, Morris writes:

"I feel small, and neat. I am not small in fact, and not terribly neat either, but femininity conspires to make me feel so. My blouse and skirt are light, bright, crisp. My shoes make my feet look more delicate than they are, besides giving me...a suggestion of vulnerability that I rather like [...] when I walk out into the street I feel consciously ready for the world's appraisal, in a way that I never felt as a man" (Morris qtd. Stone 225).²

We can reread this quote not as being obsessed with being viewed as female at the price of a lack of agency, as Stone suggests and as Hausman would agree, but rather as Morris describing physical, tangible parts of herself that would otherwise seem

² From Morris, Jan, *Conundrum* (1974).

negatively vulnerable. She is happy and seems to feel in control even at the idea of being “small” and vulnerable to the world—a feeling which normally incites panic. How can we read this as gender affirming? What once made her feel “unready for the world’s appraisal” now allows her to feel properly contained in her body, properly ready and conscious of the world’s gaze without fear. This positive description of vulnerability should not be read as Morris become a stereotypical woman, but of reclaiming her sense of self so that she no longer feels dysphoric in her body, as a person in the world.

One of the common threads found in both our Morris excerpts is an authorial confidence, a positive reclamation of vulnerability. The way one reads oneself is indicative of one’s mental states—being comfortable in one’s body is not simply expressed in language, one’s gender-affirmation is expressed by the body, by the feeling “small” and “neat,” which is then expressed in language. Affirmation, like the reverse case of Merleau-Ponty’s silent girl, reflects itself in the body (and so one’s feeling of occupying space, one’s fashion choice, etc.) and this further affirms the self, while further reflecting more of the body. It is a reflectively existent process that shows that this type of surgery shouldn’t be looked down upon as upholding a binary, nor should these narratives be read as a simple justification for body mutilation. To do so, as Hausman does, is to further contribute a cisgender imposition onto what a transgender individual should be or desire. We should instead read trans narratives, descriptive of a need for physical transition or not, as reclamations of the trans experience, and of one’s individual identity. Trans narratives are positive accounts of transgender experiences—narrative reclamations that exist on their own terms.

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