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## Transmasculinity and Desire: Salamon, Merleau-Ponty and the Embodied Experience of a Genderqueer Transboy

“Sexual interaction, depending on the sexual orientation of the partner, is key to validating the male identity of FTMs. Whether that partner is a heterosexual or bisexual woman or a gay man, the interaction that involves the FTM as male confirms gender identity” - Raine Dozier<sup>1</sup>

“If the goal is to achieve a stable and enduring sense of identity, is there room for a transmasculine subject to encounter the other’s desire without evacuating or annihilating it? Or feeling evacuated or annihilated by it in turn? Indeed, is there room for *transmasculine* desire, or is the transmasculine subject required to surrender any claim on that desire in return for a stable and legible identity?” - Gayle Salamon<sup>2</sup>

“Sexuality is not located in the genitals, nor even in one specific erotogenic zone, but rather in one’s intentionality toward the other and toward the world” - Gayle Salamon interpreting Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>3</sup>

### **Introduction: Transmasculinity and Desire**

I write about desire for three reasons: it is an undertheorized topic within trans theory; it is central to my understanding of myself as a relational being; it is a strategic move that I make, as a trans activist/scholar, to shift the emphasis from categories of sexuality to experiences of desire. I have been particularly inspired by

Gayle Salamon's work on transmasculinity, relation and desire.<sup>4</sup> Her discussion of Merleau-Ponty's formulation of embodiment-understood-through-desire forms the basis of this piece. I explore her use of Merleau-Ponty's concepts of transposition and sexual schema. This academic-style writing is interspersed with personal narratives from my own experience, in an attempt to intertwine theory/practice and to acknowledge my multiple voices as a trans person who authors, embodies and experiences this text.

While I suggest that desire is undertheorized in trans theory, I recognise that as early as Sandy Stone's "Posttranssexual Manifesto" (first published in 1991), desire has been on the agenda.<sup>5</sup> Stone asserts that, in relation to the transsexual, the layers of performative gender and intelligible (or unintelligible) gendered embodiment, an embodiment which may itself be "*medically constituted*," can "generate new and unpredictable dissonances which implicate entire spectra of desire" (Italics in original, *TSR*, 231). I take this to mean that trans desire can undermine the system of sexuality that formulates sexual orientation based on sexual object choice, or, to put it another way, complicate the assignation of categories of sexuality (such as gay, bisexual, lesbian) based on the genders of both the person doing the desiring and the person who is being desired. For example, the term "lesbian" might designate female person who desires other female people.<sup>6</sup>

The term "trans desire" is purposefully vague: it may refer to desire for a trans person (trans person as object of desire) or to the desire a trans person feels (trans person as desiring subject). I focus here on transmasculine desire because this enables me to speak from my experience as a transmasculine person. Furthermore,

I explore transmasculine desire from my experience as a desiring subject, rather than as an object of desire.

However, Salamon emphasizes that Merleau-Ponty's work challenges the subject-object dichotomy, and I similarly wish to position transmasculine desire as multiple and relational, rather than caught in a binary or working (simultaneously) in two directions. The two directions, in this case, would be that I feel desire, as a transmasculine person, and I feel desire for transmasculine people. One of the dangers in dichotomizing this transmasculine desire is that anyone who is not transmasculine falls out of the picture, and I specifically wish to include femme people in this conversation because, in my experience, femme knowledge/experience/power is often neglected in community and academic discussions of transmasculinity.<sup>7</sup>

I agree with Salamon that there is "radical and unsettling potential" in homoerotic or homosocial bonds within transmasculine communities, and I take pleasure in "the possibility that an already queer masculinity is located at the heart of transmasculinity" (Salamon, *Transmasculinity and Relation*, 268). Salamon also asks about the status of the feminine, the female, and the lesbian, within these communities of relation, and wonders if "these homosocial bonds [of transmasculinity] might form a closed circuit of identity that runs the risk of eliding or evading difference rather than engaging with it" (ibid). As a queer transmasculine person, I do not want to contribute to a closed circuit of identity, where femme/feminine people or identities are excluded. This is partly because my own masculinity does not exclude (my own or other people's) femininity, but primarily

because some of the most important relationships I have as a genderqueer transmasculine person are with femme, feminine, or female people.<sup>8</sup>

I am also not interested in using transmasculine desire to “affirm gender identity” as Raine Dozier puts it, though I appreciate and agree with Dozier’s argument that trans people, specifically FTMs, “challenge the underlying assumption in much of gender literature that sex, gender, and sexual orientation align in highly correlated, relatively fixed, binary categories” (Dozier 297).<sup>9</sup> Rather than affirming gender identity through sexual interaction, I seek other ways of approaching embodiment and desire, though I understand that gender, desire and sexuality are entangled and relational.

Stryker proposes that transgender studies “wilfully disrupts” categories of sexuality such as gay, bisexual, and lesbian (212).<sup>10</sup> Gender categories, says Stryker, “enable desire to take shape and find its aim” (212) and while I agree that gender enables desire, I also suggest that desire enables gender.

### **Shifting from Sexuality to Desire**

Instead of sexuality, I focus on the notion of *desire*. Desire entails the leaning-toward of myself to another person. Desire can be viewed as the underlying force of sexuality: sexuality being the container and desire being the content; sexuality as language and desire as emotional/physical experience. I want to avoid positing sexuality and desire in this way. Clearly, there is an intimate relationship between desire and sexuality. Perhaps they are the same thing, or different words for the same thing. Regardless, I find that speaking about desire is a useful way of avoiding some of the pitfalls of language that plague sexuality, especially when speaking from a trans or genderqueer perspective.

As will be explained in conversation with Salamon and Merleau-Ponty, desire is relational: in my desire I am for you. It is intentional: it concerns my intentionality towards others and towards the world. It is a force: it propels me towards others, towards the world, and in the process of this propulsion (this experience of desire) I come to experience myself as embodied. Desire is not located anywhere specifically on or in my body, it moves through my body in many different ways. There are two aspects of Merleau-Ponty's work, as extrapolated by Salamon, that are particularly relevant to an explication of desire from a trans perspective: the "sexual schema," and the notion of "transposition."

*My body hardens against yours, our breath catches. Lifting, moving, shifting, groaning. I feel my edges becoming more defined. My edges more defined and the space in between us becoming unstuck, blurred, sucking us into this molten space we create together. My edges more defined and yet my sense of myself less opaque, I am translucent and my face turns towards yours, I think of sunflowers and photosynthesis, I think of rain on damp wet fields, earth darkened, deep rich loam smelling of clay and the shapes we make together. The edges of my self-shape solidifying so that you can unmake me all over again.*

### **The Sexual Schema or How Desire Enables Gender**

Salamon suggests that instead of seeing desire as a function of the body, we can see the body as coming into existence through desire (83). This is signalled by my statement: "desire enables gender." Through my desire, my gendered body comes into existence. I am an embodied, desiring subject. Furthermore, my desire is relational: desire "always puts me in relation to the world," and to other people (85). It is intersubjective.

Desire creates a map, a sexual schema, of myself: “the sexual schema delivers to the subject a sexual physiognomy, just like the body schema delivers to her a bodily morphology” (Salamon 84). This is not as simple as the socially acceptable “erogenous zones,” demarcated by the cultural architects at Cosmo magazine. The sexual schema is not placed as a layer on top of the bodily schema, but can be prior our understanding of our bodily morphology, “We might even say that the sexual schema in this moment exists prior to the bodily schema: Merleau-Ponty begins with a body, visible but vaguely defined, and then moves to a consideration of the sexual schema beneath it, only after which the physiognomy of the sexual regions of the body become delineated” (84). Through my desire, I bring my body into being. Or, I understand my bodily morphology through my desire.

This is an important shift for trans people, because instead of seeing specific body parts as producing desire, for example viewing the penis as a desire generator, I can see how I interpret my body through my desire, through the sexual schema. Genitals, long held to be the ultimate signifier of both sex (as in gender) and sexuality (as in being sexual), are just another spot on the map, and do not determine how I experience desire because they are brought into existence, into significance, by my desire. Genitals may not signify at all for some people.

The sexual schema is “*strictly individual*” and thus “grounded in particularity, but also insisting on relation, and as such cannot be attached to one singular region of physicality or even one singular mode of being” (Salamon 85). Desire is unique to every person, my sexual schema is particular to me and my embodiment, but it also propels us into relationality, because it is desire for another person, it is desire towards someone (intentionality). Desire is not attached to only one area (the

genitals being the typical “singular region of physicality” that Salamon mentions) and furthermore, I form and experience the sexual regions of my body through desire. Thus, if I interpret my body through my desire, I may be a female-bodied person, or a person whose body would typically be described as female, and still interpret my genitals as a penis or phallus of some kind.

Self-definition: I understand my desire based on how I see myself, how I experience myself, how I think about myself. My desire forms a sexual schema. My body comes into my understanding through my sexual schema. Thus, I ultimately determine how I understand and experience my body. (But as noted above, the relationality of desire precludes any possibility that this descends into the “I” of individualism. Self-definition is still relational.)

Salamon, who is aiming to produce an understanding of sexuality and desire that is compatible with trans experience, emphasizes this aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s work. “Merleau-Ponty suggests that a systematic and rigid notion of erotogenicity will not do, that it is not my morphology but rather my experiences and mental representations that fundamentally constitute which regions of my body will give me pleasure, and how” (85). Experiencing desire from a non-gendered or multi-gendered perspective can be disorienting if I buy into the notions of biological sex. I do not label the parts of my body according to the diagrams of high school biology text books. I do not experience my body sexually according to dominant tropes of pleasure: I defy the expectations of penis-as-active and vagina-as-passive, I reconfigure what “penis” and “vagina” and “breasts” and “chest” signify. The idea that my biological or physiological structure is supposed to predetermine my experience of desire is not useful, and can be damaging (for trans and non-trans people). Giving

priority to my unique experiences and my sense of myself returns my power as a desiring subject. I claim my body/sexuality/desire/self on my own terms.

*When other people see my chest, they think it means I'm a girl [air-clothes-skin-bones] I look around at the huge diversity of bodies that actually exist and I know that many other boys have chests that might be called breasts*

*[air/clothes/skin/bones] I wear layers to protect my chest, preferring to breathe instead of bind, choosing to live in a cold climate so that stripping down is less necessary But when I am with you, I want to unwind these layers [air / clothes / skin / bones] and be with you in my vulnerable, goosepimply state, knowing that you will see me how I see myself [ air clothes skin bones ] This is my boys chest [air] These are my butch arms [clothes] These are my genderqueer legs [skin] This is my trans cock [bones] And here, on you, for you, with you, in you, these are my queer loving hands*

The sexual schema illustrates how my desire/body/sexuality is particular to me, and also concerns my relation to another. Because it is so particular, this model of desire “frustrates categorical summary” (85). But being strictly individual does not preclude the intentionality (or relationality) of sexuality. Transposition underscores this intentionality.

### **Transposition or How I am Propelled Towards You**

Transposition can be described as the general function which causes a particular part of my body (any part, since sexuality is embodied but not located) to be “animated” by desire, to be “brought into my bodily sense of myself” and “incorporated into my self-understanding through a reaching-out toward the world” (86). Desire is an animating force, and transposition is the process in which my

desire becomes my body, and my body becomes my desire. Desire suffuses my body, a suffusion that is intentional because it is desire of, it is desire directing myself and my sense of my body in relation to another.

In order to make sense of what sounds like a paradoxical and suspiciously philosophical notion, I want to highlight Merleau-Ponty's investment in problematizing the subject-object dichotomy. As a phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty did not ascribe to the idea that existence can be sorted into the two camps of subject or object.

Human existence is intersubjective, Merleau-Ponty suggests: I am for myself and for the other, there is no simple division between subject and object. It is in relation to another person that this is most evident. Desire, an animating force that enables my understanding of my body, also demonstrates the keenly intersubjective nature of human life. The other is not an object that I desire to possess. I am drawn towards another person, I am for me and for that person simultaneously. Transposition is the dissolving of the distance between myself and the person I desire, so that I am for myself and for that person. I am delivered my body and my body is no longer solely mine.

*Transposition (noun): 1. The act of transposing or the state of being transposed. 2. Something transposed. Transpositional (adj). Transpositive (adj).<sup>11</sup>Trans-position. I am trans-positive, I trans-pose myself onto you, you are trans-posed, you trans my pose and we transpose/transport each other to a place where every position is a transposition, every pose a transpose, and this is a subversive act, the act of transpositional displacement, because I am vulnerable-subject and you are vulnerable-subject and we cannot anchor ourselves with objects like rocks in our pockets because transposition is a river (rest in peace Virginia Woolf) and we are*

*floating/merging/subject to each new trans-position, each new bend in the river as it slides on past and we ride it transpositively, listening to our trickle-roar-moan as the act of transposing becomes the art of transposition becomes something transposed.*

Salamon describes transposition as emphasizing that my body is for you, towards you. When animated by desire, I experience my body as towards another: “my arm, if I reach out, is experienced phenomenologically less in its fiction as *my arm* and more in its function as *toward you*” (88). This is intentional and relational. I experience desire through my sexual schema, through my body. Transposition is the process by which my desire suffuses my body, becomes my body, and my body thus “becomes a leaning or a yearning, a propulsive force that negates any sense of my body as solid or still, or indeed as *mine*, in that this sensation owns me more than I own it” (87).

### **(In)Conclusion: Questions of Privilege and Purity**

“There is no purity in these domains, nor should there be, no matter how fixed or we might be in what is called our sexual orientation” (Judith Butler).<sup>12</sup>

First, how do these notions of sexual schema and transposition illuminate my experience of desire as a transmasculine subject? (Or: Why do I, a genderqueer transboy, like these concepts?)

Salamon’s formulation of desire accentuates the uncategorizable particularity of my sexuality, of my sexual schema, and the relationality/intentionality of my desire. It allows me the authority to determine which parts of my body I experience through desire, how I experience that desire, how I label or describe those parts of my body. It also emphasizes desire as a propulsive force towards another and reminds me

that in my desire I am undone, my embodied desire animates myself and propels me towards others, towards the world. I become myself through my desire because I come to know/claim/name my body through my desire while simultaneously I am pulled into relationality and unable to distinguish between myself as a stable subject and others as stable objects. The lines become blurry even while my embodied sense of self becomes defined.

In my experience, there are already blurry lines between trans and non-trans bodies. Who counts as trans, genderqueer, butch, femme? There is no easy division to be made between bodies that are sufficiently “trans” or “queer” and bodies that are not. Building on this blurriness, Salamon’s formulation of desire does not segregate normatively gendered people and trans or gender diverse people. She comments that for trans people, “desire is experienced bodily through a series of substitutions or reconfigurations that are also present, though perhaps less marked, in normatively gendered people” (89).

Second, how can I balance the need to be specific, to speak about transmasculine desire, without creating a closed circuit where (only) transmasculine desire enables (only) transmasculine embodiment or identity?

I struggle with the balance between specificity and generality: I speak about transmasculine desire because this is my embodied perspective, but I do not wish to claim that what I say is only relevant to transmasculinity or that any of these insights are gleaned only from transmasculine desire. Transmasculine communities must be careful not to privilege transmasculinity over transfemininity or femme/female/feminine identities. I do not assume that masculinity is separate from femininity, in fact, I argue that both are relational and overlapping. Furthermore,

anyone who identifies with masculinity must be extra diligent in their efforts to subvert dominant expectations. Dominant expectations would privilege masculine over feminine, white over non-white, able-bodied over disabled/differently-abled, heterosexual over homosexual, just to name a few.<sup>13</sup> So another question becomes: is this notion of desire too specific, or too general, to be useful in this context of intersecting privileges? Or, how does the process of coming into embodied personhood through desire function in relation to these intersections of privilege, power, and identity?

In Salamon's account, desire and sexuality are multiple, relational, and potentially unique to each of us. From this perspective, sexuality is not a matter of internal identification disconnected from the social realm, or about determining my identity based on the gender of the person I desire. Does this mean it is compatible with intersectional identities and my existence as a person embedded in a matrix of power/norms/privileges?

Salamon's account of desire correlates with Butler's comment that "there is no purity in these domains," referring to the domains of desire, identity and norms (531).<sup>14</sup> Butler: "I am doubtful, for instance, that we could find heterosexuals who are not negotiating homosexuality within their relationships, or lesbians and gay men who are not in some way working within and against entrenched heterosexual structures" (531). I argue that similarly, conceptualizing masculinity without femininity is impossible, just as conceptualizing femininity without masculinity is impossible, because neither are "pure" domains of gendered existence. Similarly, masculinity and femininity are not "purely" about gender, because race, ethnicity, class, ability,

sexuality and desire are intimately intertwined within the social matrix of intersubjective experience.

My (transmasculine) desire is often articulated through gender/race/class/ability/sexuality. It grounds me, defines me, enables my embodiment, and brings me outside of myself, propels me towards others. It is neither purely internal nor external, it is less concerned with sameness or difference and more excited about where they overlap, it is the unravelling of myself in the face of the other, it is the interweaving of relationships, it is this impure messy force that pulls me, propels you, and knits us together.

*Lie here with me, I am knitting our skin together [breathe] The needle is old and pearl coloured and I can feel the slow tug, stretch, pull of the stitching [breathe] I can see the edges of me disappearing into the edges of you and our edges becoming a map that we use to find each other [breathe] The needle dips in and out, through me into you, through you into me, the stitches whispering over our skin [breathe] My breathing becomes erratic, the stitches regular, even, but faster, your breathing shifts, we are caught up together and the pearl needle is a blur: under you/with you/in you/hear you/near you while you shudder and shake, an earthquake on our landscape, our bodies reconfigured through the tremble-shudder-quake, our map of sutured flesh straining [breathe] Lie here with me [breathe] The quivering subsides and when we are finished (we are never finished) we will use our map like a blanket to cover our naked flesh, me wrapped in you, you wrapped in me, our breathing even, our bodies our own.*

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—“The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in Phenomenology of Perception,” *You’ve Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, ed. Laurie J. Shrage, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 85.

Judith Butler, “Wittig’s Materialist Practice: Universalizing a Minority Point of View,” *GLQ* 13:4, 2007, 519-533.

Raine Dozier, “Beards, Breasts and Bodies: Doing Sex in a Gendered World,” *Gender & Society*, 19:3, 2005, 297-316.

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Susan Stryker, “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin,” *GLQ* 10:2, 2004, 212-215.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Raine Dozier, “Beards, Breasts and Bodies: Doing Sex in a Gendered World,” *Gender & Society*, 19:3, 2005, 313.

<sup>2</sup> Gayle Salamon, “Transmasculinity and Relation: Commentary on Griffin Hansbury’s Middle Men,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 6:3, 2005, 269.

<sup>3</sup> Gayle Salamon, “The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in Phenomenology of Perception,” *You’ve Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, ed. Laurie J. Shrage, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Her two essays, “Transmasculinity and Relation” and “The Sexual Schema” (above) are the texts I refer to. I do not specifically reference her more recent book *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, because it is beyond the scope of this article (“The Sexual Schema” is reprinted in that book). See *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, New York: Colombia University Press, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” *The Transgender Studies Reader (TSR)*, New York: Routledge, 2006. First published in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, eds. Kristina Straub and Julia Epstein, New York: Routledge, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> These categories are already plenty complicated, and I do not intend to reduce them to simple or obsolete concepts. If you consider the difference between categories such as lesbian and dyke, you can see the nuances of gender playing out in shifts of sexual terms: in my experience, a dyke may or may not identify as female/woman, which has also led to other terms such as boydyke, or boidyke, or boi. Similarly, combining

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gender and sexual terms creates new nuances, for example, genderqueer lesbian, or tranny fag. We must refrain, as much as possible, from making assumptions about what a lesbian is, or what a genderqueer is, or what a fag is. I am not arguing that we stop using these terms. I use many of them myself, happily. I am arguing that we use them in context, appreciate their growing multiplicity, and recognise that desire is complicated.

<sup>7</sup> Salamon makes a similar point when she says she is worried that “the feminine other” is positioned as a figure of “denial and negation” in Hansbury’s text (*Transmasculinity and Relation*, 270).

<sup>8</sup> As I have learned from women of colour feminism and disability studies, difference must be acknowledged, not evaded. I suggest that transmasculine communities must aim not to affirm transmasculinity through what Salamon calls a “closed circuit of identity” (*Transmasculinity and Relation* 268). Similarly, I aim to participate in open circuits of *desire*, where desire is not simply desire for the same (ie, desire for masculinity) but instead through open circuits of difference, where desire is multiple. This is not to devalue same-sex desire, because I find strength in that too, but to stress that femininity and genderqueerness are interwoven with masculinity and genderqueerness. Again, difference cannot be evaded, and difference does not necessarily entail separation or division.

<sup>9</sup> Raine Dozier, “Beards, Breasts and Bodies: Doing Sex in a Gendered World,” *Gender & Society*, 19:3, 2005, 297-316.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Stryker, “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin,” *GLQ* 10:2, 2004, 212-215.

<sup>11</sup> From Dictionary.com. Accessed 31 March 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, “Wittig’s Materialist Practice: Universalizing a Minority Point of View,” *GLQ* 13:4, 2007, 531.

<sup>13</sup> These privileges accrue regardless of our intentions (usually based on external appearance and assumptions that others make about what our external appearance signifies) but we can choose how to act: with or against it, confirming or disrupting. In my New Zealand context, the privileges of masculinity are embedded in a system of white supremacy, so that I have an intersection of privilege as a white masculine person, and must be even more committed to anti-racism and combating the intersections of racism and misogyny.

<sup>14</sup> As a way of connecting anti-racism to this notion of desire, I ask: does this view of desire and identity as impure realms relate to discourses of purity surrounding race/ethnicity? Discourses of racial purity, used as a historical tool of legal racism in the colonisation of New Zealand, also coincide with universalizing whiteness so that white is the privileged norm. When Butler asserts that heterosexuality and homosexuality are intertwined, that one negotiates all these cultural expectations about bodies and sexualities from one’s particular perspective, could this also apply to negotiating race and ethnicity?

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