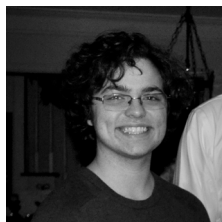


TRANS MEN & TRANS WOMEN

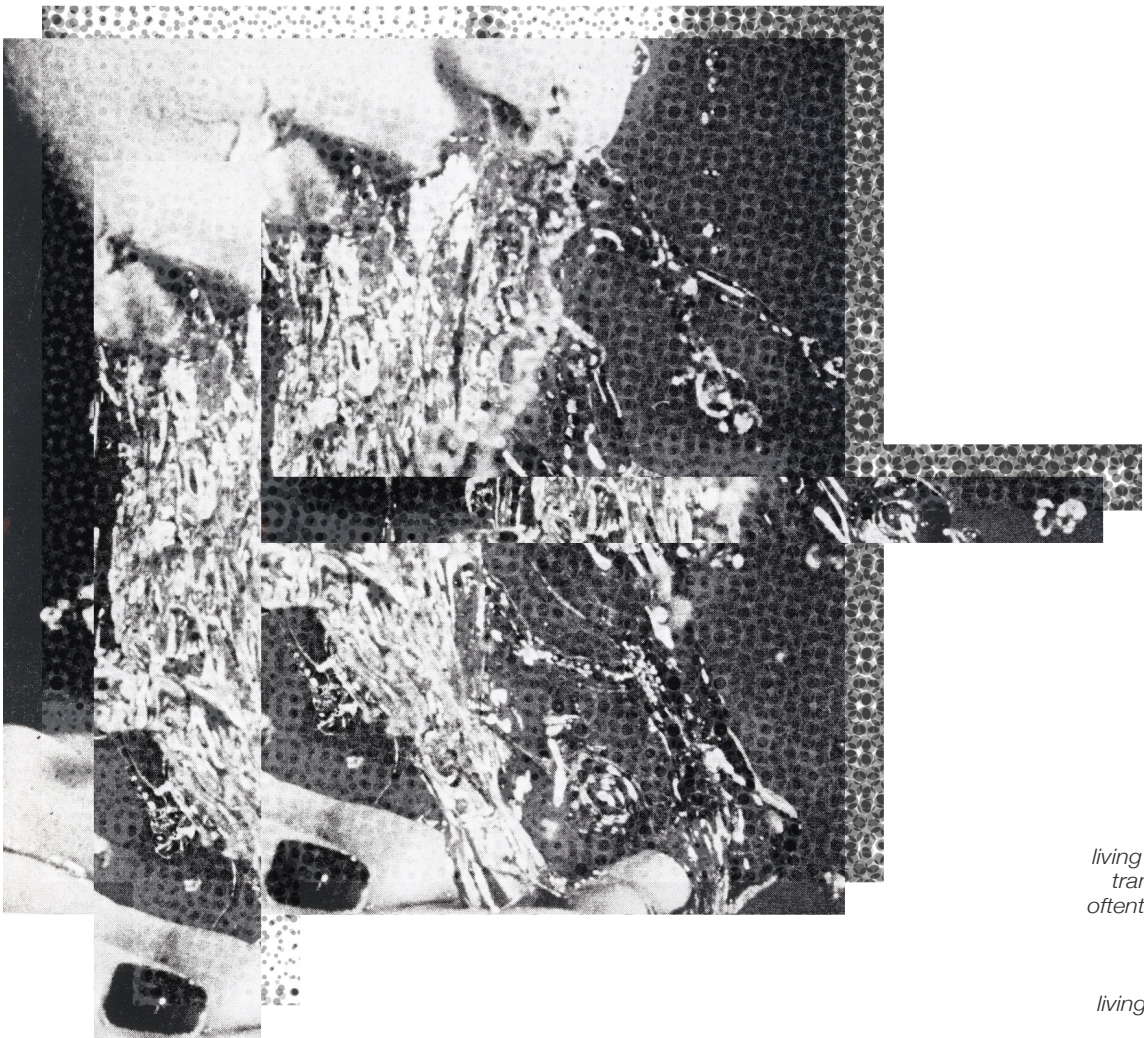
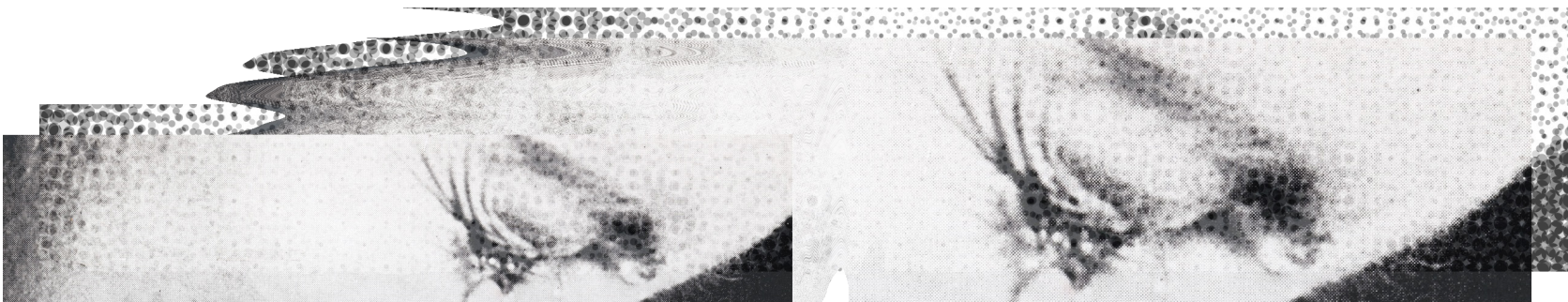
THE ROLE OF THE PERSONAL HISTORY IN SELF-IDENTIFICATION



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ABSTRACT: *This paper addresses one of the ways in which transgender individuals identify with respect to personal history, living "stealth," whereby transgender individuals do not disclose their transgender status (that is, they present themselves as cisgender), oftentimes no longer considering themselves transgender. Individuals who live stealth are often criticized for inauthenticity; thus, this paper analyses Sartrean notions of authenticity and personal history, thereby arguing that the person who lives stealth is not living inauthentically but rather is constituting their conception of self through their past, present, and future projects.*



TRANS-MEN & TRANS-WOMEN

THE ROLE OF THE PERSONAL HISTORY IN SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Recent scholarship on gender, particularly given the burgeoning societal interest in transgender issues, has focused on gender as a social construct, something entirely different than biological sex assigned at birth. Biological sex refers to the body's physical form.¹ Gender refers to the person's social classification, a role typically determined by cultural pressure to act in accordance with norms prescribed according to one's biological sex. These definitions are rough and contestable; however, it is still necessary to make this distinction for the purpose of this paper. The increasingly visible group of transgender people—which includes all persons whose gender identity deviates from the one they were assigned at birth, including nonbinary and agender identities—forces individuals to rethink what gender really is and to what extent one's biological sex at birth can determine their identity. In other words, the presence of transgender individuals to those who are not transgender can be unsettling because identifying oneself outside of the confines of biological sex undermines the idea of one's identity being predetermined by that initial gender marker.

Transgender historian Susan Stryker writes in her book *Transgender History* that “transgender issues touch on fundamental issues of human existence,”² referring to the fact that one's gender is generally taken as a given and not often sought to be defined or clarified. Individuals whose biological sex aligns with their gender often never feel the need to define their own gender because society has determined much of their social role based upon this assumed alignment. However, transgender individuals need to name their gender identity and forge a way of being that gender; they must define themselves. What I am referring to here is that trans people, generally, because they do not identify with the gender determined by their physical sex, must exist outside of the set societal standards for gender from the beginning. While it is certainly true that trans men and women are equally informed

1 It is not within the scope of this paper to explicate a nuanced distinction between sex and gender. To be transgender is to repudiate the idea that one's morphology, or biological sex at birth, determines one's gender. This rejection can be broadly described as one's social classification and one's sense of physical and relational self.

2 Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), 7.

3 Jackson Wright Shultz, *Trans/Portraits: Voices from Transgender Communities* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2015), 5-6.

by societal definitions of gender and tend to create their own gender identities accordingly, they are still forced to choose whether to validate those definitions. Transgender individuals are confronted with an extremely fragile and complex definition of what their gender identity should be, and must continually choose whether to validate or do away with that definition.

Jackson Wright Shultz discusses the myriad of ways that they do this in the book *Trans/Portraits*, saying

some of the individuals who identify under the transgender umbrella will take steps heritably, medically, or surgically to transition, while others will only transition socially. . . . Some who consider themselves fully transitioned no longer identify as transgender.³

Thus, individuals who are transgender are just that—individuals—and their experiences and outlooks are unique. The differing steps taken by transgender individuals, as well as their relationships to their transgender status, as Shultz notes, point to how complicated the transgender person's relationship is with their sex assigned at birth and how greatly these relationships vary between individuals.

Because of the uniqueness of the transgender experience, and because the philosophical issues that transgender people encounter are, as Stryker says, relevant to fundamental issues of human existence, I believe that the transgender experience demands further philosophical discourse, particularly concerning the relationship of transgender individuals' past and present, which is highly individual and simultaneously subject to public criticism. Here, I will focus on the issue of how a transgender identity may be said to alienate the individual from their past. Many transgender people are activists for the transgender community, seeing their transgender identity as an intrinsic part of their being and seeing the steps they took to transition as a way of further becoming themselves rather than as an attempt at abolishing their past. The terms “transman” and “transwoman” often serve to symbolize this inseparable relationship between a person's transgender status and their self. However, many other binary transgender individuals attempt to live “stealth,” which means that they live as their gender

identity without disclosing their transgender status.⁴ In other words, they blend in with the cisgender⁵ population, are assumed to be cisgender themselves, and tell no one or as few others as possible about their transgender status. This way of living necessitates fabricating or avoiding discussion about their pre-transition lives. Individuals who live in stealth may see their transition as a singular event necessary to live authentically as their male or female selves or their transgender status as a private medical condition. While these two perspectives—seeing one’s transgender status as a continuing part of one’s identity and seeing one’s transgender status as something to be confined to the past—are often at odds with one another, particularly through accusations of inauthenticity to those who live “stealth.” I will show in this paper that because both perspectives of gender identity have a valid way of using personal history, both ways of forming one’s gender identity are authentic ways of identification. Transgender people who live “stealth” are constituting their present through the authentic determination of the meaning of their past rather than the inauthentic annihilation of their past, which opponents of the stealth lifestyle often claim that they do. The first section of this paper, entitled “Opposition to Stealth Living,” will discuss some leading views which repudiate living “stealth” and how those views can be better understood through Sartre’s notions of bad faith and personal history. The following section, “Defense of Stealth Living,” will further detail Sartre’s theories of inauthenticity and one’s past, arguing that when we use this framework, we find that both stealth and non-stealth transgender identities can consist of authentic relations of the past and present self. In the concluding section, I revisit the ways in which transgender issues reflect fundamental issues of social existence, suggesting that this Sartrean understanding of gender and personal history is useful for both transgender and cisgender individuals as they navigate the social world.

OPPOSITION TO STEALTH LIVING

At a certain point in the process of transitioning, a transgender person ceases to live as their assigned gender and begins to live openly as the gender they identify

4 Because living “stealth” is only an option for those whose gender identities are within the binary—due to the fact that “stealth” requires passing specifically as a cisgender person of one’s gender identity—my discussion in this paper will be limited to those binary transgender identities. For more detailed discussions of passing (broadly construed), see Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2006).

5 A term used to refer to persons who are not transgender. The Latin prefix “cis-” means “on this side of.”

6 Dallas Denny, “Stealth is Soul-Destroying,” *Transgender Forum RSS*, July 22, 2013, accessed January 09, 2017. <http://www.tgforum.com/wordpress/index.php/stealth-is-soul-destroying/>.

7 Stryker, *Transgender History*, 7.

8 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Estella Barnes, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 87.

as. It is at this point when the relationship with one’s past, i.e. the relationship with one’s life as their assigned gender, becomes murky. This is particularly problematic for transgender people who live “stealth” as they are often criticized by both cisgender people and other trans people. In a 2013 essay, psychologist and transgender activist Dallas Denny says that although she believes each individual has the right to live as they see fit, living in stealth is a stressful existence because of the harm that its inauthenticity does to the individual.⁶ Denny differentiates between passing and living in stealth in terms of authenticity.

No matter how out you are, few people will know your history. When you meet them, people will make a judgment about your gender based on your appearance. . . . Passing becomes stealth when we deny our transness. . . . Stealth requires an active denial of our past—of much of who we are and all of who we were.⁷

According to Denny, this active denial of one’s transgender status constitutes a lie to others. If living in stealth centers on a viewpoint that Shultz highlights in *Trans/Portraits*, that once transitioned some transgender people no longer consider themselves transgender, an activist arguing against living in stealth could call the practice a lie to oneself. In other words, if after transitioning, a person was to consider themselves no longer transgender, the anti-stealth person might call this consideration a lie to oneself because they consider the act of transitioning something that objectively makes one transgender. Denny, in her essay, considers living in stealth an active denial, both to oneself and to others, of both who one is and was—or living inauthentically.

The accusation of inauthenticity could be viewed as an accusation of what Sartre calls “bad faith” (*mauvaise-foi*), which he says is essentially “a lie to oneself.”⁸ Sartre defines bad faith as something paradoxical; to deceive oneself, one must simultaneously know and be ignorant of the truth. Some individuals may believe that the person living as male or female without disclosing their transgender status is ignorant of the truth, which is in this case that their transness is an essential part of their gender identity and cannot be omitted. Trans people who live stealth could be, then, in bad faith because they *know* that they transitioned in order to live as their gender

identity but are ignorant of the supposed truth that their transgender status is still a necessary part of their gender identity. If one's past is an inescapable part of who one is, then to deny that past, in this view, is to deny part of one's present being.

Sartre's conception of "bad faith" is further expounded upon when he explains the connection between bad faith and one's social role. For Sartre, the extent to which one's social role constitutes their self (who they are as an individual) is ambiguous. One can use this ambiguity to facilitate bad faith, saying that they are not their role, that they are rather a free consciousness contemplating that role, and thus separate themselves from the role. To the other possibility, if one were to identify *with* the role, one could emphasize internally that the role is one's own, trying to keep one's consciousness perfectly aligned with the duties and performance of that role. In other words, identifying with the role rather than separating oneself from it involves the belief that one's social role defines who one is as an individual. This latter attitude is socially prescribed. Sartre uses the example of the service industry, saying,

a grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer. Society demands that he limit himself to his function as a grocer . . . there are indeed many precautions to imprison a man in what he is, as if we lived in perpetual fear that he might escape from it, that he might break away and suddenly elude his condition.⁹

In other words, society demands that individuals internalize their social roles, not only performing the duties of these roles but wholly becoming them. We see this frequently with gender roles as individuals are socially pressured not only to look and act as members of their prescribed gender but also are pressured to internalize that gender role. The gender role then becomes more than a social category; rather, it is regarded by the individual as an intrinsic part of who they are. This profound social pressure is, in part, the reason that transgender individuals are seen as deviant. While cisgender individuals may frequently find that their personal desires align with the desires society expects of persons of their gender, transgender individuals desire not to live as the gender that they were prescribed. This desire (and the actions thusly taken) are seen as deviant because individuals are pressured

⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 102.

¹⁰ Cynthia Lee and Peter Kwan, "The Trans Panic Defense: Masculinity, Heteronormativity, and the Murder of Transgender Women," *Hastings Law Journal* 66, no. 1 (2014): 77.

to internalize the gender role they were prescribed, not to assume a different one.

Because transgender individuals are seen as deviant by breaking social norms in this way, many cisgender individuals have violent reactions toward transgender people. This is evidenced legally by the so-called "trans panic" defense. Authors Lee and Kwan say in a 2014 article in the *Hastings Law Journal* that

the defendant claiming this defense will say that the discovery that the victim was biologically male provoked him into a heat of passion causing him to lose self-control. If the jury finds that the defendant was actually and reasonably provoked, it can acquit him of murder and find him guilty of the lesser offense of voluntary manslaughter.¹⁰

In this case, if a transgender person lives stealth and presents him or herself as "only" male or female, many cisgender people react to the discovery that the person is transgender with disgust or violence, feeling that they have been lied to. This feeling occurs because the transgender person broke free of the confines of their assigned sex and, in living authentically to their own identity, failed to live as the role assigned with their biological sex at birth. While the reactive cisgender person is not concerned with the state of the trans person's honesty with themselves, rather being concerned with how *they*, the other, have been lied to, the cisgender person in this scenario does still claim that the transgender person is acting inauthentically. This claim is made because trans people, thus perceived, have the obligation to be completely open about their transgender status, and the failure to do so is considered a wrong. The legal validation of a violent response simply serves to show how strongly the trans person who chooses nondisclosure is often vilified.

In each of these accusations of bad faith, the trans person who lives "stealth" is being defined in terms of their past because the opponent to the transgender person living in stealth regards the past as an integral part of one's present identity. For the transphobic person who uses the signifier "trans" to identify the trans person as *not really* their gender identity, the past as one's assigned gender is entirely constitutive of one's present. For the trans person who considers the nondisclosure of one's transgender status inauthentic, the past as one's assigned gender and

the movement away from that assigned gender are both important components of one's identity. Thus, to deny that identity is to deny who one is. The transgender person who lives in stealth may do so for safety reasons or simply because they do not see their assigned gender as a necessary piece of information for others. A common view by transgender individuals who do not disclose their transgender status is that being transgender is an unfortunate medical condition, one which has been corrected, and is therefore part of one's private history. However, the views which oppose a stealth lifestyle tend to see this opinion, that the event of transition or the past before transition is not constitutive of one's identity, as a lie, because of how one's past is so strongly connected to one's present identity.

DEFENSE OF STEALTH LIVING

Sartre, too, views the past as being indispensable to one's identity. For Sartre, man is free in that he is initially without identity and must create himself. Transgender individuals may be constrained at first by their biological sex, but they are free to disengage with the gender identity that is pushed onto them by society because of that assigned sex. Thus, they must create themselves in the Sartrean sense by choosing whether to validate society's definitions of gender, be it the gender they identify with or that which they identify away from. They must still, though, recognize that their gender identity was born out of a personal history that includes the imposition of a gender that they do not consider authentically theirs. In the case of a transgender individual who is living stealth, distancing themselves from and concealing their past is done to make themselves as fully male or female as possible (according to cisgender society's standards for "male" and "female"). However,

every action designed to wrench me away from my past must first be conceived in terms of my particular past; that is, the action must before all reconcile that it is born out of the particular past which it wishes to destroy.¹¹

Thus, a transgender person who wishes to reject every part of their identity associated with their past as their biological assigned sex must first accept *as truth* that they were, at one point in their personal history, living as the

gender that they no longer identify as. The opponents to a stealth lifestyle use this fact, that it is impossible to destroy such events of the past, as evidence that one must use the past as an active part of one's identity in specific ways – either using the transgender status as a defining feature of one's gender identity or as a negation of one's gender identity. Thus, actively denying the past if it is an objective part of one's present identity would be in bad faith.

Although the claims of inauthenticity have merit under this conception of the past, Sartre develops his view of the past in a way that I argue works to support living in stealth as a way of being that is not in bad faith. He says, "while freedom is the choice of an end in terms of the past, conversely the past is what is only in relation to the end chosen."¹² For Sartre, there is an unchangeable element of the past, which would be, for example, the fact that I was born as the female sex. However, there is also what he calls the element "eminently variable," which is the meaning of that unchangeable element in relation to my total being and is "strictly dependent on my present project."¹³ In other words, while the past must be encountered in all present actions, the meaning of that past is entirely subject to the present state and future project of the individual. Thus, the meaning of a transgender person's past is not decided according to the social roles given to that past identity as is assumed by critics who say that, for example, a transgender woman is *really* a man but is rather decided by the individual's present actions. By this I mean that the transgender person must decide the meaning of their past according to their present state and future project, i.e. their transition and their life lived more fully. Others, particularly in the case of violence against transgender individuals, certainly impose meaning and justify their actions through that imposed meaning, but the meanings determined by others can never truly justify anything because the only truly valid meaning is that determined by the individual. The possibility of violence may inform the individual's determination of meaning; nevertheless, one will still determine the intricacies of their identity in the most authentic way for themselves. Though other persons and their actions must be encountered, the individual is free to determine the meaning of those encounters for themselves. Thus, while the unchangeable

¹² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 639.

¹³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 640.

¹¹ Denny, "Stealth is Soul-Destroying."

element of my past may be that I lived as the female sex, my present actions and my future project whereby I will continue transitioning toward a visibly male identity reflect my professed male gender identity. In other words, the fact that my personal history includes a time where I lived as a woman, my present actions—such as the steps taken medically to transition, referring to myself by a male name and pronouns and adopting culturally male gender markers—are what decide the meaning of that time as a female. Instead of being constrained by a previous state of being, I am able to change the meaning of it for myself according to how I form my identity in the present. Sartre also says that, “[the past’s] function is to be what I have chosen of myself in order to oppose myself to it, that which enables me to measure myself.”¹⁴ Thus, the future is only realized by further dissociation from one’s past. The fact that I am transgender will never disappear and neither will my past living as the sex assigned to me at birth, but it would be invalid for my opponents were I to choose nondisclosure in regards to my transgender status, to claim that my transgender status and my past must constitute my identity in any way other than that which I choose through my present actions.

CONCLUSION

In both disclosure and non-disclosure with respect to one’s transgender status, the past is encountered and made to mean something subjective to the individual. This subjective meaning, even when it opposes the meanings imposed by others, ought to be that which is respected by the public because of the subjective nature of all individuals’ identities. Depending on the transgender person’s method and place in transition, opinions, and even personal history, the past is connected to the present in different ways. Many transgender activists attempt to use the past as a means of furthering their understanding of others in the present—for example, understanding gender-based discrimination because of personal experiences being perceived as both male and female. Other transgender individuals simply see their past as a time when they were still themselves and their transition as a tool to further themselves rather than destroy the past. Many transgender people who live in stealth oppose themselves to their past in order to further themselves in

¹⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 646.

relation to the past. The recollection of the past is used to appreciate and promote present action. Because the past is still used in the stealth lifestyle as something with which to form identity, one is not denying a part of one’s present identity when denying or opposing their past. The transgender person living in stealth is not in bad faith; rather, they are still encountering the past in a way that constitutes their present identity, much like transgender people who choose disclosure.

Transgender individuals are forced to critically encounter gender not only when they initially acknowledge their transgender identity, but also while continuing through the rest of their transition. Cisgender individuals too must critically encounter gender when they become aware of transgender identities; these new encounters, occurring with higher frequency as the visibility of transgender individuals in society increases, are perhaps one reason for mainstream society’s fascination with transgender identities. Though the simplified “born in the wrong body” narrative has often been used to first make sense of transgender identities for those unfamiliar, we see from both the different possible accounts of transgender personal history, and from the increasingly complex identities that are being presented in today’s media, that “transgender” is not merely a misalignment between the body’s sex and the brain’s gender. Every individual, regardless of their gender (or lack thereof), must determine the meaning of their past experiences, their present state, and their future projects in order to determine their sense of self—including their sense of gender. While our gender assigned at birth may once have predetermined much of our identity, we now must confront the fact that, even if we identify with that initial gender assignment, we are making the free choice to affirm those meanings and that sense of self. Transgender persons who live stealth, then, are determining meaning and identity freely for themselves, as is everyone else; therefore, their identities ought to be respected and accepted as authentic.