

Gayle Salamon

The Life and Death of Latisha King: A Critical Phenomenology of Transphobia

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Quote: "Salamon's poignant work leaves a powerful impression as she clears a space for the subject of the book, Latisha King, to become visible in a way that most did not (want to) know her and that was impossible during her short lifetime."

Gayle Salamon's writing in *The Life and Death of Latisha King* is sparse, giving a sense of stillness and quiet as if every word of the text were heavy with the weight of mourning. Short sentences and simple wording bring the point to the surface,¹ laying bare a reality that readers cannot but contend with:

On February 12, 2008, Larry King was shot by Brandon McInerney, a fellow student at the E. O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard, California. Brandon shot Larry twice in the back of the head at point-blank range with a handgun . . . Larry died in the hospital the next day. (1)

The prose and narrative strategies position readers as if they are participating in piecing together the details of King's story. For example, by citing witness questioning, Salamon vividly conjures the scene of the courtroom during McInerney's murder trial: the strict legal discourse and streamlined formal proceedings that awkwardly, and ultimately ineffectively, grappled with both the emotional charge of the event and with making sense of the broader social context of the case:

ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY MAEVE FOX: At some point did Larry make a request of you that you call him by a certain name?

DAWN BOLDRIN [a teacher at E.O Green Junior High]: He did.

FOX: Do you remember that?

BOLDRIN: I do.

FOX: What did he ask you to--what did he want to be called?

BOLDRIN: Um, I believe it was Latisha.

FOX: What did you tell him in response to that?

BOLDRIN: Told him no. He would have to officially have his name changed before I'd do that. (21)

This approach to building the narrative also reflects Salamon's own efforts as she slowly came to terms with the case as a firsthand witness of the trial:

I first heard about this case . . . from a cover story in Newsweek a few days after the shooting. That story, "Young, Gay and Murdered in Junior High: A Tale of Bullying, Sexual Identity, and the Limits of Tolerance," portrayed the killing as a phobic reaction to a gay crush gone bad. . . . When the trial ended [summer 2011], I became convinced that this was not a story about a gay child and a straight child. It slowly became clear to me that the story of the killing of "Larry King," and the story of the prosecution of that killing, was not primarily about sexual orientation . . . but was in fact about gender expression. (3-4)

Salamon's study is not, however, a documentary-style chronicle of events. For that, she sends readers to psychotherapist Ken Corbett's *A Murder over a Girl* (Corbett 2016) and Marta Cunningham's film *Valentine Road* (2013). In his account, Corbett accommodates the troubled childhood of the fourteen-year-old McInerney who shot fifteen-year-old Latisha, as well as the limitations of the adults around them, who were "[I]acking ways to think about or distinguish gender identity from sexuality" (Corbett 2016, 87). Such a compassionate perspective (for which Salamon expresses admiration) emphasizes that all those involved, from Latisha and McInerney, and their peers, to the teachers, parents, and legal guardians, were victims of some larger forces that enabled the event. "Despite modernity's expansion," writes Corbett, "social convention routinely rounds up and squashes the complexity and variety that is gender" (21).

In contrast, in her study, Salamon positions herself alongside Latisha as ally and witness, perhaps even as friend and mentor. If, in her lifetime, Latisha bore the often violent disciplining of gender and sex norms, which labeled her "a problem"² and amounted to repeated and concerted efforts of erasure (for example, the refusal to acknowledge her chosen name, the censoring and pathologizing of her identity and choices for expressing it), Salamon's patient and meticulous study turns on the agents of those social norms and seeks to precisely pin down and interrogate the work of "rounding up and squashing" that is done by "social convention." Salamon writes: "Whereas in the trial Latisha's body and bodily movements were subject to the greatest scrutiny, I attempt here to turn that gaze toward the gazers themselves, to . . . subject the bodily movements of the onlookers to the same degree of scrutiny that Latisha received . . ." (11). Thus, Salamon's study addresses not why the tragedy of Latisha's murder happened (the facts of the case are not in question), but how:

The question of how becomes a question of what created the conditions of possibility for that shooting . . . [of] how that question of "why" [that is, why McInerney shot Latisha] is taken up and followed in the case and, in particular, how Latisha's gender was understood in the context of the school, in the courtroom, and how the events in the courtroom framed the events of the shooting. (10)

True to the book's subtitle, "a critical phenomenology of transphobia," Salamon's analysis details the ways in which Latisha was seen as a problem because of her gender expression, usually (mis)perceived and articulated by others around her as a display of her sexuality. This includes teachers who construed disciplining Latisha's gender expression as a way of protecting her from

herself or from bullying by other children, who responded negatively to her "queerness."³ Salamon systematically defamiliarizes how sex and gender norms operated in others' relations to Latisha, thus privileging (and "normalizing") Latisha's "queerness." Salamon's focus on "the how" is evidently informed by Judith Butler's seminal work. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes: "within the sex/gender distinction, sex poses as 'the real' and the 'factic,' the material or corporeal ground upon which gender operates as an act of cultural inscription. . . . The question is not: what meaning does that inscription carry within it, but what cultural apparatus arranges this meeting between instrument and body" (Butler 1990, 145-46). Salamon's critical approach is also inspired by Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, which considers the notion of "orientation" through phenomenological attention to the living body: "Familiarity is what is . . . given, and which in being given 'gives' the body the capacity to be orientated in this way or that. The question of orientation becomes, then, a question not only about how we 'find our way' but how we come to 'feel at home'" (Ahmed 2006, 7). By focalizing the study through Latisha's queerness, Salamon's analysis renders starkly visible the limitations that Latisha's living body experienced as a gender-nonconforming teen. The study is thus a powerful indictment of the systemic and concerted workings of transphobia, homophobia, and racism.

Methodologically, Salamon is inspired by Lisa Guenther's work: "By critical phenomenology I mean a method that is rooted in first-person accounts of experience but also critical of classical phenomenology's claim that the first-person singular is absolutely prior to intersubjectivity and to the complex textures of social life" (Guenther 2013, xiv). Attentiveness to and self-consciousness about the tension between the personal and the transcendental is sustained through Salamon's study, giving it a particular sense of aliveness and depth. On one hand, the material of the study is the personal accounts of witnesses during the trial and also Salamon's frank interjections of her own perspective or judgment. On the other hand, the study includes analysis of media discourse about the case and, via witness accounts from the trial, of the norms and regulations governing the legal system and the institution of the school. Writes Salamon: "There is no perception without a subject, but there is no subject without a world. A subject only becomes so through her enmeshment within a world" (16). As a work of critical theory and philosophy, the book continues Salamon's earlier *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (2010) and makes an important contribution to scholarship in feminist, queer, and trans studies that engages with phenomenology (including by scholars such as Beauvoir, Bettcher, Butler, Diprose, Heinämaa, Stryker, Weiss, Young). Insofar as the book is a personal account of Salamon's experience during the trial and her processing of that experience, it can also be at home alongside works such as Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2014).

Salamon's phenomenological approach draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as scholars associated with trans studies (Talia Mae Bettcher, Susan Stryker) and critical race theory (Toni Morrison, George Yancy, Fred Moten). Though Latisha was biracial and adopted into a white family, she identified as black and Salamon notes that Latisha's chosen name signified a "coming out" both in terms of racial and gender identity (22). Salamon's theoretical framework for the study thus pays homage to both Latisha's gender and racial identity, while also practicing meaningful interdisciplinarity across disciplines that are not always allied. Moreover, the study contributes to scholarship that has extended Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the living body to address his silence on topics of body politics, sexual difference, and desire (Hass 2008, 98).

The book is divided into four sections, each of which considers Latisha's story through a different notion within phenomenology: "Comportment," "Movement," "Anonymity," and "Objects." Each section unfolds as an essayistic reflection, part philosophical, part biographical, always conceptually rigorous with incisive observations that are all the more affecting for Salamon's scintillating prose. One can only gesture at how Salamon's elegant and sophisticated analytical work and her particular phenomenological approach achieves certain insights.

Consider, for instance, the first section--"Comportment"--where Salamon considers how Latisha's gender expression came to be perceived and portrayed by "scrutinizing onlookers" (teachers, fellow students, the media) as sexual aggression. Salamon begins with an analysis of newspaper coverage of the case, homing in on variations of a frequently repeated statement: "King wore female clothing and told classmates he was gay" (28-29). Salamon notes that the "and" in the sentence was commonly understood as "disjunctive":

[T]he sentence does not offer Larry as a queer subject who lives his queerness in various modes [including dressing and speaking] but rather offers him as a queer subject through his telling ("told friends he was gay") and a trans subject in his mode of bodily presentation ("dressed in feminine attire"). The telling and the dressing are two different kinds of identification, the first of gender and the second of sexuality. (27)

This parsing points to two aspects of Latisha's "gender trouble" in terms of how she was perceived by others around her: dressing in "feminine attire" as a "boy" and "self-disclosure" about "being gay." Such phrasing is evidence of how sexuality and gender expression were regularly conflated, with the effect of "subsuming trans identity into a more readily assimilable gay identity" (29). Moreover, such assertions "seem, in a rather transparent act of projection, to diagnose the confusion as [Latisha's]" (29). Indeed, only one account, by a friend of Latisha's, stands out for distinguishing between the two: "I don't think Larry was gay. He's transgendered. It's a big difference" (20).

Salamon explains the dangerous consequences of such conflation: "Conceiving of gender expression and sexual identity as fungible encourages people to look at gender expression as an act, and often *as an aggressive act*, akin to a sexual advance or even a sexual assault" (30, emphasis in original). For example, when one of Latisha's teachers is asked during the trial to describe what made Latisha "stand out" from the other children, she struggles to offer a clear answer: "I guess his size, his petiteness . . . his mannerisms, the way he carried himself" (33). The teacher's response shows how gender expression is associated with some qualities over which Latisha does not have control (for example, physical size), and others that it is assumed she controls (for example, mannerisms, her clothing and accessories) (33). The latter dominates, however, and serves to construct gender expression as "a potential projectile, something that Latisha could be throwing at people" (34). Understood in this way, gender expression becomes a question of agency, of Latisha forcing others to look at her performance of nonnormative gender: "Latisha is demanding an unhappy engagement with the other . . . if others then react with unhappiness, negativity or aggression, they are only acceding to what Latisha herself has demanded" (55). Salamon further observes that portraying Latisha as aggressive, unruly, and disruptive (18) is consistent with how African American children are often perceived and portrayed. She is particularly concerned with how Latisha's racial identity was absent from the

narrative about the case, even while McInerney's association with white-supremacist ideology was acknowledged: "In the representation of this murder in which a white supremacist junior high school student kills a black classmate, race is literally unmentionable and is erased from the story in order to make the narrative about gayness more legible, a legibility that is in turn dependent on the simultaneous analogy with and erasure of trans identity" (40).

Midway through this analysis, Salamon seemingly digresses into a discussion of the phenomenologist Erwin Straus's "The Upright Posture" (1952), famously critiqued in Iris Marion Young's "Throwing Like a Girl" (1990). Even as she reinforces Young's earlier work, Salamon is keen to show how Straus's phenomenology "might help us to apprehend bodies in . . . contexts other than Straus's own" (41). In the rather humorous reading of Straus's essay that follows, Salamon traces the heteronormative orientation of Straus's reasoning. She recounts Straus's description of a sailor "pulling his cap askew, and his girl understand[ing] well the cocky expression and his leanings" (48). In response to Straus's assertion that "without ever being taught, we understand the rules governing this . . . expression" (48), Salamon writes: "To my eye that cocked hat is more likely to conjure Tom of Finland than it is to telegraph a heterosexual sailor with his girl" (49).

In closing the chapter, Salamon turns to the "trigger incident" in Latisha's case: a brief moment in the school hallway when McInerney heard Latisha address him with the word "baby." No one, not even McInerney, could confirm what exactly Latisha had said, but that one word was, to McInerney, "disgusting, the worst thing anyone had ever said to him" (58). For him, Latisha's "disruption of what was expected from a male" was encapsulated in that word "baby," which he took as if Latisha threw her gender at him, as if a projectile, as if an assault that requires self-defense (59).

Salamon's account is profoundly sad, frequently distressing, even harrowing at times. But limiting the account to such affective tones would not have done justice to Latisha's story. Salamon: "One of the most remarkable things about Latisha King's short life was her resilience, the way that she persevered in her self-expression in the face of normative regulations and prohibition" (102). Humor, sparing and subtle though it be, is crucial to the nuanced quality of Salamon's study. Its periodic appearance refreshes the analysis by reminding readers about the vigor and resilience that also characterize the subject at the center of the book, thus making this more than a documentation of violence and disciplining, but also an ode to and vindication of Latisha. For instance, in a section on how Latisha's choice of high-heeled women's boots was a topic of extended deliberation during the trial--"The contention in this case was that when Latisha walks down the hallway in her boots, she was making an issue of her gender" (87)--Salamon pinpoints moments when the gender performance of the "scrutinizing onlookers" slips, effectively disrobing them of their authority. About the testimony of one particularly critical teacher, Salamon quips: "[o]ne might even read a certain measure of gender envy . . . [as the teacher] delivered this testimony . . . wearing a pair of shoes that had at most perhaps an inch of lift" (74). On a more serious note, Salamon later remarks, "when a teacher herself clicks down the hall, or squishes down it in practical shoes with crepe soles, she, too, is offering her gender to the world, even if it recedes from her attention in its conformation with [gender] norms" (87).

The moments of resistance in Salamon's account are necessary to counterbalance the alarming portrayal of the strict and clipped frames in which Latisha's life was lived. The balancing between

the heaviness of loss and mourning, and the hope and love that sustain Salamon's account, is noteworthy: "[W]e need to attend to the uniquely precarious social positioning of trans-of-color lives, and at the same time resist the cultural impulse to ascribe fatality to these lives, to collect all trans-of-color lives under the sign of death" (20-21). Salamon's poignant work leaves a powerful impression as she clears a space for the subject of the book, Latisha King, to become visible in a way that most did not (want to) know her and that was impossible during her short lifetime: "We see you, we stand with you, and we will do everything we can to protect you" (163).⁴

References:

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¹ With this term, I mark Salamon's study as an important example of recent shifts in reading approach, away from "symptomatic reading" and to "surface reading," as described by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (Best and Marcus 2009), an approach that is significantly influenced, among others, by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose scholarship is relevant to Salamon's work.

² McInerney's particular understanding of Latisha as "a problem" is arresting and indicative of the dangers of a logic that locates the problem in Latisha: seeing that school authorities did not categorically forbid Latisha's gender-nonconforming behavior, McInerney takes matters into his own hands by fatally shooting her. After the event, he is reported to have said: "I thought it was a good thing to do. Everyone hated him [Latisha]. He was a problem for everybody" (Corbett 2016, 89).

³ The use of the term queer here can be seen as contentious insofar as it was not a term that Latisha used to describe herself, but it was used by others around her as an epithet. I use quotation marks to highlight this problematic, but where possible omit them in further discussion with the understanding that, given the conceptual frame of Salamon's analysis, the term takes on a largely positive if not empowering meaning. For valuable commentary on word-choice throughout Salamon's study, see in particular, pages 6-10 and 22-24.

⁴ In the final chapter of the book, Salamon invokes these words from Attorney General Loretta Lynch's 2016 announcement of the Obama Administration's commitment to protect the right to equality of trans children in schools, thus setting this philosophical study in a broader political landscape. As Salamon finished work on this book, Donald Trump's administration reversed the Obama-era protections for transpeople.