

Eliza Steinbock  
The Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis  
University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

---

## **‘Forthcoming’ Research in Trans Studies: On Assuming Trans- and Inter-Disciplin- ary Research Methods**

**Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and  
the Rhetorics of Materiality*. Columbia University  
Press: New York, 2010; 226 pp.**

ISBN: 978-0-231-14959-4

---

*Key Words: embodiment, materiality, transgender studies, queer theory, psychoanalysis, phenomenology.*

*Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality* by Gayle Salamon is a fine example of scholarship that accomplishes trans- and inter-disciplinary engagement in its interrogation of the ‘body-concept’. The four sections of the book focus on different dialogues in which the body as a concept relates to transgenderism. In seven wide-ranging chapters, it demonstrates the theoretical import of transgender embodiment for canonical philosophical texts as well as for feminism and queer theory. Its valuable *interdisciplinary* contribution to transgender studies is to

identify tools in phenomenology and psychoanalysis that assist in our understanding of desire and gender, particularly when non-normatively expressed; in this sense it demonstrates conceptual alliance with other fields. *Assuming a Body* also demonstrates ways in which transgender issues are transdisciplinary and ‘trans-sect’ the academy, cutting through and interrupting ideas that are hostile to or even foreclose transgender subjectivity. Hence, the groundbreaking contributions offered in the lineage of Judith Butler’s ‘thinking through transgender’ practice are sure to be assigned in

different kinds of courses. Readers have access to new material by Salamon in addition to chapters previously published in journals such as *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* and *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, as well as in the edited collections, *You've Changed: Sex Change and Personal Identity* (2009) and *Women's Studies on the Edge* (2008).

The title 'assuming a body' refers to a two-fold investigation of the question 'what does it mean to be embodied?' On the one hand, it asks what does it mean for a trans subject versus a normatively gendered subject to 'assume' a body, to take up an embodiment. On the other hand, the question is directed towards bodies of knowledge that conceptualize in different fashions what it means to assume a body or bodies as such, specifically interrogating phenomenology, psychoanalysis, queer theory, sexual difference feminism, judicial discourse and trans scholarship. Salamon's task was to consider how each of these disciplines conceives of the body and the ways in which they may converge to question the assumptions of each other. She takes stock of who assumes what, and for what purpose; in other words, what role 'the body' as well as 'this body' figured as transgender plays in the rhetoric of said discipline. Her stakes in the investigation involve a reckoning of her training in canonical philosophy and her allegiance to

the project of trans studies. As a philosopher, she highlights an element of epistemological uncertainty as to what a body is, or can become, mediated by the material and phantasmatic. Equally, she challenges transgender studies to examine its reliance on materiality as an assumption of 'the real,' which she writes is 'a phrase that, it seems to me, can never quite shed its normativizing and disciplinary dimensions' (3). In addition, the book debates salient issues from the field's formative decade: a muted discussion of sexuality, popular representation in the press, autobiography and a vexed relation to women's studies.

*Assuming a Body* begins by exploring theoretical resonances with transgender studies' concern with the body's 'felt sense'. Through interdisciplinary encounters with psychoanalysis (e.g. Freud, Butler, Prosser) and phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty), Part One re-loads theories of embodiment with a transgender nuance, respectively the 'bodily ego' and a proprioceptive 'sexual schema'. Chapter One concludes that 'bodily assumption, and hence subject formation itself, is a complex oscillation between narcissistic investment in one's own flesh and the "necessary self-division and self-estrangement" ... that is the very means by which our bodies are articulated' (41). The relationality to oneself developed through psychoanalysis leads to developing a phenomenological relation to others.

Chapter Two on Merleau-Ponty's concept of a sexual schema discusses his articulation of the body ontologically *being* 'sexuality' and at the same time 'freedom'. Salamon argues that the ambiguity of gender and sexuality in his sexual schema – embodied yet not entirely physical, inescapable yet inchoate – offers a useful understanding of trans embodiment that avoids the typically sexually-bereft model of transsexuality. Her statement that 'sexuality is a matter not of seeing but of sensing,' shifts trans identity and sexual expression towards the material body, though does not concentrate on genitalia (47). To emphasize the relationality of one's sexual schema, Salamon offers a reading of Lana Tisdale's affirmative response to Brandon's 'full flesh' in the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*.

The provocations of transgender embodiment to object-oriented sexuality and genital-oriented gender identification continue in Part Two, in which Salamon fashions a trans-inspired queer concept 'homoeeratic' and contributes to the notion of 'transfeminism'. A calendar titled ' "Boys" of the Lex,' for San Francisco's dyke bar, featuring transgressively masculine images, provides the grist to her contention that homoeroticism or 'love of the same' is 'insufficient for understanding how this eroticism depends on difference and alterity at the level of sex, of gender, and of bodies' (70). Salamon argues that particularly

between transmasculinities erotic power may be generated by difference within sameness, or masculinities that 'wander or stray from their customary or expected courses in unpredictable and surprising ways' (71). Her assertion that the body's morphology does not script either identification or desire is expanded in the next chapter's settling of a dispute with women's studies' investment in the referentiality of the body (its sex signs) to attest to gender identity. Chapter Four's interest in 'the future of gender' addresses the caricatured and distorted face of transsexualism given in many feminist accounts, indicating that feminist thought lags behind non-normative genders as they are theorized, embodied, and lived. This chapter carefully discusses the connections and disconnections in the project of transgender studies and feminism as well as queer theory via reference to *LGB- fake T community* organization.

In Part Three, 'Transcending Sexual Difference', Salamon more strongly advances a transdisciplinary project that wrestles over rightful use of terminology. Critically identifying the limits or hostility of a theoretical framework, Salamon takes sexual difference feminism to task. She mobilizes an American-influenced gender studies approach, which engages the heterosexual matrix, in framing her critique of French-styled essentialist feminism. She offers a queer or 'nonheteronormative' read-

ing of the sexuate body in Luce Irigaray's work in order to intervene in the 'hylomorphic' conceptualization of sexual difference as reduced to genital difference. She seeks to expose a trans-phobic body politics in which 'materialism' simply means the supposed 'material' limits of gender plasticity and 'sexual difference' refers to an immaterial body that is capable of almost limitless reconfiguration. Chapter Six addresses Elizabeth Grosz's sporadic commentary on transsexualism; Salamon sees that Grosz's brief invocations belie the crucial (and debilitating) role for the transsexual as a sexuate limit in her modeling of sexual difference as a theory of corporeal becoming. Salamon counters Grosz' reference to the 'law' of the biological body's sexual facticity – 'pure difference' – with lived realities of gender variance and flux cited by American feminists.

The hylomorphic law of sexual difference reappears in the legal lettering of male (m) and female (f) that marks documents as it ideologically 'marks' the body. In the concluding chapter on sex as a bounded property, much like a territory, the notion of trans specificity becomes most emphatic. Via an examination of the autobiographical trope and the reality of border crossing, Salamon offers a critique of property rights nested in nationalistic rhetoric. For the transsexual 'beyond the law,' she stresses the difficulty of ownership of one's body. Unlike normatively gendered people, transsexuals

caught between conflicting sex and gender recognition laws cannot safely 'assume' a stable and identifiable body: 'the depth of that misrecognition,' stresses Salamon, 'puts the stakes at nothing less than life itself' (193).

In the 1998 introduction to 'The Transgender Issue' of the journal GLQ, Susan Stryker prophetically proposed that, to a large extent, 'work in transgender studies will consist of definitional wrangling until a better consensus emerges of who deploys these terms, in which contexts, and with what intent' (149). Some battles seem fueled not only by the inevitable power struggles, but also by disciplinary mistrust and misunderstanding. Throughout the book Salamon's precise use of terminology gently guides her reader through a complex and perhaps newly discovered disciplinary terrain. Considering its numerous audiences, *Assuming a Body's* achievement of clarity in conducting disciplinary encounters provides a much-needed model as well as resource for transgender scholarship. Such research as Salamon's that may be qualified as disciplinarily 'forthcoming' will hopefully encourage more fruitful engagements between various territories of knowledge production.

This study of the body through its re-presentation in rhetoric could benefit from an even more explicit acknowledgment of its 'object' of analysis, particularly when the body

discussed is materialized by a legal ruling, a literary text, a photograph, or a film. As the title announces, the book focuses on the *rhetoric* of materiality yet, its analysis often shifts to a cultural object to provide counterclaims to traditional texts. These objects, I might propose, perform embodiment in dimensions beyond textual rhetoric; their medium-specificity also seems to resist a purely 'textual' reading. Further confusing the matter, 'rhetoric' largely remains an undefined term. Hence, I suggest that a careful delimitation of object selection, in which the corpus would be accounted for just as rigorously as the wide-range of concepts, would helpfully draw out the assumptions of Salamon's own 'rhetoric' of the body.

## References

- Scott, J. W., ed. 2008. *Women's Studies on the Edge*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Shrage, L. J., ed. 2009. "You've Changed": *Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stryker, S. 1998. The Transgender Issue: An Introduction. *GLQ* 4(2):145-158.