

# ASSUMING A BODY: TRANSGENDER AND RHETORICS OF MATERIALITY

Gayle Salamon

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## THE “FELT SENSE” AND “WITHHOLDING THE LETTER”

Gayle Salamon’s *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, published nearly seven years ago, continues to be a challenging and engaging, though at times tricky philosophical thesis. Salamon sets out to challenge the assumed unmediated access and epistemological certainty of the material body, contending that “current ideas of what a body is will be irremediably diminished until trans bodies and subjectivities are considered in a more thorough way” (1). In part, the text is a defence of queer theory taking the somewhat circuitous route of addressing how trans critics perceive and understand queers’ reliance on social construction. It is this defence that is one of the most distinctive elements of the book, which is in turn—perhaps unsurprisingly so, given that she is also thanked in the opening to the text—also a defence of Judith Butler. The book also tackles some of the thornier issues that have, since its publication, come to dominate debates within transgender studies, including: the role, place and trajectory of trans autobiographies; visual representation and meaning making; and the on-going tense relationship between women’s studies and trans studies.

From the outset Salamon makes it clear that she wishes to bring a new focus to the way in which the body is spoken about in an interrogation of the “body-concept” when related to transgender people. For this purpose she specifically centres the trans masculine body within the text. Salamon sets herself a somewhat formidable task here, given that although popular cultural notions of what it means to be transgender have

often been dominated by depictions of transgender woman; these are populations, particularly when considering trans women of colour (race is also unmentioned or at least unmarked throughout the text), who experience the most brutal response to their lived experience. To this end, in making some of her points, Salamon does struggle to maintain her initial aim, having to at times draw on the examples provided by the lives of trans women, particularly as they relate to the lived realities of violence, to make her point.

The book is organised into four sections—*What is a Body?*; *Homoerratics*; *Transcending Sexual Difference*; and *Beyond the Law*—comprised of two chapters each bar the final section which has one chapter. The first section is a skilful dance connecting Freud’s theory of the bodily ego, Paul Schiller’s body schema, Lacan’s mirror stage and Dider Anzu’s skin ego—all critical elements within already existing perceptions of transgender existence, but particularly key to foundational understandings of transsexuality. This chapter lays the groundwork for the next, which brings psychoanalysis and phenomenology into proximity through a discussion of the bodily schema and the sexual schema. It is here that Salamon does fantastic work unpacking what it might mean to understand the “felt sense” of the body in relation to its corporeal materiality and how this relates to normative and non-normative readings of sex, desire, gender and crucially, sexuality.

*Homoerratics* opens with a discussion of the visual images of dykes and trans and gay men presented in Ace Morgan’s calendar series *Boys of the Lex*. Salamon stretches the “unhelpfully flat adjective” homoerotic into “homoerratic” in order to keep up with the “libidinous identificatory refractions produced” by the *Boys*. The focus on trans masculine bodies comes to the fore most clearly here. Salamon works hard in the *Boys* to redeem social constructionism, arguing that though it has been charged with undermining the lived realities of gender, these realities are real in that they are *felt*. It is within this “felt sense” which she suggests social constructionism—in its focus on historical contingency and power relations—holds the possibility of opening up, in relation to existing morphological suppositions regarding the body.

It is in the following chapter of this section that Salamon makes her political investments abundantly clear. She opens the chapter *Transfeminism and the Future of Gender* with the primer that “gender beyond the binary of male and female are neither fictive nor futural, but are presently embodied and lived, and the discipline of women’s studies has not yet taken account of this” (95). Stating what perhaps in 2017 can be read as a premonition of the times, she argues that women’s studies need a greater understanding of gender if it is to become relevant again and trans studies need feminism for its understanding of gender as a historical category.

Section Three carries through Salamon’s political investment from the previous chapter and provides a searing two-pronged critique of Luce Irigaray’s *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* and Sally Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies*. Returning to the skin ego and the cartography of the body laid out in Section One, Salamon draws on Anzu and Schilder to

trouble Grosz's perceptions regarding sexual difference as constitutive of embodiment and subjectivity, particularly in relation to her—generally considered transphobic—approach to transsexuality. She charges Irigay with instating heteronormative boundaries with regards to “relations of sexual difference,” thereby actively excluding “the sexually different” and the “differently sexed” (131). In Salamon's words “genders that find no easy home within the binary are still animated by difference” and to exclude those from understandings of sexed difference is to “understand both sex and difference in the most reductive and biological of terms” (144).

Salamon's most impactful chapter, for me and perhaps for a South African audience more generally, is her final one: *Withholding the Letter*. Here Salamon overlays concepts of sovereignty with national belonging, border crossing as both physical and metaphorical and the question of the right of the state to declare sex on documentation. Salamon weaves an interesting reading of Jan Morris's famous autobiography *Conundrum* through an understanding of sexual and national identity. Much of the chapter is taken up by the issues Morris had regarding documentation pre- and post-transition. Prior to leaving the UK for Morocco, where she underwent gender-affirming surgery, Morris received a new passport from the UK without any designation of sex. Salamon reads this as a withholding of the status of sex, placing Morris in the precarious space of being read as an exile from gender (182). Given the growing international critique regarding the utility of sex markers on documents and the decisions taken in countries such as Pakistan to implement X category passports, it is interesting that Salamon would take the route of arguing for the necessity of a marker (Ahmed, 2017). The “stubborn blank” Morris is offered, instead of “M” or “F”, in some ways could be read as a revolutionary option given the time; instead Salamon reads this as deeply problematic for Morris signalling that the passport bearer is “improperly gendered” (183).

Salamon argues that Jan Morris could have “passed” as James for however brief in order to travel, but “there is no way to embody the absence of gender that the passport accuses her of, no way to ‘pass’ as genderless” (183). What Salamon seems to overlook here is that flying in one direction as James in order to return as Jan, leaving James, in “exile”, as Salamon describes, means exactly that, not having to embody James in order to traverse borders. The unmarked passport makes Jan's return possible, in fact, facilitates it. The suggestion that Jan embodies James in order to pass, is the kind of often-traumatic lived experience that theorists, like Salamon, drawing on trans existence, overlook. Salamon does, however, stress the critical point that Morris's experience highlights and brings much of the book together:

Gender ... [has] ... in truth less to do with sex—understood to refer to the configuration of the genitals—than it does with comportment, clothing, behaviour and social recognition. Culture often insists that sex equals genitals. But in the workings of culture, sex attribution has almost nothing to do with genital configuration (179).

In light of this, genitals—as a determinant of both sex and gender—only “happen” once and this is at birth. But “for trans people it happens a second time as they try to

conform their bureaucratic sex with their phenomenological sex” (179). Here is where Salamon drives home the point regarding gender and sex—genital configuration is only considered critical by society when there is gender incongruence or when a person presents in non-normative ways. Other than this, beyond birth, it holds very little sway.

*Assuming a Body* is dense but given the task, necessarily so. While one or two chapters may be far more easily accessible than the rest, the book might suffer from the same critique levelled at Salamon’s mentor, Butler, in that though the ideas are impactful, engaging and important they are only accessible to a particular audience. The book contains critical intersectional arguments that may bridge the cultural divide between transgender people, transgender studies and queer theory. Beyond theorisation, where does this leave actual transgender people? In 2017, where non-binary and genderqueer are increasingly visible elements of trans existence, pressing against the supposed epistemological limits of Grosz and Irigay (whether either can acknowledge this or not), well on the way towards inhabiting Salamon’s expansive possibilities theorised in the “felt sense” of the body.

## REFERENCES

Ahmed, U. R. 2017 (June 24). “Transgender Passports to Show Gender as ‘X’.” (Accessed 24 June 2017), <http://nation.com.pk/featured/24-Jun-2017/transgender-passports-to-show-gender-as-x>.