Assuming a Body is a project that works questions of embodiment through phenomenology (primarily the work of Merleau-Ponty), psychoanalysis (the work of Freud and Paul Schilder), and queer theory in order to consider how each of these disciplines conceives of the body. I seek to challenge the notion that the materiality of the body is something to which we have unmediated access, something of which we can have epistemological certainty, and contend that such epistemological uncertainty can have great use, both ethically and politically, in the lives of the non-normatively gendered. Throughout, the book takes up recent theorizations of transgendered and transsexual bodies to suggest both that those theorizations might benefit from phenomenological and psychoanalytic understandings of the body and, perhaps more crucially, that our current ideas of what a body is will be irremediably diminished until trans bodies and subjectivities are considered in a more thorough way. The project thus wants to mark the specificity of trans bodies and subjectivities and also to resist the temptation to define that specificity in resolutely material terms. I am not arguing that the
transgendered body has a material specificity that marks it as different from a normatively gendered body, but rather that the production of normative gender itself relies on a disjunction between the "felt sense" of the body and the body's corporeal contours and that this disjunction need not be viewed as a pathological structure.

In this book I examine the relation between the material and phantasmatic in accounts of bodily being and hope to show that this need not be a relation of incompossibility, but can be characterized by a productive tension that accounts for ways in which the materiality of the body is present to consciousness as well as importantly, the ways it absents itself from consciousness. I read theories of embodiment offered by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sigmund Freud, Paul Schilder, and Judith Butler, questioning how the relation between the phantasmatic and the material contained within those theories might contribute to a better understanding of trans bodies. At the same time, I ask how a consideration of trans bodies might help us understand how relations between the phantasmatic and the material can be embodied and lived. Each of these inquiries opens up onto the broader question of what it means to be embodied. Throughout, I rely on the notion of the phantom or ambivalent presence to complicate suppositions about the nature of bodily being, where that phantom is sometimes textual and sometimes material, sometimes designating the ambivalent presence of a particular region or part of the body and sometimes indicating a characteristic of embodied subjectivity in general.

Phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and queer and transgender theory each approach the question of what it means to assume a body by asserting the primacy of a "felt sense" of the body, and the different means by which each discipline does so, when examined in conjunction, can begin to delimit the contours of this body whose felt sense is usually unquestioned. Phenomenologists understand this felt sense as proprioception, psychoanalysis thinks of it as the bodily ego, and it has sometimes emerged in transgender theory as the grounds for claims about identity and "realness." Each of these disciplines contends that this meaning, and ultimately the body itself, hinges on a felt sense. It is my contention that one can acknowledge the ways in which this felt sense is a product of, and also subject to, cultural interpretations without disavowing or dismissing the persistent importance of this sense. In conjoining utilizing the conceptual tools offered by these discourses, it is my hope that discussions of transgenderism and transsexuality might not be so problematically reliant on "the real," a phrase that, it seems to me, can never quite shed its normativizing and disciplinary dimensions.

Part I addresses the ways in which presence and absence, material substance and immaterial feeling have structured theories of bodily being in psychoanalysis and phenomenology. In a number of works theorizing transgenderism and gender dysphoria, discussions of the nature, origin, and meanings of the body have tended to treat the materiality of the body as self-evident and given, aligning the body with substance and presence, thought in simple and stark opposition to that which is absent, immaterial, or ideal. Such accounts produce a theory of embodiment in which both gender and gender dysphoria are considered to be the products of bodies whose presence is asserted as an indisputable fact and whose materiality is thought to secure both identity and subjectivity. And yet, those immaterial structures which subtend the body's materiality, such as the felt sense that delivers the body to consciousness, cannot be accounted for within a theory that understands the body to be a plenitude of materiality and meaning, a substance without rupture or discontinuity, nor can the problem of correspondence between a subject's felt sense of the body and its corporeal contours be addressed within a strictly materialist framework.

Chapter 1, "The Bodily Ego and the Contested Domain of the Material," looks at psychoanalytic conceptions of the bodily ego. I consider Paul Schilder's account of the development and function of the body schema, Didier Anzieu's formulation of the "skin ego," and Freud's famous assertion that the ego is "first and foremost a bodily ego," along with the recent scholarship that has amassed around Freud's claim. I argue that the body one feels oneself to have is not necessarily the same body that is delimited by its exterior contours, and that this is the case even for any normatively gendered subject. Transpeople have been justifiably wary of psychoanalysis because of the ways it has been used to pathologize gender variance and gender-variant people. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis, perhaps
more than any other discourse, has provided the most thorough and
detailed examination of the elaborate set of mechanisms by which
a subject “knows” her own body, and psychoanalysis can give us
a richly productive way of describing that join between the psychic
and the material—if its more homophobic and transphobic tendencies
can be curbed. Since psychoanalysis deals with the construction
of the self, and the way in which that self inhabits a body, it can
complicate the assumption that the material body is unproblematic­
ally available to us; within psychoanalysis, the body is available to
a subject only through a complex set of mental representations, of
psychic images, designated alternately as the bodily ego or the body
schema. This concept can be of use to genderqueer communities
because it shows that the body of which one supposedly has a
“felt sense” is not necessarily contiguous with the physical body as it
is perceived from the outside, thus complicating the notion of the
subject’s relationship to the materiality of her own body.

The second chapter, “The Sexual Schema: Transposition and
Transgenderism in Phenomenology of Perception,” considers phe­
nomenological accounts of the body that employ the concept of a
body schema and focus directly on the felt sense of the body. I take
up Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological exploration of embodiment
and examine his radical proposition that attention to the felt sense
of the body need not require the assertion of a body that stands
behind, or exists prior to, our perceptions. I turn to his account of
bodily being in Phenomenology of Perception, in which subjectiv­
ity itself is achieved through the construction of a body image. In
this phenomenology there is no easy recourse to a materiality that
would definitively answer the question of embodiment, because
for Merleau-Ponty “body parts are not objects, but potentialities.”
The body is, instead, “a nexus of living meanings,” gaining these
meanings through proprioception, the primary but unlocatable
“felt sense” that allows a body to be experienced as a coherent
whole rather than a collection of disparate parts. The implications
of these ideas for thinking transgenderism are quite promising, and
several trans writers have described this disarticulation between
felt and observed gender in language that is deeply resonant with
phenomenological accounts of embodiment. Transgender theorist

Jason Cromwell, for instance, suggests that the sex that one’s body
manifests, the sex one can see, need not be the sex one can be,
but does not give a thorough account of bodily being that would
explain this disjunction in detail; Merleau-Ponty’s work provides
just such an account. Merleau-Ponty challenges both philosophical
accounts of embodiment that rely upon a dualistic conception of
body and self and mind/body theorists whose conceptions of the
body are predicated on starkly drawn models of inside and outside.
Instead, he suggests that our bodies are inextricably intertwined
with both our selves and the worlds in which our bodies are sit­
uated. I consider his claim that bodies become material only through
relations with others and explore the consequences that this might
have for theorizing transsubjectivity.

Part 2 engages visual representations of transpeople in pho­
ography and the popular media. In chapter 3, “Boys of the Lex: Trans­
genderism and Social Construction,” I examine a growing number
of texts that are grouped under the rubric of “transgender studies,”
first surveying transgender studies’ vexed relationship to, and emer­
gence from, discourses of feminist and queer studies. Some femi­
nist theorists have claimed that transsexuality merely reifies gender
norms rather than challenging them. Transgender authors, in turn,
have charged that feminist theory has been inattentive to the lived
experiences of transgendered people. I consider the history of this
debate and the ways in which transgender theory has offered new
and productive understandings of gendered embodiment. Second,
I interrogate some of the problematic claims about bodily materi­
ality that transgender theorists have advanced. Jay Prosser’s goal,
for example, is to “substantiate transsexual identity, to reveal the
materiality of the figure of transition,” and to “foreground the
bodily matter of gender crossings” that would “reveal the extent
to which embodiment forms an essential base to subjectivity.”
Prosser’s account focuses on embodiment as a strategy to combat
the invisibility of transsexual and transgendered persons within gay
and lesbian discourses. I am sympathetic with these aims, which I
take as indicative of a desire to counter a historic absence of rec­
novation with an emphatic and embodied presence and to pinpoint
the specificity of a transsexual subjectivity. I worry, however, that
the attempt to pinpoint this difference of transsexuality by asserting that the transsexual body is “unimpeachably real” unwittingly falls back in a problematic slippage between the assertion of a felt sense of the body (which is surely necessary) and the consequent claim that what a body is and how it is assumed are self-evident things (which is not).

The fourth chapter, “Transfeminism and the Future of Gender,” asks after the relationship between women’s studies, feminism, and the study of transgenderism and other non-normative genders. In asking after the place—or lack of place—of transgender studies within the rubric of women’s studies, I want to suggest that feminism, particularly but not exclusively in its institutionalized form, has not been able to keep pace with non-normative genders as they are thought, embodied, and lived. Recent contestations around the term transgender echo some of the same concerns about referentiality and identity that have surfaced with the circulation of the terms queer and woman within feminist discourses. I have three aims in this chapter. First, I want to suggest that, if it is to reemerge as a vital discipline, women’s studies must become more responsive to emerging genders. Genders beyond the binary of male and female are neither fictive nor futural, but are presently embodied and lived. Women’s studies has not yet come to terms with this and is thus unable to assess the present state of gender as it is lived, nor is it able to imagine many of its possible futures. The antagonism that women’s studies sometimes displays toward transgenderism is iterated otherwise in the mutually antagonistic relationship between lesbian communities and transmen asserted in the popular press. My second aim is to explore that representation of antagonism and the role that fantasies of violence and figurations of transpeople as predaceous have in shaping that representation. The third aim is to read other ways of figuring the relationship between trans and lesbian communities, and the chapter closes with a reading of photographs of transmen as documented by two lesbian photographers.

Part 3 looks at philosopher Luce Irigaray, who has famously posited sexual difference as the major philosophical issue of our age. Chapter 5, “An Ethics of Transsexual Difference: Luce Irigaray and the Place of Sexual Undecidability,” considers feminist reimaginings of sexual difference and corporeal materiality through Irigaray and her reception among feminists trying to challenge and complicate the issue of the materiality of the body and its limits. I address the idea of a sexuate limit which is both implicit and explicit in these feminist challenges to materiality, especially in the work of theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz who question traditional philosophical notions of the body’s corporeal limits, and expand the horizons of what “counts” as a body. I argue that this notion of the limit is challenged, but also transferred; questions about the limits of bodily plasticity become displaced into questions about the limits of gender plasticity, where the foreclosure of gender plasticity in the form of transsexuality is intended to secure the body as a site capable of almost limitless physical reconfiguration.

Chapter 6, “Sexual Indifference and the Problem of the Limit,” continues to work with Irigaray’s notion of sexual difference through a reading of Irigaray’s “Place, Interval” and asks whether a nonheteronormative reading of body and relation is possible within the logic of that essay and, if so, what room might be made for sexual relationships that fall outside the scope of the strictly heterosexual or bodily and identificatory configurations that cannot be understood as strictly male or female. I explore Aristotle’s conception of place as articulated in Physics, focusing on the ontological primacy offered to place and Aristotle’s use of relation, containment, and mutual replacement in order to secure a coherent definition of place. Irigaray reads Aristotelian place as figuratively gendered and engages Aristotle both to critique this figuration and to theorize relations across the bridge of sexual difference. The question of sexual difference ends at an impasse in “Place, Interval,” and this impasse stems from Irigaray’s fundamentally hylo-morphic understanding of sexual difference: a conviction that male and female, like matter and form, are necessarily ontologically conjoined and that any one sex cannot find expression or existence without the other. The chapter concludes by considering the place of sexual difference itself within Irigaray’s schema. I read some of her own equivocations about “the interval” as that which must be preserved in order to ground ethical relations across sexual difference, but also as a gap that needs to be bridged so that the sexes
might coexist with one another. The chapter tries to extend this cartography of difference by considering bodies and psyches that do not find easy home in either the category of male or female and suggests a possible paradigm for understanding "sexual difference" not as a boundary, mapped onto the body in strictly determinative ways, but as a marker of difference that can be operative not only across the categories of male and female but within them as well.

The concluding chapter, "Withholding the Letter: Sex as State Property," reads Jan Morris's autobiography Conundrum alongside recent legislation regulating gender and transpeople to consider sex as a bureaucratic entity. My argument about trans specificity is at its most emphatic here, and I argue that sex is analogized to property or understood metaphorically as property in much literature, but sex is treated as material property in transpeople's dealings with medical and state bureaucracies and functions specifically as state property rather than private property for transpeople in a way that it does not for the normatively gendered.

Assuming a Body thus reads from a number of disciplinary traditions in an attempt to show that a critical phenomenological analysis of what a body is and how it comes to be one's own can enrich and broaden the mostly gender normative accounts of bodily materiality offered by psychoanalysis and phenomenology and that phenomenology and psychoanalysis can help us understand transgendered bodies as embodying a specificity that is finally not reducible to the material. I hope then to engage with current dialogues about embodiment happening simultaneously, yet unconnectedly, in (at least) two different fields. Philosophical and theoretical considerations of embodiment have been historically neglectful of sexual difference, and those theories of embodiment that do attend to sexual difference have often considered non-normative genders to be pathological. Canonically philosophical considerations of embodiment have rarely considered the ways in which gender variation can both supplement and challenge traditional notions of corporeality, or what kinds of gendered embodiments are legislated and what kinds are prohibited by philosophical accounts of embodiment. What new forms of embodiment does a transgendered subjectivity enable? Conversely, the newly emerging field of trans studies doesn't yet engage with those philosophies of embodiment that might strengthen some of the political claims it wants to make, and few trans writers have yet availed themselves of the promising tools that phenomenology and psychoanalytic theory offers, their richly descriptive means of detailing the relation between body and feeling, and understanding disjunction there as a potentially powerful facet of embodied subjectivity rather than a mark of pathology.

In Assuming a Body I hope to draw on those insights, the unyoking of bodily materiality from bodily feeling, to move the current conversation about transsexuality and transgenderism beyond the decidedly Cartesian frame in which it sometimes finds itself, even as it should be noted that transgender studies as a field is growing so quickly and robustly that it is in many ways already becoming something other than what I describe here. It is my aim to bring psychoanalytic, phenomenological, and transgendered bodies proximate enough so that their similarities might become more visible and their differences might be brought into productive tension with one another.

A note on language and pronouns: if the pronomial preference of an individual is clear, I have honored that preference. This has meant sometimes using gender-specific pronouns and sometimes using gender-neutral ones, and I have deliberately tried to retain that inconsistency in pronoun usage throughout the text.

The book discusses both FTM and MTF transpeople, though my general discussions of trans will often take FTM experience as my focus, in a reversal of what has historically been a conflation of trans experience with MTF experience.