BOOK REVIEW

The Wrong Wrong Body

Notes on Trans Phenomenology

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Trans: A Memoir
Juliet Jacques
London: Verso Books, 2015. 320 pp.

Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality
Gayle Salamon
New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 240 pp. 3 illustrations.

Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality
Jay Prosser
New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. 288 pp. 31 photos.

From 2010 to 2012, Juliet Jacques penned an immensely popular autobiographical column for the *Guardian* while transitioning from male to female. With *Trans: A Memoir*, Jacques reworks and expands on her earlier work with biting wit and brutal intimacy. But as Sandy Stone (1991) pointed out over two decades ago, transsexuality is just as much an issue of *genre* as of gender, and Jacques remains deeply suspicious of the transition memoir. Her wryly generic title, far from announcing the book's allegiance to genre conventions developed to court a prurient public interest and satisfy medical gatekeepers, registers Jacques's uneasy and often recalcitrant navigation of the memoir form. A number of the book's chapters end, therefore, as if in protest, with short critical essays explicitly devoted to, say, trans representation in film or the origins of transgender theory. Much of the book is in fact a memoir *about* a memoir, and Jacques's ethical and political reflections on her original *Guardian* column, in which she explicitly engages with a broad tradition of trans autobiographical writing, quickly come to stand in for

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the concerns underlying the writing and publication of *Trans* itself. As Jacques puts it in the epilogue: "Having written my life story once already, I found it incredibly frustrating that if I wanted to be a literary writer and journalist, I had to cannibalise myself a second time before I could do anything else. Initially, I wanted to write a wider history of trans people in Britain, as well as short stories, but all I could get publishers to consider was a personal story" (299).

In other words, *Trans: A Memoir* is a book trapped in the wrong genre. Jacques begins by reprinting the account of her surgery originally published by the *Guardian* in 2012, in a move dislodging, if not totally dispensing with, sex reassignment surgery (SRS) as the transition memoir's structuring desideratum—the "be-all and end-all," as Jacques says (252). The effect is to open up a kind of breathing room for Jacques's poignant ability to render everyday life in prose without compromising its unremarkableness. If the author duly includes certain staples of trans autobiographical writing—coming out, changing names, hormone therapy, street harassment—the reader is just as likely to encounter Jacques's involvement in Manchester's postpunk music scene, her rotation through temp jobs punctuated by the odd freelance-writing gig, or her melancholic attachment to a collection of short stories about trans life whose writing she is forced to endlessly defer. Indeed, if *Trans* passes as a memoir about transition, then it is equally, if not principally, a document of precarity, depression, and the low, slow sizzle of bureaucratic life. Not only does Jacques take readers on a Kafkaesque tour of the National Health Service's gender reassignment process—at one point Jacques had considered titling her book *The Process* in a nod to Kafka's *The Trial* (*Der Prozess* in the original German)—but also, in a stroke of grim irony, Jacques actually works for the NHS in various administrative positions for the bulk of the book, including a post at the very hospital where her surgery has been performed. Transition for Jacques is not some "mythical hero's journey," as the media would usually have it, but "a bunch of hoops to jump through while working in boring jobs" (294).

Perhaps Jacques's book will be remembered (and it surely should be) as the first transition memoir to have succeeded in making transition *boring*. Jacques's writing, of course, is anything but: brisk, cutting, unpretentious, sometimes graphically vulnerable, with a bone-dry sense of humor. But the book's greatest strength lies in the kind of overwhelmingly underwhelming ordinariness that Jacques skillfully captures in print—what Martin Heidegger (1962) might call "everydayness," what Beth Povinelli (2006) might call "thick life," and what Jacques does call "the minutiae of existence" (118). Jacques has written a phenomenology of real-life experience—and, more specifically, Real Life Experience, that long march through the clinics during which a pre-op trans person must demonstrate that transition will not disturb their or anyone else's social

productivity—and she proves herself a street-and-pub phenomenologist of formidable rank and resolve. For above all, *Trans* is a study in waiting: waiting for hormones, waiting for the *Guardian* to start her column, waiting for her temp agency to call back, waiting for the privilege to wait for surgery, all while shuttling between editors, psychiatrists, therapists, administrators. Jacques's is a thick present like Edmund Husserl (1964) never imagined, an abeyance, a holding pattern over the unextraordinary.

Indeed, one gets the sense that the governing affect of transition is not that of going places—compare Jan Morris's (1974) exotic trip to Casablanca for her surgery—but of going nowhere, slow. Jacques's name for this is being "burnt out" (294). Jacques lives transition not as a narrative passage from wrong to right, dysphoria to alignment, but as something akin to Lauren Berlant's (2011: 199) *impasse*, "a space of time lived without a narrative genre" endemic to the circulation of precarity in neoliberal times. This is not to downplay the real material, psychic, and affective benefits of Jacques's transition. (The American reader, moreover, cannot help but marvel at the miracle of socialized medicine, no matter how bureaucratic.) But it is to suggest that the ethics of getting by that Jacques develops for herself over the course of the memoir operates without the guarantees of a phantasmatic future anterior; hers is an ethics, in Povinelli's (2008: 511) words, that is "radically present tense." As Jacques herself tells her therapist after her operation, transitioning has no necessary relationship to stable employment, affordable housing, or psychic well-being: "And that's just fixing *my* stuff. I can have as many operations as I like, David Cameron is still prime minister" (280).

This is the context in which I take Jacques's line that she felt "not trapped in the wrong body but trapped in the wrong society" (305). Compare Morris's (1974: 3) first line in *Conundrum*, later to be plastered on the cover of the 2012 reprint: "I was three or perhaps four years old when I realized that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl." Jacques writes early on in *Trans* that the wrong-body narrative "had never quite spoken to me" (75), and she often implies that her book, like *Transgender Journey* before it, is intended to "get beyond the 'wrong body' clichés I'd always seen in newspaper articles" (180). Indeed, on these grounds it would be easy to take *Trans* as a fresher, more critical, farther-left update of Morris's approach, mercifully purged of identity politics and hence more digestible for feminist and queer theorists raised on Judith Butler. Witness, for instance, the radical imprint of Verso Books. (No doubt Verso is looking to continue to expand its less-than-stellar offerings in the gender and sexuality department—subjects too touchy-feely, one suspects, for the traditional socialist crowd, to whom Verso's recent republication of several classic texts in socialist feminism must have seemed a tolerable compromise. One recalls as well that Verso, too, independent radical press that it is, must have been among those

publishers that told Jacques they were only interested in a personal story.) But if Jacques is critical of the wrong-body narrative, she is also ambivalent about it, and she relies on its rhetorics throughout the book: "male in body but female in spirit" (118), "finally be comfortable in my body" (159), "my body was catching up with my mind" (225), "the anatomy I always wanted" (272), "re-launching the symbiotic relationship between my body and my mind from a starting point that felt right" (306).

In fact it would be presumptive, I think, to say that Jacques "relies" on the narrative, as if the wrong body were, for those trans folks who *do* take it up, at best a strategy deployed under politically compromised and compromising circumstances, a kind of calculated last resort in the face of cis ignorance, abhorrence, or prurience. To be sure, the wrong-body narrative (alongside the before and after photographs) has long served as the reigning mode of sensationalization of trans life, from Christine Jorgensen all the way to Caitlyn Jenner. But it is precisely the sensationalizing character of the wrong-body narrative—rather than its "essentialism," as we used to call it in the nineties (or "essentialism," as we call it in the twenty-teens)—with which Jacques takes issue: think Jorgensen in 1952 or Jenner in 2015, all made up for the cameras and the magazines, as if transsexualism were some curious condition in which *extraordinarily beautiful women* became trapped in men's bodies. Jacques (2016), trans phenomenologist, repudiates this: "It was very important to include daily experiences in this book, partly as a counter to the glamorisation, the sensationalisation of trans lives. I wanted to show being trans within an everyday context, within boring jobs."

On the essentialist question, in fact, Jacques is quite content to remain agnostic. When her friends or coworkers ask her *why* she feels uncomfortable in her pretransition body, she has "no answer. . . . I didn't think too much about nature and nurture when I was worrying about the possibility of having my head kicked in if I answered back to any of the people who yelled at me in the street" (185). When it is a matter of improvising modes of survival in the ordinary, and when that ordinary has become "a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation" (Berlant 2011: 3), the essentialist question is quite simply beside the point. What does it matter whether bodies exist outside discourse or not when yours is under low, slow siege, not just by the threat of physical assault but also by bureaucracy, depression, anxiety, and precarity? So when Jacques writes that she "felt trapped not by my body but [by] a society that didn't want me to modify it" (76), she is directing us to what it means to survive in a society where the only *right* kind of wrong body is the sensationalized wrong body, extradited from the ordinary and airlifted out of the everyday. What such a society forecloses is the possibility of a trans phenomenology in which the ordinary body, wrong or otherwise, is given pride of place: "It's easy to forget how

important the body is, especially for trans people. Before I get to the city, street, house or bedroom I live in, I spend more time in my body than anywhere else, and if that's not right then I can't do much else" (308). What's important—*what's essential*—is "to live in a body that is right for you. Or is as good as you can get it" (Jacques 2016).

Of course a phenomenology like Jacques's would not be unheard-of where the thinking of trans life is concerned. One of trans studies' founding documents, Harold Garfinkel's (1967) classic study of the (putatively) transgender woman he identifies as "Agnes," adopts a phenomenological approach to sex status as achieved through organized everyday practices. More recently, Henry Rubin (1998) has advocated for the phenomenologies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as useful complements to the Foucauldian discourse analysis then (and arguably still) hegemonic in feminist and queer studies. For phenomenology, Rubin writes, "bodies are the ultimate point of view" (268). As such, phenomenology directs us toward "the circumscribed agency of embodied subjects" (271), thus enabling trans studies "to theorize transsexual and transgender experience on its own terms" (279). But as Rubin's work is sociologically oriented, I set it aside here. In the wake of Jacques's new book, I am most interested in revisiting two other works of trans phenomenology, more literary in persuasion: Jay Prosser's *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998) and Gayle Salamon's *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (2010). Both works draw (to different extents) on an archive of memoirs as primary documents for theorizing trans life while managing to come to almost diametrically opposed conclusions about the trans body. My reading of *Trans: A Memoir* owes a great deal to each of these texts; at the same time, both trans phenomenologies ultimately miscarry, I think, in ways I hope to show by reconnecting them with a number of thinkers in the phenomenological tradition and finally with Jacques herself.

Let me begin with Salamon. *Assuming a Body* draws on phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and queer theory to combat what Salamon sees as trans studies' temptation to rely on a fantasy of unmediated access to the materiality of the body. In the book's first half, Salamon insists that phenomenology and social construction are complementary enterprises, and trans studies will require both in order to give an account of gender nonnormative embodiment unleashed from the fetters of *the real*, "a phrase that, it seems to me, can never quite shed its normativizing and disciplinary dimensions" (3). In subsequent chapters, engaging a range of cultural materials (films, photographs, newspaper articles), she critiques trans theorists who are wary of social construction (including Prosser) and feminist theorists and women's studies scholars uneasy with the entrance of trans theory into their fields and departments. Later sections take a compelling speculative turn, in which Salamon, perhaps surprisingly, turns to Luce Irigaray's

work to ask if a conception of sexual difference without sexual dimorphism would be useful for trans studies. The book ends with a reading of Morris's *Conundrum* alongside legal and bureaucratic issues facing trans people, especially those who are transitioning.

As Susan Stryker's blurb on the back cover suggests, Salamon's theoretical concerns often lead her to reopen "the field's fiery formative decade in the 1990s," and in this conflict her loyalties lie first and foremost with Judith Butler, who receives the first thanks in the acknowledgments. Like Butler, Salamon is made ethically and politically anxious by claims of realness or materiality (call it "sex") anterior to all signification; for her, such claims are ultimately of a piece with the essentialist logic that grounds, for instance, the transphobic police state (for instance, the so-called bathroom bill passed by the North Carolina state legislature in 2016). In the first chapters Salamon pursues this critique by arguing that the psychoanalytic bodily ego and the phenomenological body image both describe a "felt sense" of the body that is never continuous with the so-called physical body but through which the latter is always already psychically and socially mediated and vested with meaning. Again like Butler, Salamon tends to blur the lines between *signification*, in a structuralist sense; *discourse*, in a Foucauldian sense; *the social*, in a constructionist sense; and *the imaginary* and *the symbolic*, in a psychoanalytic sense. Salamon's understanding of felt sense thus takes shape along lines familiar to any student of the hermeneutics of suspicion: "The very feelings of embodiment that would seem to be the most personal, most individual, and most immune to regulatory injunction," she claims, are actually *effects* of psychic investments and discursive sedimentations (77).

As a result, Salamon must square the phenomenological circle. "One can contend," she contends, "both that a body is socially constructed and that its felt sense is undeniable"; what is crucial is that we tarry with the "tension between the historicity of the body and the immediacy of its felt sense." But Salamon is often tempted to resolve this tension, as when she confronts readers with a familiar distinction that subtly profits from a certain semantic overdetermination of the verb *to feel*: "Claiming that the body feels natural is not the same as claiming that it is natural" (77). To be sure, in everyday life, not only am I unaware of "the forces that have shaped and continue to shape my body," but indeed, "bodily life would grind to a halt were such awareness required." Yet to defend a theory of social construction, Salamon must insist that this "simple givenness," this unproblematic availability of the phenomenological body, "is a fiction, albeit a necessary one" (78)—even though only two pages earlier she assures readers that "to claim that our experiences of our sexed and gendered bodies are socially constructed is not to claim that our experiences are fictive" (76). Here the phenomenological account is absorbed into the social constructionist account, and the felt sense of

the body Salamon wants so much to affirm is revealed as, at best, an ontologically indefensible but pragmatically necessary—call it *strategic*—essentialism and, at worst, a perverse kind of ideology that it is nevertheless impossible, at the risk of total phenomenological gridlock, to demystify.

Now my aim here is not to catch Salamon in a logical contradiction or to discount the tremendous resources afforded by theories of social construction. My point is simply that phenomenology and social construction are reconciled nowhere near as readily as Salamon suggests. Phenomenology begins with the notion that the givenness *of* experience *to* experience *as* experience cannot be explained (away) as the effect of some underlying reality. So when Salamon interprets Husserl's famous slogan "Back to the things themselves!" as a call for "understanding things as they are and not merely as they appear" (89), she has got things exactly backward. On the contrary, as Husserl (1982: 44) writes in *Ideas I*, this slogan expresses phenomenology's "principle of principles," namely, "that everything that offers itself originarily to us in intuition (in its fleshly actuality, so to speak) must be accepted simply as it gives itself" (translation modified). Or as he later puts it, "Nothing shall interest us but precisely the subjective alteration of manners of givenness, of manners of appearing" (Husserl 1970: 146). In other words, phenomenology is first and foremost about *phenomena*, that is, what appears, what manifests, what is given to experience. Its task is not, therefore, to unearth the invisible "substratum of history" by which the phenomenon is "always subtended," precisely because, as Salamon herself admits, "that history is invisible in the more mundane course of everyday life" (78). Rather, phenomenology asks how what *does* appear comes to appear in the first place, as well as what that which appears even "is." From this perspective, the givenness of phenomenality as such—how and why what is experienced is experienced as experience—is no more elucidated by social construction or historical materialism than it is by biochemistry or particle physics.

Now if this smacks of a little naïveté, for Salamon it would be the doomsday scenario, courtesy of the Lacanian Real, "that domain of plenitude and fullness that not only exists outside of language, but, indeed, is fundamentally incompossible with subjectivity itself[,] . . . outside of language, outside of meaning, outside of the symbolic, outside of relation, outside of desire[,] . . . a motionless and meaningless stasis equated with radical abjection and death" (41). This, indeed, is her opinion of Prosser's *Second Skins* (1998). Prosser, like Salamon, takes phenomenology and psychoanalysis as points of departure for considering the feeling of trans embodiment, but his conclusions are very different. Prosser begins his book with a ruthless and exhaustive critique of how queer theory in the 1990s (his primary target is Butler) both arrogated and disavowed trans subjects by transforming them into sigils of gender performativity through

which "queer can sustain its very queerness" (58). (Think of Jack Halberstam's [1994] pomo refrain: "We are all transsexuals.") For Prosser, the queer annexation of trans occludes "the *narrative* of becoming a biological man or a biological woman (as opposed to the performative of effecting one)" that is essential, for better or worse, to understanding transsexual life (32). Transsexuality's irreducible narrativity—what Prosser calls *body narratives*, chief among them the wrong-body narrative—leads Prosser to a series of readings of an archive of trans memoirs, Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*, Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, and autobiographical photographs (including, on the book's final page, a photo of the author himself). Throughout *Second Skins*, Prosser is most concerned not with debunking or deconstructing transsexual narratives of gender authenticity but with how theory is to make itself responsible to such claims. In this sense Prosser seems to have quite deliberately gone against the grain of paranoid reading long before it became fashionable to do so (see Sedgwick 2003).

Hence Prosser, unlike Salamon, demonstrates little anxiety over the status of a "felt sense" of the body, especially when it comes to wrong embodiment. Prosser duly notes that the wrong-body narrative is a "powerful medicodiscursive sign" that has been deployed by researchers and researched alike—often, in the latter case, as a strategy for obtaining surgery or hormones. But to assume in advance that this narrative is always already a technology of power through which transsexuals are interpellated into gender normativity would be to foreclose the sincerely held convictions of many transsexuals themselves. At the end of the day, "transsexuals continue to deploy the image of wrong embodiment because being trapped in the wrong body is *simply what transsexuality feels like*" (69; emphasis mine). Prosser's term for this is "the literal"—an openly polemical choice given the "fear of the literal" (13) that grips many feminist and queer theorists, who routinely evaluate their critical objects "on the basis of whether they reveal ('good': antiessentialist) or conceal ('bad': essentialist) their constructedness" (15). Thus flouting the protocols of 1990s theory, Prosser asks us to attend to the literal and ontological senses of transsexual embodiment.

Prosser quickly clarifies, however, that this embodiment "is just as much about feeling one inhabits material flesh as the flesh itself." This distinction sets the stage for what Prosser, like Salamon, calls a "body image." Even as he cautions us against aligning the body image with "the imaginary," Prosser claims that the body image, although it "clearly already has material force for transsexuals," is nonetheless "radically split off from the material body" (7, 69). So when Salamon contends, contra Prosser (she thinks), that "the usefulness of the body image for theorizing gendered embodiment is precisely not that the body image is material" (38), she is in fact only echoing Prosser's earlier claim that the body image is "radically non-coincident with the material body" (85). What might more rightly

distinguish their positions is that Prosser understands this felt sense as demanding to be literalized, most prototypically through surgical intervention. Reading a procedure like SRS as a "recovery of what was not," Prosser compares the longed-for post-op body to the "phantom limb" of neuroscientific fame, describing it as a "prior phantomization of sex, which is not to undermine but to underline the felt presence of transsex precisely in the very space of its physical absence." This "felt imaginary" summons its own literalization, "its externalization, its substantiation, in material flesh" (84–86).

Yet it seems to me that despite his best efforts Prosser ends up putting literality, as it were, on the wrong side of the equation. Prosser's literal is fundamentally a literal-to-come, linked to an imagined, idealized, or phantasmatic future where the "imaginary or phantomized signifieds" of the transsexual body image will be—one day, some day—reunited with their "corporeal referents" (86). I should be clear here that I am taking issue not with Prosser's faith in the referent but with the way that this faith again displaces the body's literality into a projected future anterior where surgically enabled transition will have finally been "completed." This seems to be largely in keeping with Prosser's perhaps worrying tendency to privilege SRS as "*the* definitive transsexual experience" (89). What's left behind by this narrative is another body, one that Prosser calls "physical" or "material," the present, preoperative (or indeed, *non*-operative) body—that is to say, the wrong body itself, in the flesh. (For the record, this same thing quietly transpires in Salamon's text in her passing references to a "literal body" or "blunt materiality" [25, 88].) What are the stakes of Prosser's alignment of the literal not with the wrong body of the present but with the right body of the future? As Halberstam (1998: 172) asks, who specifically "can afford to dream of a right body," especially when rightness "may as easily depend on whiteness or class privilege as it does on being regendered"? Isn't the whole point of the naked phenomenality of "felt sense" that the very thing that feels itself to be trapped in the wrong body *is nothing other than the wrong body itself*?

What I am getting at here is how ironic it is that Prosser should win literality for the post-transition transsexual body only through the dereliction of the literality of the wrong body itself—what Heidegger would call *facticity*, the way that finite beings find themselves thrown into the world and dispersed into the specific possibilities of everyday life. This is not to say that the wrong body is not undesirable, irritating, constraining, even unbearable. On the contrary, the wrong body is literally, nakedly wrong. But it is only through the wrong body's *already being there*—its "naked 'that it is and has to be'" (Heidegger 1962: 173)—that the very wrongness of that body comes to be disclosed in the first place. I am therefore inclined to read certain trans folks' "felt sense" of themselves less as body images and more as what I would call, paraphrasing Eve Sedgwick (1990),

"nonce ontologies."[1] A nonce ontology is an irreducibly phenomenological improvisation on the relationship between thinking and being that has always already taken root in an ethical and political being-in-the-middle-of-something—what Fred Moten calls "sharing before origin" (2008: 73). At a moment when the hermeneutics of suspicion has become all but synonymous with reading *tout court*, when the work of the critic all too often turns out to be either the relentless reproach of a text for collaborating with the enemy or the painstaking selection of an object that will consent to behave just like the critic herself, nonce ontologies call us to a phenomenological reengagement with what is naive, sincere, uncomplicated, unironic, uncritical, unstrategic, or just plain ordinary about everyday being in the world—a "return," as Husserl (1970: 59) once put it, "to the naïveté of life."

So when Prosser writes that "transition often proves a barely livable zone" (1998: 12), the keyword here is *barely*: to say that transition is barely livable must already be to say that transition *is livable*, no matter how bare this life gets. This is where Jacques comes back in. I do not wish to engage, however, in that crude lit-crit exercise of imagining how Prosser and Salamon would have each read *Trans: A Memoir* had it been available to them. (I would find it far more interesting, if just as crude, to imagine how Jacques would read *them*; perhaps one day she will indulge me.) Instead, let me offer a kind of inexact parallel, by way of Cat Fitzpatrick's (2015) review of *Trans: A Memoir* published in the *Lambda Literary Review*. Fitzpatrick praises Jacques for her "clear-eyed and evocative" storytelling, but finds *Trans* limited by the formal constraints of its genre, which is "structured, between sensationalism and exclusion, to preclude any real discussion of the mundane realities of what it is like to actually be a trans person, either before or after transition." Given the histories that Salamon, Prosser, and Jacques herself describe, it is hard to disagree.

But I do not think it follows, as Fitzpatrick does, that a book like *Trans* "may well do a lot to further the conversations cis people have about trans people, but it can do little to further our conversations with each other"—if only because, as Jacques's nonce ontology teaches us, the very "mundane realities" the trans memoir ought to formally occlude have nowhere else to unfold but in the thick of a trans ordinary entangled in without being reducible to its cisnormative conditions. To conclude that authentic trans writing, "not just by us but actually for us," will not become possible until some vaguely postrevolutionary moment when trans people will "control the means of distribution" is to imagine that trans lives, bodies, and their many modes of survival, getting by, and making ends meet are already determined by an omnipotent cisnormative present. It is to have mistaken cisnormativity's fantasy of itself as a sovereign enclosure for how things actually are on the ground, at the office, in the streets, at the pub, in the existential minutiae of

the trans ordinary. This, indeed, is the whole point of *Trans: A Memoir*. It is about the livability of the dead-end, the survivability of what's wrong — whether that is the wrong body, the wrong society, or the wrong genre — even as the wrongness of what is given is equiprimordial, as Heidegger would say, with givenness itself. It is to say that abjection, unlivability, and their attendant modes of spectacularization are not the only possible grounds for making ethical and political claims. It is about getting by, getting along, getting a body as good as you can get it. If it is about holding out for what is right, this is only because it is already about holding out in what is wrong, even if that is the wrong kind of wrong to hold on to. In the end, Jacques writes, "I was just trying to *live*" (162).

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Note

1. Sedgwick's famous phrase is "nonce taxonomies," which she uses to describe the plural, shifting, and often contradictory ways in which gender or sexual subcultures name and classify their own modes of being, living, desiring, and practicing.

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