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Monstrosity as Metaphor

A Trans*/Feminist Analysis of Rage

And Its Potential for Change within the Academy

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Abstract (English):

Entitled *Monstrosity as Metaphor* (2024), this thesis will look at the historical use of 'monstrosity' as an allegory for trans experiences, examining both transphobic and trans-affirmative literature. It investigates how 'the monster' was reclaimed in an effort to claim space for 'trans' within the academy, giving rise to concepts like 'transgender affect' and 'somatechnics.' Furthermore, the thesis dives deeper into notions of representation and (in)visibility of trans people, exploring some alternative strategies to understand and depict difference: 'the haptic,' 'disidentification,' 'transing.' Looking at how trans artists today are re-imagining monstrosity, it hopes to provide a more direct and embodied contact to the concept. It ends with an analysis of the uses of metaphors within marginalized communities. In essence, this thesis aims to demonstrate how (trans) 'monstrosity' – and its accompanying affect rage – has functioned as a tool for resistance and how it is still relevant today.

Samenvatting (Nederlands):

Deze masterproef onderzoekt het historische gebruik van 'monstrositeit' als allegorie voor trans ervaringen, waarbij zowel transvijandige als -vriendelijke literatuur geanalyseerd wordt. Het kijkt naar hoe 'het monster' opnieuw werd opgeëist in een poging om ruimte te claimen voor 'trans' binnen de academische wereld. Verder exploreert deze masterproef noties van representatie en (on)zichtbaarheid in verband met trans personen, waarbij een aantal alternatieve strategieën worden onderzocht om 'difference' te begrijpen en af te beelden: 'het haptische', 'disidentificatie', 'transing.' Door te kijken naar hoe trans kunstenaars vandaag de dag monstrositeit opnieuw verbeelden, hoopt het een directer en meer belichaamd contact met het concept te bieden. Het eindigt met een analyse van het gebruik van metaforen binnen gemarginaliseerde gemeenschappen. In essentie wil deze masterproef aangeven hoe (trans) 'monstrositeit' – en het bijbehorende gevoel van woede – heeft gefunctioneerd als een middel voor verzet en hoe het nu nog steeds relevant is.

Deze masterproef is een examendocument dat niet werd gecorrigeerd voor eventueel vastgestelde fouten. In publicaties mag naar dit werk worden gerefereerd, mits schriftelijke toelating van de promotor(en) die met naam op de titelpagina is vermeld.

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Preface

“In birthing my rage,
my rage has rebirthed me.”¹ – Susan Stryker, *My Words to Viktor Frankenstein*

I am writing this thesis to graduate in a Master in Gender and Diversity, an inter-university program in Belgium. After successfully completing all the courses during the academic year 2020-2021, I found myself in need of a break.

Throughout the program, I couldn't shake off a growing sense of frustration. Gender Studies were framed as the study of mainly the differences and inequalities between men and women. While we were taught these categories are socially constructed, historically and culturally changing and generally fluid, the program rarely reflected these teachings. While the concept of 'intersectionality' was acknowledged as crucial from the outset, it was not explored in depth. I often noticed the absence of discussions about embodiment, personal experiences, and reflections on our positions, privileges, and differences.

Queer topics were typically relegated to the end of courses, with trans matters receiving little to no attention, with the notable exception of one single course (*History of the Body, Gender and Sexuality*). Notably, there were no trans instructors – at least, none that I am aware of. Those who did teach seemed uncomfortable diving into the topic. The 'trans issue' appeared to be a source of discomfort for the cis people involved in the program, entangled in a struggle of being politically correct and getting the words right. Unfortunately, this seems to have led to the exclusion of trans perspectives from the curriculum, rendering them invisible. It became clear to me that, throughout the program, I felt unseen. Underrepresented.

In recent years, I have come to recognize my own trans identity. It has its own way of disrupting normative frameworks, primarily through embodiment and stories. In the Western world, where queerness has become weaponized and ‘included’ into liberal discourse, being trans for me feels more radical and revolutionary. I say this with caution, acknowledging the fine line between visibility and violence – particularly for those who, besides being trans, embody other signifiers of difference like racialized, disabled, feminine, queer, and so on. But precisely in the ‘borderlands’ of factors like these, there is a special wisdom to be found.

I dedicate this thesis to my (trans) icons, my trans siblings, my trans body, my trans rage.

¹ Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chameunix, Performing Transgender Rage,” *GLQ*, Vol. 1. Issue 3 (SA: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1993), 248.

Introduction

“Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters.”²
– Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*

“The monster is an ambivalent figure recurring in trans discourse,”³ according to Anson Koch-Rein. In literature, since at least the 1970s, it is recurrently used as a metaphor to dehumanize trans people. Radical feminists used the image of the nameless creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) to portray the surgically modified bodies of trans women as unnatural and dangerous. Notably, Shelly is the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the founding feminist philosophers and author of *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

Following Susan Stryker’s ground-breaking essay *My Words to Victor Frankenstein* (1994), a new discourse on ‘trans monstrosity’ seems to have emerged, coinciding with the development of Transgender Studies within academia. In reclaiming the figure of the monster, however, trans people face the difficulty of formulating resistance in the same metaphorical language as the transphobic attack. Moreover, as a universal figure of difference, it also surfaces in racist, ableist, homophobic, and sexist discourses, “making its use especially fraught.”⁴ Despite its historical baggage, it is impossible not to address the monster, though, which was reclaimed because of its “ambivalent ability to speak to oppression and negative affect.”⁵

As such, this thesis examines the use of ‘monstrosity’ in literature where it emerged as a central trope and metaphor, “serving widely divergent narratives of transphobic insult and trans resistance alike.”⁶ It aims to demonstrate how the concept has played a crucial role in carving out a space for trans experiences, embodiments and identities, particularly within the academy but also outside of it. First, it delves into a selection of texts by authors who have helped shape the field of ‘Trans* Monstrosity,’ namely Susan Stryker, Nikki Sullivan, Donna Haraway, Sandy Stone, and Paul B. Preciado. Then, it briefly analyses mainstream representations of ‘trans,’ while scrutinizing notions of (in)visibility. Additionally, alternative strategies for understanding and depicting difference are explored, such as ‘the haptic,’ ‘disidentification,’

² Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 15.

³ Anson Koch-Rein, “Monster,” in: *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* Vol. 1 No. 1-2 (2014), 134.

⁴ Koch-Rein, “Monster,” 135.

⁵ Koch-Rein, “Monster,” 135.

⁶ Koch-Rein, “Monster,” 135.

and ‘transing.’ It continues by taking a look at how trans artists today are re-imagining ‘monstrosity.’ Finally, it examines not only a few other metaphors who originated in marginalised communities, but also how rage has been analysed differently as a tool for resistance rather than something negative. Important authors here are Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed, Maria Lugones, and Hilary Malatino.

In essence, the objective is to illustrate how ‘monstrosity’ has served as a tool for resistance and change and how it continues to hold relevance today. This is relevant to the study of Gender and Diversity, as it looks at marginalised modalities of knowing, seeing and being. Furthermore, it contributes to the larger research field of Transgender Studies that still does not get enough recognition in European academic contexts. As way of conclusion, the thesis argues for the integration of ‘trans’ as an integral component of the Flemish program of the Master in Gender and Diversity.

Methodology etc.

“It matters what matters we use to think other matters with;
(...). It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.”⁷
– Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

Throughout this thesis, two methodologies are used: Comparative Literary Analysis and Trans Methodology. The choice for this combination aims at offering a comprehensive, embodied, and interdisciplinary approach.

Comparative Literary Analysis: At the basis of this thesis is a comparison of several works of literature on the topics of transness, monstrosity, and/or rage. They span across different fields, like Gender Studies, Critical Race Theory, Feminist Theory, and so on. I selected literature based on their inherent value within their fields, and their potential to add value to the core goal of offering a ‘trans*/feminist analysis of rage.’ The analysis on ‘trans monstrosity’ was specifically underpinned by texts on the subject by (in chronological order) Donna Haraway, Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, Nikki Sullivan, and Paul B. Preciado.

Trans Methodology: Throughout the thesis, I also explore and further develop a framework for ‘trans methodology’ as a way to rethink the cultural belief in the inaccurate and limiting false logic that ‘seeing is equivalent to knowing.’ This provides a new means of apprehending identity and visibility. Jay Prosser, an early advocate of trans studies, explored how trans methods offer new modes of being, doing, and thinking – by placing emphasis on embodiment.⁸ Trans lives, as noted by Prosser, are not based on moving away from one type of body into another, as the binary and linear trans narrative established by the medical and psychiatric industries contends. Rather, “trans people move further *into* embodiment.”⁹ In other words, trans methodologies are deeply informed by trans embodiments. While I found it difficult to successfully convey ‘trans embodiment’ in the analysis of literature on the topic, I hope the chapter on ‘A New Generation of Trans Monsters’ can make up for this. It serves as an illustration to show how monstrosity is expressed by several trans artists today.

⁷ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

⁸ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality, Gender and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁹ Ace Lehner, “Beyond Representation: Trans Embodied Methodologies,” on: *Dilettante Army*, 2022 (<https://dilettantearmy.com/articles/beyond-representation>, accessed on 12 January 2024).

Research Question

This thesis researches the following question: Which role has ‘monstrosity’ played in the exploration of trans rage as a tool for resistance and change, specifically within the academy? In other words, how have (trans) theorists reclaimed the monster as a way of claiming space and transforming trans discourse? And how is the metaphor still relevant today?

Positionality of the Author

The concept of ‘positionality’ has become central to feminist writing. It refers to the understanding that researchers and authors inevitably articulate their perspectives from specific positions within society, regardless of their perceived objectivity. Related to the notion of intersectionality, it encompasses a range of factors like gender, race, ability, sexuality, economic status, and so forth. As Donna Haraway writes: “Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges.”¹⁰ She argues that knowledge production can never be universal since truth is inherently contextual – contingent on a specific culture, time, and place. Haraway urges for a “feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasizes vision again,”¹¹ which would ultimately lead to “a way of embodying feminist objectivity.”¹²

For the reasons mentioned above, I find it important to disclose my own positionality. I am a white transmasculine non-binary person, who grew up in Belgium and now lives in Berlin. Combining the fact that my grandmother is US-American and the places I have lived, I am a child of the Western World. I grew up in a financially stable, emotionally turbulent household. My father is an academic, my mother has the equivalent of a master’s degree.

I am able-bodied, although I struggle with chronic pain and have a history of ‘mental illness.’ Two years ago, I received the official diagnosis of ‘transsexuality’ through the German healthcare system. Since then, I have been micro-dosing testosterone and recently started a fundraiser to be able to finance my top surgery. At this point, I am sure I would also receive the diagnosis of ‘obsessive-compulsive disorder’ (OCD) if I wanted to. It is an often-misdiagnosed mental illness, that is heavily overrepresented in the wrong ways – leaving actual

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in: *Feminist Studies* Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), 581.

¹¹ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 582.

¹² *Ibid.*, 583.

sufferers with serious challenges to find treatment. OCD is also listed as one of the top ten most debilitating illnesses by the World Health Organisation (WHO), including physical illness. In mainstream representations, OCD sufferers are often depicted as if they are at war with their own brain, as if they would be fighting a monstrous entity almost separate from themselves. Navigating the world, and explicitly the psychiatric and healthcare system, with these struggles has certainly fuelled my fascination with monstrosity. I will be further exploring this at the end of chapter 6.6.

Trans* Terminology

Trans, Transgender, Transsexual

Before diving into the core of the thesis, I found it necessary to provide an explanation for opting for the term 'trans*' in the title as opposed to the alternatives 'trans,' 'transsexual,' and 'transgender.' These words are all used by trans people for themselves and in discussions on trans* identities. But they hold distinct meanings, reflecting both diverse individual experiences and socio-political contexts throughout time.¹³

Historically, 'transsexual' referred to individuals who sought out medical interventions, such as hormone therapy or gender confirmation surgeries, to align their physical characteristics with their gender identity. Initially, it lost popularity in most circles due to its clinical connotations, but it appears to be regaining usage within trans communities in recent times. In contrast, 'transgender' is a widely accepted term that includes a diverse array of gender identities that transcend societal expectations associated with the sex assigned at birth, thus emphasizing the self-identification of individuals whose gender identity differs from societal standards. 'Transgender' has gained prominence in academic, activist, and medical contexts in the past decades. With a more recent introduction, 'trans' generally serves as an umbrella term encompassing a broad range of gender experiences that deviate from the sex assigned at birth. It is an inclusive term that can be used for a broad spectrum of gender expressions and identities.

¹³ Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, Lisa Jean Moore, "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" In: *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3/4, Trans- (2008).

What's in A Name?

“If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.”¹⁴ – Audre Lorde, Speech in 1982

The act of finding words and naming can be a source of empowerment for anyone. Especially if one embodies marginalisation in one way or another, naming oneself is a way to claim space. For instance, as a self-described “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,”¹⁵ Audre Lorde, for instance, always pointed at the use of words as a necessary tool in liberating oneself. However, the process of naming is also deeply ingrained in the construction of modern knowledge and expertise, involving categorization. Labelling is always a reduction of the reality and partially negates the richness of the individual. The language currently employed to articulate sexual and gender diversity originated in the mid-19th century, coinciding with the era of industrialization and colonization.¹⁶ The most recent surge in gender categories and new terminologies is not immune to criticism and is perceived as a product of (neo)liberal strategies of inclusion and assimilation.

As author Maggie Nelson notes: “Words change depending upon who speaks them; there is no cure.”¹⁷ Instead of constantly introducing new terms, Nelson suggests a focus on understanding the potential uses and contexts of existing words. Viewing language as a shifting ecosystem – in which words fly, move, fall, fail to convey their message, or show the multiplicity they invoke – this could release us from the superficial task of getting the names right. While focusing on the correct words is an act of respect on an interpersonal level, when we zoom out, it leaves us distracted from more pressing issues in the context of transness.

Trans*

‘Trans*’,¹⁸ as suggested by Jack Halberstam, potentially allows for a more comprehensive understanding of transness, creating room for the analysis of various phenomena that present as forms of gender variability. The asterisk serves to redefine ‘transitivity’ by rejecting the

¹⁴ Audre Lorde during a speech at Harvard University, 1982.

¹⁵ Sara Ahmed, “Introduction,” in: Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), v.

¹⁶ Jack Halberstam, *Trans*, A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 5-9.

¹⁷ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), 8.

¹⁸ Halberstam, *Trans*, A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 1-21.

notion of transition as a destination or a fixed form. It postpones the ‘certainty of diagnosis,’ making trans individuals the authors of their own naming and categorization.

Halberstam describes ‘trans*’ as:

“(…) a name for expansive forms of difference, haptic relations to knowing, uncertain modes of being, and the disaggregation of identity politics predicated upon the separating out of many kinds of experience that actually blend together, intersect, and mix. This terminology, trans*, stands at odds with the history of gender variance, which has been collapsed into concise definitions, sure medical pronouncements, and fierce exclusions.”¹⁹

Taking all of this into account, I decided to mainly use ‘trans’ throughout the text, avoiding the asterisk for legibility reasons. I also sometimes shifted to the terms of ‘transgender’ and ‘transsexual,’ depending on the context. In choosing the title, I found ‘trans* rage’ to be most fitting as it potentially bridges the gap between past, present, and future.

¹⁹ Halberstam, *Trans*, A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 4-5.

Monstrosity

Monster Theory

“Monstrosity (noun): a malformation; something deviating from the normal.”²⁰
– Merriam-Webster Dictionary

According to Wikipedia, a ‘monster’ is a type of fictional creature that can be found in mythology, religion, folklore, horror, fantasy, and science fiction. The word itself is derived from the Latin word ‘monstrum,’ which can be translated as an omen or something that can evoke dread and wonder. Monsters are typically depicted as dangerous and frightening – bizarre, deformed, hideous, freakish, grotesque.²¹ Dwelling at the margins of society, they are ‘others’ who exist outside the realm of belonging.

During the 1990s, primarily in the United States, monsters increasingly became a subject of interest in Cultural Studies. For the author of *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), Donna Haraway, monsters have always outlined the limitations of community in Western imaginations. She elaborates on this with a few examples:

“The Centaurs and Amazons of ancient Greece established the limits of the centered polis of the Greek male human by their disruption of marriage and boundary pollutions of the warrior with animality and woman. Unseparated twins and hermaphrodites were the confused human material in early modern France who grounded discourse on the natural and supernatural, medical and legal, portents and diseases – all crucial to establishing modern identity. (...) Cyborg monsters in feminist science fiction define quite different political possibilities and limits from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman.”²²

Subsequently, a separate field of Monster Studies began to be formed. In the introduction to *Monster Theory* (1996), a compilation of essays that seem foundational to this ever-growing field of research, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen asserts that monsters “provide a key to understanding

²⁰ “Monstrosity,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/monstrosity>, accessed on 6 January 2024).

²¹ “Monster,” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monster>, accessed on 6 January 2024).

²² Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 177.

the culture that spawned them.”²³ In viewing the monstrous body as a metaphor for the cultural body, the essays in this volume interpret entities like demons, beasts, vampires, etc. as symbolic materializations of cultural discomforts that run through a society and influence its collective behaviour. In his own contribution to the book, Cohen formulates seven theses on ‘Monster Culture,’²⁴ functioning as a kind of ‘toolbox’ to be able to grasp “the relationship between monstrous and cultural bodies”²⁵:

1. The monster’s body is a cultural body.
2. The monster always escapes.
3. The monster is the harbinger of category crisis.
4. The monster dwells at the gate of difference.
5. The monster polices the borders of the possible.
6. Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire.
7. The monster stands at the threshold... of becoming.

Cohen argues that the monster is “that uncertain cultural body in which is condensed an intriguing simultaneity or doubleness.”²⁶ It triggers unsettling, suppressed, yet formative traumas, creating an inseparable connection between before and after, and demands us to piece together its fragmented body. For Cohen, “(...) the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other, known only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis.”²⁷

²³ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), ix.

²⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in: *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3-25.

²⁵ Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, x.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, ix.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

Race and Monstrosity

“Blackness, in particular, always already signals monstrosity in a white supremacist culture.”²⁸
– Benny Lemaster, *Transing Dystopia*

Unfortunately, it appears that all authors whose works count as key literature for the analysis of ‘trans monstrosity’ are white. While the monster is a universally used metaphor in racist discourse, it proved challenging to find literature on the specific intersections of race, transness and monstrosity. While black trans people are highly visible in media and film, they seem to be rather invisible in academic literature in comparison to white trans scholars. However, a concrete illustration was found in an analysis by C. Riley Snorton of a lithographic portrait from 1836, titled *The Man-Monster*.²⁹



The Man-Monster, Peter Sewally, alias Mary Jones, published by H.R. Robinson, 1838.

²⁸ Benny Lemaster, “Transing Dystopia: Constituting Trans Monstrosity, Performing Trans Rage in Torrey Peters’ *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones*,” in: *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* Vol. 6, No. 2-3 (2018), 102.

²⁹ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 61.

The image depicts Mary Jones, a black trans woman and sex worker living in New York, here portrayed “rather ordinary-looking.”³⁰ Following her trial, where she was convicted for stealing a customer’s wallet close to the brothel she worked at, prints of the image were widely spread throughout the city. As a historian, Snorton calls attention to the cultural significance of lithographs for changing “the imagistic landscape of slavery.”³¹ As they were easy to print and distribute, lithographs accelerated the circulation of cartoons and caricatures, significantly in times of political scandals.³² Consequently, he explores how *The Man-Monster* “as caricature gave expression to the particularity of Jones’s media spectacle and the visual antagonism toward black freedom.” In his analysis, Snorton also engaged the concept of ‘fungibility,’ which is well-known within Black feminist scholarship and refers to the extensive and limitless (ab)use of blackness beyond labour, such as violent domination or entertainment.³³ As Saidiya Hartman explains, the “value of blackness resides in its metaphorical aptitude, whether literally understood as the fungibility of the commodity or (...) as the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves.”³⁴ The interplay between the title of and the image itself, so argues Snorton, confirmed a common understanding about ‘black fungibility,’ “in which the interchangeability of gender figured one aspect of blackness’s capacity, as its transversed captivity.”³⁵

In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017), Snorton aimed to disrupt the idea that blackness and transness are separate identity categories by examining their interconnectedness throughout history. He also defines ‘trans’ as “a movement with no clear origin or point of arrival,” that “finds expression and continuous circulation within blackness.”³⁶ Moreover, so states Benny Lemaster, in a white supremacist culture, blackness will always be inevitably linked to notions of monstrosity. In a world that dehumanizes and oppresses people based on their racialisation, transness risks worsening “already persistent monstrous projections along intersecting lines of identification and embodiment.”³⁷ Simply put, people of colour face way greater hurdles in reclaiming a metaphorical figures or tropes like ‘the monster.’

³⁰ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 62.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Iyko Day, “On Immanence and Indeterminacy: Black Feminism and Settler Colonialism” (*EPD: Society and Space*, Vol. 39, No. 1 2021), 4.

³⁴ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 78.

³⁵ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 62.

³⁶ Ibid., 2.

³⁷ Benny Lemaster, “Transing Dystopia,” 102.

The Frankenstein Phenomenon

“The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born.”³⁸ – Susan Stryker, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein*

In her book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), Mary Daly dedicates a chapter on the *Boundary Violation and the Frankenstein Phenomenon*. She portrays trans people as products of a “Frankenstein phenomenon” of “ghoulish gynaecologists”³⁹ and agents of “necrophilic invasion”⁴⁰ of female space.

Clearly asserting her negative views of trans people, she writes:

“Today the Frankenstein phenomenon is omnipresent not only in religious myth, but in its offspring, phallocratic technology. (...) Transsexualism is an example of male surgical siring which invades the female world with substitutes.”⁴¹

Daly was the advisor to Janice Raymond, whose dissertation *The Transsexual Empire* (1979) might be considered a culmination point of anti-trans ideology in 1970s radical feminism. She depicted trans people as “synthetic products” of a “medical empire.”⁴² The anti-trans applications of the monster trope “often draw on ideas of physical monstrosity to uphold their naturalization of binary sex and gender.”⁴³

It seems difficult to imagine a feminist discourse as openly transphobic, considering the ‘progress’ in trans recognition and healthcare. However, in the current socio-political climate in the West – with increasing polarisation and right-wing discourse – new portrayals of trans people as “monstrous, crazy, or less than human”⁴⁴ have emerged. This is exemplified by so-called ‘TERFs’ (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists), a new generation of ‘feminists’ that

³⁸ Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein,” 238.

³⁹ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (With a New Intergalactic Introduction by the Author)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 70.

⁴⁰ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 69-72.

⁴¹ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 71.

⁴² Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), 165.

⁴³ Koch-Rein, “Monster,” 134.

⁴⁴ Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 12.

have opportunistically repurposed the work of authors like Daly and Raymond to defend an ‘anti-gender’ ideology. As analysed by Cristan Williams:

“TERFs objectify trans people as the embodiment of gender and therefore sexism itself.” Instead of focusing on the systemic architecture of sexism within society, as radical and trans feminists do, TERFs primarily focus upon the eradication of that which they believe has come to embody all that is oppressive about patriarchal culture: trans people.”

Author J.K. Rowling has willingly positioned herself at the front lines of this ‘movement,’ now often referred to as the ‘TERF Wars.’⁴⁵ To give an example, in December 2021, she criticized the Scottish police for a policy that allows rape suspects to self-identify in terms of gender, to which she tweeted:

“War is Peace.

Freedom is Slavery.

Ignorance is Strength.

The Penised Individual Who Raped You Is A Woman.”⁴⁶

In the article *J.K. Rowling and the Order of the TERFs* (2021), Braedyn Ezra Simon concluded that her transphobic tweets construct a discursive story of a privileged majority savouring a position of authority and abundance, while “pushing down at a minority: marginalized, abused, pushed into corners through terrible legislation emerging from prejudice and lack of understanding.”⁴⁷ As a result of Rowling’s influence, ‘TERF’ in the UK has grown into a political movement that aims to limit trans rights “on the false premise that they erode cis women’s rights.”⁴⁸ Without any remorse, she continues to spew her narrow and harmful beliefs into the world, ultimately staying stuck in a set of binaries: us/them, man/woman, technology/nature, black/white, pure/evil.

⁴⁵ Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen, Ben Vincent, “TERF wars: An introduction,” in: *The Sociological Review Monographs*, Vol. 68 No. 4 (2020), 677-698.

⁴⁶ Tweet by J.K. Rowling, *Twitter*, 12 December 2021

(https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1470092815506063365?lang=en, accessed on 13 January 2024).

⁴⁷ Braedyn Ezra Simon, *J.K. Rowling and the Order of the TERFs: A Critical Discourse Analysis into the Construction of ‘TERF’ Ideology Transforming UK Gender Politics* (Berlin: Freie Universität, 2021), 5.

⁴⁸ Simon, *J.K. Rowling and the Order of the TERFs*, 5.

Key Texts Shaping the Field of ‘Trans Monstrosity’

Susan Stryker: My Words to Victor Frankenstein (1993)

“Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, (...) I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie.”⁴⁹
– Susan Stryker, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein*

In 1993, California State University hosted an interdisciplinary academic conference titled *Rage across the Disciplines*,⁵⁰ which proved a pivotal moment for trans activism and scholarship in the United States. Susan Stryker, one of the instigators of this turning point, decided to take part in the conference with a performance piece in which she adopted the gaze of Mary Shelly’s monster. In an exploration of her rage, she wrote *My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chameunix*. With a deliberate aim to challenge the confines of acceptable academic discourse, she took the stage dressed in combat boots, a worn punk t-shirt, a quartz pink triangle earring, and a leather jacket adorned with a sticker proclaiming, “FUCK YOUR TRANSPHOBIA.”⁵¹ At the time, Stryker was an emerging historian but also an active member of the direct-action advocacy group known as Transgender Nation. She had helped to organize a protest at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in San Francisco that year, following discussions within the collective on how they could mobilize their rage into concrete political actions.⁵²

Stryker intended for the formal structure of her Frankenstein performance to represent a “transgender aesthetic by replicating our abrupt, often jarring transitions between genders.”⁵³ In doing so, it wasn’t solely her language choices that challenged generic categorization – much like her transness challenged the conventional notions of lawful gender. It was also her performance itself that pushed the limits of what was seen as acceptable within academic discourse. You can only imagine the astonishment of the audience when, amidst her provocative monologue, she claimed, “You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein,” 240.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 237.

⁵¹ Ibid., 238.

⁵² Ibid., 237.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 241.

One year later, in 1994, Stryker published an adaptation of the performance text in the third issue of *Gay and Lesbian Studies Quarterly*, with the subtitle *Performing Transgender Rage*.⁵⁵ The essay is divided into four chapters: 'Monologue,' 'Criticism,' 'Journal' and 'Theory,' each with their own distinct themes and writing style. Stryker takes you on a journey of her own dealing with trans rage, not only on an academic but also on a personal and intimate level. It not only provided a fresh philosophical, political, and literary perspective to her earlier monologue but also marked the beginning of an academic tradition wherein Gothic horror conventions are used to challenge heterosexist hegemony.

In the 'Theory' chapter, Stryker critically examined her notions of what she termed 'transgender rage.'⁵⁶ For her, this rage emerges from her position in society ruled by the "unstable but indissoluble relationship between language and materiality,"⁵⁷ situated at the limits of subjectivity and signification. In the following paragraph, she continued by explaining its specificities:

"This primary rage becomes specifically transgender rage when the inability to foreclose the subject occurs through a failure to satisfy norms of gendered embodiment. Transgender rage is the subjective experience of being compelled to transgress what Judith Butler has referred to as the highly gendered regulatory schemata that determine the viability of bodies, of being compelled to enter a "domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation"⁵⁸ that in its unlivability encompasses and constitutes the realm of legitimate subjectivity. Transgender rage is a queer fury, an emotional response to conditions in which it becomes imperative to take up, for the sake of one's own continued survival as a subject, a set of practices that precipitates one's exclusion from a naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for being a subject. However, by mobilizing gendered identities and rendering them provisional, open to strategic development and occupation, this rage enables the establishment of subjects in new modes, regulated by different codes of intelligibility. Transgender rage furnishes a means for disidentification⁵⁹ with compulsorily assigned subject positions."⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," 237-254.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16.

⁵⁹ 'Disidentification' will be explained in a later chapter.

⁶⁰ Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," 240.

For scholar Harlan Weaver, Stryker's essay left an unforgettable mark on trans theories as it engaged the monster's rage to reinterpret and redo transness. It revealed how Stryker's language encouraged its readers to feel and interact with her, as her descriptions of embodiment and rage "map onto us, her readers, pushing us to feel in kind."⁶¹ In his article *Monster Trans: Diffracting Affect, Reading Rage* (2013), Weaver explored an interplay between Stryker's text and Shelley's *Frankenstein* that he analysed through the concept of 'diffraction' – a concept defined by Donna Haraway as "an optical metaphor for the effort to make a difference in the world."⁶² Through actively exploring "bodily affects, the somatechnics⁶³ of bodily feelings, that diffract between her and Shelley's monster,"⁶⁴ Stryker invited us to create new and different understandings of language, gender, and materiality. This aimed to prompt the reader to also be moved by rage and affect, igniting a transformation in our relationship with our bodies and stories. "Reading Stryker's words, we are asked to transform,"⁶⁵ so states Weaver, which is exemplified by this paragraph for example:

"Like the monster, the longer I live in these conditions, the more rage I harbor. Rage colors me as it presses in through the pores of my skin, soaking in until it becomes the blood that courses through my beating heart. It is a rage bred by the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against my survival."⁶⁶

Apparent here, Stryker's rage had transformed her sadness, her frustration about limits of her trans body and her experiences of trans degradation into articulate expressions – described as "yet another rage within."⁶⁷ In an article titled *Transing Dystopia* (2018), Benny Lemaster analysed how trans rage emerges from the acknowledgement of constantly having to prove one's worth in a 'cisheterosexist' society. For Lemaster, Stryker's essay framed trans rage as a "site of potentiality"⁶⁸ in which "stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power."⁶⁹ This labour of reclamation would situate her work within a tradition of transfeminism. This reminded Lemaster of the commitment to, in the words of Talia Bettcher, "politics that focuses

⁶¹ Harlan Weaver, "Monster Trans: Diffracting Affect, Reading Rage," in: *Somatechnics* 3.2 (2013), 303.

⁶² Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_Oncomouse* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16.

⁶³ 'Somatechnics' will be explained in the following chapter.

⁶⁴ Weaver, "Monster Trans," 303.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," 244.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁶⁸ Benny Lemaster, *Transing Dystopia*, 101.

⁶⁹ Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," 249.

on the intersections of sexist and transphobic oppression.”⁷⁰ Reading trans monstrosity through a transfeminist lens calls for ambivalence – embracing both the positive trans monstrosity as generative and negative monstrification in transphobic accounts.⁷¹

While *My Words to Viktor Frankenstein* is thus generally seen as a seminal essay, almost achieving the status of a cult classic, the essay did receive criticism as well. In her recent book *Recognizing Transsexuals: Personal, Political and Medicolegal Embodiment*, Zowie Davy criticized it for not making “bodies of difference, with sociocentric multiplicities, appear in her own work” and leaving “them as literary metaphors.” Lemaster also criticized Stryker’s framing of monstrosity as it “presumes whiteness,”⁷² therefore not acknowledging the problematic connotations of ‘monstrosity’ beyond just gendered ones. In other words, these critiques show that Stryker’s essay does not engage enough with other embodied differences in trans people’s lived experience enough – not taking into account factors like race, disability and so on.

Nikki Sullivan: Somatechnics, or Monstrosity Unbound (2006)

“Since the publication of *Frankenstein* a plethora of monsters have populated the realms of feminist fiction, interfering with (...) dominant ontologies, generating mutant offspring, cyborg vision(s).”⁷³ – Nikki Sullivan, *Somatechnics, or Monstrosity Unbound*

In 2003, a group of academics at Macquarie University in Sidney organized a conference entitled *Body Modification*, to which Nikki Sullivan invited Susan Stryker as one of the keynote speakers.⁷⁴ In the decade following her *Frankenstein* performance, Stryker’s contributions to the field of Transgender Studies had gained prominence, specifically for the ways in which she scrutinized normative understandings of technology. She consistently criticized prevailing notions about the trans body, challenging the narrative that it either requires or needs to have undergone technological interventions.

⁷⁰ Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance,” in: *Signs* vol. 39, No. 2 (2014), 387.

⁷¹ Lemaster, “Transing Dystopia,” 101.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷³ Nikki Sullivan, “Somatechnics, or Monstrosity Unbound,” in: *Scan Journal* vol 3 no. 3 (2006), 5.

⁷⁴ “Susan Stryker talks Somatechnics, Queer Monstrosity, and Trans Politics,” *Well, Well, Well*, December 2023 (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/13PU9snpPespOE68C9XsBC?si=d4962f6491cc4ce7>), consulted on 27 December 2023).

The objective of the 2003 conference was to express the various ways in which all bodies “are always already modified”⁷⁵ – not only through tattoos or piercings, or by undergoing surgical procedures. Afterwards, the term ‘somatechnics’ was coined to underscore what they perceived as the inseparable connection between the body and technologies/tools, “in and through which corporealities are formed and transformed.”⁷⁶ As Stryker proclaims in a 2023 podcast, the term actually came to her in a dream.⁷⁷ So from its inception, the field of somatechnics was influenced by trans thought. The *TransSomatechnics* conference (2008), held at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, specifically acknowledged this connection.

In the essay *Somatechnics, or Monstrosity Unbound* (2006), Nikki Sullivan specifically explored the connections between ‘somatechnics’ and monstrosity. First, she investigated the historical role and status of ‘technology’ in debates within feminist discourse about womanhood. She looks at two different strands of feminism that emerged throughout the 1970s, namely anti-natalist equality feminism and anti-technology radical feminism. Sullivan then moves on to the postmodernist feminist writings, specifically to ‘Haraway’s hybrids,’ finishing her analysis with more examples of what she describes as ‘monstrous fiction’ and how they relate to somatechnics.

Sullivan started off her analysis by contextualising so-called anti-natalist equality feminism. In her *Dialectics of Sex: The Case for a Feminist Revolution* (1970), for example, Shulamith Firestone identified technology, together with “cybernetic socialism,”⁷⁸ as the perfect tool for women to transcend their ‘sex’ and accompanied reproductive roles. This point of view was inspired by the introduction of effective contraception at the time. This process would make it possible to create alternative relationships and types of relationality, as social life would no longer be organized around biological reproduction. However, as explored by Sullivan and others before her, the issue with these views is that they rely on “a series of related philosophical dualisms: nature/culture, biology/technology, body/mind, private/public, reproduction/production, immanence/transcendence, woman/man.”⁷⁹ In doing so, feminists like Firestone would actually reproduce “the superiority of masculine values and occupations,”⁸⁰ rather than undermine them. For Sullivan, these kinds of instrumentalist

⁷⁵ Nikki Sullivan, “Somatechnics,” in: *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* Vol. 1 No. 1-2 (2014), 187.

⁷⁶ Sullivan, “Somatechnics,” 187.

⁷⁷ “Susan Stryker talks Somatechnics, Queer Monstrosity, and Trans Politics,” *Well, Well, Well*, 2023.

⁷⁸ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectics of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 238.

⁷⁹ Sullivan, “Somatechnics, or Monstrosity Unbound,” 1.

⁸⁰ Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Oxford, Polity Press, 1991), 2.

feminist models clearly portray technology as some “neutral tool,” that can easily be used by anyone to serve their needs – as if it holds “no ethical or political qualities and yet it holds out the promise of progress.”⁸¹ In contrast, anti-technology radical feminists explicitly positioned themselves against this potential of (reproductive) technologies, defining them as inherently patriarchal and therefore harmful to women. Everyone involved in Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering (FINRAGE), including Janice Raymond, shared these beliefs. Sullivan calls attention to Raymond’s statement that “technological reproduction is first and foremost about the appropriation of the female body.”⁸²

According to Sullivan, anti-natalist equality feminists and anti-technology radical feminists undoubtedly share a fundamental vision: an essentialist view of women rooted in and reinforcing binaries. Furthermore, they either see nature as holy and disregard technology, or it is the other way around. “What is demonised in one account is mythologised in the other (...),”⁸³ so states Sullivan. However, she continues, this either/or model and the logics behind it have been heavily critiqued by numerous postmodern feminist writers. In these accounts, technologies have been described as ‘heterogenous,’ inherently linked to systems of power and knowledge, and integral to subjectivities.

The introduction of ‘somatechnics’ – a term that seems to resist concrete definitions – seems to respond to this historical dilemma. Derived from the Greek words ‘soma’ (body) and ‘techne’ (craftsmanship), ‘somatechnics’ suggests that technology is not simply “something we add or apply to the already constituted body (as object), nor is it a tool that the embodied self employs to its own ends.”⁸⁴ Instead, following postmodern feminist thought, meant by ‘techne’ are the dynamic tools that are used “in and through which different corporealities are crafted,”⁸⁵ endlessly generated in relation to others and the world. In other words, there is a clear interdependence between soma and techne: bodily being is always inherently technologized and technologies are always inherently embodied.⁸⁶ Sullivan highlights how her examples of monstrous fictions, throughout the essay, aim to redefine the relations and limits between identities and technologies:

⁸¹ Sullivan, “Somatechnics, or Monstrosity Unbound,” 1.

⁸² Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, xxxi.

⁸³ Sullivan, “Somatechnics, or Monstrosity Unbound,” 2.

⁸⁴ Sullivan, “Somatechnics,” 188.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

“Here, selves are fleshly hybrids, the partial, perverse, and forever shifting effects of what we might (un)productively think of as somatechnics. In other words, in raising the remonstrative question of who we are these texts not only enable, but perform, contingent, friction-generating articulations, and in doing so constitute technological interventions into the same old stories (...).”⁸⁷

Importantly, Sullivan dives into the writings of Donna J. Haraway, author of *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985). For Haraway, the cyborg – a hybrid creature rejecting rigid boundaries – functioned as an imaginative resource generating “effects of connection, of embodiment, and of responsibility for an imagined elsewhere.”⁸⁸ In her essay, Sullivan reiterated Haraway’s notion that there is “no singular pre-discursive state or place that we can simply name Nature.”⁸⁹ If there is no common understanding of what nature encompasses, that means it cannot be as easily transcended or remained true to as stated by the feminists discussed earlier. For Sullivan, particularly Haraway’s essay *The Promises of Monsters* (1992) holds valuable meaning. As an alternative to both anti-natalist equality feminism and anti-technology radical feminism, Haraway suggests “what we might think of as diffractive optics”⁹⁰ to imagine “a regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others,”⁹¹ which will be further explored in the next section.

Donna Haraway: The Promises of Monsters (1992)

“We are all in chiasmatic borderlands, liminal areas where new shapes (...) are gestating in the world.”⁹² – Donna Haraway, *The Promises of Monsters*

Donna J. Haraway is arguably the godmother of the field of ‘trans monstrosity.’ Not only was her essay *The Promises of Monsters* (1992) a pivotal text to rethink the metaphorical value of monstrosity, but she was also the advisor of Sandy Stone at the time she published her

⁸⁷ Sullivan, “Somatechnics, or Monstrosity Unbound,” 7.

⁸⁸ Donna J. Haraway, “*The Promise of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others*,” in: *Cultural Studies*, eds. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P.A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 295.

⁸⁹ Sullivan, “Somatechnics, or Monstrosity Unbound,” 3.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters,” 299.

⁹² Ibid., 79.

influential *Posttranssexual Manifesto* (1987). In a revision of her manifesto, Stone later added a reference to Haraway's essay:

"The disruptions of the old patterns of desire that the multiple dissonances of the transsexual body imply produce not an irreducible alterity but a *myriad* of alterities, whose unanticipated juxtapositions hold what Donna Haraway has called the promises of monsters – physicalities of constantly shifting figure and ground that exceed the frame of any possible representation."⁹³

Haraway intended for *The Promises of Monsters* to be a "mapping exercise and travelogue through mindscapes and landscapes of what may count as nature."⁹⁴ In an attempt to create another relationship, Haraway redefined nature as a 'commonplace' – a place to which people turn to "order our discourse, to compose our memory,"⁹⁵ she writes. "Neither mother, nurse, nor slave, nature is not matrix, resource, or tool for the reproduction of man."⁹⁶ Nature, to Haraway, is not a physical place, hidden treasure, or an essence that can be violated or saved. She also described it as a 'trope,' which implies that nature, both as fact and fiction, is 'made.'

However, Haraway continues, not only is nature constructed, and therefore does "not pre-exist as such,"⁹⁷ but the same goes for objects and bodies. Bodies are not material, she states, but 'materialized.' Viewing bodies as dynamic and historically specific can "invite a different kind of engagement and intervention,"⁹⁸ which Haraway finds in what she termed "differential artifactualism."⁹⁹ It is similar to the concept of "inappropriate/d others,"¹⁰⁰ a concept developed by feminist theorist Trinh Minh-ha in a way to understand 'difference' as a 'critical difference within,' in contrast to means of separation, 'othering,' or as "grounding difference as apartheid."¹⁰¹ Being an 'inappropriate/d other' would involve being in a state of "critical, deconstructive relationality, in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality," to be "dislocated from the available maps," and not to be "originally fixed by difference."¹⁰² This approach can serve as a method for establishing powerful connections that can potentially transcend structures of domination and oppression.

⁹³ Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back," 16.

⁹⁴ Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters," 295.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁰⁰ Trinh Minh-ha, *She, the Inappropriate/d Other* (Wisconsin: Center for Twentieth Century Studies, 1986).

¹⁰¹ Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters," 299.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

This view on nature proved to be a crucial statement, in which Haraway positioned herself against the common obsession (of feminists) with the dichotomy of nature/technology:

“In the belly of the local/global monster in which I am gestating, often called the postmodern world, global technology appears to *denature* everything, to make everything a malleable matter of strategic decisions and mobile production and reproduction processes.”¹⁰³

Another important idea in Haraway’s essay is the “corporeality of theory”¹⁰⁴ – in other words, the idea that theory is embodied. She aimed to provoke “metamorphoses and boundary shifts that give grounds for a scholarship and politics of hope in truly monstrous times.”¹⁰⁵ Said differently, with *The Promises of Monsters*, she offered a kind of metaphorical toolbox on how to rethink difference, especially regarding notions like nature, technology, identity, and embodiment. Hoping to inspire others to be more critical, empathetic, and less anthropocentric, she called for a transformation of methodology, research and discourse. For Haraway, these calls for action had nothing to do with any conventional ideas about progress but “just maybe the pleasure of regeneration in less deadly, chiasmatic borderlands.”¹⁰⁶ Subsequently, Haraway proposed an alternative for ‘representation,’ which she criticized for relying too heavily on the power dynamics between two parties.¹⁰⁷ Instead, she suggested a practice of ‘articulation,’ which is fundamentally shaped through language and discourse, and therefore never fixed nor innocent. Haraway elaborates:

“To articulate is to signify. It is to put things together, scary things, risky things, contingent things. I want to live in an articulate world. We articulate; therefore, we are. (...) ‘Who am I?’ is about (always unrealizable) identity; always wobbling it still pivots on the law of the father, the sacred image of the same. (...) Who are ‘we’? that is an inherently more open question, one always ready for contingent, friction-generating articulations. It is a remonstrative question.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters,” 297.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 306.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 312.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 324.

For Haraway, the world must continuously be articulated through “people’s points of view,”¹⁰⁹ or what she has termed “situated knowledges.”¹¹⁰ Welcoming this diversity of narratives could help unlock the potential for transformation (and regeneration) within marginalized communities and beyond. The monstrous, then, becomes a metaphor for embracing chaos and resisting fixed categorizations.

Sandy Stone: The Empire Strikes Back (1987)

“Who is telling the story for whom, and how do the storytellers differentiate between the story they tell and the story they hear?” – Sandy Stone, *Posttranssexual Manifesto*

By introducing a poststructuralist approach to gender identity, Sandy Stone’s *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto* (1991) is widely recognized as a cornerstone text in the development of Transgender Studies. The first part of the title is a response to Janice Raymond’s 1979 ‘anti-transsexual polemic,’ providing trans people with new paths to steer away from both medical and transphobic feminist discourses.

Stone started off her manifesto by critically examining the Stanford Gender Dysphoria Program, which in 1968 started its research project to find the definition of ‘transsexualism.’ More specifically, she explored how the theory of ‘trapped wrong body’ came to be so widespread. In response, she proposed the idea of “(...) constituting transsexuals not as a class or problematic ‘third gender,’ but rather as a genre – a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored.”¹¹¹ Stone called for trans people to document their bodies and experiences, advocating a shift away from so-called “plausible histories.”¹¹² As an illustration of this concept, she challenged the widely held perception among trans people that ‘passing’ – successfully living in the chosen gender and being recognized as a ‘natural’ member of that gender – would be the ultimate goal. Stone contended that ‘passing’ involves the “denial of mixture,”¹¹³ the annihilation of one’s life before transitioning, and thereby effectively erasing a important part of their personal history. For Stone, the act of ‘passing’ seemed like the

¹⁰⁹ Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters,” 313.

¹¹⁰ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 581.

¹¹¹ Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back,” 14.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

essence of the 'transsexualism' diagnosis, in which it followed this Derridean imperative: "Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres."¹¹⁴ In other words, by embedding the trans person within a normative framework of narratives, these 'plausible histories' negate their uniquely different experiences and subsequently render them invisible.

Furthermore, Stone argued that both trans people and the medical/psychiatric system become complicit in this limiting process, preventing them "(...) a life grounded in the 'intertextual' possibilities of the transsexual body."¹¹⁵ Striving for intertextuality requires not only multiple interactions with boundaries, Stone continued, but also the maintaining of a well-defined subject position. In this context, it would become crucial to "rearticulate the foundational language by which both sexuality and transsexuality are described."¹¹⁶ She proposed to start by collectively criticizing the 'wrong body' theory as an accurate way of describing transness. Instead, Stone recognized the need for a deeper analytical language that allows for complexity, contradictions, and ambiguity – concepts that were already integrated into feminist theory at that time.

Nonetheless, Stone recognized how unimaginable it would be to ask trans people "to forgo passing, to be consciously 'read,' to read oneself aloud."¹¹⁷ Still, she pointed to the fact that "transsexuals know that silence can be an extremely high price to pay for acceptance."¹¹⁸ She insisted on encouraging trans people to write themselves "into the discourses by which one has been written"¹¹⁹ and become 'post-transsexual':

"I ask all of us to use the strength which brought us through the effort of restructuring identity, and which has also helped us to live in silence and denial, for a revisioning of our lives. (...) Perhaps it's time to begin laying the groundwork for the next transformation."¹²⁰

Finally, Stone drew attention to the unavoidable result that to "(...) deconstruct the necessity for passing implies that trans people must take responsibility for all of their

¹¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, "La Loi Du Genre/The Law Of Genre," in: *Glyph* Vol. 7:176 (1980), 202.

¹¹⁵ Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back," 14.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

history.”¹²¹ This would entail not only a redefining of their lives in terms of difference but also taking back the agency over their reshaped bodies.

Paul B. Preciado: *Can the Monster Speak?* (2021)

“Neither then nor now did I ask to be 'given' freedom. The powerful constantly promise freedom, but how could they give subalterns something that they themselves do not know?”¹²²
– Paul B. Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*

In 2021, the concept of ‘monstrosity’ showed up again through the eyes of trans scholar, curator, and filmmaker Paul B. Preciado – well-known for his book *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in The Pharmacopornographic Era* (2008). The Ecole de La Cause Freudienne in France invited him, in 2019, to speak in front of the members at their 49th Study Day, which brought together about 3,500 psychoanalysts on the topic of ‘Women in Psychoanalysis.’ Standing in front of an audience for whom he is a ‘mentally ill person’ suffering from ‘gender dysphoria,’ Preciado caused an outcry and was unable to finish. *Can the Monster Speak?* is the published full version of the speech.

The subtitle of Preciado’s speech refers to Kafka’s short story *Report to An Academy* (1917), in which an ape called Red Peter had learned how to behave as and live among humans.¹²³ In front of an assembly of scientists, he describes how human subjectivity to him feels as much confinement as in the metal cage he had known before. Comparing himself to Red Peter, Preciado addressed these experts in psychoanalysis from his “‘cage’ as a trans man” – with a body that is “branded by medical and juridical discourse as ‘transsexual’, characterized in most of your psychoanalytic diagnoses as the subject of an ‘impossible metamorphosis’.”¹²⁴ He criticizes his audience for seeing his ‘trans condition’ as a kind of neurosis or even psychosis, further elaborating on his standpoint:

¹²¹ Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back,” 16.

¹²² Paul Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021), 25.

¹²³ Franz Kafka, *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (1917) (https://kunsthallewien.at/101/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Ein-Bericht-fur-eine-Akademie_Franz-Kafka_DT.pdf?x32383, accessed on 2 January 2024).

¹²⁴ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak*, 18.

“And so, it is from the position assigned to me by you as a mentally ill person that I address you, an ape-human in a new era. I am the monster who speaks to you. The monster you have created with your discourse and your clinical practices. I am the monster who gets up from the analyst’s couch and dares to speak, not as a patient, but as a citizen, as your monstrous equal.”¹²⁵

With the title, Preciado referred to a question posed by Gayatri Spivak in a 1988 essay that has become crucial to intersectional feminist thought. When she asked, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”¹²⁶ Spivak points to the fact that the most marginalized people in society have no platform to talk about their issues, no voice in policymaking or choice over their representation. Her famous stance that “white men are saving brown women from brown men” highlighted relations between the colonizers and the colonized. It has been adapted in critical analyses of feminist and queer discourses to demonstrate inter-community hierarchies, exposing the power positions of respectively white women and cis gay men.¹²⁷

To bridge the gap, Preciado declared to his audience how he had learned their language, that of “Freud and Lacan, the language of the colonial patriarchy.”¹²⁸ Throughout his essay, he draws on decades of trans theory to prove his point that he will no longer tolerate being reduced to a label or disorder. It seems that Preciado might have succeeded in effectively reclaiming monstrosity – to use it as a metaphor for his rage against a normative and oppressive system. As encouraged by Sandy Stone’s manifesto three decades earlier, his intervention aimed to prove it is not like psychology is offering the only opportunity to reach freedom or sanity. Trans people don’t feel ‘saved’ by psychotherapists but merely undergo the debilitating process of diagnosis to get access to the healthcare they need. Trans people are still forced to portray their lives with what Stone called “plausible histories”¹²⁹ – to construct false narratives in order to receive a diagnosis of ‘Transsexuality’ back then or ‘Gender Dysphoria’ now.

Throughout all the accounts in this chapter, there is a clear and crucial need for the acknowledgment of complexity. In recent medical discourse, this process of reducing a person

¹²⁵ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak*, 19.

¹²⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?”. In: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Lawrence Gossberg & Cary Nelson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) 271-313.

¹²⁷ Sarah Bracke, “From ‘saving women’ to ‘saving gays’: Rescue narratives and their dis/continuities,” in: *European Journal of Women’s Studies* Vol. 19 (2012), 237-252.

¹²⁸ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak*, 19.

¹²⁹ Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back,” 14.

to a limited set of features has been termed “diagnostic reductionism.”¹³⁰ Following research on complex conditions like ‘chronic fatigue syndrome’ and ‘Fibromyalgia,’ researchers have stated that this trend “needs to be superseded or at least complemented by an individualised approach,”¹³¹ that considers “bio-psychosocial factors.”¹³² Not only does compulsive labelling take away the richness of someone’s personal story, but having to adhere to a set of norms can actually be an ‘ill-making factor’ in itself. In the application of DSM categorizations of ‘Transsexuality’ and ‘Gender Dysphoria,’ this diagnostic reductionism is also at play. And for Preciado, while echoing visions of the authors of this whole chapter, these normative notions of ‘trans’ need a radical update:

“We urgently need clinical practice to transition. This cannot happen without a revolutionary mutation in psychoanalysis, and a critical challenge of its patriarchal-colonial presuppositions. (...) The subject/object duality (...) is replaced by a new relationship, one that conjointly leads to mutation and to becoming other. (...) It will entail learning together, and healing our wounds, abandoning the techniques of violence and devising a new approach to the reproduction of life on a planetary scale.”¹³³

In a 2023 podcast, Susan Stryker made an intra-community reference to Preciado’s influential lecture. She jokingly criticized him for not having credited her work, especially *My Words to Victor Frankenstein* (1994).¹³⁴ In 2024, Stryker will publish a collection of her essays under the meaningful title *When Monster Speaks*, which can be interpreted as a response to Preciado’s question. Edited by fellow theorist McKenzie Wark, the volume will showcase the development of Stryker’s writing in the past few decades. In an early review of the book, historian Jules Gill-Peterson recognized Stryker’s pivotal role in the (academic) discourse around ‘trans’:

“Decades ago, the monster demanded a word with its creator, and thus was trans studies.”¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Peter Vermeir, An Mariman, Lilla Lucza, Viola Sallay, Anne Weiland, Karen M. Stegers-Jager, Dirk Vogelaers, “Epidemiology and organisation of care in medically unexplained symptoms: A systematic review with a focus on cultural diversity and migrants,” in: *International Journal of Clinical Practice*, 2021 (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9285020/>, accessed on 11 January 2024).

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak*, 76.

¹³⁴ “Susan Stryker talks Somatechnics, Queer Monstrosity, and Trans Politics,” *Well Well Well*, 2023.

¹³⁵ “When Monsters Speak: A Susan Stryker Reader,” on: *Duke University Press* (<https://www.dukeupress.edu/when-monsters-speak>, accessed on 29 December 2023).

Representation

Transgender Studies

“Look for us – transgender warriors – in the leadership of the struggle to usher in the dawn of liberation.”¹³⁶ – Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*

In the 1990s, influenced by community activism, a new type of scholarship emerged, that examined ‘trans’ beyond its psychology or medicalization, which had dominated the discussion previously. Apparent in the initial *Transgender Studies Reader*, the topic became a cultural obsession, “exerting a fascination across many (...) fields, and many communities of interest.”¹³⁷ The efforts of trans academics and theorists are progressively shifting away from the perception of transness as a mental disorder, focusing instead on experiential accounts by experts in the field – trans people themselves.

The research that is part of Transgender Studies engages with the fundamental disciplinary concerns of present-day social science and humanities,¹³⁸ and has connected observations derived from the exploration of phenomena that challenge or disrupt traditional confines of gender. A primary focus in this still emerging field of study revolves around the fact that the taxonomy of sex and gender seemingly has become disordered. Sex and gender instead of stable external categories, now seem to be “embedded in the individuals who experience them.”¹³⁹ This concern has emerged from the deconstructive process inherent in postmodern thought, a process in which “modernity and its values, including gender, have been stripped away.”¹⁴⁰ However, for trans people and their self-perception, the question arises as to whether gender can be theoretically reclaimed. While the theoretical deconstruction of gender is intriguing, it does not reflect the gendered reality of daily lived experiences, especially for trans people who still face a serious level of stigma, oppression, and violence. This is considered one of the most crucial reflections that trans people have contributed to feminist and queer theory.

As one of its main principles, and in slight contrast to what Sandy Stone asks for in her influential *Posttranssexual Manifesto* (1987), trans theory recognizes that the trans position is inherently problematic. Labels such as ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are insufficient in capturing the

¹³⁶ Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 128.

¹³⁷ Susan Stryker, Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xii.

¹³⁸ Stryker, Currah, Moore, “Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?,” 11.

¹³⁹ Stryker, Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader*, xii.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

complexity of the trans experience, given the personal history and knowledge of trans people is so widely different from those of cis people. However, articulating this position is a task that should be tackled by predominantly trans people.¹⁴¹ By shining light on the struggles of living a trans life, as well as critiquing prevailing discourse, trans theorists have successfully amplified trans voices within academic spheres.¹⁴² According to Stryker and Whittle, the emergence of transgender studies has “created new ways in which to be an activist, as well as new ways of being trans.”¹⁴³ Among other things, it has made it possible to go beyond the relative safety established for queerness in order to claim a distinct position of suffering and embrace the rage that it evokes.

However, despite this increased representation of transness, the heightened visibility has not necessarily led to substantial improvements in the overall living conditions for trans people.¹⁴⁴ The 2010s were characterized by a “paradoxical simultaneity of unprecedented trans visibility in arts and media and of ongoing transphobic violence, disproportionately affecting economically disadvantaged communities and communities of colour.”¹⁴⁵ These shifts can however also be read as a “testament to the fact that representation expands the realm of the intelligible.”¹⁴⁶ In fictional works, trans characters slowly no longer seemed to be represented as only the spectacular signifiers of gender variance, but started inhabiting diverse narrative universes.¹⁴⁷

In the following sections, we focus on visual representations of transness, in which the concept of ‘visibility’ will be further inspected. By exploring the complexities of supposedly straightforward concepts of both ‘representation’ and ‘trans,’ it becomes possible to navigate away from the so-called “trap of the visual,”¹⁴⁸ that equates more mainstream representation with more societal recognition.

¹⁴¹ Cf. The concept of ‘Positionality’ (see 3.2.) and this specific quote (see 2.1.1.): “If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive,” said by Audre Lorde during a speech in 1982 at Harvard University.

¹⁴² Stryker, Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader*, xiv-xv.

¹⁴³ Stryker, Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader*, xv.

¹⁴⁴ Cael M. Keegan, Laura Horak and Eliza Steinbock, “Cinematic/Trans*/Bodies Now (And Then, and to Come),” in: *Somatechnics* 8, no. 1 (2018), 1-13.

¹⁴⁵ Koch-Rein, Yekani & Verlinden, “Representing trans”, 2

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴⁸ Toby Beauchamp, *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 19-20.

Trans Narratives on Screen

“For a very long time the ways in which trans people have been represented on-screen, have suggested that we’re not real, (...) that we’re mentally ill, that we don’t exist. (...) Yet here we are, and we’ve always been here.”¹⁴⁹ – Laverne Cox, *Disclosure*

Throughout the history of film and media, the representation of trans people on-screen has been intricately linked to troublesome images of gender non-conforming people. These depictions often categorized them as either helpless victims with little agency or portrayed them as dangerous psychopaths and sexual predators, exemplified by characters like Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) or Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Another example can be found in J.K. Rowling’s *Troubled Blood* (2020), which she wrote under the male pseudonym Robert Galwraith (the irony!). These three fictional works feed the myth about ‘men dressing up as women to hurt women,’ which is exactly what Rowling also warns for in her transphobic tweets. Another notable phenomenon is the act of ‘disclosure’ of the trans woman’s body, which is often followed by visceral reactions, including expressions of unbelief and literal sickness. An exaggerated example can be found in several scenes in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), in which Jim Carrey plays a goofy detective who by ‘revealing the truth’ triggers the whole cast to start vomiting.

As is noted by Anson Koch-Rein, Elahe Haschemi Yekani and Jasper J. Verlinden, it is crucial to dissect “how the cinematic gaze spectacularized trans bodies in these seductive ways.”¹⁵⁰ Trans representation has relied heavily on tropes that originated the concept of ‘being trapped in the wrong body,’ which is now widely criticized in trans discourse. This type of storytelling ultimately oversimplifies the richness of trans experiences, repetitively reducing it to the theme of transition. This resembles how ‘disabled’ people are often reduced to their disabilities. Echoing the words of Talia Mae Bettcher, “we’ve actually been trapped in the wrong theory.”¹⁵¹

Yet over the past decade, there has been a remarkable transformation in the portrayal of transness in media. The early 2010s witnessed a substantial surge in the visibility of trans characters on television, exemplified by the compelling performances of Candis Cayne in *Dirty, Sexy, Money* (2007–2009) and Laverne Cox in *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019) –

¹⁴⁹ Laverne Cox in *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*, 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Anson, Koch-Rein, Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Jasper J. Verlinden, „Representing trans: visibility and its discontents,” *European Journal of English Studies*, 24, no. 1 (2020), 2.

¹⁵¹ Bettcher, “Trapped in the Wrong Theory,” 404.

both authentically depicted as powerful and openly trans women. The more recent Netflix series *Pose* (2018–), centred on the New York ballroom culture from the 1980s and 1990s, proved a pivotal display of trans people shaping their own narratives. With a large percentage of trans people in the entire production team, the show succeeded not only in reflecting on the history of trans representation, but also in shedding light on the current challenges that specifically trans people of colour face.¹⁵² Within the context of increasing visibility and still disproportionate violence, the show emphasizes themes of survival, resilience and community. The development of mainstream trans representation – that respectfully portrays trans people of colour – as C. Riley Snorton writes, contributes to staging a “usable history for more liveable black and trans lives.”¹⁵³

Visibility and its (Dis)Contents

“That’s the paradox of our representation: the more we are seen, the more we are violated.”¹⁵⁴
– Tiq Milan, *Disclosure*

While trans representation is on the rise – marked by the rise of Transgender Studies, widespread discussions around pronouns and numerous celebrities publicly coming out – trans visibility often persists in a binary framework. This is historically characterized by a disproportionate and sensationalized visibility of (certain forms of) trans femininities, compared to a relative lack of the media attention given to trans masculinities.

In the introduction to their book on trans representation, Koch-Rein, Yekani and Verlinden delve into this difference in visibility and representation between transmasculine and transfeminine embodiments.¹⁵⁵ People on the transfeminine spectrum are significantly more susceptible to surveillance, ridicule, often targeted explicitly for their visibility. This violence, that happens at the intersection of the hypervisibility of transfeminine people and their race, sexuality and economic status, seems to be linked to visibility as a sort of exposure or disclosure. On the other hand, some forms of violence – such as domestic violence, suicidality, structural violence, and abuse by healthcare professionals – thrive on the invisibility of transfeminine people. Therefore, it is crucial to “distinguish the violence that is linked to the

¹⁵² Koch-Rein, Yekani, Verlinden, “Representing trans,” 2.

¹⁵³ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 183.

¹⁵⁴ Tiq Milan in *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*, 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Koch-Rein, Yekani, Verlinden, “Representing trans,” 4-5.

invisibility of structural inequality and the exposure to violence that hypervisibility creates.”¹⁵⁶ In other words, they assert the need for a more delicate examination of the gender-specific intersections involving trans embodiments, visibility, and violence. Moreover, it is time to bring these specific nuances into not only academic discourse, but also politics, healthcare, representation and so on.

Put differently, it is crucial to recognize the logics of visibility/invisibility within the realm of trans representation, while continually considering the privileges and oppressions associated with factors like race, gender, economic status, ability, citizenship and so on. As Lana Wachowski poetically declares in a speech after receiving a visibility award from HRC: “Invisibility is indivisible from visibility.”¹⁵⁷ In contexts like these, intersectional approaches are vital, like one suggested by Mari Matsuda: the method of “asking the other question.”¹⁵⁸ When confronted with something that appears transphobic, it should be asked, ‘What is the racism, sexism, or ableism embedded in this?’ This method would allow for a more multidimensional and holistic understanding of other human beings and their lived experiences in this world.

Additionally, as Aren Z. Aizura advocates, it is imperative to analyse how the predominance of U.S.-centred trans representations reflects “the complex global flows of shared subcultural knowledges.”¹⁵⁹ It is important to examine the global circulation of trans representations and how they are perceived, resisted, or adapted within local contexts. Here, the following questions could be asked: are there particular national interests driving the visibility of recognizable scripts for trans bodies based on specific identity politics in representation? And how does this dynamic intersect with the visual portrayal of other forms of gender non-conforming embodiment that might not neatly align with such narrative frameworks? In considering these, a more comprehensive analysis would emerge that moves away from hierarchical divisions between local/global, north/south and so on.

¹⁵⁶ Koch-Rein, Yekani, Verlinden, “Representing trans,” 5.

¹⁵⁷ Human Rights Campaign, “Lana Wachowski receives the HRC Visibility Award,” *Youtube*, 25 October 2012 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crHHycz7T_c, accessed on 26 December 2023).

¹⁵⁸ Mari Matsuda, “Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy: Legal Theory out of Coalition,” in: *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1183–1192.

¹⁵⁹ Aren Aizura, “Of Borders and Homes: The Imaginary Community of (Trans)sexual Citizenship,” in: *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, 2 (2006): 291.

Alternative Strategies for Representing Trans

Disidentification

The term ‘representation’ itself is also a contested concept, evident in its three different meanings: 1. to stand in for or symbolize, 2. to speak or act on behalf of, 3. to re-present past events. One form of resistance against representation is found in the concept of ‘disidentification.’ Queer-of-colour theorist José Esteban Muñoz, who coined the term, defined it as a tactic used by minorities:

“Disidentification is a performative mode of tactical recognition (...) to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology. Disidentification resists the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of self within the social, a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification. Counteridentification often, through the very routinized workings of its denouncement of dominant discourse, reinstates that same discourse.”¹⁶⁰

Muñoz defines ‘disidentification’ as strategies that “neither (...) assimilate within such a structure nor strictly (oppose) it,”¹⁶¹ as a “hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance.”¹⁶² He further describes it as a kind of ‘work’ undertaken by minority subjects, that involves reframing, re-imagining and to a certain extent undoing them, to be able to reproduce new ways of representing.

Returning to the example of *Pose*, it can be interpreted as a fan-fictional response to the 1990 movie *Paris is Burning*, therefore serving as an act of disidentification. Instead of fully identifying or outright rejecting the original material, the trans producers of *Pose* have performed a kind of “disidentificatory desire.”¹⁶³ This involved creating representations that do not entirely represent the real people depicted but still maintain a profound affective connection with them.¹⁶⁴ Disidentification thus serves as a political and representational

¹⁶⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, “‘The White to Be Angry’: Vaginal Davis’s Terrorist Drag,” in: *Social Text* No. 52/53, *Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender* (1997),” 83.

¹⁶¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications. Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

¹⁶² Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 25.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁴ Koch-Rein, Yekani & Verlinden, “Representing trans,” 5.

strategy for marginalized subjects, allowing for “their (partial) identification across boundaries of identity.”¹⁶⁵ As a mode of engagement, disidentification has the potential to unlock a wealth of representations that can be made useful by decoding and recoding. This process might not only provide an “utopian blueprint”¹⁶⁶ for the future of trans representation but also carve out spaces in the present, fostering the formation of new alliances.

The Haptic

“If we are to dislodge transgender from the event of its medicalization and meditate, alternatively, on the handmade dimensionality of experience, what might transgender come to mean?”¹⁶⁷ – Jeanne Vacarro, *Handmade*

The haptic, so suggests Jack Halberstam, could provide a compelling aesthetic framework for trans representation overall.¹⁶⁸ Drawing on Laura Marks’ book *Touch* (2002),¹⁶⁹ Halberstam characterizes it as a sensory mode of perception that involves a model of perception and knowing that is neither oriented toward mastery nor restricted to visual domain. Under the heading *Handmade* (2014), Jeanne Vacarro highlighted the experience of touch as an alternative method for reading trans bodies. Shifting away from diagnostic classification methods, which have historically negated trans people’s agency in defining their own identities, she proposes another sense of knowing:

“The handmade is a haptic, affective theorization of the transgender body, a mode of animating material experience and accumulative felt matter. As bodily feeling and sensation transform flesh parallel to diagnostic and administrative forces, a handmade orientation foreground the work of crafting identity.”¹⁷⁰

This notion of ‘crafting identity’ allows for the exploration of visual methodologies used by various artists in representing (trans) bodies, without fetishizing them or constraining them

¹⁶⁵ Koch-Rein, Yekani & Verlinden, “Representing trans,” 5.

¹⁶⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 200.

¹⁶⁷ Jeanne Vacarro, “Handmade,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1-2 (2014): 96.

¹⁶⁸ Vacarro, “Handmade,” 96.

¹⁶⁹ Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Media and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 20.

¹⁷⁰ Vacarro, “Handmade,” 96-97.

within binary systems of visual pleasure. Therefore, the haptic could provide “one path around the conundrum of a binary visual plane.”¹⁷¹ In essence, by not following the logic where what is not female seems to be male, and what is not male appears to be female, it would be possible to acknowledge how generally only partial knowledge is available. It also disrupts the dichotomy between object and subject, as it does not require the viewer to engage in acts of looking, judging, or labelling. For Marks, the haptic represents “a visual erotics that offers its object to the viewer but only on condition that its unknowability remain intact, and that the viewer, in coming closer, give up his or her own mastery.”¹⁷² As implied by this quote, ‘hapticality’ embraces concepts like ‘meaning,’ ‘seeing,’ and ‘knowing’ in ways that transcend rational processes of sense-making and instead “force the viewer to examine their own relations to truth and authenticity.”¹⁷³

The language of the haptic offers an alternative to legal, medical and mediatized modes of knowing. Simultaneously, it serves as a tool for a remapping of the gendered body, shifting the focus away from (having or lacking certain) genitalia to exploring ways of knowing through the hand, the arm, the toes, the skin – in essence, understanding the body in bits and pieces. The haptic body is continually “improvised (...) on behalf of a willful and freeing sense of bewilderment.”¹⁷⁴ As such, the haptic could serve as an ideal framework for representing transness, as it seeks “to throw the organization of all bodies into doubt.”¹⁷⁵

‘Transing’

Taking it a step further, ‘trans’ itself could be read as a methodological tool for analysing visual representations of bodies. Keegan, for instance, talks about a “sense of trans,”¹⁷⁶ that utilizes cinematic forms “not merely to sense *for* transgender, but *as* transgender: a desiring feeling for what might otherwise go unrealized.”¹⁷⁷ For trans scholar Jack Halberstam, it is about elevating the discourse beyond the simplicity of a binary:

¹⁷¹ Jack Halberstam, *Trans*, A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 89-90.

¹⁷² Marks, *Touch*, 20.

¹⁷³ Halberstam, *Trans**, *A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 90.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Cael M. Keegan, *Lana and Lily Wachowski* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 6.

¹⁷⁷ Keegan, *Lana and Lily Wachowski*, 6.

“There is a lack of nuance of time and space. To be transgender is something largely understood as existing within the dogmatic terminus of male or female. And to “transition” imparts a sense of immediacy, a before and after from one terminus to another. (...) Binary is a false idol.”¹⁷⁸

‘Trans’ can also be outlined as a sort of transdisciplinary, trans-medial and trans-historical praxis, “to move newly among times and spaces, across fields and forms, toward (im)possible sensations, affects, and futures – always rooted in the material realities of transgender life as it has been historically and bodily constituted.”¹⁷⁹ In this framing of ‘trans’ – akin to notions of ‘queering’ or ‘cripping’ – ‘transing’ representation is about conveying the ambivalences of visibility within the context of embodied trans lives.

Let’s look at a few examples to illustrate this. Certain anachronistic scenes in *Pose* or the musical finale in *Transparent* (2014) exemplify defamiliarizing aesthetic choices that can be interpreted as a ‘transing’ of form, that is distinctively moving away from realism.¹⁸⁰ In these shows, violence and trauma tend to be addressed in a more affective and empathic than typical realistic depictions. This is achieved by suddenly bursting into song or breaking the so-called fourth wall. In doing so, these shows use television as an escapist tool that offers hope by celebrating trans visibility and resilience. Taking the example of the famous Wachowski director duo, after both came out as trans women, there has been a ‘transing’ of the narrative of *The Matrix* (1999).¹⁸¹ It is also clearly visible in *Orlando, My Political Biography* (2023), the newest film by Paul B. Preciado. Not only does it showcase a trans reading of Virginia Woolf’s famous novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) by Preciado himself, but the film also lets its actors tell their own stories of trans becoming.

Koch-Rein, Yekani & Verlinden state that the politics of trans representation “are not limited to the notion of ‘authentic’ or ‘good’ representations but ideally intervene and *trans* our ways of looking at the world.”¹⁸² Correspondingly, the increase in trans representation on

¹⁷⁸ Tracy Baim, “Second Wachowski filmmaker sibling comes out as trans,” on: *Windy Cindy Times*, March 8, 2016, <https://www.windycitytimes.com/lgbt/Second-Wachowski-filmmaker-sibling-comes-out-as-trans-/54509.html> (accessed January 8, 2020).

¹⁷⁹ Keegan, Horak and Steinbock, “Cinematic/Trans*/Bodies Now”, 3.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ “Why The Matrix Is a Trans Story According to Lilly Wachowski,” *Netflix*, uploaded on Youtube, 4 August 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adXm2sDzGkQ>, accessed 6 January 2024).

¹⁸² Keegan, Horak and Steinbock, “Cinematic/Trans*/Bodies Now”, 7.

television can be viewed as a ‘transing’ of genres and conventions, rather than framing it as a progressive sign of liberal inclusion in normative society.¹⁸³

In conclusion, many trans people do not experience transness or transitioning in a linear way and yearn for more affective nuances and a sense of so-called ‘trans time’ – again, similar to notions of queer or crip time. The technique of ‘transing’ could potentially break down binary ways of representing, looking, and thinking – to evoke a “transgender gaze, within which time, space, desire, and embodied identification all splinter, representing a collapse of the matrices of gender and sexuality.”¹⁸⁴

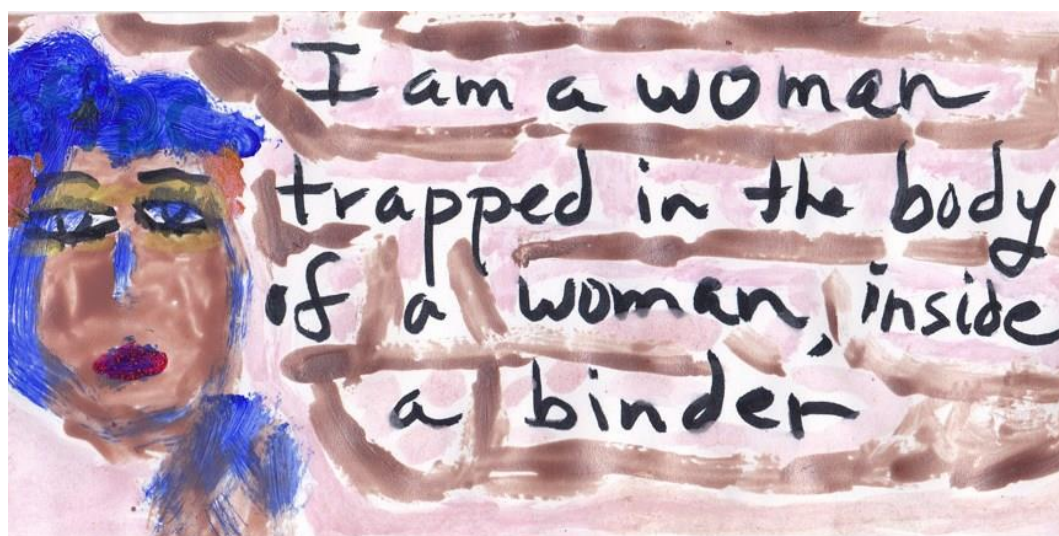
¹⁸³ Koch-Rein, Yekani & Verlinden, “Representing trans”, 6.

¹⁸⁴ Halberstam, *Trans**, *A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 94.

Vaginal Davis' Monstrosity

"It's the misfits, the maladjusted, who advance culture. Everyone else is just a slug. The maladjusted RULE!!!!"¹⁸⁵ – Vaginal Davis, *Interview with Hyperallergic*

Multidisciplinary artist Vaginal Davis deserves a chapter of her own, even though she identifies neither as 'trans' nor as 'monstrous.' Her work seems to speak for itself in evoking those two qualities in a refreshing, ambiguous, and 'disidentificatory' way.



Various Hags (series), painting by Vaginal Davis, Berlin, 2012.

José Esteban Muñoz called her style "terrorist drag" and wrote an article on her short film *The White To Be Angry* (1999), which he analysed through the lens of "the cultural politics of *disidentification*."¹⁸⁶ He points to the fact that Davis' work spans across several "cultural production genres," as it "appropriates, terroristically, both dominant culture and different subcultural movements."¹⁸⁷ In an interview where she describes how she acquired the name Vaginal Davis, Muñoz sees a principal example of how he understood 'disidentificatory':

"It came from Angela Davis – I named myself as a salute to her because I was really into the whole late '60's and early '70's militant Black era. When you come home from the inner city and you're Black you go through a stage when you try to fit the dominant culture, you kinda want to be white at first – it would be easier if you were

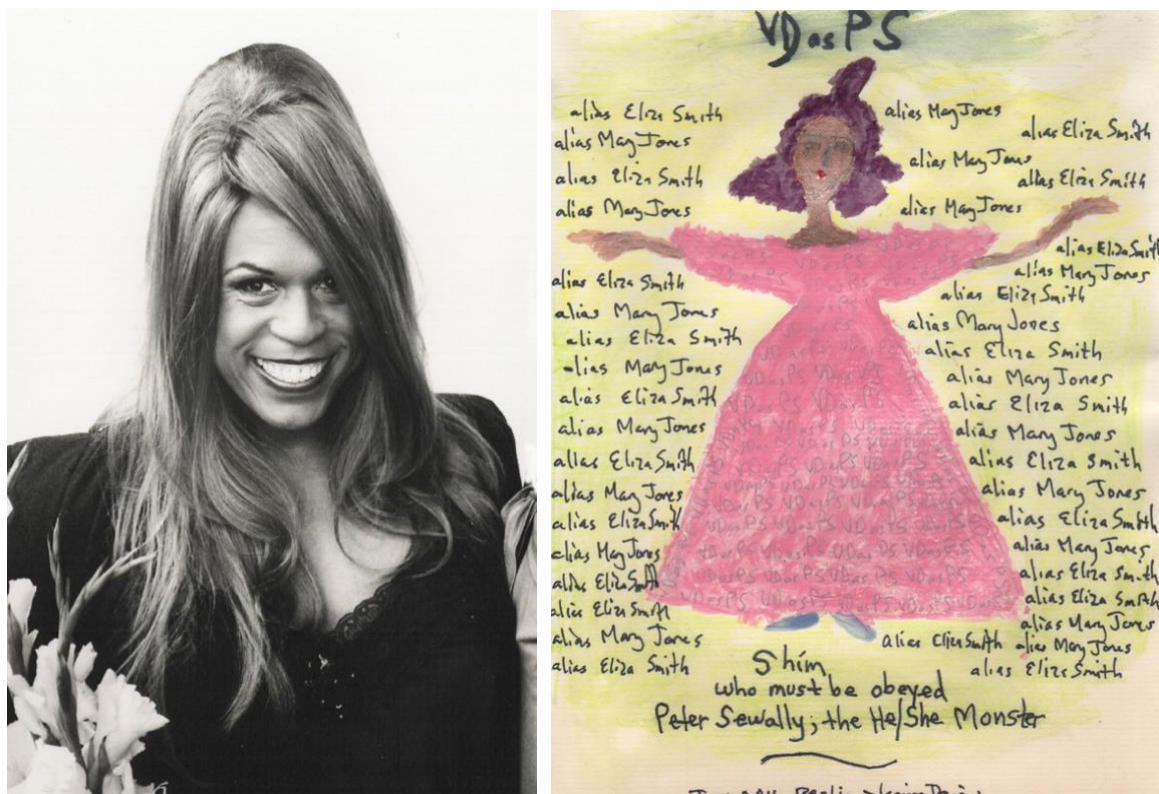
¹⁸⁵ Keenan Teddy Smith, ""The Maladjusted RULE!": A Conversation with Vaginal Davis," *Hyperallergic*, 30 July 2020 (<https://hyperallergic.com/554360/vaginal-davis-the-white-to-be-angry/>, accessed on 14 January 2024).

¹⁸⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, ""The White to Be Angry": Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag," in: *Social Text* No. 52/53, *Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender* (1997), 83.

¹⁸⁷ Muñoz, "Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag," 82.

White. (...) That's what I call the snow period – I just felt like if I had some cheap white boyfriend, my life could be perfect, and I could be some treasured thing. I could feel myself projected through some White person and have all the privileges that white people get-validation through association. (...) Then there was a conscious shift, being that I was the first one in my family to go to college – I got militant. That's when I started reading about Angela and the Panthers, and that's when Vaginal emerged as a filtering of Angela through humour.”¹⁸⁸

Since the 1980s, a self-labelled ‘sexual repulsive,’ Davis gained recognition for disrupting the cultural assimilation of what she called ‘homocore’ and corporate-friendly drag. She deliberately positioned herself at an awkward intersection, consistently rejecting conservative tactics within both gay and black politics. To achieve a hilarious and devastating effect, she employed punk music, invented biography, insults, self-mockery and repeated incitements to group sexual revolt.



Left: Vaginal Davis, photo by John Vlautin, 2002.
Right: “VD as PS,” painting by Vaginal Davis, Berlin, 2011.

¹⁸⁸ Tommy Gear and Mike Glass, “Supremely Vaginal,” *aRude* 1 (1995), 42.

Noteworthy, Davis lectured about the figure in the *Man-Monster* lithograph in 2011, in which she called Mary Jones the “She Monster of Olde New York.”¹⁸⁹ She contributed an original painting to an online exhibition about the lithograph depicting *Peter Sewally/Mary Jones*, curated by Jonathan Ned Katz and Tavia Nyong'o.¹⁹⁰ Davis intended it as a 'concept drawing' for a potential film based on Jones' life, envisioning herself in the lead role. In the title of this painting “*VD as PS*” (2011), she portrays herself as Peter Sewally, and as such, as someone widely known as ‘the He/She Monster.’ However, in her re-imagining of the lithograph, a shift in the narrative takes place: here, it is the monster, Vaginal Davis, who ‘must be obeyed.’

¹⁸⁹ “Peter Sewally/Mary Jones, June 11, 1836, by Jonathan Ned Katz and Tavia Nyong'o: The Man-Monster's Legacy,” *OutHistory*, 2017 (<https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/sewally-jones/visualizing>, accessed on 13 January 2024).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

A New Generation of Trans Monsters

“The old world is dying and the new cannot be born: now is the time of monsters.”¹⁹¹
– Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

In their artist statement *Visible Monstrosity as Empowerment* (2015), Antony Clair Wagner explains the importance of appropriating the monster as a tool for empowerment. They call for monstrous visibility, as it would help deconstruct the “violent hegemonic imaginary”¹⁹² by refusing its shame and boundaries. For Wagner, embracing the ‘monster’ is about asking the question: “How can we own the transgender imaginary?”¹⁹³

In this section, a few examples will be presented in which trans artists today have re-imagined monstrosity and are taking it to a whole different level. This development could be explained by several factors. The growth of the internet and social media has made it possible for trans people all over the world to be more easily connected. Regarding trans monstrosity specifically, the world of gaming and its capacity for the creation of alternative universes have played a huge role. Character-building, in both board- and videogames, has changed the way in which trans people can engage with their gender identity. It offers a space to play without having to face social repercussions, to be authentic without experiencing violence. In other words, these ‘fictional’ characters offer a sense of agency over one’s own body that is difficult to achieve in the outside world.

Furthermore, for sure in the Western world, there is overall more space for ‘monstrosity’ to be expressed and celebrated, regardless of criticisms of assimilation and mainstream representation. Queer and trans communities seem to be thriving, strengthened by decades of activism and a growing sense of interconnectedness. While still facing violence in the outside world, the expansion of so-called ‘safer spaces’¹⁹⁴ has made creative expressions of monstrosity more powerful than ever.

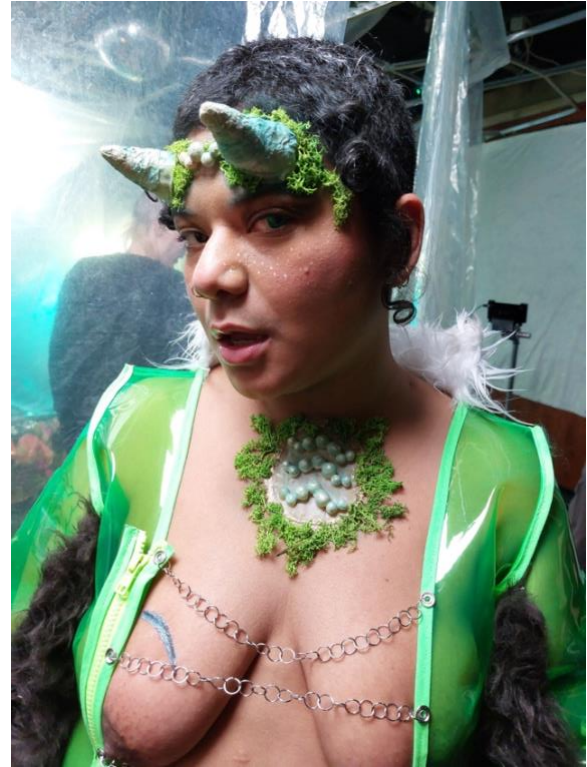
¹⁹¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935).

¹⁹² Anthony Clair Wagner, “Artist Statement: Visible Monstrosity as Empowerment,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2015), 341.

¹⁹³ Wagner, “Visible Monstrosity as Empowerment,” 341.

¹⁹⁴ Drawing from my own work experience in awareness and harm reduction, I prefer the notion of ‘safer’ space, as I believe there is no ultimate safety in this world. Bringing together a group of people, especially when marginalized, is bringing together a vast spectrum of experiences, backgrounds, belief systems, ideas about gender, race, ability etc. As a resource here, I refer to the Belgian project “Manifesto Safe(r) Space”: <https://gentskunstenoeverleg.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Manifesto-Safer-Space-NL-2-2.pdf>.

To start off this exploration of a new generation of trans monsters, let's look at the artist and performer La Papi Patacon, who grew up in Colombia and is currently based in Berlin. In 2023, they started organizing drag shows under the name *Monstrosity*.¹⁹⁵



Left: La Papi Patacon, photo by Camilo Cain, Berlin, 2023.

Right: Papi La Patacon in *Planet Anthurium*, prosthetics and photo by me, Berlin, 2023.

In these shows, everyone gets the opportunity to share their monstrous self, whatever that means to them. When I asked Patacon, what they understand by monstrosity, they said:

“To be different, to be awkward, to be weird. To be a monster, for me, is also to be the best for yourself, to become what you desire, what you need, what you want. So, it’s a possibility, it’s an open door for people to connect to their authenticity.”¹⁹⁶

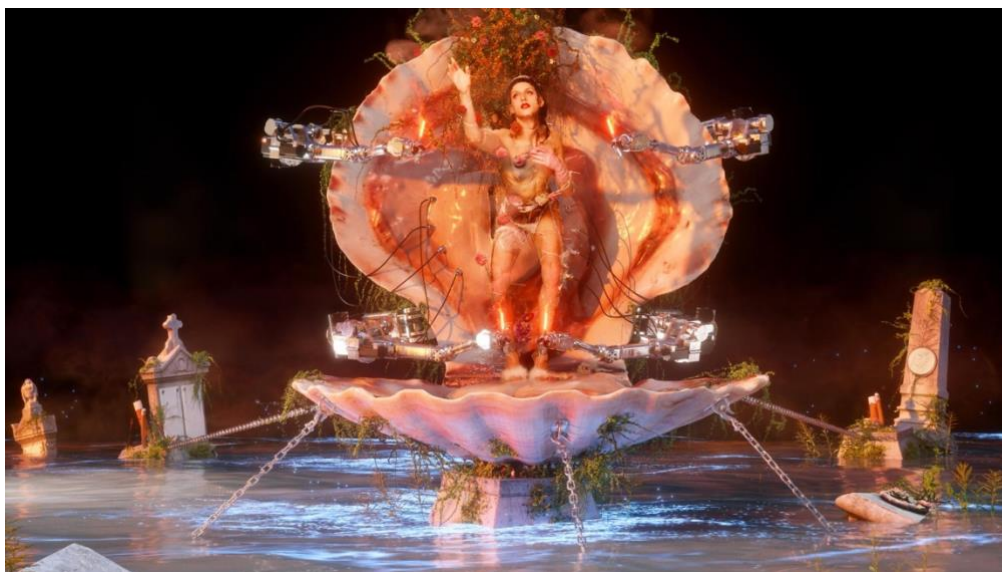
For Patacon, the *Monstrosity Show* is about creating a community to heal and become who we want to be, regardless of limitations and harassment enforced by society. They also highlight how monstrosity shows how everything is connected: “Everything we can see, touch or feel is all connected,”¹⁹⁷ echoing methods like ‘hapticality’ and ‘transing.’

¹⁹⁵ Instagram ‘Monstrosity Show’: <https://www.instagram.com/monstrosityshow/>.

¹⁹⁶ Spontaneous interview on Whatsapp with La Papi Patacon, 12 January 2024.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

As a more celebrity case, Venezuelan artist Arca gained a worldwide following – not only because of the experimental ‘genre-bending style’¹⁹⁸ of her music but also by adopting a cyborg aesthetic and bad-ass attitude. Looking at the definition in Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), Arca’s persona could easily be read as a “cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and human.”¹⁹⁹ After releasing her album called *Mutant* (2015), Arca’s fans started spontaneously adopting the name ‘mutants,’ thereby somehow inscribing themselves into her monstrous universe. Arca also released a track literally titled *Monstruosidad* (2015), for which she was applauded as “continuing to flex (...) boundary-breaking techniques, sourcing gold out of a deranged, hyperactive digital world.”²⁰⁰



Nonbinary (still), videoclip by Arca and Frederik Heyman, 2020

In the videoclip for *Nonbinary* (2020), director Frederik Heyman portrayed Arca as a mutant deity, “a cyborg Venus, a post-human goddess of birth and rebirth attended to by an android army of co-stars.” The lyrics show how she has control over her own narrative:

“I’m special you can’t tell me otherwise / That’d be a lie (...) Who do you think I am?
/ It’s not who do you think you’re dealing with, no / ‘Cause you’re not dealing with /
There’s no deal / Bitch it’s real on my side”

¹⁹⁸ Jonathan Sawyer, “Arca Releases New Genre-Bending Album ‘KiCk I,’” *High Snobiety*, 26 June 2020, (<https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/arca-kick-i-album-stream/>, accessed on 3 January 2024).

¹⁹⁹ Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 5.

²⁰⁰ “Arca shares “Monstruosidad” Track,” *DIY Magazine*, 22 December 2015 (<https://diymag.com/news/arca-shares-monstruosidad-track>, accessed on 4 January 2024).



Nonbinary (still), videoclip by Arca and Frederik Heyman, 2020

For trans people, so states Elijah van Soldt, “technology allows them to become their real selves long before the material world allows them to be.”²⁰¹ On a website called *(IM)POSSIBLE BODIES*, an interactive virtual experience about cyborgs and artificial intelligence, Van Soldt contributed an article dedicated to *Transgender Cyborgism*. He states that human/machine hybridity is about being “in the state of becoming, indefinitely evolving into a more fulfilled version of myself.”



Tentacular Spectacular: The Cryptid Swamp, curated by Oozing Gloop, coded by Esben Holk, 2023.

²⁰¹ Elijah van Soldt, “Transgender Cyborgism,” *(IM)POSSIBLE BODIES* (<https://impossiblebodies.nl/en/blog/transgender-cyborgism-2/>, accessed on 4 January 2024)

In their multidisciplinary project *Tentacular Spectacular* (2023), artist Oozing Gloop reimagines monstrosity by curating an alternate universe called “The Swamp.”²⁰² This world can be accessed online in a virtual game-like space, where different drag artists contributed videos that showcased their “queer obsession with frogs.” Throughout their work, Gloop explores the importance of hands. “Monsters don’t exist, we make them,”²⁰³ so they say. In their workshop series, *My Monstrous Hand*, participants were invited to transform their hands by using prosthetics and found materials. For Gloop, hands are like tentacles, portals to nonhegemonic forms of knowledge, referring to Donna Haraway’s concept of “tentacular thinking”²⁰⁴ – shifting the focus to networks, bodies, connections, and touch.



My Monstrous Hand, facilitated by Oozing Gloop, hand and photo by me, Berlin, 2023.

In contrast to the Anthropocene (made by human hands), Haraway defines her ‘Cthulucene’ as a promising monstrous era of the future, that is “made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming.”²⁰⁵ Though for Gloop, that is not a future goal but already a reality. They believe this time of monsters came into existence in 2016 – when Trump was elected, David Bowie died, and Haraway released *Staying with the Trouble* – a symbolic year that was

²⁰² Oozing Gloop, “Tentacular Spectacular Live,” 2023 (<https://tentacularspectacularlive.art/>, accessed on 13 January 2024).

²⁰³ Spontaneous interview over the phone with Oozing Gloop, 13 January 2024.

²⁰⁴ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 99-103.

²⁰⁵ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 30-57.

“great & terrible, grotesque and ghastly!”²⁰⁶ It is also the year Gloop did what they called it “The Awful Journey,”²⁰⁷ where they walked hundred miles in drag for nine days, inspired by the ‘Nine Days Wonder’ by Will Kemp, “from the year 1600, when a Shakespearean clown Morris danced from London to Norwich.”²⁰⁸ Through webs of symbolic interconnections, Gloop is able to convey the complexities of monstrosity and transness – while framing it in an easy narrative and visual framework. They also tell me:

“The original *Frankenstein* is actually quite complex, a lot of people don’t realize this – it’s a story in a story in a story, which is just like the experience of trans identity: a narrative on a narrative on a narrative.”²⁰⁹



Left: Boris Karloff in *Frankenstein* (still), directed by James Whale, 1931.

Right: *Coco Klein*, photo by Stevie Stevie, Berlin, 2023.

Frankenstein’s creature has clearly not yet left the realm of queer and trans imagination. In a recent look, Berlin-based drag artist Coco Klein re-interpreted its monstrosity. Coco describes themselves as a “supersonic, gender-bending (...) shapeshifter sent to earth to spread the message of radical self-expression,”²¹⁰ constantly reinventing themselves.

²⁰⁶ Oozing Gloop, *The End Times Zine*, 17 May 2022 (<https://tentacularspectacularlive.art/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/zine.pdf>, accessed on 13 January 2024), 25.

²⁰⁷ Gloop, *The End Times*, 25.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Spontaneous interview over the phone with Oozing Gloop, 13 January 2024.

²¹⁰ Instagram ‘Coco Klein’: https://www.instagram.com/coco_klein/.

In my own life and creative practice, I have also been exploring ‘trans monstrosity’ a lot. The creation of my alter ego, Baby Monster, during the pandemic has provided a transformative outlet for my creativity. I have described it as a ‘trans clown freak and neurodivergent critter’²¹¹ with a mission of ‘becoming weirder and wilder.’



Left: *Hot Take*, poster by me, Berlin, 2023.

Right: *Baby Monster*, photo by Luz Peusovich, edit by me, Berlin, 2023.

Growing up as a confused kid in a turbulent household, I always felt like I had to put on a mask, be the ‘okay’ one. This led me to not only being incredibly shy but also to ‘building walls’ – to the point where I was often detached from the world outside and myself. Throughout high school, I was struggling with severe depression, anxiety, and anger issues.

Luckily, in the meantime, I have sort of found my place in the world. I owe this transformation to books, incredible friendships, the chance of living in Berlin, queer nightlife, access to therapy, the mind of Donna Haraway and the companionship of dogs. All of these have allowed me to explore my queer- and transness, the neurodivergence of my brain and the whole spectrum of human emotions. Especially the feeling of rage continues to inform my artistic and activist practices, as it motivates me to keep changing, to push boundaries and

²¹¹ Choosing the word ‘critter’ is again a reference and ode to Donna Haraway, specifically to her book *Staying with the Trouble* and the film made in collaboration with Fabrizio Terranova *Donna Haraway: Storytelling for Earthly Survival*, both released in 2016!

deviate from the ‘normal.’ It shows in my commitment to challenge traditional beliefs around education, by creating alternative ways of sharing knowledge and resources. For example, I recently cofounded the research group Hot Take in Berlin, where we meet on an informal basis to talk about specific subject or one of our special interests. The aim here is to foster neurodivergent and non-academic ways of collective learning. I am also an active member of the organisation Critical Queer Solidarity, where I work on various projects such as ‘Lesbian Legacies,’ ‘Monsters in the Mountains,’ and ‘Intergenerational Dialogue in the LGBTQIA+ Community.’²¹²



Honky Donk: Mad Tea Party, photo by Madakya, Berlin, 2023.

I am also the co-founder of a clown party called Honky Donk, where guests are invited to be weird, grotesque, freakish, extravagant, camp, monstrous.²¹³ The first edition was Alice in Wonderland-themed and a big success. In ‘safer spaces’ like this, there is a possibility for people to explore more radical expressions of their hybrid selves, without the threat of shaming or exclusion. In my creative practice, as Baby Monster, I have explored drag, performance, storytelling, and prosthetics.²¹⁴ Recently, I created a new alter ego: a clown named Bobo – a word for someone ‘stupid’ in Spanish which also combines the names of my two dogs. Clowns

²¹² Website ‘Critical Queer Solidarity (CQS)’: <http://cqs.berlin/about/>.

²¹³ Instagram ‘Honky Donk Berlin’: <https://www.instagram.com/honkydonk.berlin/>.

²¹⁴ Instagram ‘Baby Monster’: <https://www.instagram.com/babymonster.261/>.

can be analysed as monstrous as well, as they invoke fear in many people and somehow dwell in the margins of society.



Left: *Baby Monster as Bobo*, photo by Jude Vadee, Berlin, 2023.
Right: *Kulshedra*, prosthetics by me, photo by Laurent Savino, Berlin, 2023.

Generally, I am fascinated by alter egos, as I believe they can serve as agents for resilience and transformation. By way of illustration, I have assisted my good friend and performer Kulshedra in realizing one of their creative visions for a performance last summer.²¹⁵ Their name comes from a mythical creature from Balkan mythology, a seven-headed dragon traditionally feared in their country of origin, Albania. By crafting and applying a prosthetic spine on their back, they could embody this monstrous creature while performing. These kinds of practices, for me, makes trans monstrosity tactile and bring about a haptic form of knowledge.

I have to say, it felt a little weird to write about myself, my embodiments and practices like this. But maybe, possibly, this is what it means to write oneself into a discourse.

²¹⁵ Instagram 'Kulshedra': https://www.instagram.com/kulshedra_x/.

Trans/Feminist Rage

Metaphors from the Margins

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”
– Audre Lorde, *Learning from the 60s*

Several other examples of metaphors, that emerged in marginalised communities, can help to rethink difference and resistance. In this section, the concepts of ‘intersectionality’ and ‘borderlands’ will be explored a bit more in depth.

Throughout her body of work, Audre Lorde emphasized the significance of acknowledging our differences and using them in a creative manner. As a critique of ‘inclusion’ in mainstream modes of knowledge and representation, Audre Lorde’s well-known statement could offer some metaphorical wisdom: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”²¹⁶ In her brief essay, Lorde addresses the problem of division within the feminist movement, arising from a lack of awareness regarding intersectionality, before the term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw.²¹⁷ Lorde writes the following on the power of differences:

“Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.”²¹⁸

Translating this to ‘trans,’ intersectionality serves as an essential tool for unravelling the power dynamics hidden behind trans representations and usages of ‘monstrosity.’ As a metaphor, heuristic tool, and critical social theory, the concept of ‘intersectionality’ has come a long way. In her article on the subject, Patricia Hill Collins underscores the power of the term, which has provided a “ready-made yet open-ended framework”²¹⁹ to study the interwoven dynamics of social inequalities. Taking this into account, there is a need to cultivate more space for differences – both within the trans community and the world outside of it. Only

²¹⁶ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House (1984),” in: *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 110-114.

²¹⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, Intersectionality

²¹⁸ Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” 112.

²¹⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 28.

then will it be possible to perceive transness as simply one among various embodiments, as human and complex. Persisting in a focus on identity politics, political correctness and specific terminologies that go with it, and therefore separate ourselves from anyone who is slightly different, hinders any genuine change.

In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa offers another important metaphor. She defines her own position in society as one defined by borders, while being situated at an ambiguous place of contact between dominant and non-dominant cultures:

“Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. (...) A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.”²²⁰

Said differently, Anzaldúa defined the ‘borderlands’ as structural places that reflect hierarchical power relations and exist outside of conventional categories of belonging.²²¹ It suggests a place that not simply harbours experiences but also involves a specific way of operating on a political and intellectual level. Consequently, as a metaphor, the ‘borderlands’ represent a geographic, political, cultural, and affective landscape that defies explanation through binary logics or notions of liminality or the space in-between. Living in the margins, to Anzaldúa, entails “keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, (...) like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element.”²²²

“In the Borderlands

you are the battleground (...)
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back;
(...)

To survive the Borderlands

you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads.”²²³

²²⁰ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.

²²¹ Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, 32-33.

²²² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, (preface).

²²³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 194-195.

The metaphorical language in Gloria Anzaldúa's work has significantly influenced trans theory. In her *Posttranssexual Manifesto* (1987), Sandy Stone highlights Anzaldúa's concept of the 'Mestiza' as "the illegible subject living in the borderlands who is of partial speech in each but always only partially intelligible to each."²²⁴ Trying to find an escape, her figure of the 'new Mestiza' tries to counteract this illegibility by taking control over speech and inscription, actively writing herself into the discourse. Inspired by this practice, Stone invites trans people to do the same – "to use the strength which brought us through the effort of restructuring identity, and which has also helped us to live in silence and denial, for a revisioning of our lives."²²⁵

²²⁴ Stone, *The Empire Strikes Back*, 25.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

Rethinking Rage and Resistance

“Rage is equated by our dominators with hysteria or insanity.”²²⁶

– Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinages*

How is it possible to use rage as a tool for resistance and change? While popular psychology gives the impression that anger and rage are negative emotions, there are a lot of accounts where they are explored differently.²²⁷

Audre Lorde explores the question in her presentation entitled *The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism* (1981), held at the National Women’s Studies Association Conference that year. She writes how her response to racism is anger, that she has lived with it and ignored it until it consumed her. Lorde proclaims: “My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of anger will teach you nothing, also.”²²⁸ She addressed both the white and people of colour in the room, when she stated how she wants to speak about her anger, and about what her “travels through its dominions” have taught her. Although Lorde specifically addressed women in her lecture, her exploration of the uses of anger counts for anyone facing oppression. Those who have stocked up on anger, both personal and institutional, might be able to use it against the source of their anger. For Lorde, anger can become a “powerful source of energy serving progress and change,”²²⁹ serving as a “strengthening act of clarification.”²³⁰ She also specifically differentiated it from hatred:

“Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change.”²³¹

According to Lorde, facing away from anger is denying the insight and information it holds, thereby accepting the frameworks already known that are “deadly and safely familiar.”²³² She urges women of colour not to turn away from their anger in the face of racism, but to “stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, (...) to tap that anger as an important source of

²²⁶ Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinages: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 111.

²²⁷ Hilary Malatino, “Tough Breaks: Trans Rage and the Cultivation of Resilience,” in: *Hypatia* vol. X, no. X, (2018), 1-2.

²²⁸ Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism (1981),” in: *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), 107.

²²⁹ Lorde, “The Uses of Anger,” 110.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

²³² *Ibid.*, 115.

empowerment.”²³³ In her article *Tough Breaks: Trans Rage and the Cultivation of Resilience* (2018), Hilary Malatino explores how rage is integral to the survival of marginalised people. Looking for different understandings of anger, she seeks out its function as “an energy that propels us toward more possible futures, an energy that encourages to break those relationships that do not sustain us (...).”²³⁴ Malatino specifically looks at the phenomenon of trans rage, drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler and Maria Lugones, which will be explored in the next paragraphs.

Following Ahmed’s thought processes in her books *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) and *The promise of happiness* (2010), Malatino defines rage as an “orienting effect,” that shields people from harm and “moves us.”²³⁵ Being angry can socially lead to being perceived as unfriendly or unapproachable, which can be an “important mode of self-preservation,”²³⁶ a way to strengthen immunity against hostile surroundings. Ahmed analyzed a process of “affective conversion,”²³⁷ that turns people from minorities into ‘killjoys.’ When negative feelings like anger, depression, unhappiness stick to them, they become “affect aliens”²³⁸ – who cannot just be happy through normative modes of happiness – who deviate and “pervert the normal.”²³⁹ In *The promise of happiness*, Ahmed has meticulously delved into the analysis of the normative cultural and political implications of these allegations. They set the stage for a lamentation about the failure of marginalized people to find contentment in their living conditions: “we are told that our unhappiness is making them unhappy, that our anger is eroding the social and familial ties that bind.”²⁴⁰ People from minorities become “unhappiness causes,”²⁴¹ who transform good feelings into bad ones.

However, Ahmed argues, rage could serve as a tool to become unstuck, to break free and find an escape from these challenging relations. Rage occurs when interpersonal, political, and institutional dynamics become too much. In her body of work, she has consistently pointed to the significance of “breaking points”²⁴² – moments of reaction and being brutally honest – that bring about transformation. These outbursts of anger are exactly what leads marginalized

²³³ Lorde, “The Uses of Anger,” 114.

²³⁴ Malatino, “Tough Breaks,” 2.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The promise of happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 45.

²³⁸ Ahmed, *The promise of happiness*, 45.

²³⁹ Malatino, “Tough Breaks,” 3.

²⁴⁰ Malatino, “Tough Breaks,” 3.

²⁴¹ Ahmed, *The promise of happiness*, 49.

²⁴² Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 97.

people to lead a “bearable life (...) that can hold up, which can keep its shape or direction, in the face of what it is asked to endure.”²⁴³ Nonetheless, it is important here to point to the still disproportionate rates of suicidality in trans people. Malatino points to the necessity to give space to these ‘breaking points,’ while creating more tolerant social frameworks to rely on. She elaborates:

“Sometimes, a break is followed by a suicide; but often, a break is a moment that enables a more livable life to be realized. We associate instability with breaks precisely because of this radical differential of possible aftermaths, precisely because of these high stakes. Breaks scare us – and others – for that reason. But our survival is radically dependent on these others; what happens during and after a break depends on the communal uptake such breaks receive: how they are witnessed and understood. If one breaks – if one keeps breaking – and is met only with criticism, pathology, censure, isolation, or institutionalization, the spectre of suicide looms larger and larger.”²⁴⁴

Malatino is inspired by a particular essay by Maria Lugones entitled *Hard-to-Handle Anger*, published in her book *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (2003). Here, Lugones explored the role of anger in the work of women of colour and develops a “nonce taxonomy of anger.”²⁴⁵ Eve Sedgwick conceptualized ‘nonce taxonomies’ in her *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) as methods of “mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations”²⁴⁶ that shape the social landscapes of marginalized people and are strategically developed from their lived experience of oppression. They are “forms of categorizations that are essential to our survival, though they are not necessarily intelligible or perceptible to dominant culture.”²⁴⁷ Lugones produced a nonce taxonomy by theorizing from her own lived experience with anger – which lead her to formulate a valuable set of statements that analyse anger in terms of its potential for resistance. She explores the multiplicity of anger:

“(...) there is anger that is a transformation of fear; explosive anger that pushes or recognizes the limits of one’s possibilities in resistance to oppression; controlled

²⁴³ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 97.

²⁴⁴ Malatino, “Tough Breaks,” 5.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

²⁴⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 23.

²⁴⁷ Malatino, “Tough Breaks,” 7.

anger that is measured because of one's intent to communicate within the official world of sense; anger addressed to one's peers in resistance; anger addressed to one's peers in self-hatred; anger that isolates the resistant self in germination; anger that judges and demands respect; anger that challenges respectability."²⁴⁸

For Lugones, it is neither merely a pathological symptom nor an isolating phenomenon but an indication of injustice, signalling the effects of systemic and interpersonal mistreatment. Through communication, anger can be productive, often leading to transformation in social relations and selves. Malatino concludes that anger is "much more than an undesirable loss of control, an irrational form of overreaction."²⁴⁹ Referring to the poem in Stryker's essay *My Words to Viktor Frankenstein* (1994), she states how sometimes anger "(...) gives us back our bodies and lives, steals them back and recuperates them from dominant systems of sense (...) where we are understood as mad, insane, hysterical."²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Perigrinations*, 10.

²⁴⁹ Malatino, "Tough Breaks," 7.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

Monstrosity as Metaphor

“Trans rage is forceful. The greater the force, the greater the material shift effected.”²⁵¹
– Hilary Malatino, *Tough Breaks*

As a way to finish the analysis, I want to draw some conclusions on how we can understand monstrosity as a metaphor for transness. While the first accounts were of transphobic nature, with the writing of radical feminists (TERFs) Daly, Raymond and Rowling, the rest of the thesis explores trans/feminist perspectives on monstrosity and rage.

“Trans metaphorizations of the monster draw from implications of monstrosity way beyond the idea of monstrous bodies,”²⁵² writes Anson Koch-Rein. In his dissertation, *Mirrors, Monsters, Metaphors: Transgender Rhetorics and Dysphoric Knowledge* (2014) he “locates marginalized forms of knowledge in recurrent metaphors circulating”²⁵³ in discourses on trans experiences. For Koch-Rein, the ‘monster’ was used to describe feelings of gender dysphoria and thereby it “shows how dysphoric knowledge characterizes the affective experience of knowing the place of one’s embodiment in the gendered order of the world.”²⁵⁴ In the accounts discussed in this thesis, monstrosity is reclaimed as “a site of agency that negotiates a queerly complex relationship to nature, origin narratives, and language.”²⁵⁵

In her ground-breaking piece *My Words to Victor Frankenstein*, Susan Stryker speaks as if she was the eloquent monster of Frankenstein speaking to its creator. She does so to reinterpret trans embodiment and rage against a normative society that not only naturalizes binaries but also denies trans people legal recognition, healthcare, and rights. Throughout the 1990s, arguably following the reclamation of the trans monster, Transgender Studies emerged as a field of study within the academy. Instead of rejecting the characterization of monstrosity, it advocates for embracing it, seeking to reshape the world in a way that makes liveable what is currently still deemed monstrous gender.²⁵⁶

This thesis advocates for an intersectional trans/feminist analysis of ‘monstrosity’ and its associated affect trans rage. According to Benny Lemaster in *Transing Dystopia* (2018), such analysis sheds light on “two co-constitutive processes: 1) becoming monstrous and its affect,

²⁵¹ Malatino, “Tough Breaks,” 17.

²⁵² Anson Koch-Rein, “Monster,” 135.

²⁵³ Anson Koch-Rein, *Mirrors, Monsters, Metaphors: Transgender Rhetorics and Dysphoric Knowledge*, advisor Dr. Michael Moon (Emory University, 2014), 4.

²⁵⁴ Koch-Rein, *Mirrors, Monsters, Metaphors*, 247.

²⁵⁵ Anson Koch-Rein, “Monster,” 135.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

2) monstrous becomings.”²⁵⁷ First, ‘becoming monstrous’ involves examining the discursive and material mechanisms through which trans people are portrayed as monstrous as an effect from oppressive structures. As stated by Bernadette Calafell, this is about understanding “how (...) difference, or Otherness, gets constructed as monstrosity.”²⁵⁸ Identities are always intersectional, and precisely these “intersectionalities inform monstrosities.”²⁵⁹ In becoming monstrous, embodiment and subjectivity are ‘monstrified’ because of intersectional differences. ‘Monstrous becomings,’ in contrast, are reclamations of the contested figure of the monster in order to construct new trans imaginaries. In a transfeminist analysis of Stryker’s essay, it is possible to see how both Frankenstein’s monster and ‘trans monstrosity’ disrupt normative standards, both thriving in oppositional yet complementary ways. Frankenstein’s monster fails to fit within visual norms in society, leading to its characterization as monstrous but then learns a human language “in order to claim a position as a speaking subject and enact verbally the very subjectivity denied it in the specular realm.”²⁶⁰ In other words, the monster is a non-belonging subject of that manages to learn certain strategies to inscribe itself into the discourse, not by assimilating but by crafting its own narrative.

Similarly, Sandy Stone called for trans people to transcend the ‘plausible stories’ projected onto them by medical discourse, in order to write themselves into the discourse. Paul B. Preciado talked from a monstrous standpoint, when addressed the field of psychology. He challenged the fact that ‘the trans condition’ is still defined as a mental disorder, reducing trans people to a limited set of symptoms or characteristics. Nikki Sullivan calls for a ‘hybrid ontology’ that reconceptualizes connections between technology, nature, embodiment and identity, by introducing the term ‘somatechnics.’ Through Haraway’s eyes, monstrosity as a metaphor calls for a ‘regenerative politics of inappropriate/d others,’ that embraces chaos and pushes for a more fluid and dynamic understanding of difference. Therein lie the promises of monsters: “a *myriad* of alterities (...) of constantly shifting figure (...) that exceed the frame of any possible representation.”²⁶¹ Monstrosity has the potential to unlock a vast universe of possibilities, but it is crucial to approach the concept with a critical lens. In a world that still denies certain groups of people their human rights, through a process of dehumanization, monsters need to be handled with care.

²⁵⁷ Benny Lemaster, *Transing Dystopia*, 101.

²⁵⁸ Bernadette Marie Calafell, *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015), 4.

²⁵⁹ Calafell, *Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*, 5.

²⁶⁰ Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein,” 241.

²⁶¹ Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back,” 16.

Conclusion: Let the Monster Speak!

“Rage
gives me back my body
as its own fluid medium.”²⁶² – Susan Stryker, *My Words to Viktor Frankenstein*

‘Monstrosity’ as a metaphor holds the potential of opening our (academic) eyes to – the complexity and potential of – trans narratives, ‘affect’ and rage. The documentation of trans lives has only just begun in earnest, leaving much anticipation for what the future holds. After critically examining the increase in trans visibility, this thesis explored a few alternative strategies for trans representation (disidentification, the haptic, ‘transing’). On an academic level, there is a lot of enthusiasm within the still emerging field of Transgender Studies, slowly reaching farther than the U.S., its place of birth. Furthermore, ‘trans’ holds a big theoretical possibility to be included in other fields, as can shift away our thinking from binary hierarchies like good/bad. It has great potential to embrace complexity, chaos and nuance in a time where we really need it – especially in the face of the phenomena like ‘transnormativity’ and commercial exploitation of trans narratives.

We live in a time where the ‘monstrification’ of trans people (still) persists. Despite the progress in laws and medicine in the West, trans liberation still feels like a utopic vision. Trans people continue to face a disproportionate amount of violence – such as misgendering, stares, second-guessing of their identity, verbal abuse, threats, assaults, fatal attacks. Following a backlash signified by the ‘TERF Wars’ in the West, trans folks realized again that they are trying to survive in a world not designed for them – a society that often disregards their experiences, identities, embodiments, and narratives.

As a final intervention, I want to express my hope that European universities will embrace this ‘trend’ and incorporate more ‘trans’ into their programs. For instance, the Flemish master program in Gender and Diversity could considerably improve its curriculum by adding courses like ‘Introduction to Transgender Studies,’ ‘The Politics of Representation,’ or ‘Trans/Feminisms.’ Generally, the program could benefit from amplifying marginalized voices and hiring researchers with more diverse backgrounds and embodiments.

In other words, let the metaphorical monster speak!

²⁶² Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein,” 247.

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