

Subversive Sutures: A Counter-hegemonic Reading of Trans Monstrosity



The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.

- Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

Look for us - transgender warriors - in the leadership of the struggle to usher in the dawn of liberation.

- Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*

Abstract

This essay presents a new approach to read the concept of trans monstrosity proposed by Susan Stryker in "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix" in 1994. Her work, in an emergent context of transgender studies, establishes a literary dialogue with Frankenstein's creature, thus offering a groundbreaking view from which to criticize transmedicalism¹ and the reification of hegemonic gender identities. Still, the post-structuralist framework in which the text was written limits its political possibilities beyond the discursive denaturalization of the gendered body. Hence, in light of contemporary transgender Marxist thought, new conceptual tools are offered to bring to fruition the counter-hegemonic politics that lied in the monstrous seams and sutures originally theorized by Stryker.

Keywords: Trans monstrosity, gender system, counter-hegemony, post-transsexual.

Resumen

Este ensayo introduce un nuevo enfoque de lectura de la monstruosidad trans, concepto propuesto en 1994 por Susan Stryker mediante "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix." Su obra, enmarcada en un contexto emergente de los estudios transgénero, establece un diálogo literario con la criatura de Frankenstein para ofrecer una mirada rompedora a través de la cual criticar el transmedicalismo y la reificación de las identidades hegemónicas de género. No obstante, el ámbito postestructuralista en el que el texto fue redactado ha delimitado sus posibilidades políticas a la mera desnaturalización discursiva de los cuerpos generizados. Por consiguiente, se ofrecen nuevas herramientas conceptuales, a la luz del pensamiento trans-marxista contemporáneo, desde las que poder llevar a buen puerto la política contra-hegemónica que ya radicaba en esas suturas y costuras monstruosas que Stryker teorizó.

Palabras Clave: Monstruosidad trans, sistema de género, contra-hegemonía, post-transexual.

¹ Medical theorizing that responds to the suffering of trans people by finding its root in the body and not in social relations

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1. Introduction: The Transsexual Empire Reads Back

From 10 to 12 June, 1993, California State University held an interdisciplinary academic conference under the name of “Rage across the Disciplines.” This conference would mark a before and an after for Transgender activism in the United States. Susan Stryker, the person responsible for this episode, was a budding historian who at that time was an active militant in the queer direct action collective called Transgender Nation. With the deliberate intention of challenging the boundaries of acceptable academic discourse² (245) on the stand appeared a woman wearing combat boots, a tattered punk t-shirt, a quartz pink triangle³ earring and a leather jacket with a sticker that read “FUCK YOUR TRANSPHOBIA” (245) plastered on the back. I can imagine the surprise of the attendants, but this had to be much greater when, in the middle of her incendiary monologue, Stryker alleged: “You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both.”(247) In this way, the trans theorist adopted the gaze of Mary Shelley’s monster to denounce gender identities as oppressive cultural constructs, as well as dominant historical relationships in which all people are immersed without even questioning them, thus mobilizing gramscian concept of hegemony.

One year later, Susan Stryker revisited Mary Shelley’s gothic creature in the form of an essay titled “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix.”⁴ This text gave a new philosophical, political and literary perspective to her monologue, while initiating an academic tradition in which Gothic horror conventions are adopted to question heterosexist

² Hereafter, all references to this primary source will be made by displaying only the page number, in order to avoid unnecessary repetitions.

³ Male sexual deviants (encompassing what is today referred to as trans women) were marked with pink triangles during the nazi Holocaust.

⁴ Hereafter referred to as “My Words”

⁵ hegemony. Taking these preliminary thoughts as my starting points, this dissertation examines how “My Words”, precisely by establishing monstrosity as a cultural framework from which to theorize gender nonconformity, can contribute to the flowering of trans counter-hegemonic politics today. In what follows, I will analyze the main features of “My words” as they pertain to the aforementioned thesis. In particular, I will focus on how the dialogue that Stryker establishes between the Gothic tradition and her own gender nonconformity contributes to the illustration of the gender system as an hegemonic cultural construct, how critical speech adopting the monster’s voice can denaturalize the gender system and by what means can trans monstrosity promote social transformation.

I wish at this point to think a little along these lines, as I have three main concerns or questions to consider ahead. In the first place, I want to address what this essay will refer to with the term trans. In 1992, communist militant Leslie Feinberg proposed a first definition of transgender as the people who defy "man"-made boundaries of gender (5). Along these same lines, Susan Stryker herself speaks of people who transgress the limits built by their culture to define and contain gender, noting that it is more of a departure from an unchosen starting point than a specific destination or mode of transition (“Transgender History” 11). I acknowledge both of these outlooks to be compelling enough to provide a clear definition for my analysis.

Secondly, I want to consider the relevance of the study over Stryker's piece in the current sociopolitical context, as well as which my objectives in carrying out this analysis are. In this regard, it can be said that a critical reading of “My Words” entails an alternative approach to one of the main contentions of contemporary feminist issues: The reification and

⁵ Coined by André Gide in 1911 to refer to the social imposition of attraction to the opposite sex, also referring to gendered behaviors that are considered normative

subversion of gender identity. Two springs ago, I acquainted with Stryker's text, coinciding with my reading of *A la conquista del cuerpo equivocado* by Miquel Missé. I comment on this personal memory, because the juxtaposition of both readings was what allowed me to establish the dialogue between "My Words" and the present of trans issues. The aforementioned essay by Missé presented a critique of the hegemonic narratives of transgender activism and advocated a collective social transformation, instead of corporal and individual, that could overcome identity politics. The issue of trans identity is a very precarious intellectual terrain when it comes to critical debate, that nevertheless should flourish to forge political alliances within the feminist movement in the dispute for a new model of society. This plight is by no means accidental, as the trans community continues to suffer great social rejection, as well as agonizing labor discrimination, all of which contributes to survival itself being at stake in the ways in which trans people think and live their gender. When one's mere existence has been paid at such a traumatic price, identity is the only bulwark that remains in the life of trans people, thus being reasonable the refusal to rethink as oppressive the subjectivity for which one has struggled so sorely. Hence, I do understand that any theoretical proposal presented in this essay has to be complemented by a radical change in the material conditions of trans people lives, for as long as hegemonic gender narratives are tools of immediate survival, there will be no possible reframing discussion. Still, this remark being needed, a development around this question would unfortunately exceed the very limits of the essay.

Retaking a reading of gendered identity as structural oppression, by the mid 1990's a new narrative began to emerge from the scholarly work of Sandy Stone, that established the foundations for the new transgender politics (Bettcher 384). Many of the theoretical proposals of this school of thought, of which Stryker is heir and which evolved academically into the

creation of transgender studies, posed questions and contradictions that were not so distant from the concerns of today's gender-critical⁶ feminism, namely, that of whether gender should be read as an hegemonic structure or as a self-determined identity. However, the ignorance towards this trans literature, along with the arduous socioeconomic conditions faced by the trans community and formerly commented, have contributed to an intellectual tension in Saxon academia which has materialized at a transnational level, generating a political conflict that permeates the entire society. One of the best examples of this scholar disputes is the 2014 publication of *Gender Hurts* by Sheila Jeffreys, which brought back to life a progeny of anti-trans academic literature.

Two years later, the stage in the United States, where all of these debates emerged, took an eminently reactionary turn when it comes to trans politics after the appointment of the Trump Administration. The National Center for Transgender Equality keeps track of a wide record of all the transphobic measures implemented by Trump. However, the banning of the trans community within the military in April 2019 should be highlighted for its special relevance in LGBT activism. This measure must be contextualized in a country where a social majority does not have access to public services such as healthcare unless it is part of its imperialist armed forces. Furthermore, throughout 2016 the passing of bills which sparked the so called "Bathroom wars" (Miles "Transgender Resistance" 156) took place in various states. The most rigid of these legislative measures was the case of Wyoming, where the presence of trans people in a bathroom that did not correspond to their sex was declared a crime of public indecency, opening the door to unprecedented heteronormative repression. This account is

⁶ Theoretical branch of radical feminism that finds the root of patriarchal oppression in the ways in which gender is personified, rather than studying the material structures on the basis of which gender identity is constructed in the first place, consequently advocating for an "abolition of gender" based on the substitution of gender for merely sexual categories without emptying them of a gendered reading (as it is primarily based in class social reproduction), thus being coupled with the trans-exclusionary postulates within feminism.

only a proof of the fact that the theoretical debates around trans identity have considerable consequences on the most vulnerable lives of the system. Yet, it cannot be disregarded that our society has a pending debate concerning this issue, which, done properly, can contribute to raise awareness that it is necessary to organize life differently. However, as Talia Bettcher explains in “When Tables Speak”, one of the main predicaments that have hindered this ravenous dispute is the absence of trans critical literature and hence the importance of recovering it.

Another impasse around transgender theorizing is that it was originally inscribed in the deconstructivist methodology of poststructuralism, thus being a thought-provoking literature at the service of the denaturalization of dominant sex-gender structures, but still with serious limitations in what refers to political agency. Nevertheless, for the last decade transgender intellectual work has taken up historical materialist approaches that allow to open new political doors within trans liberation. Thus, I find it necessary to maintain an alive dialogue between contemporary trans theorizing and a critical genealogy of transgender studies from the 1990s. This is why I have chosen this title⁷ for my introductory section, in interest of addressing the importance of revisiting olden trans literature, through present theoretical tools, and thus contribute to build more dignified futures for gender nonconforming people. Hence, I would like this essay to be an attempt to generate transformative and respectful dialogues around trans criticism of identity, thus leaving behind the transphobic outlook that has latterly characterized gender critique.

⁷ Allusion to the transphobic essay *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the Shemale* by Janice Raymond, parodically rewriting it through the postcolonial motto "The Empire writes back."

Finally, a last concern may arise after presenting my objectives, and it is that of the relationship between all these theoretical approaches, definitions and scholar disputes to the transgender question on the one hand; and something as seemingly detached as Gothic monstrosity on the other. In what follows, I will try to answer this question.

2. Theoretical framework: Trans Monstrosity Trouble

If “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix” brims with counter-hegemony, this resides in its confrontation with the gender system. Nevertheless, I try to show that if trans monstrosity is a concept that contributes to a critique of the gender system, this possibility has not yet flourished academically. Due to its own historical and scholarly limitations, I try to show that Stryker’s theoretical contribution was marked in its analysis by post-structuralist courses, in line with Sandy Stone’s and Judith Butler’s thought, which already permeates the essay. Thus, the counter-hegemonic possibilities of trans monstrosity were transiently buried alive thus favoring the theorizing over the transformative capacity that entails the personal re-appropriation of deviant stigma; that is, embracing abjection instead of interrogating its roots, conforming the, then emerging, queer studies. Yet, over the last decade, new scholarly voices have emerged within trans thought that, as I will argue, allow a new reading of monstrosity in “My Words” focusing on its potential for the so-called abolition of gender. These voices today are encompassed in the school of thought of transgender Marxism, whose main theoretical contributions I will develop in my conceptual framework. When preparing this work, I have resorted to a transdisciplinary methodology, coming from various sources, among them literary criticism, political philosophy and LGBT studies; all this framed within cultural studies. These secondary sources have provided me

with the conceptual and critical tools, to be broadened below, on the basis of which to develop the analysis of the work in question, namely "My Words" by Susan Stryker, thus concluding with a personal appraisal reflecting the syntheses extracted throughout and through the research carried out.

So far the issue of trans monstrosity has been approached from the academic intersection between gothic studies, monster studies within cultural studies, and transgender and queer studies themselves. After the publication of "My Words", an academic discipline concerned with the cultural politics that are inherent in a dialogue between gender nonconformity and Gothic literature conventions began to flourish between the 1990s and 2000s, which was well called "queer gothic". Queer gothic as a field of study, as Jeffrey Weinstock notes in "Out of the Closet and into the Classroom", is consolidated through three seminal publications: *Queer Gothic* (2006) by George E. Haggerty, *Queering Gothic in the Romantic Age* (2007) by Max Fincher and *Queering the Gothic* (2009) edited by William Hughes and Andrew Smith (74). The queer gothic gaze reads the Gothic novel as a political discourse produced at the cultural moment in which sexuality was being codified as identity (Weinstock 77). In this way, as Weinstock points out, the Gothic is revealed to be a kind of Butlerian drag show in which theatricalized performances of gender highlight it as socially constructed (81).

Regarding the trans question within Gothic Studies, it is worth highlighting the forerunner theoretical contribution of Jack Halberstam in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995) and Jolene Zigarovich in *Transgothic in Literature and Culture* (2017). Halberstam contends that the terror of the Gothic resides in meaning itself running riot (2) and hence, a reading of gothic monstrosity demands identity itself to be read as a constructed category (31). On the other hand, Zigarovich, argues that like the monsters of

the Gothic novels, "transgender phenomena haunt the entire project of European culture" (6) and that, from this disruptive possibility, the necessary academic alliance between transgender and gothic studies is born. However, despite its interest in de-naturalizing heteronormative conventions, queer gothic has failed to develop a critical account of the gender system through monstrosity, as well as to incorporate the contributions of Marxism into its analysis of cultural production. I argue that this perspective is compelling for a counter hegemonic reading of trans monstrosity and thus, the conceptual framework within which I tackle the question introduces the concepts of hegemony and gender abolition.

I have supported my research by means of several secondary sources, all literary, among which I would highlight, with regards to the cultural study of monstrosity, the seven theses of *Monster Culture* by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and the aforementioned *Skin Shows* by Jack Halberstam. This is due to Halberstam's rigorous study of Mary Shelley's creature and its relationship with identity and literature, common to transgender theory, and Cohen's proposal to understand the monster as a cultural body that, when it takes the floor, interrogates its *raison d'etre*, and with it the very cultural apparatus that produces monstrosity (12).

Further, Halberstam notes that "the historization of monstrosity in literature reveals the technology with which difference has been marked within and upon bodies" (8). In the domain of trans politics I have worked namely with the classic text *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*, by Sandy Stone, along with the fanzine-manifesto "Towards an Insurrectionary Transfeminism", signed by "some deceptive trannies" and with the, to myself avant-garde, theoretical contributions of transgender Marxist thought, mainly embodied in the articles on gender abolition published by Jules Gleeson, the essay "Beyond Negativity: What Comes after Gender Nihilism?", by Alyson Escalante and the journal *Invert*.

Sandy Stone's work is developed within the realm of discourse, but it is necessary to read it to understand the gender system-critical literature that influenced Stryker's work. Stone understands trans bodies as a set of embodied texts in whose intertextual possibilities, in recovering their own history, lies a potentiality of political disruption (296). Although undoubtedly interesting, Stone's work failed to read gender as a fetishized form of material exploitative relationships (Invert, 5). As it is asserted in the editorial of the first issue of *Invert*: "That these relations are written upon the body does not mean our analysis should remain in the body's domain."⁽⁵⁾ Thus, it was necessary to reinforce the analysis of trans monstrosity with a materialistic approach within trans contemporary thought. In 2012 "Towards an Insurrectionary Transfeminism", openly advocates for the abolition of gender within transgender activism, by claiming that "trans" and "women" are words that designate capitalist social relations. Yet, the aforementioned text by Escalante, along with Gleeson's insight, offers a cutting-edge perspective for trans liberation that must be taken into account when theorizing a counter-hegemony. The theoretical proposition of what I will henceforth call Transgender Marxism is that the focus should be put on the class interests at play in the production of gendered difference (Escalante 3), understanding the gender system as an hegemonic ideology that exists to obscure and naturalize the exploitation of women in capitalism (Escalante 7). The last words of both Escalante and Stryker's essays refer to the construction of a better world, therefore I argue that they are not antagonistic readings, but complementary in their transformative aim; that I will put together through the concept of trans monstrosity.

Having presented the state of the question of trans monstrosity, as well as my secondary research sources, I will proceed to develop the conceptual framework concerning my inquiry. I consider that the theoretical development around four concepts, present

throughout my analysis is required: Trans monstrosity, the Gender System, hegemony and gender abolition.

As Susan Stryker formulates at the beginning of her essay, the political alliance between trans people and the literary figure of the monster, namely that of Frankenstein, did not emerge from within the trans movement but from the most reactionary and transphobic voices of American feminism in the eighties, when Mary Daly referred to transsexuality as "The Frankenstein Phenomenon" (245). In the entry of "Monster" in the glossary of the *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Anson Koch-Rein highlights that it is precisely the monster's ambivalent ability to speak to oppression and negative affect that makes it a site of agency for the trans community (135). Given that monster derives from the Latin "monstro" (show what was concealed), Stryker argues that the monster's voice is an interesting tool to de-monstrate that the gendering process to which all people are subject is a mere illusion of naturalness (250). For Zigarovich the monster is a narrative that dismantles heteronormative social constructs ("Trans Legacy" 269) while Halberstam advocates for embracing one's trans monstrosity insofar as it represents the disruption of dominant boundaries (27). Thus, trans monstrosity is a place of critique to the gender system. Also called the Sex-gender system, the origin of the concept dates back to the sixties and the second-wave radical feminism in the United States, in particular to Shulamith Firestone's contribution in *The Dialectic of Sex*. Gender designates the dominant social relations that are ascribed to a body on the basis of the presumed reproductive capacity that is culturally readable in its genitalia. David Fernbach, pioneer of the Gay Liberation Front, argues why treating gender as a system places it as a collective structure that violates all people, and that it is not a mere question of roles, since gender is not based on sheer regulatory ideas of masculinity and femininity (21) but hides

behind it an oppressive material social organization: the sexual division of labor (26). Hence, as gendered behaviour is reified, the gender system is an hegemonic organization.

Antonio Gramsci coined this term in his *Prison Notebooks* to refer to the sense of reality, mediated by the interests of the ruling class, which most people perceive as natural. Raymond Williams argues that hegemony is a concept that dialectically transcends both the notion of culture as the total social process in which men define and configure their lives, and that of ideology as a system of meanings that constitute the expression of a class interest (129). Hegemony entails a dynamic and contradictory process by which social formations are constituted, reproduced and transformed (Wood 410), as well as a framing of all competing definitions of reality within the thinking horizons of the ruling class (Lull 34). In my analysis I argue that Susan Stryker regards the gender system as an hegemony. Yet, the political construction of a trans counter-hegemony has to consider the call to the abolition of gender.

Abolitionism is a term that emerged within anti-racist struggles referring to the slavery of black people in the United States (Gleeson “Abolitionism” 13). The turning point regarding abolitionist politics came with the critique of the American carceral system as it began to focus on the material conditions upon which prisons were built. In such a way, gender abolitionism is the political demand that endeavors to overthrow the material conditions on which the ideological naturalization of sexual difference is built (Escalante 8). *Invert*, described as a trans journal of contemporary Marxist thought focused on the abolition of gender, clarifies that this demand has become the conceptual terrain of the transphobic right wing of feminism (7) and that their call for the abolition of gender often boils down to the abolition of trans people. I make their words my own when they argue against the essentialism of this feminism that sex is the naturalization of gender’s dual projection upon bodies (7) and that while the deviance from the norm is always punished, each new identity encompassed in

the gender system will only be one more violent chain (Escalante 4). For this reason, trans women, given that their very existence attacks the nature of the bases of heteronormativity that are crucial for the functioning of capitalism, can only achieve their liberation by destroying the existing society and abolishing themselves in the process (NotYrCister 7). In my analysis I argue that a counter-hegemony to the gender system must have this political horizon in mind.

Thus, having presented the entire theoretical framework of my research, as well as the new Marxist and gender abolitionist perspective that I incorporate into my study of the counter-hegemonic possibilities that are inherent to the trans monstrosity proposed by Stryker in "My Words", in what follows I will develop my own analysis of the essay in question.

3. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix"

3.1 The Seams and Sutures of Gender

Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieve the similarity of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself.

In such a way Stryker concludes the monologue she presented at the University of California in 1993, transcribed in "My Words" (247). This passage, which in my eyes is the most theoretically captivating piece of the essay, allows us to study Stryker's reading of what I have

come to call the gender system as hegemonic. In the first place, it should be noted that Stryker's retelling of Frankenstein's story answers Sandy Stone's call for a post-transsexual theorizing rooted in the embodied experience of transgendered people (244). To recover the own history that has been inscribed in the trans body is also to discover the contradictions of the gender system in oneself, Stryker metaphorized these contradictions in the sutures of the monster. It is not inadvertent that the monster chosen by Stryker to de-naturalize the gender that violates herself has been the creature of Frankenstein. Mary Shelley locates the body itself as a locus of fear (Halberstam 28), being the very physicality of patches and threads in the monstrous body favorable to a theoretical project that seeks to de-construct a dominant narrative. Victor's creature horrifies insofar as it is made up of the *dissecta membra* of a dead society raised up again as the living dead (Jackson 102). I argue that trans monstrosity horrifies capitalist culture as it represents the *dissecta membra* of a dead reified gender raised up again as living dead.

Particularly interesting is the apostrophe in which Stryker addresses the reader to announce his or her own unnaturalness. This interpellation breaks with the identity character of trans activism, gender is not perceived as part of a personal subjectivity; but as a structure that haunts the entire society; and therefore, the reader of these words can become a monster through literature in the same way that the creature of Frankenstein does. A critical reading of this passage seeks to find the trans becomings, that is, the contradictions with the gender system, in the life of all people. Thus, Stryker breaks with the individualistic notion of gender to elevate it into false consciousness, of an ideological semblance of nature that truly leaks into each person's diary. The political subject of trans liberation becomes humanity as a whole, oppressed by the material-discursive hegemonic practices that produce the meanings of our flesh to make us men and women (Stryker, "More Words" 40). This political claim is

introduced by means of the ingenious paradox "Nature exerts such a hegemonic oppression" (251), given that the concept of hegemony itself designates what is perceived as natural but only reflects the interests of a ruling class.

Insofar that Stryker does not consider that transsexual experience has its roots in the body but that its structural violence materializes in its domain, she poses a critique to the transsexuality narrative by claiming: "The agenda that produced hormonal and surgical sex reassignment techniques [...] cultural politics are aligned with a deeply conservative attempt to stabilize gendered identity in service of the naturalized heterosexual order" (248). This entails a groundbreaking perspective, in line with Sandy Stone's manifesto, which points to the system as responsible for wanting to erase the past of gender nonconforming people, not for their well-being, but to erase the systemic contradictions these people embody. Thus, consultations become gender tribunals (Abietar 76) that produce a heterosexist political fiction and impose it on trans bodies. This is an exercise in hegemonic violence, and not only in medical science, for, as Joan Vendrell observes: gender is not somatized but the body is gendered (70). Susan Stryker asserts that "a gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity" (253). This violence leaves behind a scar on one's identity and on this scar, claims Paul Preciado, the property is established, the family is founded and the inheritance is bequeathed (23). This scar is not natural and has class interests behind it, still this scar suppurates. The sutures of the monster are a breach in the hegemony of gender. As Stryker says, trans people "are something more, and something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be" (248), and it is in their monstrosity where political disruption commences, when they speak from outside this illusion of naturalness; trans counter-hegemony begins with their words to Victor Frankenstein above the village of Chamounix.

3.2 Can the Monster Speak?

I have asked the Miltonic questions Shelley poses in the epigraph of her novel: ‘Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay to mould me man? Did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?’

These words (254) from the poem *Paradise Lost*, through which the creature of Mary Shelley builds its rage towards its creator, through which Susan Stryker questions the textual violence (Stone 296) inscribed in her transsexual body are the seeds of a counter-hegemony. The monster's linguistic articulation becomes so important in "My Words" that the very title of the essay conveys that the text we are reading is the transcription of the monster's words to its creator. Stryker establishes an intertextual dialogue with Frankenstein's novel, and more specifically with the scene in which the monster, having learned the European lexicon and literatures, meets Victor in the Alps and together they maintain a conversation in a cabin in the mountains (249). The monster takes the floor in a monologue in which he expresses the story of how he came to identify himself through difference from his point of view: “The monster accomplishes this resistance by mastering language in order to claim a position as a speaking subject and enact verbally the very subjectivity denied to it in the specular realm” (247). Stryker, in allusion to Gayatri Spivak’s oeuvre, asserts in “Transing the Queer (In) Human” that her aim with her essay was to make the subaltern speak (227).

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Sandy Stone theorized the ways transsexuals had been subalterned both by feminist transphobia and medical discourse (T. Salah 201) and I argue that the intertextuality between Susan Stryker's rage and that of Frankenstein's monster answers Stone’s call to reappropriate difference and reclaim the power of the refigured and reinscribed body (298-299). The theoretical and literary dialogue that, I assert, Mary Shelley

and Sandy Stone maintain through Stryker's monstrous becoming is grounded in the liaison between literature, difference and identity. Mary Shelley's seminal novel delves into the intersections of literature and monstrosity; the author formerly referring to her own work as “my hideous progeny” in the epigraph (Halberstam 31). Besides, the monstrosity of her own literary creature is remarkably shaped and produced by literature per se; a body across which difference has been repeatedly written (Halberstam 12) to the point where textual production is responsible for generating monsters (Halberstam, 31). Frankenstein's monstrous identity is self-constituted through the creature's readings of De Lacey's texts. The main anxiety behind this exercise of textual exegesis the monster makes, and that according to Halberstam constructs the reading subject of the Gothic, is the question of whether one reads or, on the contrary, is written.

Stryker alleges "I could speak of my earliest memories, and how I became aware of my difference [...] I can describe how I acquired a monstrous identity by taking on the label transsexual to name parts of myself that I could not otherwise explain" (249). Hence, Stryker's monstrosity was also produced through the pathologizing literature that encompasses transsexuality; she also constituted her difference and rage through the written word as Frankenstein's creation did. Thusly, I argue, both became readable as palimpsestic embodiments, in terms of Stone's theory. Susan Stryker uses this same post-structuralist rhetoric by claiming that her transsexual body literalizes violence (254), referring to the heterosexist fiction of the gender system that was dictated over her body, in the fashion of medical technologies. Through her intertext with Frankenstein, she is performing a belletristic post-transsexual exercise: to write oneself into the discourses by which one has been written (Stone 299).

Once the monster masters the language of the master, it commits an intrusion into its epistemological domain; from this action the true terror is born: difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its mortality (Cohen 12). When the monster, as difference made flesh (Cohen 7), manages to speak against its creator ; through the accumulated rage in the palimpsest of its literal and literary sutures, it can only express one thing: “Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay to mould me man? ” Jeffrey Cohen puts it better than I could have ever done: “Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, [...] but they always return. And when they come back, [...] these monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them” (20). In other words, if we assume that the gender system is an hegemonic organization, to question from trans monstrosity its very *raison d’etre* ; is to question the class interests behind transphobia and the transsexual narrative as corrective violence on gender nonconforming people, the historical and dialectical construction of difference.

Apropos of the political agency in the monster’s enunciation, Stryker asserts: “If you will but listen to the monsters: the possibility of meaningful agency and action exists, even within fields of domination that bring about the universal cultural rape of all flesh. Be forewarned, however, that taking up this task will remake you in the process ”(254). In this passage, Stryker endows her monstrosity with the critical capacity of what Homi Bhabha comes to call "metonymies of presence" (128), referring to a strategic confusion of metaphoric axes of the cultural production of meaning (128), in line with Butlerian subversive parody: gender will reveal itself as imitation through its conscious parody (Kosofsky 139). It is at this

point in my analysis that I see the incorporation of new methodologies of trans materialistic thought necessary. This new approach will allow unearthing the counter-hegemonic possibilities of the trans monstrosity of their living grave: the dissolution into discourse. The complexity of this cul-de-sac for me is illustrated in Cinzia Arruzza's critique of Judith Butler's early work⁸. Opposing, as queer thought does, an essentialist vision of gender and locating its construction in a social temporality opens the possibility of transformation (Arruzza), and this is a framework that Stryker genuinely contemplates in her essay. Otherwise, it would not be honest to say that the perspective of the textuality of trans bodies as transgressive closes the doors to collective political agency in favor of individual subversion. Actually, Butler herself asserts that such an idea cannot be conceived in the absence of an individual who is outside the social relations that constitute it (Arruzza).

The real trouble faced by gender theories based on the application of the post-structuralist concept of citationality (intertextuality in Sandy Stone) is that the temporality in which gender is cited upon bodies is not abstract but social and historical (Arruzza). Queer temporality is therefore a theory that seeks to understand social practices from a linguistic perspective, but that loses sight of their historical dimension (Arruzza). Not in vain, Arruzza wonders: "Is this analysis methodology capable of seriously accounting for a historical phenomenon of transformation and subversion?" My humble answer in this essay is no, and that is why I consider that the contribution of Marxist thought can be of great help in this issue. I do not consider this issue to be reduced to a separation of economy and culture-ideology ; in such a way that the "protocols of unveiling" that according to Kosofsky haunt the cultural studies (143), and of which the text of Stryker is an instance, cannot play a political role in social transformation. So far, the denaturalizing and intertextual possibilities

⁸ Gender as Social Temporality: Butler (and Marx)

of trans monstrosity have been a compelling theoretical tool to unmask the gender system and the hegemonic production of difference. Still, in what regards to building a trans-monstrous counter-hegemony, it is necessary to complement this hermeneutics of suspicion (Kosofsky 140) with the philosophy of praxis. And if there is a theory that is responsible for this liaison, it is that of Marxism. For Marx, the possibility of transforming praxis also resides in the contradictions and fissures (Stryker's sutures) of a system, namely capital, in the social temporality of its own reproduction (Arruzza). However, social change is the opposition to the subversive citation of a norm, since it consists in creating something new, in breaking with the previous textuality. Cinzia Arruzza claims that when Marx declares in his *Eighteenth Brumaire* that history happens twice, "first as tragedy, then as farce", the farce lies in the deception of the actors of history by believing themselves in an exercise of citationality from the past.

As I advanced in my conceptualization of the gender system, the latter is an ideological camera obscura of the sexual division of labor; that is, a historical relationship. For this reason, trans monstrosity must be able to historicize its own production and thus transform the roots of transphobia into the material realm. Now that, as Kate Bornstein would put it, the emperor wears no clothes, it is time to overthrow the monarchy.

3.3 Putting Transformation back in Trans: Towards a Monstrous Counter-hegemony

May your rage inform your action and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world.

These are Stryker's last words (254) in her essay, this time being addressed to the reader rather than its creator. With this closure, I contend, "My Words" is erected in the genre of political philosophy, whose literary aim is described in the eleventh Marxian thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." (65) So far, I have argued that the gender system is an hegemony, that the identity categories it produces are reified (Coll 248), violently literalizing each body according to the dominant heterosexist ideology. However, hegemony, although always dominant, is never absolute (Williams 135) and hence, in all historical moments there are alternative or opposite forms to existing politics and culture (Williams 135) pursuing to transform extant society, namely, counter-hegemonies. Indeed, Stryker does not give any textual clue throughout her essay of how this social transformation can be articulated through trans monstrosity, conceivably due to the post-structuralist turn, that drives her to consider the terrain of discourse as her main battleground. Still, it is possible to interpret what should be, according to herself, the counter-hegemonic function of trans struggle by reading how in another context⁹ she suggests to strategically define transgender phenomena as "anything that disrupts or denaturalises normative gender, and calls our attention to the processes through which normativity is produced" ("Transgender Feminism" 60). Thus, a common starting point for all transformative perspectives within trans liberation must be to call attention to the responsibility of social structures in the distress of trans people (Missé 146), that is, to

⁹ Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question

consider that it is not the trans body that is mistaken, but that the very society, that is being reproduced through the gender system, is.

Leslie Feinberg in the dedication of *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come* refers to Marxism in his/her LGBT militancy as the use of an old key to open new doors (4). I think this expression perfectly defines the task that I entrust myself in what follows, that of proposing which could be the basis for a transmonstruous counter-hegemony that responds to Stryker's call and maintains her criticism of the processes by which gender normativity has been historically produced. I start from Laura Miles's approach that transgender identity is a social construction alluded to a special historical period, mode of production and material conditions ("Transgender Oppression"), therefore, it is an integral part of the capitalist gender system, at the time its mere existence is pregnant with its abolition. The Radical Queens collective¹⁰ already declared in 1973 in their manifesto: "Both roles (masculinity and femininity) are inventions of the oppressor, both are oppressive to those who accept them" (Mecca 114), thus offering, *avant la lettre*, a warning that the demands for recognition of trans identities, subtly naturalize the power and class relationships that create gendered identity in the first place (Escalante 4). On the other hand, as Cinzia Arruzza alleges, the reification and naturalization of sexual identities, as well as the performative historical process that reifies them, are part of the capitalist totality (Arruzza), are rooted in its relations of production.

These postulates lead me to conclude, first and foremost, that trans monstrosity should serve to politicize the inability of gender nonconforming people to reproduce existing capitalist society, and, I assert, in this betrayal to social reproduction, transphobia is grounded.

¹⁰ Collective of the 1970s in Philadelphia, made up of transvestites and transfeminines close to the postulates of radical feminism

This is the *raison d'être* behind the cultural production of trans monstrosity. Thus, the theoretical framework of monstrosity can help to understand the antagonistic character of trans existence in the capitalist system. Stryker claims: "Transsexual embodiment, like the embodiment of the monster, places its subject in an unassimilable, antagonistic, queer relationship to a Nature in which it must nevertheless exist" (249) and along these same lines, Jules Gleeson argues that "the work still to be done is a political overcoming of the existing order which we (transgender community) exist against ("The Call" 15).

Understanding this antagonism with the gender system, and thus with the social reproduction of capitalism, as the root of transphobic violence reminds us of Stryker's words warning that a critical questioning of the gendered subjectivity of her reader, can derive in his or her own monstrous becoming. However, there I find the true counter-hegemonic potential of Stryker's trans monstrosity: it does not politicize from its own identity but from systemic abjection, allowing political organization based not on what you are, but against what you exist, namely gender system. This broadens trans-monstrous political subjectivity to that of any person, whether identified as trans or not, who suffers structural corrective violence in order to be assimilated into social reproduction. On the other hand, heterosexist culture does not socially read those who distance themselves from masculinity, necessarily as women. It is more of a negative categorization: a non-man, *id est*: a monster. Historically, there has been an inability on the part of the LGBT movement to articulate a project of collective transformation without reproducing and naturalizing identities, which, in turn, are the last frontier of the oppression to combat. The plight here is that the existence of a collective identity is necessary to organize political struggle. However, the negative identity of monstrosity, insofar as it is articulated from the impossibility of fitting into those oppressive and reified gender identities, favors a counter-hegemonic perspective within trans liberation and the abolition of gender.

Hence, I recast Hilary Malatino's theorization of a coalition of monsters (204) that politically groups all failures to assimilate to hegemonic modes of social reproduction (207) as a possible way to materialize a trans counter-hegemony. The trans-monstrous militancy that I propose raises its radical politics from the seams and sutures that constitute a faultline to the capitalist gender system, thus recognizing in their own monstrosity the communal and historical possibilities to make a new, unmistakable, society bloom.

4. Conclusion: Monsters all, Are We not?

Old as I am, I know nothing. Why people in this world hate what is not them. Why they fear all they don't know. Why they hate themselves most of all. For being weak. For being old. For being everything altogether that is not God-like. Which of us can be that? Monsters all, are we not?"

In the popular horror television series *Penny Dreadful*, the witch Joan Clayton (Patti LuPone) hopelessly shares the former reflection along with Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), after a public humiliation. It seems convenient to start my conclusions with this passage, on the one hand because it belongs to the contemporary cultural work that best depicts the liaison between Gothic literature and queerness, and on the other because, in the final question that is posed by the witch, all the critical considerations that have led my analysis to this appraisal happen to converge. I have begun this essay by arguing that if trans monstrosity could conceptually contribute to a critique of the gender system, this possibility had not materialized in the academy. "My Words" responds to a posttranssexual call for a theory rooted in the citationality of the body. From this post-structuralist perspective, Stryker establishes an intertextual dialogue with Mary Shelley's monster as her work delves into the crossroads of

literature, identity and difference. Shelley's creature constitutes his own monstrous identity through reading, and thus Stryker mobilizes his first person account to criticize the transmedical literature that has been violently engraved on her body. Thus, Susan Stryker advocates adopting the monster's voice in order to de-monstrate the illusory character of the gendering process. Nevertheless, I have analyzed that despite the fact that gender relations are written upon the body, their historization reveals that these originate in the domain of material life through the sexual division of labor. That is why I claim that Stryker's text advances a reading of the gender system as an hegemonic structure, while the mere reflections of dominant class interests are presented as natural. Hence, I have tried to show that the concept of trans monstrosity as a place of critique to the gender system, should observe the historical development of the class struggle in the production of the gendered difference, and therefore, read transgender identity as an integral part of the capitalist gender system.

I have analyzed the political possibilities of the monster's interrogation, given that questioning its own *raison d'etre* puts into question the very social formations that engendered it; this so-called Miltonic question being a strategic enunciation to unmask the gender system and the hegemonic production of difference. I have argued that this questioning inherent in the monster's cultural politics contributes to an antagonistic awareness of the transgender subject within the system that breeds it, namely capitalism. Thereafter, I have incorporated the Marxist perspective that the possibilities of transforming a system reside in the breaches and contradictions that it generates while reproducing itself. I have complemented this outlook with Stryker's metaphor of the monster's sutures (as breaches to the gender hegemony) to conclude that a counter-hegemonic reading of trans monstrosity should politicize the trans inability to reproduce existing society. The reflections so far presented here have lead me to the conclusion that a trans counter-hegemony derived from monstrosity is possible thanks to

one question. While trans-monstrous politics is not based on identity but on systemic abjection, it allows a collective organization that transcends gender identities that have been reified in the form of hegemony. To conclude, a trans-monstrous militancy would present counter-hegemonic possibilities insofar as its political subject would not be based on who somebody is but against what structures he or she exists, thus raising consciousness on how gendered oppression is ingrained in the capitalist totality. Therefore, trans monstrosity discloses that trans liberation can only flourish by way of the abolition of every historical relation that sustains the mirage of the gender system.

Ultimately, I claim that I would like to consider this essay a contribution to a societal discussion, hand in hand with the theory and practice that LGBT militancy produces every day. I believe that we are in a political context in which capitalist hegemony is being contested, in which new ways of organizing life and reality are on the horizon. Therefore, being aware that I write from an interregnum of history, I return to Sandy Stone's words when she resolved at the end of her manifesto that it's time to begin laying the groundwork for the next transformation (299), for our time has arrived: Monsters all, are we not?



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