A SUSAN STRYKER READER

WHEN MONSTERS SPEAK

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Edited by McKenzie Wark

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ASTERISK: Gender, Trans-, and All That Comes After
A series edited by Susan Stryker, Eliza Steinbock, and Jian Neo Chen

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INTRODUCTION

MCKENZIE WARK

The Nineties

I was a little nervous about meeting Susan Stryker for the first time. It was a cool October morning in New York City. We sat outside at the Hungarian pastry shop on the Upper West Side. I needn't have worried. It was a delightful conversation ranging from the medicinal uses of ketamine to John Lilly's experiments in dolphin communication. And, of course, we talked about transgender stuff.

In transgender time one has at least two ages: the number of spirals around the sun since birth, and another, younger age, since coming out. Meeting Susan, I was a newly hatched trans woman meeting a revered elder. And not just any elder. She literally wrote the book, *Transgender History*. And she coedited *The Transgender Studies Reader*. And she cofounded the journal, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*.[1]

At the same time, I was meeting a contemporary. We were both born in 1961. For all I know, I might be a month or two older. We both grew up in the mass broadcast age, finding hints of who we could be through popular media, whether it was Bugs Bunny cross-dressing as Brunhilda or imagining ourselves as "tall and tan and young and lovely" in Astrud Gilberto's "Girl from Ipanema."[2]

For both of us, our thirties were in the nineties, and as writers we were shaped by and responded to the nineties as a world-historical context: The Soviet Union collapsed. China took the capitalist road. The anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa prevailed. The United States went to war in the Persian Gulf. In the nineties, we learned new acronyms like NAFTA and WTO. The internet was still fun, but its commercialization was gathering speed.

Since we are talking about queer people, the nineties needs a soundtrack: the sounds drifting from car stereos from Sydney to San Francisco were Madonna and Prince, Janet Jackson and Whitney Houston. In classically American segregated fashion, there was both gangsta rap and grunge. In the gay clubs there was house music, and in the more forward-leaning straight(ish) ones, techno—both of which you might get on a compilation CD. By the end of the nineties, Napster would suggest a whole other model of media consumption. Meanwhile, talk shows were all the rage on cable TV and featured repeated segments about trans people, mostly awful.

Our more local contexts ran in parallel, too. For much of the nineties, Stryker was in San Francisco, and I was in Sydney, two of the gayest towns on the Pacific rim. Both had lively urban enclaves of the kind one used to call "bohemian," where people gathered to shape their lives around self-creation and to invent new collective modes of being.[3] Rising rents had not yet driven us out of our playgrounds. The start of the AIDS pandemic had hit both cities hard, but at least by the mid-nineties the antiretroviral drug "cocktail" started working for people living with AIDS.[4]

I mention this by way of situating how I read the writing that I have selected and arranged here. This writing is anchored in a time I know well, as Stryker's contemporary and as a writer also formed by the nineties in a bohemian milieu. And yet, at the same time, it is writing that I approach in trans time: as that of an elder speaking of an era I missed. I didn't come out until the 2010s. In trans time, I'm very green.

Like many trans people, I absorbed the language and perspectives of those who had transitioned just before me and were my teachers, mentors, and guides. In my case, mostly millennial trans women. Trans sensibilities are constantly remaking themselves. For example, we will see how the word *transgender* became important for Stryker for defining a way of being that took some distance from the older language of the *transvestite* and *transsexual*. By contrast, I came up in an era when, at least in my Brooklyn milieu, we started calling ourselves *transsexuals* again, investing the term with different meanings, and using the term as a way of distinguishing a sensibility different from what *transgender* came to mean as a liberal institutional marker. Trans

people, not unlike other tiny minorities, have only tactics in and against the languages applied to us by dominant cultures and institutions.

As a trans woman, I'm a product of 2010s-era discourse.[5] But as a writer and theorist, I started working in my own voice in the 1990s—as did Susan Stryker. I think she asked me to edit this collection in part because we share that moment. We both witnessed how languages, ways of being, forms of alternate life, were appropriated into dominant cultures and institutions, including higher education. And we both have a sense that what the selective tradition retained from those times of creation has narrowed.[6]

I don't think either of us is interested in nostalgia. Rather, it's a matter of rewinding to find some less familiar sounds to sample in order to fast-forward somewhere else. Maybe there are possibilities, ways of being queer, of being sexual, of being trans, of being a writer or artist, of living one's life as collective creation that were left behind. Maybe there are possibilities also for adding some textures and colors to the kinds of academic discourses that institutionalize the memory and teaching of such ways of life.

This is where my other perspective comes into play: not just a veteran of the nineties but a participant-observer in this much more recent trans milieu. One reason I stayed in the closet throughout the eighties and nineties is that it was unthinkable to me that, if I came out, I could get any sort of job that would be part of intellectual life—in academia or the media or anywhere. I thought the choice was to stay closeted so I could get work and write, or to come out and do survival sex work.[7] This was a fair estimation, although the life and work of Susan Stryker is the counterfactual. I could not have done what she did, though. If I tried it, I don't think I'd have made it. I imagine I'd be dead.

The situation for trans people can't be said to have improved all that much, frankly. Particularly for trans people of color, or whose family rejects them, or who are deprived of education and community support, or get caught up in the carceral system. I'm not a liberal optimist. And yet for that tiny sliver of educated and supported trans people, there's at least some slim possibility of working professionally and having some version of a middle-class life. Or there would be, were it not for the casualization and proletarianization of so many formerly "middle-class" trades, including academia.

I see this among the millennial trans people who are my contemporaries in trans time. Thanks to the struggles won and work created by Stryker and others, some things are different. Queer and trans studies have a toehold in the academy. All sorts of social and cultural institutions now feel obliged to at least acknowledge that we have a right to work and live in the world of for-

mal liberal equality. The chances of living and working in general are under continual downward pressure, although there's some irony in that the one industry in which trans people have carved out new possibilities for financially stable lives is tech.

One of the most powerful tendencies to emerge from the nineties, and largely in the San Francisco Bay Area, was the commodification of the internet. It is now transforming the whole of the economy and rendering a lot of intellectual labor precarious and casual. There are other drivers, but the internet is one of the sources of the adjunctification of the university. Just when trans intellectuals might get their chance to have a niche in the academy, the academy itself is reneging on its commitment to sustainable intellectual lives within its doors.

At the same time, several generations of trans people have discovered each other, and themselves, via the internet. Access to the internet was so restricted for so long, that the ability to express and negotiate trans-ness, and to organize, was skewed toward the sensibilities of affluent, white trans people.[8] Traces of this linger in today's era of far more generalized social media. Meanwhile, there are certainly still queer and trans bohemian milieux to be found—I am living in one here in Brooklyn, New York. These milieux have a different texture now that so much of our existence is mediated through online social media rather than zines and newsletters.

I was there for the online world of gender play and community of the nineties.[9] But unlike Stryker, I missed the formation of a trans version of queer everyday life. When I came out, I found an everyday life already shaped both by the trans avant-garde to which Stryker belonged and by decades of online culture. I hear Stryker's voice in stereo, then: as a contemporary and an elder. And I listen through both channels when selecting and editing the texts for this book.

I wanted to make a book rather than just a collection of pieces. Each of the three parts can be read through in order and has its own story to tell. The parts are each more-or-less sequential within themselves, but each operates on its own timeline—rather like trans time itself. What follows is a guide to further points of interest.

Part 1, "Trans SanFrisco," puts into sequence texts that emerged out of the Bay Area queer and trans milieu, particularly its S/M culture.[10] Part 2, "Trans Theory as Gender Theory," builds on the practices and languages developed in the Bay Area, and it tackles questions of the politics of knowledge, memory, and inter- and intra-community alliance. I held back Stryker's best-known piece, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," until the last arc, part 3,

"When Monsters Speak." I want the reader to become familiar, first, with the milieu from which it emerged and, second, with the kinds of patient political negotiations that came after—before confronting trans rage. We then follow that text's career across twenty years through Stryker's commentaries on it.

Trans SanFrisco

In part 1, I have grouped together Stryker's writings that emerged mostly out of the Bay Area, starting in the nineties. The space of the city appears as one for the possibility of reinventing what everyday life could be like.[11] It is hard to overestimate how traumatizing the start of the HIV/AIDS pandemic was, particularly in places that had high concentrations of gay people, trans people, sex workers, and intravenous drug users. A whole generation—mine, Susan's—who had been sexually active before anyone knew what AIDS was had to confront the loss of many loved ones in an atmosphere of panic, stigma, and isolation.[12]

The HIV/AIDS pandemic never ended. What changed in the nineties was the reconstitution of ways of life that, for want of a better term, I'm calling *bohemian*. Styrker emerges from the milieu of Trans SanFrisco as a trans woman who refuses to accept trans-ness as a mental illness or a medical diagnosis. She looks for other practices and other languages. The language of transition can instead be aesthetic or spiritual. One might learn how to become transgender through sexual or artistic practices.

We start with the short story "Trick Dive." It's set in an archetypal waterfront dive bar. Being from a port town, I can confirm that such places used to exist and contained people not unlike these characters. The story is told from the point of view of a trans sex worker confronting a man who wants something from her—*knowledge*. The knowledge he will pay for might just be whether she still has a dick or not. And it might be something more. "Trick Dive" sets up a major theme of this book: What knowledge might the trans person have?

"The Surgeon Haunts My Dreams" is writing one might now imagine as autofiction: the narrator seems close to the author, although it's not the confessional voice of autobiography.[13] It's more speculative. The trans woman's body appears here via two regimes of knowledge. One is that of the surgeon. Far from being a benevolent Man of Science, he has his own desires. Perversity, if that's what it is, belongs not only on the side of the body under the knife. The other regime of knowledge is that of the sado-masochistic practices encountered in "Trick Drive." What can a body come to know viscerally by taking the knife into its own hand?

The piece also has a masturbation scene in which the narrator has to find a way to extract pleasure from what one might think of as her dick, although the word is hardly adequate. Here and elsewhere in these autofictional pieces, Stryker is less interested in psychoanalytic language, with its assumptions about gendered bodies, than in exploring the phenomenology of the ambiguities of the trans body and its "many-handed hunger."[14]

"Renaissance and Apocalypse" sets the scene for the emergence of distinctively trans artists and art practices within a wider queer culture. Renaissance implies rebirth, and the essay hints at pasts in which something like what we now call transgender people may have had forms of cultural continuity and a place in the culture at large. The nineties was not the first, nor the last, "tipping point" for trans people, where we might begin again to make our own art after our own desires, and where that work might start attracting the attention of a wider audience.[15] Stryker is already warning of the dangers of sanding off the edges of our experiences for wider cultural consumption.

Stryker points to the structural homology between the slave narrative and trans autobiography. It's a parallel one would not want to draw out too far. A reparative reading might start from how the struggle to build a sustainable and cumulative trans existence has both political and cultural dimensions and connecting both is the problem of pluralizing the kinds of narratives we get to have.[16] There's a hope, in many ways fulfilled, that if our struggle for liberation makes any headway, it both enables and draws upon trans creative expression in new forms, which is something these autofictional pieces are already doing: finding a form for writing that can hew closer to the experiences of the trans body in the world when thought outside of our "medical colonization."

"Across the Border," cowritten with Kathy High, proposes just such a work of art—an unrealized creative project documenting an orchiectomy.[17] The class and race dimensions of orchiectomy as a transition path are noted, as removing the testicles is cheaper and simpler than vaginoplasty. It also makes a unique kind of body: distinctively trans.[18] "Renaissance and Apocalypse" experimented with a religious language for trans culture. Here we are in the language of contemporary art. High's contributions note the formal problems of making visual art about the trans body, Such art, when not voyeurism, can become surveillance. The problem of the *cis gaze* has arrived.[19]

"Los Angeles at Night" is my favorite piece of Stryker's. It pulls together beautifully an autofictional style of narrative while allowing concepts to emerge organically out of situation and story. Autofiction becomes autotheory.[20] Stryker takes the blade back from the surgeon as a tool for practic-

ing presence in the flesh as a kind of art, or ritual. What S/M and trans-ness might have in common is that the body can't be ignored, but neither is it simply given. The "language of the body," as Kathy Acker called it, can be felt through an art that gives it occasion to speak.[21] Besides its beauty as a piece of S/M writing, "Los Angeles at Night" also asks what a trans erotics would be like if made not only about us but by us and for us.

"Dungeon Intimacies," like "Renaissance and Apocalypse," pulls out to give us a wider view, but now of a Trans SanFrisco that is disappearing. It stresses the agency of the local as something more than merely reactive to globalization. It documents the S/M scene of the time and its innovations in forms of corporeal becoming-together. Stryker learns the language of *queer*, *transgender*, and *genderqueer* in the chill-out moments on the scene.

Here knowledge merges with and emerges from avant-garde practices within a bohemian psychogeography nestled within the larger urban possibilities and constraints of the Bay Area.[22] Stryker draws from a phenomenology of experimental corporeal experience rather than relying on psychoanalysis, which takes gender categories as given. Through practices, of which S/M is only one example, bodies emerge from the ambiguity of being into a language all their own.[23] Or so it was in Trans SanFrisco, for a time. Before the tech boom changed the city and before its sexual avant-gardes became the raw material for an internet porn industry.[24]

"Perfect Day" brackets the nineties in a longer arc, ending in a more settled life of kids, partners, blended families, and all that. It starts by winding back to Stryker's teen years. "Living as a man was nonconsensual," she writes of her teenage self. Looking for knowledge about gender, the library didn't help. I had the same experience with that. The only books I could find talked about whatever was going on with my gender and sexuality in terms of medical diseases and mental illnesses, when all I wanted was a pointer to where I could find people like me to befriend.

Pre-transition trans women who love women are sometimes good at sex. We pay very close attention. But we are maybe not great at it.[25] It is hard for us to be in our own bodies. We can be attractive because we are "not like other guys." But also frustrating to our partners—because not like other guys. "Perfect Day" steps nimbly through many of these tensions, making a valuable contribution to the conversations trans women have about our sexualities.

This section concludes with two appreciations of younger artists, Charlotte Prodger and Cooper Lee Bombardier. The key to the former is the art of modified embodiment.[26] Ketamine was one of the things Susan and I discussed when we first met. I'm "out" as a recreational user but was also

low-key jealous that her K is on prescription. Its dissociative, out-of-body qualities might be especially appealing to trans women.[27] "Ketamine Journal" uses diary entries as a mediating form between body and text, as Stryker does elsewhere.

I chose to end this section with Stryker's introduction to Bombardier's *Pass with Care*.[28] It registers the formation of the next generation of trans writers and artists in Trans SanFrisco. There's an intimation here that trans culture might begin to be cumulative rather than always fugitive.

Trans Theory as Gender Theory

In part 2, the story moves away from the Trans SanFrisco milieu. It deals less with cultural or spiritual or sexual languages for trans existence and more with the political and academic "micropolitical practices through which the radical implications of transgender knowledges can become marginalized." "Trans Theory as Gender Theory" tells a story about negotiating with the power of normative institutions of gender, sexuality, and history.

We start with Stryker's tribute to Gayle Rubin. Appropriately enough, they met at a queer fundraiser at the Eagle, a gay leather bar. Rubin is important as an example of a scholar whose work is "grounded in her own bodily acts." Stryker presents Rubin not only as a role model but also as one of those invaluable people who has written letters of recommendation and in other ways enabled out trans and queer people to get toeholds in academia.

Like many feminists, Rubin was interested in the conceptual double of sex and gender; only for Rubin this was a historical and institutional structure.[29] Rubin was one of those feminists who stood apart from the dominant tendency to reify and dehistoricize the category of "woman." Her intervention in the famous, or perhaps infamous, Barnard conference of 1982 was to stick up for the feminism potentials of S/M practices, sex work, and porn against the rise of "good-girl feminism."[30] This was the text by Rubin that seized my attention in the mid-eighties, when I was an undergrad minoring in women's studies. (I know, that should have told me something.)

Since "trannies were lumped in with all the other perverts" in the moralistic strain of feminism, the lines of alliance for Stryker were clear—even if Rubin was not always particularly helpful on trans stuff in her influential early writings. Even for writers coming at trans-ness sympathetically, the perspective of queer sexualities tended to see trans-ness as if it was another kind of kink. They kept the structural association of trans with deviance, then flipped the value of deviance from bad to good—and us with it. While some

of us—Stryker and myself included—experience trans-ness in part through a deep connection to sexuality, many do not.

Trans-ness is not reducible to sexuality, and indeed, the sexualization, particularly of trans women, can be part of the problem. Still, the path toward trans studies was clear. Second wave feminism that took the "natural" sexed body as a given was not adequate for dealing with queer sexuality, and so queer studies had to strike out from its maternal feminist home. Further, to imagine the figure of the trans person independently from sexuality, trans studies had to take a little distance from queer studies—how much is still up for debate.[31]

Once we posit trans embodiment as its own distinctive kind of politics, knowledge, and politics of knowledge, then we can work through its consequences for feminism. Trans makes the category of "woman" more interesting and might even "queer the woman question." Gender might no longer be just a mimetic double of sex as a "biological" given—as it has become in much of Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) discourse. Instead, we might all practice nonmimetic ways of experiencing and conceiving our becomings. Stryker experimented with both gender as lived, and genre as written.

Interestingly, for Stryker, the concept of trans-ness is not limited to trans people. It is present as that which the sex/gender system controls. Whether in gay or straight life, there are sanctions for doing gender "wrong." One of the agents of control of trans-ness ended up being a certain kind of feminism that set itself up as the police of good womanhood. It treats the "biological" body, or rather a fantasy of it, as if it were a "natural" given that could ground a politics and a culture of womanhood across time and space.[32] In doing so, this trans-exclusionary feminism bought into colonial formations of knowledge and power through which white women became the agents of "proper" gender expression, both in the colonies and against working-class women at home.[33] An influential strand of second wave feminism repeated the patriarchal notion of woman as close to nature and simply reversed its value, making this the source of the good, the beautiful, and the true. This conceit of naturalism was then treated as the reason for rather than against the agency of women in public life.

Third wave feminism brought a much-needed critique of the essentialism and Eurocentrism of this project as well as new concepts such as the *performativity* of gender, which in Judith Butler's view retroactively produces the fiction of embodied sex as its origin.[34] And yet transsexuality often appears in both second and third wave feminism as a kind of allegorical point of con-

centration for thinking about everything but the trans body itself. Despite its claims to progress, even in third wave feminism, a long-standing tradition of transsexuality as allegory for modernity finds itself repeated somewhat uncritically in academic drag.[35] Trans-ness is the sign of "gender trouble" or—one might even say—of "sex trouble."

Trans feminism makes trans-ness its own experiential site rather than a mere allegory for other people's gender anxieties.[36] Trans feminism might nevertheless connect to struggles other than around trans-ness. Drawing on her own experiences, Stryker points toward a range of social struggles around disability, mental health, undocumented labor, workplace discrimination, privacy, access to health care and housing, policing, and mass incarceration. Stryker: "How we each live our bodies in the world is a vital source of knowledge."

Trans-ness also troubles queerness. *Homonormativity*, or what Jasbir Puar will later call *homonationalism*, might be concepts describing how certain ways of being a gay man or lesbian are incorporated into models of the good citizen and consumer.[37] Homonormativity might also mean the ways in which gay and lesbian communities and organizations themselves police the boundaries of queerness against other expressions of it, particularly gender-variant and trans ones. It's disappointing, to say the least, when queer people accept the straight world's models of gender. Hence re-emergence of "LGB without the T" politics and sensibilities. The move to sever us is not without a certain perverse logic. Trans-ness is not an equivalent identity category to being a gay man, or a lesbian, or bisexual. Trans people can be any of those things, or be "straight." In the sensibility of liberal identity politics, the T functions more as a supplement, or as the "containment mechanism for gender trouble."

Leslie Feinberg popularized the idea of *transgender* as a kind of political umbrella category that could include transsexuals, transvestites, and other gender-variant or gender-expansive people, including what in more recent language one might call nonbinary and agender people.[38] Across much of Stryker's writing the term *transgender* has that valence. Now that transgender has become a liberal political identity category, I venture that one might even speak of a kind of *transnormativity*. In moments of transnormativity, certain expressions of trans-ness appear as acceptable and redeemable. This respectable trans-ness is then worthy of consideration as the basis for rights-bearing subjects. Not surprisingly the face of transnormativity is often white, or at least well-spoken, not publicly sexual, and at some remove from sex work.[39]

There are now even sanctioned historical narratives of trans-ness, which highlight certain figures and moments as formative struggles that endow certain trans people with the potential to claim to be rights-bearing subjects. Stryker reminds us that Nietzsche once dissected historical thought into three kinds: antiquarian, monumental, and critical.[40] Antiquarian history gives us a lineage and connection. Monumental history seeks heroic stories to inspire great things. Critical history is more steely-eyed and focuses on past injustices. Now that Marsha P. Johnson has a waterside park named after her, it's timely to revisit this intervention into questions of what kind of histories serve what purpose for trans people today.

How are we to remember the moment of August 1966 at Compton's Cafeteria in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco? Was it a riot or a revolt? How does it relate to what happened at Stonewall a few years later? What are we to remember: That we suffered? That we struggled? Or that we endured? Who exactly is that "we"? Stryker did much to bring Compton's into focus as a moment in trans history—to the extent that in the 2019 version of the miniseries *Tales of the City* (based on the characters from Armistead Maupin's much-loved books), Compton's becomes the key to the backstory of the central character Anna Madrigal.

The general concept of *normativity* emerges as a key theme across these texts. Whereas the writings in part I attempt to find a form outside of normative literary forms, those in part 2 take on normativity, particularly that of feminists, gays, and lesbians, as a topic. At the level of form, they also question normativity in historical studies. Historical writing that centers the body of the writer, as trans writing sometimes must, can find itself relegated to the margins by a *normativizing disciplinarity*. Scholarship that insists on a subjective neutrality as a way of simulating objectivity is for trans people part of the problem. It is exactly this epistemology that handed power over our lives to medical and psychiatric Dr. Frankensteins.

One of the most fraught kinds of normativity for trans women to negotiate is lesbian culture. As Stryker puts it, we are neither its object nor subject but often its *abject*: that which is pushed aside with disgust.[41] She asks, provocatively, what it would mean to think lesbian feminism as structured around its transphobia. Lesbian feminism, like second wave feminism, is too often a version of Eurocentric modernization discourse. It is a certain model of womanhood, posed as the most liberated, most advanced, most befitting of the claim to rights. It's critical attention turned against other women. That can include working-class butch and femme dykes, women of color, trans women,

or trans men—all of whom supposedly perpetuate oppressive gender roles.[42] The personal is political, but the political can also get very, very personal.

What's striking to me about the essays I grouped together under "Trans Theory" is Stryker's patient and controlled tone. She shows the contributions trans people can make by drawing on the knowledge gained from encountering the world through our particular bodies. And at the same time, she shows how those to whom we appealed for solidarity and support did not always have our backs.

When Monsters Speak

I've arranged the book so that we start with the formative experiences of cultural and political knowledge-making in "Trans SanFrisco," followed by the application of that knowledge to the politics of institutional alliances in "Trans Theory," before returning, in part 3, to Stryker's most famous piece: "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." Hopefully, those to whom the depth and breadth of transgender rage seemed opaque will now have some sense of what it feels like.

Another context for this text, highlighted maybe a little more than in some of the others, is transgender political organizing. It deals with the politics of emotions and the emotions of politics. Here the affinity with queer experience and organizing, whatever our tensions with it, is worth stressing. Trans politics, like queer politics, might entail the recognition that certain emotions are not private, isolated experiences. That shame, fear, despair, and rage are social and political.[43]

At the same time, the piece works through aesthetic questions as to what trans writing might become. Sandy Stone had already shown the limits of the conventional trans memoir, where transition is the culmination of a personal journey facilitated by doctors.[44] The concluding emotion of transition is supposed to be living happily ever after in one's "real" gender. Stryker imagines transition otherwise: as an art of the body, which of necessity is also a politics of the body, due to the infuriating obstacles put in the path of our individual and collective self-transformation. She creates, out of parts, a genre for this theory and practice of gender. The raging tone feels akin to that of ACT-UP, with all its survival-driven urgency.[45]

The structuring conceit of Stryker's text is the unnaturalness of the trans body. All human bodies are in some way unnatural, in the sense that they all require some kind of technics to endure and thrive.[46] But some have to be held as abject—as unassimilable, as other—to sustain the fiction of the normative

body as natural. Finding this scapegoating not just from the straight world but also from feminists, lesbians, and gay men pushes the narrator to embrace alterity, to become the "leatherdyke from hell." Gayle Rubin on steroids—but where the steroid happens to be estrogen.

But here is the risk this self-fashioning runs: How to "lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself?" This is both personal and political work: to create ways of existing with, even drawing on, this powerful affect without self-harm. If you are trans, you have very likely lost sisters and brothers and others who died by their own hand, sometimes as much from rage as from sadness. But there's more: one also has to deflect oneself from inflicting this rage onto other trans people, something I see constantly in the community drama among the trans people around me.

When trans people create themselves, it's both a personal and communal act.[47] The theme of creation in this text draws on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Once upon a time, only God was a creator, and the best humans could do is to imitate His handiwork. A hierarchy of perfection stretches down from God, via the angels, to Man, and to his imitations as a poorly realized representation.[48]

When I first read this text, years before I could even contemplate the need to transition, I read it through Raymond Williams and what, for him, was the long history to the struggle to democratize creation.[49] A key moment is that of the romantic poets, Mary Shelley's contemporaries, for whom the poet is a special kind of human endowed with creative capacities. For Williams, the long revolution of socialism had the aim of freeing not only the labor of working peoples but their creative capacities as well.

In Mary Shelley, and in Susan Stryker, we find a complication on the way to the democratization of creation: What happens when the desire to create takes the bodies of others as its material? When Christine Jorgensen became famous in 1952 as the first celebrity trans woman, one of the things being celebrated was the creative power of the men who made her.[50] The surgeon still haunts our dreams.

The more common critical path taken in second wave feminism is to celebrate womanhood as natural, which ironically enough returns us to the archaic idea of the world as God's creation.[51] Woman is aligned with nature, purity, and the good against masculinity as the Frankensteinian will to cut the world into reasonable shape. The result is the spectacle of middle-class white women taking themselves to be the apotheosis of naturalism. And so, we arrive at health authorities issuing warnings against putting wasp's nests into vaginas.[52]

Stryker takes the other path: rather than become natural and good, become artificial and bad—become monstrous. Monsters, like angels, are messengers, not from God but from elsewhere. Perhaps from creation itself, from an entirely different conception of "nature" in which it has no author or master but is change, difference—variation itself.

On this other path, "nature" is no longer a stick with which to beat others for failing to conform to some arbitrary virtue smuggled into the conceit of being ordered by God. If "nature" still exists as a concept, it might mean something more like that which unfolds into some capacity—existing or novel—to be materially ongoing in the world. Nature is not virtue; it is the *virtual*. It's virtual in the sense Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari gave the word. It's not an ideal, it's real. It's just not actual. It's what is not but could actually be. It's all the things the actual could become or, rather, the capacity of their becomings.[53]

From the point of view of nature as the virtual, the other concept of nature as virtue is, ironically enough, an artifice or—less politely—a lie. It is merely the transposition of some component of a historical social order as a metaphor into a state of nature as a means to justify it. This is what Marx said happens when bourgeois economics sees the market as a natural order. Or what Haraway says happens in the primate sciences when the bourgeois family becomes a given of the natural order.[54] One way to think the Anthropocene is as the failure of such a concept when implemented as a tool of domination on a planetary scale.

Stryker is still interested in how gender saturates the world, but not along a nature/artifice binary. She makes use of a reading of Mary Shelley that distinguishes the male gaze (and cis gaze) from the auditory space as feminine. The latter is ambient, unbounded, animated, and dialogic. The former treats the world as objects that—if they can be seen—can be cataloged and controlled.[55]

Alongside a critique of visibility, what are the powers and tactics of *invisibility*, of the ambient and audible?[56] It's a theme across the Trans SanFrisco writings. For Stryker, it's the darkened spaces of the S/M club, where the visual is turned down and the array of other bodies can enter all the senses. It's the sounds of quivering flesh, or dialogues in the chill-out space, where other talk comes into play. Tactics that can be very selectively deployed in the light of day to talk back to power. Capacities I was finding, at that time, on the other side of the Pacific—in raves.[57]

Talking back is, among other things, a trans power of survival in the street, when we fail to register as "natural" bodies to the cis gaze. The derogatory term among trans women for a sister who doesn't pass is a *brick*. For many,

the only tactic that seems to offer any safety is to mimic cis womanhood, to *pass*, to be *unclockable*, to accept the codes of gender as given as if they were a natural order, which in the parlance of trans women is to be *fish*.

In 2021, at least fifty trans people were murdered in the United States, mostly trans women of color.[58] No wonder many trans people modify and present their bodies as cis-passing. This is gender as more than *performative*, given that it takes more than negotiating dominant language-like codes to pull it off. One had to cut and temper flesh itself. All to appear in the visual field—just so—in a way that accepts the lie of nature rather than challenging it. Many trans people do not have the luxury of queer gender play. Stryker rescues even these transsexual bodies from abjection. They too seize the powers of creation. That might matter more than the style in which the gender of the body is then fashioned.

In "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," Stryker issues a trans challenge to "nature" itself. The piece opens with a description of appearances that intentionally presents the bad object to the controlling gaze, which is itself revealed to be a gaze that is shared not only by men but also by many women who think they are feminists, and by many queer viewers who think they are somehow radical. And then this anomalous vision speaks of what it knows, of what it not only sees but also senses.

"My Words" speak—in the plural—back to the sciences that made transsexual bodies possible but did so out of weird unacknowledged desires and with a controlling instinct. They also speak back to both feminist and queer communities who have not heard the challenges trans-ness poses to the worldview that seeks to make us in their image through their fantasies of mastery. "My Words" propose an alternate queer ecology[59]—or better—a trans ecology, in which we will not be that terrifying image of what we are to all the Dr. Frankensteins: a body without a mouth.[60]

Ten years after "My Words," Stryker reflects on them in "Queer Theory's Evil Twin." Like Frankenstein's monster, the evil twin is a common narrative trope found everywhere from daytime soaps to Pier Paolo Pasolini.[61] As queer theory's evil twin, transgender studies brings trouble into the family. Stryker names three writers with whom she is in dialogue—Judith Butler, Sandy Stone, and Leslie Feinberg—for whom trans-ness is already a kind of gender trouble, needling at some corner or other of what is not yet ready to be named *cis normativity*.

Out of those texts, Stryker draws possibilities for "enacting a new narrative," and in that, she is writing in parallel to the Bay Area writers of the New Narrative movement.[62] The world of New Narrative writers is a kind of

literary "family by choice," which is something akin to what Stryker wants from queer writing: a space within which trans writing can find commonality. Some years later, trans writing will start to feel the need for its own space, at some remove from queer literature and theory.[63] Just how close its relation to queerness ought to be is still up for debate.

Some twenty years after "My Words," in "Transing the Queer (In)human," Stryker offers a different kind of intertext for it, gesturing toward Gayatri Spivak on subaltern speech, Jean-François Lyotard on language games, and Michael Hardt and others on affective labor. "My Words" enacts speaking rather than being spoken to or of, crafting moves in a rigged discursive game. It vents the surplus feelings that performing all that work generates.[64] With the hindsight of twenty years, "My Words" is not only situated in multiple existing language games. It is also a key move in starting a new one—transgender studies. One might wonder, however, what other possibilities were left behind. For instance, what might it have looked like if this text was as central to a trans literature as to a trans scholarship?

Beyond that, what might be at the far horizons of what "My Words" articulated? To me, the essay speaks also to media theory and its interest in the human as a byproduct of the technical rather than as its author.[65] If the human is a special effect of technics, then it might at least be interesting to consider those versions of the body that are deemed to have failed to be human because they are too marked by technics, of which trans people are just one example.

At the twenty-five year mark, Stryker is writing in a context in which queer theory has expanded into, and linked up with, a critique of the *biopolitical*, in which forms of life are categorized, ranked, and valued—or treated as waste.[66] Against which various *new materialisms* emphasize a scaleless, interconnected universe continually in process, often charged with what looks suspiciously like old-fashioned vitalism.[67] I have written elsewhere against these kinds of contemplative worldviews that seem to forget the praxis from which any worldview extends.[68]

What I appreciate about Stryker's writings is that they are more than a merely contemplative worldview upon universal trans-ness. The texts write from their own situatedness, from moments of struggle to become. They write from practices—writerly, political, artistic, sexual—from which these particular concepts emerge. Concepts, it turns out, that have all sorts of uses beyond transgender studies, but which have their limitations as well.

In responding to Katrina Roen and Karen Barad, Stryker acknowledges these limitations, which are also those of the whiteness of the networks of trans people within which they were in part generated. More generative, per-

haps, is Marquis Bey's reading of Stryker in which Blackness and trans-ness are adjacent ways of naming what was and is fugitive, unfigured, uncaptured, in racial capitalism. Scholars such as C. Riley Snorton and Jules Gill-Peterson have done much to show how in the United States and beyond, the categories of the sexed body, as they appear in that medical science (which supposedly grounds its "naturalness") have always been racialized.[69] Jian Neo Chen, micha cárdenas, Francisco Galarte, and others have brought trans of color lives, arts, and culture into the dialogue, or rather the polylog, on trans-ness, putting pressure on it as a category, even within American life.[70]

Unlike Stryker, I never felt all that strong a need to trouble queer discourse as a means to affiliate with it. I read queer theory at the time of its initial boom as if I was a cis bisexual. It bothered me for different reasons. For instance, the way that in *Volatile Bodies* Liz Grosz treated bisexuality as a vector of disease.[71] Or the way that the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras tried to control access to its popular annual ball by mandating that all members sign a declaration that offered only two options: lesbian or gay man. I showed up to the public debate at the Tom Mann theater with the bisexuals rather than the transsexuals to see about that.

By the time I eventually came out, queer theory, with its celebration of the ineffable, indeterminate play of gender appeared to me as one of the obstacles to my own transition. It often treated actual trans people, and trans women in particular, as the bad object for taking it all too literally (on which, see all the inexcusably bad takes on *Paris Is Burning*). By contrast, I had what Stryker did not: networks of trans people who might overlap with queer networks but did not depend on them. It must be said, however, that like everything else in America, these networks were often segregated.

I had that, in part, because of Styker's work across the nearly thirty-year period this collection covers. When monsters speak, their voices echo.

Notes

1 Stryker, *Transgender History*; Stryker and Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader*; Stryker and Aizura, *The Transgender Studies Reader II*.
2 On the broadcast age, see Spigel, *Make Room for TV*.
3 Lucy Sante is one of my favorite writers of bohemia. Sante, *The Other Paris*; Sante, *Low Life*.
4 See "Trans in a Time of AIDS," special issue edited by Che Gossett and Eva Hayward, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (2020).
5 See the fictional account of this subculture in Fitzpatrick, *The Call Out*.
6 On selective tradition, see R. Williams, *The Long Revolution*.

7 Perkins, *The Drag Queen Scene*. The late Roberta Perkins studied sociology with R. W. Connell at Macquarie University, just a few years before I did.
8 Here I'm indebted to the as-yet-unpublished work of Cass Adair.
9 To get the flavor of that, see Sullivan and Bornstein, *Nearly Roadkill*; Horn, *Cyberville*.
10 On which, see also Califia, *Macho Sluts*.
11 Compare with Tea, *Valencia*.
12 Here I know the New York accounts best: Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*; Shulman, *Rat Bohemia*.
13 Gasparini, *Autofiction*.
14 Fleishmann, *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through*.
15 The tipping point is named after Steinmetz, "The Transgender Tipping Point." It might also include the public reception of Janet Mock's autobiography, *Redefining Realness*, and the model Geena Rocero's very public coming out in a TedTalk. See Rocero, *Horse Barbie*.
16 On reparative reading, see Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.
17 On the work of Kathy High, see https://www.kathyhigh.com.
18 Monir, *Napkin*.
19 A short piece by Cara Esten Hurtle got me thinking about this concept. See Wark, "The Cis Gaze and Its Others."
20 There are many versions of autotheory. See, for example, Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*.
21 Acker, *Bodies of Work*.
22 Solnit, *Infinite City*.
23 Salamon, *Assuming a Body*.
24 On San Francisco gentrification and housing struggles, see Tracy, *Dispatches against Displacement*.
25 A point made by Peters, *Detransition, Baby*.
26 Prodger, *Selected Works*.
27 Baer, *Trans Girl Suicide Museum*.
28 Bombardier, *Pass with Care*.
29 G. Rubin, *Deviations*.
30 Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*.
31 For the case against queer theory, see Namaste, *Invisible Lives*.
32 Repo, *Biopolitics of Gender*.
33 Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*; Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality*.
34 But see also Prosser, *Second Skins*.
35 Heaney, *The New Woman*. On third wave feminism, see Gillis, Howie, and Munford, *Third Wave Feminism*.
36 See "Trans/Feminisms," special issue edited by Susan Stryker and Talia M. Bettcher, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2016); and "Trans/Feminisms," special issue edited by Talia Bettcher et al., *Sinister Wisdom* (Spring 2023).
37 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.
38 Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*.

39 Jean et al., *Revolution Is Love*, documents the struggle to define a practice of trans liberation outside of transnormativity. See also Meronek and Major, *Miss Major Speaks*.
40 Nietzsche, *Untimely Mediations*.
41 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.
42 Kendall, *Hood Feminism*.
43 Subsequent work on transgender "bad affect" includes Malatino, *Side Affects*; and Awkward Rich, *The Terrible We*.
44 Stone, "The 'Empire' Strikes Back." For selections from classic trans memoirs, see Ames, *Metamorphosis*.
45 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*.
46 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*.
47 Gleeson, "How Do Gender Transitions Happen?"
48 Wark, "Trap Metaphysics."
49 R. Williams, *The Long Revolution*.
50 See Jorgensen, *A Personal Autobiography*, with its introduction by Stryker.
51 Although here we might mention how the work of the late Rachel Pollack complicates the women's spirituality tradition. See Pollack, *The Body of the Goddess*.
52 Miller, "Why Are Women Putting Wasp Nests in Their Vaginas?"
53 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.
54 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.
55 One could connect this to a parallel development in studies of Blackness and sound. See Weheliye, *Phonographies*.
56 Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*.
57 St. John, *Technomad*.
58 Carlisle, "Anti-trans Violence and Rhetoric."
59 Wölfe Hazard, *Underflows*.
60 Vividly pictured in the Wachowskis' film *The Matrix* (1999).
61 Pasolini, *Petrolio*.
62 Killian and Bellamy, *Writers Who Love Too Much*.
63 Cugini, "The Troubled Golden Age of Trans Literature."
64 Gregg and Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*.
65 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*.
66 Stryker, "Biopolitics."
67 Dolphijn and van der Tuin, *New Materialism*.
68 Wark, *General Intellects*.
69 Bey, *Black Trans Feminism*; Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*; Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny.*
70 Chen, *Trans Exploits*; cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*; Galarte, *Brown Trans Figurations*.
71 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 197.