

Trans Subjectivity in Preciado's *Can the Monster Speak?*

Limits and Possibilities of Preciado's Engagement with Psychoanalysis

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In this thesis, I examine Paul B. Preciado's speech *Can the Monster Speak?* (2019) and show how it reflects the ambivalent historical entwinement of psychoanalysis and trans*-ness. I suggest that Preciado uses the figure of the monster to articulate trans subjectivity, and that his conceptualisation of trans subjectivity is rooted in the refusal of and disidentification with normative discourses about trans lives. Through this refusal, Preciado illuminates the workings of these discourses. I read Preciado through postcolonial critiques in trans studies and show how Preciado's strategies for making non-normative trans subjectivity visible risk becoming limiting due to an ambivalent attachment to psychoanalytic concepts and the colonial legacies in the psychoanalytic tradition. Finally, I connect the question of limitations in Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity to on-going discussions in trans studies over the field's aims and object of study.

Key words: trans subject, monstrosity, Paul B. Preciado, trans studies, subjectivity, psychoanalysis

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1 Introduction

In this thesis, I analyse Preciado's speech *Can the Monster Speak?* through the concept of trans subjectivity. I am analysing the speech thematically to see what is made visible through the lens of 'trans subjectivity' in relation to the history of trans people and psychoanalysis. Further, I problematise Preciado's trans subjectivity and interrogate it from the perspectives of intersectional and postcolonial critique.

Preciado is a contemporary high-profile trans philosopher whose work largely focuses on denaturalising the binary sex/gender system, that has dominated scientific discourses since the late eighteenth century (Laqueur, 1992). *Can the Monster Speak?* is the published version of a speech Preciado was invited to hold at the 49th Study Day of the École de la Cause Freudienne on the 17th of November 2019 on the topic of "women in psychoanalysis". The École de la Cause Freudienne is the French psychoanalytic institute originally founded by analyst Jacques Lacan. In the speech, Preciado radically questions the assumptions of psychoanalysis regarding sex/gender and consequently the discipline's ability to adequately understand trans subjects. As Preciado writes in the preface to *Can the Monster Speak?*, his speech caused so much uproar and disruption in the audience that he was only able to read a quarter of it. Afterwards, filmed, transcribed, and translated versions of the speech circulated on the internet and caused much discussion (Preciado, 2021). It fed into current debates within psychoanalysis about the discipline's treatment of trans people, connected with discussions about the possibility of countertransference in therapeutic setting (Evzonas, 2021; Gherovici, 2011; Goldner, 2011; Saketopoulou, 2022).

In the speech, Preciado first gives an autobiographical account of his own gender and transition, before challenging the psychoanalysts to revise their notion of what Preciado refers to as the "epistemic regime of sexual difference." He writes: "I was assigned female at birth and, like the mutant ape, I extricated myself from that confined 'cage', in order to enter another cage, granted, but at least this time through my own initiative" (Preciado, 2021, 20). In the first part of the speech, Preciado works through his autobiographical account of transitioning to develop his critique of the cis-heteronormative regime. In the second part, he puts forward and develops three interconnected theses that challenge the assumption of a naturalised gender binary. First, he asserts that the current understanding of sexual difference is historical and therefore contingent. He then points out that since the 1940s scientific research has found data that questions the assumption of a natural binary sex/gender system.

Thirdly, he foretells that this binary sex/gender system will shift and change in the next decade or two:

“I would like to begin by saying that the regime of sexual difference as promulgated by psychoanalysis is neither a nature nor a symbolic order but an epistemological politics of the body and that, as such, it is historical and changing.

Secondly, I would like to inform you, in case you did not already know, that this hierarchical epistemic binary regime has been in crisis since the 1940s, not just because of the challenges posed by the political movements of dissident minorities, but also because of the discovery of new data – morphological, chromosomal and biochemical – that renders sex and gender assignation at least contentious, if not impossible.

Thirdly, I would like to say that, shaken by profound changes, the epistemic regime of sexual difference is mutating and, within the next ten or twenty years, will probably give way to a new epistemology. Trans feminist, queer and anti-racist movements, together with new approaches to filiation, to loving relationships and to identification in terms of gender, desire, sexuality and naming, are merely signs of this mutation and of experiments in the collective construction of a different epistemology of the living human body.” (Preciado, 2021, 43-4)

Finally, he ends by challenging the attending psychoanalysts at the event to consider the theses put before them and their own attitude towards the necessity of a “mutation of psychoanalysis, [...] the emergence of a mutant psychoanalysis, one equal to the paradigm shift we are experiencing” (ibid., 77). Thus, he calls for a reform of the discipline in the face of the changes that have occurred to the understanding of sex and gender.

To provide a background against which Preciado’s words can be read, I contextualise Preciado’s speech in the historical encounter between psychoanalysis and trans* people. This way, I situate both Preciado and psychoanalysis in the discourse on transsexuality and the questions this discourse raises over who speaks for whom.

In my analysis of the speech, I employ a two-fold approach. On the one hand, I employ the concept of “trans subjectivity”, which draws on Sandy Stone’s “Posttranssexual Manifesto” (Stone, 2006), Susan Stryker’s “My Words to Victor Frankenstein” (Stryker, 1994), and is rooted in Michel Foucault’s work on the subject and subjectivity. I read *Can the Monster Speak?* as an articulation of a particular trans subjectivity that Preciado envisions, one that is rooted in Preciado’s understanding of the historic entanglement between trans* subjects and psychoanalysis. This proposed trans subjectivity sketched by Preciado challenges psychoanalysis’ authority to produce knowledge about trans* people and enables an

understanding of trans subjectivity not rooted in some form of pathology, but rather is conceptualised as a rejection of oppressive social norms. On the other hand, I look at possible limits of Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity. By employing postcolonial and critical works by Gayatri Spivak (Spivak, 1993) and Jasbir K. Puar (Puar, 2015), I show how Preciado's trans subjectivity, despite its critical aim, is not open to all and is located in specific circumstances. Although Preciado's speech as a critique of psychoanalysis has previously been discussed by Patricia Gherovici (Gherovici, 2023) and Jamieson Webster (Webster, 2023), the introduction of postcolonial critique to this discussion is distinctive of my approach.

The dialectic of my analysis dovetails with my own affective investments in the speech of being both compelled and frustrated by it. Ever since I first read Preciado's speech, I have had a strong emotional reaction to it, one that has only re-occurred more strongly through repeated readings: I feel an intense excitement and almost jubilant feeling when reading the beginning of the speech, where Preciado's rebellious stance towards the psychoanalysts in his audience is something to admire and empathise with. In part, it might be the satisfaction of seeing someone articulate how and why trans subjectivity does not fit the prevalent understanding of gendered subjectivity of psychoanalysis but is, in fact, in opposition towards it. As someone who underwent psychoanalytic therapy in my teenage years during my own gender struggles, Preciado's writing resonates strongly with me. For example, when he writes:

“[...]‘the talking cure’ succeeds in doing something that no other institution within the regime of sex, gender and sexual difference can do: devise a language of sexuality, instil a feeling of normal and pathological sexual identity and gender identity, offer a patriarchal and colonial meaning to dreams, and gradually form a kernel of binary identity based on autofiction” (Preciado, 2021, 51).

The identity of “woman” which my therapist worked so hard to instil in me, remained stable until about a year after I finished my sessions with her and encountered various testimonies of trans and gender outlaws. Then this carefully constructed identity as a woman came crashing down, and I had to work hard on undoing the identity my therapist had spent so much effort on constructing. Preciado channels the feelings that animate the refusal to comply with the pressure to sort oneself into gender categories that are not of one's own making. He valorises the experience of rebellion and articulates the intellectual, emotional, and psychic labour that goes into disidentifying with the categories that the “regime of sexual difference” offers. However, this intensely, almost painfully positive, and perhaps even liberatory feeling that his writing evokes in me, then flips and turns into disappointment and frustration with some

aspects of the speech: when Preciado compares medicine and psychology's effort to control the trans body to the colonial effort to control territory (Preciado, 2021, 36), it seems that he is brushing over important differences. And when he describes rejecting the advantages of passing as a white man (ibid., 34), he seems to overlook the fact that he cannot always control whether others bestow advantages on him.

The frustration is linked to a broader disturbance over the whiteness of trans studies and the tendency towards universalising gestures found in parts of the discipline more widely. Some of these efforts within trans studies to make trans*-ness more visible sometimes involve sacrificing attending to the geographic and historical specificity of the background against which it appears. In the second part of my analysis, I attempt to critique these aspects of Preciado's speech that echo some tendencies within trans studies that disavow the influence of colonialism in the interest of universalising trans*-ness.

From the awareness that articulating trans subjectivity both enables and constraints, both renders visible and obscures, I arrive at the following research questions for my work:

RQ1: How does Preciado envision trans subjectivity in the speech, and how is this envisioned trans subjectivity distinctive in the field of imagined trans subjectivities?

RQ2: What limitations does Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity encounter from a postcolonial perspective?

I suggest through this thesis that Preciado is offering an account of trans subjectivity that is anti-identitarian and anti-normative, in the sense that he frames being trans, not as a gender ontology or identity, but as a method for negotiating and undermining the constraints of the patriarchal-binary sex/gender system.

In chapter 2, I will introduce the historical background of the relationship between trans*-ness, transsexuality, and psychoanalysis. This history provides the context for the speech and for Preciado's work that critically engages with the role of medicine and psychoanalysis in the current binary sex/gender paradigm. In the second half of chapter 2, I introduce Preciado's work and the reception of Preciado's speech. Chapter 3 introduces my theoretical frame and introduces the conceptual background of my concept of "trans subjectivity", derived from the work of Michel Foucault and Sandy Stone. This is followed by the postcolonial critique of the Foucauldian interpretation of "the subject" and the observation that within the current discursive power formation, some positionalities are excluded from the category of "the trans

subject". My analysis of the speech follows in chapter 4, where I discuss how Preciado's envisions trans subjectivity through the figure of the monster and show what this trans subjectivity enables and what it forecloses. Chapter 5 relates the analysis back to the field of trans studies, before I conclude in chapter 6.

2 Trans and Psychoanalysis – an Ambivalent Encounter

Since the beginning of trans studies as an academic discipline authored and led by trans individuals, one key concern of the discipline has been the historical conceptualisations of transness in Western psychoanalysis and medicine. The encounter between trans conceptualisations and psychoanalysis is fraught with problems and conflicts, and the work within trans studies that engages with psychoanalysis reflects these contradictions. In this chapter, I will lay out the historical background against which Preciado's speech is set. In particular, I sketch the historical developments in the human sciences during the nineteenth century that eventually led to the diagnostic criteria and category of "transsexuality" in the mid-20th century. Since the discipline of psychoanalysis (alongside medicine) plays a central role in this process, this historical background provides important context for Preciado's speech.

The historical entwinement I am presenting here runs from the beginning of psychoanalysis as a field of study and the antecedents of the concept of transsexuality, up to the emergence of trans studies as an academic field. The history I am sketching presents the development of the diagnosis of "transsexuality" from the perspective of trans studies, that is, in line with trans studies' theoretical investments in queer theory, and the field's aims to critically question the position of authority and exercise of power by the disciplines of medicine and psychoanalysis. The theoretical investments that inform trans studies are discussed in greater detail in chapter 3 of this thesis. In the latter part of this chapter, I will introduce Preciado's work and how my analysis of *Can the Monster Speak?* relates to academic discussions of his work.

2.1 Medicine, Psychoanalysis, and Transsexuality

Psychoanalysis played a key role in the development of the diagnosis of "transsexuality" and the consequent understanding of trans people based on that concept. Although gender nonconformity or deviation from cultural prescriptions of how men and women should act is not a new phenomenon¹, transsexual and transgender individuals in the way we understand them are a result of the modern era's drive towards classification and its understanding of sex and gender (Halberstam, 2018, 8). The trans rights movement has worked towards

¹ Attempting to write trans history immediately raises the question of what counts as "trans" *avant la lettre*, since the concept of "trans" is tied to the modern understanding of sex and gender. For a recent overview of this history that also addresses these theoretical questions, see Kit Heyam's *Before we were trans: A new history of gender* (Heyam, 2022).

depathologising transness in order to depart from the psychoanalytic understanding of “transsexuals”, but this countermovement is happening in response to psychoanalysis’ discourse on transsexuality. As such, it is necessary to be aware of this original discourse in order to understand the attempts to change it.

According to the historian Thomas Laqueur, the contemporary Western model of a binary sex system was developed in the eighteenth century, alongside an understanding of “incommensurable difference” based on difference in reproductive organs (Laqueur, 1990, 149). This was part of a gradual shift away from earlier models in the West. In Europe from antiquity to the eighteenth century (*ibid.*, 25), the predominant model was that of a single sex with two expressions: “the construction of a single-sexed body with its different versions attributed to at least two genders” (*ibid.*, 20). Women were seen as a derivative of the male sex, rather than as a separate and different sex altogether: “Women [...] [were] inverted, and hence less perfect, men. They [had] exactly the same organs but in exactly the wrong places” (*ibid.*, 26). With the development towards modern medicine, the model of sexual dimorphism developed. In this model, women are no longer derivative from men, but men and women are divided into two distinct sexes (*ibid.*, 148).

For Laqueur, one ramification of this shift is that sexual difference became the ground for the difference of what we call gender roles for men and women: “Two sexes, [...] were invented as a new foundation for gender” (*ibid.*, 149). Laqueur holds that this shift in the understanding of the conceptual binary of men and women was central to the social developments of the nineteenth century as well, among them to the development of feminism. The binary model of sexual difference “allowed the emergence of the full spectrum of nineteenth-century social thought, from reactionary reassertions of ‘natural’ hierarchies to feminist advocacy of cooperative society” (Gallagher & Laqueur, 1987, viii). Indeed, these discussions over the role of women were then inflected through the question of the nature of women’s bodies as distinct from those of men (Laqueur, 1987, 35).

Psychology was one of the new sciences of the human that developed during this period and was greatly influenced by this shift to the model of sexual dimorphism. In the budding discipline of psychology, early figures developed theories of the relationship between sexual difference and the mental landscapes of men and women. Sigmund Freud, widely known as the “father of psychoanalysis”, is one of the early figures that developed sophisticated accounts of that relationship. Freud himself is ambivalent on the relationship between the

biological/anatomical sex and any psychological structures, and on the role that social conventions play with respect to gender. He at several points in his writing expresses doubt regarding a neat delineation between men and women and works with a notion of “bisexuality”, whereby every person carries aspects of both sexes in themselves.² Thomas Laqueur reads Freud’s work as a negotiation of the by then established two-sex model, and sees Freud’s introduction of the sex drive as an integration of the previous one-sex model on the psychic level, since the sex drive is common to both sexes (Laqueur 1990, 233). In this reading, the blurriness in Freud’s remarks on sex and sex roles signifies his discomfort with and negotiation of the clear notion of “sexual difference” established by modern medicine and anatomy. Further, his theorisation of the sex drive has the implication that “all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious” (Freud, 1977, 56n). Queer studies researchers have developed this re-reading of Freud’s writings where *all* human sexuality is “perverse” (Dean & Lane, 2001, 4). However, this interpretation of Freud has not been the most common or influential. As Patricia Gherovici comments, “the freedom of the sexual drive, [...] tends to scare most people, including psychoanalysts who have tended to address this issue through the lens of conservative values” (Gherovici, 2023, 70-1).

Following the establishment of sexual difference as primary category of distinction, which paired biological differences with appropriate psychological development and social behaviour, led to efforts to explain how and why some individuals do not adhere to this model. The resulting categories of homosexuality and transsexuality (among others) are thus a product of taxonomical work and an attempt to make sense of those who do not appropriately follow the schema of men desiring women and women desiring men. The label and understanding of transsexuality are thus a corollary of the development of psychoanalysis. Without psychoanalysis, there would be no transsexuality. Susan Stryker influentially used the relationship between Mary Shelley’s Doctor Frankenstein and Frankenstein’s Creation to

² Freud’s notion of bisexuality seems to cover both biological and social dimensions of masculinity and femininity, although the issue is complicated by his additional equation of masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud writes that “observation shows that in human beings pure masculinity or femininity is not to be found either in a psychological or a biological sense. Every individual on the contrary displays a mixture of the character-traits belonging to his own and to the opposite sex; and he shows a combination of activity and passivity whether or not these last character-traits tally with his biological ones” (Freud, 1977, 142n). However, in his later lecture on femininity (Freud, 1964), Freud seems to struggle with inferring psychological bisexuality from anatomical similarity between the sexes, and wants to resist “giving way to anatomy or to convention” (ibid., 119). As far as I can make out, he neither reaches a clear picture of what he means by “masculinity” and “femininity”, nor on the issue of “bisexuality”.

conceptualise the nature of the link between modern medicine, psychoanalysis, and trans people (Stryker, 2006, 248). In Shelley's classic novel *Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus* (Shelley, 1996), Doctor Frankenstein creates an artificial living body and subsequently struggles with the implications of this act. Just as the Creation is the result of Dr Frankenstein's scientific interest in uncovering the secret of life and showing his mastery over creation, transsexuals are the result of modern science's desire to classify, and to prove its powers in various new surgical techniques (Stryker 2006, 248).

Richard von Krafft-Ebbing was one of the first to investigate and attempt a taxonomy of types of what he terms the "contrary sexual instinct" (as opposed to what was conceived of as the "normal" sexual instinct towards procreation) in his *Psychopathia Sexualis with Special Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct* (Halberstam, 2018, 6-7; von Krafft-Ebbing, 2006). In his work, he links homosexuality to gender variance and identifies different sub-types of homosexuality, some of which he considers to be "disturbed" and "psychotic" (Stryker & Whittle, 2006, 21). The tendency to view transsexuality as a variation or product of (suppressed) homosexuality that Diane Morgan identifies as prevalent in psychoanalysis can thus be traced back to von Krafft-Ebbing's early classifications (Morgan, 1999, 230).

Morgan traces the roots of the contemporary psychoanalytic relation to transsexuality to the discussion of the "Schreber case". This concerns the treatment of Daniel Paul Schreber at the end of the 19th century at the Sonnenstein hospital near Dresden that was led by Professor Paul Flechsig. Schreber spent 14 years of his life in psychiatric institutions, eight of which at Sonnenstein (Sass, 2015). During his second illness while at Sonnenstein, he wrote the *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* [translated as *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*] which provides a testimony of Schreber's convictions, including the belief that God had turned him into a woman. Later, Schreber also published an open letter to Flechsig, where he complains that Flechsig "could not completely resist the temptation of using a patient in [his] care as an object for scientific experiments apart from the real purpose of cure, when by chance matters of the highest scientific interest arose" (Schreber, 1995, 9, italics in original). Sigmund Freud used the *Memoirs* for his re-evaluation of the case in 1911, where he suggests that Schreber's delusions of being turned into a woman by God is due to Schreber's repressed homosexuality (Morgan, 1999, 226). Morgan summarises the lingering effect that this case has had for the relationship between psychoanalysis and transsexuals as follows: that transsexuals are confronted with both "the formulaic judgement of repressed homosexuality tending to psychosis" and a dependency on medical research into physical causes of transsexuality. As

she writes: “Faced with one institution that refuses to think outside of Oedipalized libidinal drives and another that presumes to deal with psychosomatic crises as solely the result of organic malfunctioning, transsexuals have been trapped” (Morgan, 1999, 230).

However, there were also early dissidents to the assumption that transsexuality is a form of homosexuality. Magnus Hirschfeld was founder of the first advocacy organisation for homosexuals in 1897 and later of the Institute for Sexology in Berlin in 1919. He published *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress* in 1910 (Hirschfeld, 2006), in which he explicitly argues against the view that “transvestism” can be reduced to either homosexuality, fetishism, or psychopathology (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, 28). Rather, Hirschfeld considered “transvestism” to be one of many “mixtures of manly and womanly substances” that exist in different degrees (Hirschfeld, 2006, 37) in the spectrum between the two poles of “pure male” and “pure female” (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, 28).

The first usage of “transsexual” [*sic*] goes back to David O. Cauldwell’s article “Psychopathia Transsexualis” (Cauldwell, 2006), where he describes a case of “psychopathic transsexuality” [*sic*] that he attributes to “a poor hereditary background and a highly unfavourable childhood environment” (Cauldwell, 2006, 40-1). The term became popularised by Harry Benjamin, who throughout his life was a “compassionate though paternalistic advocate for transgender people” (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, 45). His contemporary Cauldwell advised “social education” and “rehabilitation” to cure transsexuals (Cauldwell, 2006, 44). In contrast, Benjamin drew a distinction between transvestism on the one hand, which he saw as amenable to treatment through therapy if so desired, and transsexuality on the other. Regarding the latter, he wrote that “psychotherapy for the purpose of curing [transsexuality] is a waste of time” (Benjamin, 2006, 51). Instead, he advocated for access to medical procedures if a psychiatrist determined that “the psyche cannot be brought into sufficient harmony with the soma” (*ibid.*). His writings and clinical practice in the US in the middle of the 20th century were deeply influential for the medical approach to trans people after him and into the present (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, 45). In this approach, transsexuals are to be granted access to medical procedures for the purpose of “passing” successfully, but only on the condition that the transsexual passes a psychiatric assessment.

In the 1950s, John Money and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University introduced a distinction between biological sex and social gender role (Slagstad, 2021, 1072). Since then, the sex-gender distinction has been fundamental to much feminist and queer analysis, and also

led to the account of transsexuality developed by Robert Stoller (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, 53). Stoller's model distinguishes between an individual's biological sex, social gender role, and subjective gender identity, with elaborate explanations of the way in which biological sex influences the other two dimensions (Stoller, 2006). In my interpretation, Stoller's introduction of subjective gender identity as an explicit third dimension opens the door for the much-discussed, "classic" trans narrative of being "trapped in the wrong body" (Stone, 2006, 231). Benjamin's and Stoller's work shaped the medical and psychological approach to transsexuality for the next decades. In particular, the work of Harry Benjamin and others towards developing "Standards of Care" for trans patients eventually resulted in the inclusion of "gender identity disorder" in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnosics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980 (Stryker, 2017, 138). This marked the arrival of transsexuality in the medical and psychological establishment.

Concurrently, outside of the medical and psychological institutions, trans activism and self-organisation occurred in various forms and places in the 1950s and 60s. One key location in the 1960s, for example, was San Francisco's Tenderloin district, where the Vanguard queer youth organisation and Glide Memorial United Methodist Church (among others) began working towards better trans lives (Stryker 2017, 93-4). However, progress was sparse in the two decades before 1990 (ibid., 151). It was not until the 1990s that trans activism in different forms and places gained momentum in a new transgender movement (ibid.). This movement combined activism with a new resonance of trans issues in academia, as well as the expansion of transgender feminism (Stryker, 2017, 155-160). Although the genealogies of trans studies can be traced in multiple ways, one possibility is to trace trans studies' beginnings to the activist work that culminated in the transgender liberation movement. At the time, there was a shift in language from "transsexual" to "transgender" following Leslie Feinberg's influential 1992 pamphlet "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come" (Feinberg, 2006), where "transgender" now came to function as an umbrella term for all those marginalised due to their deviations or disidentification from social norms of gender and embodiment (Stryker, 2006a) 4). With this shift in language came the possibility of referring to an "imagined community" of all those otherwise disparate people who wanted to respond to Feinberg's call, and a transgender liberation movement did indeed follow (ibid.). This movement followed the publication of Feinberg's pamphlet and Sandy Stone's influential "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" in 1991 (Stone, 2006). In this text, Stone called for the development of epistemic and creative practices that would be capable of

communicating the realities of those who transitioned or “changed sex” (Stone, 2006, 231). In chapter 3, I discuss Stone’s “Manifesto” in greater detail.

One constant during the development of the category of transsexuality is that the voice of the trans subject is only audible through the interpretation of the doctor or psychoanalyst. In that sense, the understanding of transsexuality and trans subject is hampered by the power imbalance between patient and doctor. In order to address this, the field of trans studies developed in the 1990s together with the emergence of a more coherent transgender identity label and concurrent trans rights movement. As Stephen Whittle writes in the foreword to *The Transgender Studies Reader* (Whittle, 2006), trans studies emerged with the aim to unsettle or counteract previous research done on trans people, which defined transsexualism as a mental or medical disorder and thus focused on psychology and medicalisation (Whittle, 2006, xii). Trans studies set out to de-pathologize being trans and to produce knowledge about trans people that would be in accordance with the lived realities and experiences of trans people. For example, Jay Prosser’s *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (Prosser, 1998) sets out to develop narratives of transition in clear engagement with and opposition to the scientific narratives available so far. Tracing the legal pitfalls and uncertainties regarding trans individuals, Stephen Whittle contrasts the dominant understanding of transsexuality with his own, lived experience (Whittle, 1999). However, Diane Morgan traces how the early Schreber case from the late 19th century has shaped psychoanalysis’ conceptualisation of transsexuality and shows how these early writings still shape the understanding of gender non-conforming people (Morgan, 1999). The long durée of the psychoanalytic and medical conceptualisations of transsexuality linger in the public discourse. As such, they continue to solicit engagement with them from trans studies, and negotiation of their legacy by trans subjects themselves.

2.2 Paul B. Preciado’s Work in Context

In *Can the Monster Speak?*, Paul B. Preciado invokes the violent social and medical history of trans in both explicit and implicit ways. The speech thus falls into the tradition of trans studies’ engagement with the development of the binary sex/gender system, the diagnosis of transsexuality, and the consequences of these for trans subjects. It also connects with Preciado’s previous work that questions the notions of naturalised sex and naturalised gender, particularly his book *Testo Junkie* (Preciado, 2013). His work has become increasingly discussed in recent years and he has also gathered renown outside of academic contexts. In

their introduction to a special issue of the academic journal *Paragraph* that is dedicated to his work, Elliot Evans and Lili Own Rowlands call Preciado “the most fashionable of contemporary philosophers”, citing his appearance in the Spring/Summer 2021 campaign of fashion label Gucci as a particularly colourful indicator of his prominence (Evans & Rowlands, 2023, 1).

Paul B. Preciado was born in Spain but moved to the U.S. in the 1990s, first to pursue an MA in Philosophy at The New School in New York City under the supervision of the poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida and Agnes Heller, then proceeded to do his PhD at Princeton University. He completed his dissertation in Philosophy and Theory of Architecture in 2010 titled *Pornotopía: Architecture and Sexuality in Playboy During the Cold War* (Preciado, 2014), which when later published as a book won the Prix Sade in France. He has worked at the Université Paris VIII as professor of Political History of the Body, Gender Theory, and History of Performance, and at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona as the director of the Independent Studies Program. Further, he was Curator of Public Programmes of *documenta14* in Kassel and Athens. In 2000 he published the *Manifeste contra-sexuel* (published in English as the *Contrasexual Manifesto* in 2018) (Preciado, 2018). In 2013, the English edition of *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* appeared (Preciado, 2013). His columns at French newspaper *Libération*'s website between 2013 and 2018 were published in 2019 as *An Apartment on Uranus* (Preciado, 2019). That same year he gave the speech titled *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts* at the *École de la Cause Freudienne*, the psychoanalytic institute founded by Jacques Lacan (Preciado, 2021). With the documentary *Orlando, My Political Biography* (Preciado, 2023a), Preciado made his directorial debut, and the documentary was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Berlin International Film Festival the same year.

In the English-speaking world, Preciado is best known for his book *Testo Junkie*, in which he proposes the concept of the “pharmacopornographic era” to denaturalise sex, gender, and sexuality. He describes how the interplay between the pharmacological industry, medicine, and politics gives rise to a notion of natural sex and sexuality that is in fact entirely artificially created and used to regulate bodies (Preciado, 2016, 35-6). In-between the stylistically more conventional theoretical chapters that trace the historical development of key pharmacological inventions such as “the pill” or pharmaceutical testosterone, the book features autobiographical chapters where Preciado tells the story of his relationship with “V.D.” (the French novelist

Virginie Despentes), his grief over the death of his friend “G.D.” (the French writer Guillaume Dustan), and the changes he undergoes as a result of taking testosterone without medical supervision or sanction. The mixing of autobiographical and theoretical text is a key feature of Preciado’s work and has contributed to the emergence of auto-theory in feminist writing practices (Brostoff, 2021; Rowlands, 2023; L. E. Wilson, 2020). Preciado’s work is politically radical in the way he calls for the dissolution of norms of all kinds. This is echoed in the descriptions of non-normative social practices in his autobiographical writing, in the departure from received academic writing style, and in his publications in the traditionally left newspaper *Libération*, which has brought his work to a wider, non-academic readership.

Especially in recent years, his work has received increasing attention in the English-speaking world and beyond, including a recent special edition of the journal *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* dedicated to his work (Evans & Rowlands, 2023). In the introduction to her PhD on Preciado’s *Testo Junkie*, Sofia Ropek Hewson provides an overview of the different contexts in which *Testo Junkie* has been taken up in the English-speaking world: these range from discussions on French feminism and xenofeminism, via debates on accelerationism, labour, and reproduction, to queer discussions of anti-futurity and the politics of bareback sex (Hewson, 2018, 6-7). Finally, his work has also been discussed in the context of addiction and intoxication (Hewson, 2018, 7; (Nelson, 2021, 154-170). In trans studies, it is the theoretical work in *Testo Junkie* which has proved most influential. This work extends Michel Foucault’s arguments on power, discipline, and the formation of subjectivity (Stryker & Blackston, 2023, 404) and can be read as a continuation or extension of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, where Preciado describes how the concepts of gender and sexuality are turned into commercial products (Malatino, 2023, 452). The term “pharmacopornographic era” describes the conflux of biotechnology, hyper-focus on sex, social and mass media, cybernetics, drugs, and surgery that characterises the present (Stryker and Blackston, 2023, 404). In this context, Preciado theorises trans bodies as emblematic to a “massive epistemological transformation in how embodiment is understood, as well as a massive ontological transformation regarding both what bodies *can do* as well as what *can be done with* bodies” (Malatino, 2023, 453, emphasis in original). However, his theoretical work has also received criticism for resorting to a “theoretical primitivism that presents itself as a methodological avant-garde” (Rosenberg, 2014) and for its tendency towards universalisation and overstatement (Hansen, 2016). Especially the reception of *An Apartment on Uranus* has included criticism of his inclination towards facile comparisons and lack of specificity when he extends his understanding of the

oppression of trans bodies to other loci of oppression (Michalak, 2023, 95-6; Brazil, 2020; Long, 2020; Wallenhorst, 2020). M. Michalak has recently offered a reading of *An Apartment on Uranus* through the lens of Latin American decolonial transfeminism(s) that is attentive to these criticisms while also holding that Preciado's thought "moves towards a necessary ecological frame for rethinking his work and its relation to decolonial transfeminist struggles" (Michalak, 2023, 104). As such, Michalak sees Preciado as a fruitful thinker in the effort to build solidarity between different struggles (ibid.).

Paul B. Preciado's work is increasingly also reaching the Finnish audience. The Finnish translation of *Testo Junkie*³ was published in 2022 (Preciado, 2022), and 2023 saw the release of the Finnish translation of *Can the Monster Speak?*⁴ (Preciado, 2023b) (both translated by Anna Nurminen and published by Tutkijaliitto).

The auto-theoretical tendencies of his work are evident both in his shorter texts from *An Apartment on Uranus* and in *Can the Monster Speak?*, where he explicitly uses his personal experience to critique psychoanalysis' view of trans people. In *Can the Monster Speak?*, Preciado directly addresses the gathering of psychoanalysts from the psychoanalytic institute where he gave the speech and accuses the psychoanalysts of countertransference in their response to and treatment of trans people (Gherovici, 2023). As psychoanalysis is a delicate process that leaves the patient vulnerable to the analyst, the ethics of that relationship is particularly important. Preciado's accusation is that the psychoanalyst is not able to treat a trans* patient ethically because the binary model of sex and gender that they hold to be the truth will impair the analyst's ability to correctly see and respond to the patient (Preciado, 2021, 32-3). This inability on the part of the analyst is discussed under the term "countertransference."

Countertransference refers to the effect the patient has on the therapist ("analyst" in psychoanalysis), where the analyst projects some of their own feelings onto the patient and thereby loses the appropriate distance between patient and analyst. Discussions about countertransference within psychoanalysis turn on the awareness that psychoanalysis is not a failproof scientific method, but depend on the abilities of the analyst and their interactions with the patient. Countertransference discussions centre around concurrent acknowledgment of the limitations and ways of navigating them (Wilson, 2023, 933). In the context of debates

³ Finnish title: *Testonisti. Farmakopornografisia Tunnustuksia*

⁴ Finnish title: *Voiko hirviö puhua?*

over psychoanalysis' treatment of trans people, countertransference is the mechanism by which the analyst's own fears and discomforts with the binary sex/gender system are projected onto the patient and may perpetuate the pathologisation of trans people (Saketopoulou, 2022; Sennott & Smith, 2011). Preciado's speech fed into existing discussions in psychoanalysis about the status and treatment of trans people in the discipline and has been referenced in this context since (Saketopoulou, 2022, 188). *The Psychoanalytic Review* published a special issue titled "Trans* Becomings and Countertransference Volume 1: A Contemporary Perspective From France", which explicitly references the speech as an inciting event for its publication (Evzonas, 2021, 375). Patricia Gherovici addresses the critique of psychoanalysis' normative view of sex and gender as articulated by Preciado in the speech (Gherovici, 2023). She affirms Preciado's call for a "mutation in psychoanalysis" (Preciado, 2021, 77) and advocates for a re-reading of psychoanalysis' history (and particularly of Freud, as a "Pink Freud") that is informed by queer theory's interpretation of psychoanalysis to find room for a less rigid understanding of sex and gender within the discipline (Gherovici, 2023, 70). Gherovici herself works at the intersection between Lacanian psychoanalysis and queer and trans studies. Meanwhile, Jamieson Webster discusses Preciado's relationship to psychoanalysis and sketches a vision of "somato-militancy" in psychoanalysis, a reform of the discipline based on Preciado's suggestions (Webster, 2023).

Outside of psychoanalysis, the speech has been discussed from several perspectives. For example, Marta Segarra Muntaner reads the speech with emphasis on its intertextual references to Franz Kafka and the strategy of "disidentification". Segarra Muntaner suggests both that the arguments of the speech cannot be fully understood without attention to the references to Kafka, and that Preciado's disidentification extends beyond gender and includes disidentification from the human species towards animality (Segarra Muntaner, 2022). In contrast, Alessia Franco unpacks the suggestions for an "epistemology of transition" and theorises the current shift in the understandings of sex and gender that Preciado outlines (Franco, 2022). Anna Baleige and Mathilde Guernut similarly focus on this shift towards the end of what Preciado calls the "paradigm of sexual difference". They trace how the development of gender studies gave rise to different epistemologies that enable the depathologisation of trans people today (Baleige & Guernut, 2021).

My engagement with the speech similarly focuses on the critical engagement with psychoanalysis, but my interest lies in unpacking Preciado's development and envisioning of

trans subjectivity in relation to the gathering of psychoanalysts that he is addressing. I am interested in showing the possibilities and limits that lie in the trans subjectivity he envisions, as it relates to the negotiation of the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis. To my knowledge, this is the first work that relates Preciado's speech to postcolonial criticism of the poststructural, queer theoretical framework of trans studies.

In situating Preciado within the field of trans studies, I have chosen to focus on the influence of Michel Foucault's work and the relationship between psychoanalysis and trans. The field is not a monolith, and many versions could be given about its genealogies and histories. I have nevertheless chosen to limit my focus to the influence that psychoanalysis, Foucault, and queer theory has had on the field of trans studies, Preciado's *Can the Monster Speak?* serves as one example of this. This focus excludes a whole body of work within the field that challenges this characterisation of its history and traces its roots to other places and fields, such as black and woman-of-colour feminist theory, disability studies, postcolonial theory, indigenous studies, and trans community organising and cultural production (Bey, 2022; Puar, 2015; Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013). In the context of discussions that identify trans studies as "at a crossroads" regarding its relationship to queer theory (Amin, 2023, 56), my aim is to illuminate the possibilities and limitations that this theoretical framework offers for trans studies.

In the following, I first introduce the theoretical framework of my thesis and discuss the concept of subjectivity inspired by Foucault, as the individual's negotiation of its subject position in the context of power-knowledge. I then introduce the postcolonial and intersectional critique towards this, which I also utilise in my analysis of Preciado's speech *Can the Monster Speak?*.

3 Theoretical Framework

In the previous chapter I laid out some important landmarks in the historical relationship between trans*-ness and psychoanalysis that functions as the backdrop for Preciado's *Can the Monster Speak?*. By sketching the historical and academic/theoretical entwinements of trans*-ness and psychoanalysis, I provided the context for Preciado's remarks and located his work in the queer and trans studies tradition that critically engages with the legacy of psychoanalysis.

In this chapter, I introduce my main theoretical framework of the subject and approach to the analysis of the speech. My theoretical frame is two-fold: On the one hand, I take my cue from a key source in queer theory, the work of Michel Foucault, whose concepts of power and subjectivity have been widely utilised, scrutinised, and employed. Hence, on the one hand, I draw on Foucault's work on interlinked power-knowledge-subject formations in order to develop my key concept of "trans subjectivity." On the other hand, I engage with postcolonial and intersectional critique in order to challenge the very notion of "a trans subject" as such. Therefore, I aim to illuminate the possibilities of trans subjectivities as locations of fruitful critique of and opposition to discursive power formation, while also remaining sceptical about a too essentialist notion of a "trans subject." Given Preciado's prominence in the field of trans studies, it is important to scrutinise the ways in which his work reflects the legacy of poststructuralist queer and feminist theories in the field of trans studies more widely. With this two-fold approach, I aim on the one hand to articulate what a poststructuralist and queer theoretical frame makes visible through Preciado's work, and on the other hand to show what it forecloses. This way, I address both the limits of what Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity enables to see, and the limits that trans studies' attachment to the poststructuralist and queer theoretical frame brings with it more widely.

3.1 Michel Foucault: Power-Knowledge-Subject

Trans studies developed from within a poststructuralist theoretical frame and saw its task as producing a counternarrative to the medical/psychoanalytical narrative of transsexuality (Love, 2014). Trans studies' understanding of itself, of its position towards other disciplines and of its role, has been strongly based on the work of Michel Foucault. In her introduction to the first *Transgender Studies Reader* for example, Susan Stryker explicitly uses Foucault's concept of "subjugated knowledges" to distinguish between "the study of transgender

phenomena” and “transgender studies”, with the latter being dedicated to the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Stryker, 2006a, 12). This understanding of trans studies also goes back to the classical text in the field, Sandy Stone’s “The Empire Strikes Back” (Stone 2006), which similarly developed from a poststructuralist theoretical frame and used this to articulate a “posttranssexual” position – that is, one that departed from an investment in the diagnosis of “transsexuality” and instead questions the formation of that category and its diagnostic criteria.

Much work in the field therefore is set against the theoretical backdrop of Foucault’s work. Several aspects of Foucault’s work are of particular relevance to trans studies. Central to the field is for example the ability, based on Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978), to criticise the way that ‘official’ knowledge about sex/gender also describes and produces its own deviance. This has enabled work that critically studies the development of the label of “transsexuality” and questions its classification as ‘deviant’. In the context of academia, the subject of trans studies is also closely connected to the field of queer studies (Love, 2014, 172) which, in turn, as a field is deeply influenced by the work of Michel Foucault (Butler, 1999; Sedgwick, 1990). In this manner, queer theory draws on the work of Michel Foucault to question and destabilise the knowledge claims of the sciences of the human, and to question the “will to knowledge” more broadly. For example, in the preface to *Epistemology of the Closet* (one of the foundational texts of queer studies), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes that she takes Foucault’s work on the centrality of sexuality to the Western conception of the self as “axiomatic” (Sedgwick, 1990, 3).

What is particularly significant is the observation Foucault makes in his *History of Sexuality*, volume 1 (Foucault, 1978), namely that society inevitably produces its own norms and deviants. In the nineteenth century the human sciences experienced a boom and began to categorise human sexual behaviour, developing a whole array of diagnoses and distinctions between various undesirable and perverse behaviours. The corollary of this expanded taxonomy of human behaviour is that it requires even closer examination and control over said behaviour, to enforce the distinction between desirable and undesirable. Further, the medicalised definition of what, e.g., homosexual behaviour looks like, Foucault shows, also produces the “identity” of the homosexual. Previously the concept of sodomy had named several different ‘aberrant’ sexual behaviours, which referred to sexual acts that were non-procreative, but had not been used to draw sharp distinctions between individuals. As Foucault writes in relation to the emergence of homosexuality as an identity:

“[S]odomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.” (Foucault, 1978, 43).

The sodomite was someone who engaged in the behaviour cast as illegal by the law but was only a sodomite for the duration of that act. What changes with the medicalisation of sexuality is that the description of the (sexual) behaviour then comes to produce a stable identity that sticks to the individual. It is an effect of the modern classification system that it produces not only many more categories of behaviour but also the subjects that engage in them. In this way, society with its labelling of deviant behaviour also produces the deviants that engage in the behaviour. In other words, a norm and its opposite.

Key for both trans and queer studies is the Foucauldian definition of the subject. Foucault writes: “There are two meanings of the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to” (Foucault, 1982, 781). This quote precisely suggests the double-sided nature of subjecthood in modern society. It indicates a shift in the form of subjecthood from behaviour that is passing and changeable towards stable and deep-rooted identities. In turn, the concept of identities justifies a closer observation of the subject. Because the behaviour of the subject is supposed to indicate the subject’s identity, the subject’s actions become “both an object of analysis and [...] a target of intervention” (Foucault, 1978, 26). This indicates the entwined nature of power-knowledge: The knowledge that arises out of human science disciplines like psychology, medicine, sociology, anthropology, and criminology is a central part of the discursive ordering of society, which in turn gives rise to the exercise of power in the physical management of human behaviour. As Foucault writes: “[P]ower and knowledge directly imply each other... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault, 1995, 27).

In Foucault’s work on power-knowledge, power is both productive and repressive. Foucault operates with a specific conceptualisation of power as “exercised rather than possessed” (Foucault, 1995, 26) and “productive” rather than repressive (Foucault, 1995). With the first point, Foucault stresses the distribution of power throughout modern society. Rather than power being held by one or a small group of individuals, it is diffused throughout the

structures that make up contemporary society. The bureaucrat, the prison guard, and the doctor all exercise power in the different societal institutions of bureaucracy, the penal institution, and the medical system. The way in which power is manifested is in its use. It is not held by someone or originate from a specific source but is only held in virtue of the institutional function. This way, power is “disseminated”: both decentralised and depersonalised (Foucault, 1995, 304). The individual in contemporary society is governed by passing through the institutions that make up society. These institutions oversee the behaviour of the individual and correct missteps. In this context, Foucault talks of micro-power used to discipline and control the body (Foucault, 1978, 145). Through constant but small modulations of behaviour, various institutions reinforce and uphold social norms.

On top of seeing power as exercised and decentralised, Foucault understands power to not only suppress, but also produce. Specifically, power “makes individuals subjects” (Foucault, 1982, 781). Here, the entwined nature of power and knowledge comes to the fore. Foucault argues that the knowledge produced by the sciences, and particular the human sciences, shapes the ways of understanding the world that we have access to. Society operates based on the categories that the human sciences develop. This is what Foucault terms discourse. Because of the way these discourses carve up the world, and because of the ever-increasing classification of the world, the categories for behaviour are expanded. When behaviour is classifiable, then it also easily becomes seen as either good or bad. The knowledge that is produced by the human sciences categorises and orders, and thereby also distinguishes between what is desirable and undesirable. This distinction is then implemented and enforced in the institutions like school, the prison, or the psychiatric institution, or power-knowledge discourses around sexuality.

The concept of the subject which Foucault operates with has its roots in the work of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, where Lacan theorises the individual’s negotiation between individual psyche and the outside world. In his psychoanalytical theorising, he traced the way in which the individual negotiates the encounter with social roles and how the subject internalises these, negotiating them in their emerging subjectivity (Murray, 2015, 174). What the concept of the “subject” as opposed to the “individual” emphasises is that the subject exists torn between different pulls and is not a stable entity. Lacan wants to separate the subject from the individual, the self, the ego, and other similar terms, that are used to talk about human beings as coherent entities (Malone & Friedlander, 2000, 363). In contrast, the subject, in Lacanian terms, is fragmented and limited. Lacan’s use of the word originates from

linguistics and structuralism in particular, where the subject is the entity associated with action (the predicate) (Murray, 2015, 173). From that point of view, the subject does not exist as a stable entity apart from its association with the action expressed by the verb of the sentence. Further, since the subject is only possible through its place in language, “the subject” stresses that existence takes place in pre-existing structures that are negotiated through life, and that living outside of the structures is not possible. This shows the dual nature of subjectivity or subjectiveness: the subject can perform the actions available in language through association with the predicate, but it cannot escape the boundaries of this association. Outside of language, the subject does not exist. Therefore, subjectivity both enables and constraints.⁵

Despite the fact that his conceptualisation of the subject is indebted to the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan, Foucault’s relationship to psychoanalysis is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, he criticises psychoanalysis “for its normalizing and confessional tendencies with respect to sexuality, its adherence to the repressive hypothesis, and its reliance on an overly simplistic juridico-discursive model of power” (Allen, 2018, 170). However, he also describes it as a critical counter-science on the other hand (ibid.). Since the discipline’s key method is that of scrutinization and questioning of socially received narratives, and uncovering forms of deception, it does not lie in opposition to Foucault’s aims himself. Indeed, Foucault’s theoretical tools are themselves derived from the discipline of psychoanalysis. However, given the entwinement of power and knowledge and psychoanalysis’ status as influential discipline, the effects of the knowledge produced by psychoanalysis can be highly problematic. One of these effects is the classification of transsexuals as pathological.

3.2 Introducing Trans Subjectivity

I use the concept “trans subjectivity” as an analytical tool to describe what Preciado articulates in his speech. Although there is no agreed-upon definition of “trans subjectivity” in the field of trans studies and it is not a clear reference point for debate, I nevertheless chose this concept because of its roots in Foucault’s work and psychoanalytic theories, especially the work of Jacques Lacan. Despite Preciado’s misgivings towards psychoanalysis, the speech

⁵ Martin Murray also links Lacan’s use of “subject” to his interest in phenomenology, where “subject” was used to describe distinct human beings (Murray, 2015, 173). The use of “subject” here emphasises the existence of “subjective experience” without accompanying conscious volition (Malone & Friedlander, 2000, 363). The “subject” therefore also stresses the limitations of agency with respect to experience. To fully develop this second axis of Lacan’s subject goes beyond the scope of this thesis, however.

operates in similar theoretical territory. Through the use of “trans subjectivity”, I emphasise the similarity of discourse between Preciado and psychoanalysis and show that their investments and assumptions do overlap. Psychoanalysis held an ambivalent appeal for Foucault, and I hold that this is similarly the case for Preciado. With the choice of “trans subjectivity” as the key concept for my analysis, I aim to highlight this ambivalent attachment to psychoanalysis in spite of the rejection and critique of the discipline articulated in the speech. By using “trans subjectivity”, I aim to capture psychoanalysis’ notion of “subject” as fragmented in contrast to the holistic view of the individual, self, etc., and the Foucauldian insight of subjecthood as both enabling and disabling. Trans subjectivity therefore captures both what is enabled, made possible, and becomes comprehensible by being a trans subject, and what possibilities are lost, foreclosed, or erased by becoming trans.

Although “trans subjectivity” does not exist as an agreed-upon concept in trans studies, and the poststructuralist/psychoanalytical theoretical frame is only one possible theoretical framing for discussion of trans issues, it is nevertheless possible to identify some aspects of trans subjectivity that circulate within trans studies’ debates. As stated earlier, the starting point for my discussion here is Sandy Stone’s “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (Stone, 2006), and Susan Stryker’s “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage” (Stryker, 2006b).

First published in 1991, Sandy Stone’s “Posttranssexual Manifesto” is one of the founding texts of trans studies that strongly shaped the direction of the field (Stryker & Whittle, 2006, 221). Its theoretical investments lie in poststructuralism, so that in this text, Stone envisions trans subjectivity as disruptive force directed at the “traditional gender frame” and its discourse (Stone 2006, 230). For her, the traditional gendered discourse produces the pressure for the transsexual to “disappear” (ibid.), since the process of transitioning with the aim of passing is in this view the route to living a “normal” life. The trans subject is primed to be erased, leaving no room in traditional gendered discourse for the trans subject to speak. Against this pressure to disappear and be silent, Stone envisions that the transsexual’s experience of transitioning could function as a common ground from which to articulate a counterdiscourse and “to speak from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond the constructed oppositional nodes which have been predefined as the only positions from which discourse is possible” (ibid.). Trans subjectivity here thus emerges through the transsexual’s disruption of the known and understood (‘normal’) arrangement of gender, sex, sexuality, and desire. Stone asks the transsexuals to leave behind their investments in “passing” and in disappearing into

the appearance of normality (ibid., 232), in order to harness their “potential for productive disruption” (ibid., 231). Stone envisions trans subjectivity as a position from which the discourse can be changed, and also as one of marginality. Trans subjectivity is under pressure of erasure, but simultaneously exposes the underpinnings of society that produces that pressure. Trans subjectivity exposes the “binary phallographic founding myth by which Western bodies and subjects are authorized” and from which trans subjectivity deviates, and thereby becomes a position from which wider society can be critiqued (ibid.).

What Judith Butler calls the “heterosexual matrix” structures current society’s discourse and largely determines what experiences can be articulated and comprehended within it (Butler, 1990, xxviii). Trans subjectivity in Stone’s “Manifesto” originates from the mismatch between this supposedly normal structure of sex, gender, and desire along the presumed heterosexual gender binary, and the trans subject’s experience. Since the discourse assumes that a subject is normatively gendered (*not* transgendered), trans subjectivity then emerges as a form of troubled and troubling, compromised subjecthood, which negotiates the experience of not conforming to that which is assumed to be a normal and natural part of subjectivity. Following Stone, the sense in which trans subjectivity is a ‘compromised subjecthood’ is in its limited expressibility within the discourse in which the subject is tacitly assumed to be cisgendered (Stone, 2006, 230). Because the ‘normal’ subject is cisgender, trans subjectivity is a form of compromised subjecthood.

In another influential, early text of trans studies, Susan Stryker (Stryker, 2006b) uses the figure of Frankenstein’s Creation to theorise trans subjectivity as it arises from bodies deemed monstrous. Stryker explores how the label of the “monster” attaches to the transsexual who disturbs the notion of fixed genders (ibid., 245). She explores how the transsexual thereby becomes a symbol of the artificiality of the supposedly “natural” sex/gender system (ibid., 247). The notion of monstrosity circulates in trans studies and in the history of how transsexuality has been described and received in society. For my understanding of monstrosity, I am inspired by Margrit Shildrick’s classic work *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (Shildrick, 2002). Shildrick’s work provides the backdrop for much contemporary work on monstrosity⁶. Combining relational ethics with the cultural study of monstrosity, she argues that monstrosity is related to vulnerability such that

⁶ Even though Shildrick herself interestingly does not discuss queer people in more detail in *Embodying the Monster*, her work has clearly provided much fruitful content for queer studies (see, for example, Santos, 2023).

monstrosity is not contained within the Other. Instead, it is linked to vulnerability because it is ultimately attached to bodily existence overall. Shildrick argues that monstrosity as a phenomenon is intricately connected to the construction of subjectivity and selfhood because it becomes the place where everything is moved that must be excluded in order to achieve subjecthood. As Shildrick writes:

“[monsters] are... the other within. In seeking confirmation of our own secure subjecthood in what we are not, what we see mirrored in the monster are the leaks and flows, the vulnerability in our own embodied being. ... [Monsters] disrupt both internal and external order, and overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject.” (Shildrick, 2002, 4)

Shildrick’s work has provided the understanding of the relationship between monstrosity and normativity, such that the monstrous beings “alone can confirm the normalcy and closure of the centred self, though, [...] simultaneously unsettling it by being all too human” (ibid., 3). By marking some subjects as monstrous because of their non-normative forms of embodiment, and thereby excluding them from normality, the rest of society can thereby confirm its own normalcy by policing the distinction.⁷ Trans subjects become monstrous subjects because trans subjects violate norms around bodily integrity and thus are associated with a monstrous embodiment (Morgan, 1999, 231). The result is a compromised, monstrous subjecthood.

3.3 Postcolonial Critique of “the Trans Subject”

The second part of my theoretical frame for the analysis of *Can the Monster Speak?* aims to destabilise the concept of “trans subjectivity” by challenging the notion that there can be “the trans subject” as such. This second part of the theoretical frame derives from postcolonial and intersectional critique, especially the work of Gayatri Spivak and Jasbir K. Puar. My choice to supplement the analysis with this second angle is motivated by a concern over the tendency towards problematic generalisations within trans studies, and by the awareness that the theorisation of “the trans subject” that is cited above takes place and is rooted in a specific time, location and context.

Trans subjecthood has also been discussed as a mode of compromised subjecthood, where the medical diagnostic process subalterns the trans subject (Salah, 2014, 201). The term subaltern

⁷ For instance, in the development of biological dimorphism, the “monstrosity” of intersexed bodies played a key role in naturalising the model of the two sexes (see Dreger, 1998).

originally used by Antonio Gramsci has influentially been developed by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Can the subaltern speak?”. In this essay, she is critical of the tendency (in white European and Western academia) to identify the oppressed as the probable location from which radical change can occur, since this imbues the oppressed with hopes and expectations that further obscure their voice and perspective, adding to their discursive marginalisation (Spivak, 1993, 68). Given this discursive power formation, she famously denies that the subaltern can speak or be heard in such a way that radical change could easily follow.

Gayatri Spivak’s essay engages with Foucault’s work on the question of power-knowledge and its connection to those that are not considered subjects. She traces the limits of what Foucault’s concept of the subject can grasp, and what it is unable to. In particular, she emphasises that the poststructuralist notion of the formation of the subject through the discourse leads to inadequate conceptualisation of those who stand in opposition to that discourse. She utilises the concept of the “subaltern”, by which she means those whose lives are not intelligible from the perspective of the dominant discourse. She gives the example of *sati*, the tradition of widow-burning in Hindu culture – a practice outlawed under British colonial rule – and argues that in the strongly-opposing narratives over this practice, the women’s will, consciousness, or desire cannot be voiced (Spivak, 1993, 97). Spivak criticises the idea that the subaltern should be the origin of resistance and change. The perspective of the subaltern would qualify as the subjugated knowledge that Foucault lists. However, according to Spivak it is naïve to assume that the subaltern can speak and articulate their perspective in the discourse of the hegemony. Rather, the subaltern does not qualify as a proper subject and thereby does not have the possibility to speak in the discourse at all.

“Can the Subaltern Speak?” was written in reaction to the early work of the Subaltern Studies group and their aim to study the subaltern “as an objective assessment of the role of the élite and as a critique of élitist interpretations of that role” (Guha, 1982, vii). In Spivak’s essay, she critiques this aim. She is concerned that even with the most benevolent of goals to give the subaltern a place to speak, such a speech act will take place under circumstances that make an authentic articulation of the subaltern impossible. These circumstances are that the outsider will be providing the setting for the subaltern to speak in, which implicitly constitutes and produces the subaltern such that its authenticity is foreclosed (Leitch et al., 2010, 2110f). Relatedly, the aim to give the subaltern a voice problematically essentialises that category. This is because the subaltern is from the start defined by its distance from the élite, which overshadows any other ways of characterising or defining those subsumed under “subaltern”

that would differ from this focus on the power relation oppressor-oppressed (Ashcroft et al., 2000, 200f).

Spivak's contribution lies in her nuanced treatment of the position of the subaltern, her focus on women within postcolonial studies, and her critique of the poststructuralist account of the subject as inadequate for representation of the non-Western and subaltern subjects. She writes:

“It is impossible for contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe. It is not only that everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the debate of the production of that Other, supporting or critiquing the constitution of the Subject as Europe. It is also that, in the constitution of that Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary [...]” (Spivak, 1993, 75)

Spivak here draws attention to the limits that poststructuralist thought encounters with respect to non-European subjects. Citing Edward Said's work on orientalism (Said, 1980), Spivak writes that the Western discourse implicitly works to establish itself as the known and knowable Subject while casting the rest of the world into the role of unknown Other. Further, because of the colonialist legacy of erasing the traces of non-Western epistemes and their material traces, even the attempt at grasping or recovering hints of these lost epistemes is foreclosed. Thus, the “unnamed subject” is unable to find resources with which to form its own self-understanding that are not derived from the Western discourse.

In an attempt to articulate the violence that the medical and psychoanalytical view of transsexuality inflicts on trans subjects, Spivak's work has been taken up by trans studies. In the keyword section of the first issue of the *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Trish Salah gives an overview of how the concept of the subaltern has been taken up in trans studies to theorise the compromised subjectivity of trans subjects, since the diagnosis “subject[s them] to institutional regulation and administrative violence” designed to erase them (Salah, 2014, 201). The concept of the subaltern marks the compromised position of the trans subject in the discourse, emphasising the difficulty for trans subjects to speak and be heard on their own terms. This connects to the goal of trans studies to provide a space to uncover the subjugated knowledge. The ability to construct such a counter-knowledge is limited by the subordinated subject position of the ‘subaltern’ trans subject.

Spivak's conceptualisation of the subaltern explicitly stands in opposition to the assumption that "the subaltern" can exist as a homogenic category or identity. This observation also applies to the notion of the subaltern trans subject and has led to a critical discussion about the concept of the "trans subject" in the field of trans studies. The concept of the subaltern has been used to discuss the erasure and silencing of some trans positions in the context of the discourses on what constitutes the trans subject. Critiquing the discursive authority of the poststructuralist-influenced Anglo-American discourse on transgender, and specifically the work of Judith Butler (Butler, 1990), Viviane K. Namaste has criticised the poststructuralist theorising of the transgender subject because it privileges a theoretical explanation for the marginalisation of trans subjects as rooted in the discursive hegemony of the sex/gender binary. In doing so, it underemphasises the material realities of trans people and excludes discussion of empirical cases. The focus on the sex/gender binary as the origin of trans exclusion leads to the erasure of transsexual women who are sex-workers from the circle of trans subjects that are represented by academic discourse on the trans subject, according to Namaste (Namaste, 2021). Dean Spade has written about trans in relation to class and connects contemporary neoliberal individualism with the current activist agenda towards more rights for already privileged subjects (Spade, 2023). In the spirit of Spivak's original starting point, the concern with language and power, scholars have also questioned the export of US labels and politics (like "queer" and "trans") to other contexts, such as Québec (Namaste, 2005) and have voiced criticism of the concepts and language that are available for articulating and making sense of trans experience. This criticism extends both to the language of the "medically sanctioned transsexual discourses" as well as the language of the transgender rights movement (Salah, 2014, 202).

The theoretical question of whether there is such a thing as a uniform trans subject has its practical application in the political discourse on trans people. Since the trans rights movement in the 1990s, political activism has been successful in pushing for rights of trans people, up to and including juridical representation in several countries. However, the status of the rights-bearing trans subject is not open to all trans bodies as this position carries with it its own norms.

Jasbir K. Puar theorises how (dis)ability and capitalist value extraction of bodies play a role in excluding certain subjects from the position of the rights-bearing trans subject. In her article "Bodies with New Organs: Becoming Trans, Becoming Disabled" (2015), Puar focuses on the way in which certain trans bodies in contemporary capitalism become commodified through

medical intervention and become thereby a consumable commodity. Her point of departure is the political hailing of trans rights in the U.S. context as “the civil rights issue of our time” (Joe Biden, quoted in Puar, 2015, 45) and the question of which trans bodies are referenced in this framing of civil rights teleology. She asks why trans bodies (among others) were excluded from the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). From this starting point, she examines which bodies ‘count’ as disabled and why trans bodies are not associated with illness in the ‘correct’ way to be covered by the ADA. Through this, she examines the ambivalent relationship between trans bodies and medicalisation and the consequent difficult connection between the trans and the disability movement. Her aim is to provide an analysis of how certain bodies become “pieced” (or compartmentalised) into different parts for capitalist value extraction, and to show how certain trans bodies come to be prized under these circumstances for their ability to be pieced, modified, flexible, and thus re-capacitated for capitalist exploitation.

Puar focuses on:

“the privilege of who is able to be disabled and is able to be transgender as a function of state and legal recognition that is often elusive for [certain] bodies, demonstrating capacity – the ability to not just become, not to pass but to piece – rather than only debility, deviance, victimhood, ostracization, or nonnormativity at the center of these projects. The trans body that pieces, then, also passes not as gender-normative male or female but as trans” (Puar, 2015, 56).

She criticises certain forms of trans activism (those invested in medicalisation as a way to return to wholeness) and examines the way in which the category of “trans” in contemporary politico-capitalist discourse functions in favour of some bodies but not others. In order to view the interactions between (trans)gender, racial, ability, and species differentiation, she proposes “a reconceptualization of corporeal assemblages that foreground ontological continuums in relation to epistemological bifurcations” (ibid., 58).

A further strand of critique towards the concept of the “trans subject” originates in decolonial work from outside (Western) academic spaces, which situates psychoanalysis (and, therefore, the development of the category of “the transsexual”) within the legacies of colonialism. From that angle, psychoanalysis is both part of the justification for colonialism by dehumanising the colonised and shares the colonialist assumption that its knowledge is universally applicable (Nay, 2023). For example, at the *2023 Nordic Trans Studies Conference*, keynote speaker YV Nay posed the question this way: “What are trans studies now and what should its future be, given the myriad legacies of colonialism and eugenics?”

(ibid.). Jack Halberstam likewise connects colonialism to the psychoanalytic project of classifying gender variation:

“[A]ll of these efforts to classify human behavior emerged out of and contributed to ongoing racial projects that held apart white populations from populations of color; these “scientific” distinctions between normal and abnormal bodies lent support to white supremacist projects that tried to collapse racial otherness into gender variance and sexual perversion.” (Halberstam, 2018, 6)

Part of this destabilisation of “the trans subject” is the articulation of Black trans studies or trans of colour critique (Stryker and Blackston, 2023). This critique arises out of a deeper consideration of Black radical and feminist thought as it connects with trans studies (ibid., 80). Key figures in this turn are C. Riley Snorton through the monograph *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Snorton, 2017) and Marquis Bey through their book *Black Trans Feminism* (Bey, 2022) and their article “The Trans*-Ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-Ness” (Bey, 2017), which appeared in *TSQ*’s 2017 Special Issue “The Issue of Blackness”. The key driver behind this concern with matters of blackness is the understanding that the unvoiced implicit assumption in trans studies and beyond is that the trans subject is white (Ellison et al., 2017; Vidal-Ortiz, 2014). Part of uncovering this assumption is to understand the way in which the discourse on sex and gender (“the sexual regime”) is located within racial and colonial hierarchies and histories. The whiteness of the implicit subject of trans studies then also hides the way in which, e.g., the monstrosity of the trans subject and the monstrosity of the black person are part of the same racist colonialist regime. Scholars like Sylvia Wynter have developed a critique of the category of the “human” and its rootedness and dependence on a colonial world order (Wynter, 2003). This demonstrates that the purportedly universal category of the “human” in actuality constitutes a false extension and assumed universality of modern European maleness (ibid.). The assumption of this particular group as being representative of humanity proper produces a hierarchy whereby all those outside of the parameters of this narrow category are sub-human (or monstrous). This hierarchy in turn served (and continues to serve) colonial and neo-colonial ventures and the construction of the European colonial modernity.

Other work in contemporary trans studies is concerned with the intersections and interactions between colonialism and the regime of sexual difference. Some work in this area focuses on recovering indigenous gender roles and practices lost through the violence of colonisation (Miranda, 2010; Wesley, 2014). Importantly for the field of trans studies (and indeed gender studies more widely), for example María Lugones’ work demonstrates the interconnection

between the colonial category of the human vs. the savage and the “modern/colonial gender system” (Lugones, 2007). She argues that it is part of the European worldview to prioritise biology and let it assume the status of objective foundation – thereby relying on biological differences (sex) to provide the objective foundation for the sex/gender system (Lugones, 2008). She argues that this “somato-centricity” is not a universal truth but a feature of the European colonial worldview, and that thereby the institution of the sex/gender system (including the distinction between sex and gender) is part of the modern colonial framework (ibid.). This work is important for trans studies because of its implications regarding the purported objectivity of the Western medical framework for understanding sex, gender, and sexuality. Given that Lugones argues that the Western sex/gender system is part of the colonial modern worldview, it follows that also the construction of the category of trans people as those falling outside of the neatly delineated biology-based system of sex/gender is part of the colonial enterprise. It also calls into question the strong emphasis on biology and sex that underpins the Western medical view on trans people. Within trans studies, decolonial studies have influenced many contributions in recent years (e.g. Chávez & Vázquez, 2017; Meyers, 2022; Morgensen, 2016; Nay, 2019, p. 201720172017; Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013), notably the special issues of the *Transgender Studies Quarterly*: “Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary” in 2014 and “The Europa Issue” in 2021.

As I have shown above, it is thanks to the work of postcolonial scholars and intersectional critique that the category of the trans subject has become problematised and its racialised connotations have been made visible. This work shows that concept is located in and implicated in colonialist worldview and racial-colonial processes, whereby some epistemologies are seen as universal, others marginalised. Further, some trans lives are recognisable *as* trans, as eligible for trans rights, and others not. In the following chapter, I want to bring both the productive and troubling sides of the concept of trans subjectivity to bear on my analysis of *Can the Monster Speak?*.

4 Monstrosity and Ambivalence in Preciado's *Can the Monster Speak?*

In this chapter, I read *Can the Monster Speak?* as the articulation of trans subjectivity as it is envisioned by Preciado. This trans subjectivity is at its core tied to monstrosity, since Preciado uses the figure of the monster to articulate and envision it. This trans subjectivity has an ambivalent relationship towards the discourse it exists in: On the one hand, it is about refusal, disidentification, and escape from the normative constraints of the discourse. On the other hand, Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity participates in the discourse and attempts to change it. In my reading, these two seemingly contradictory gestures coexist and essentially form what trans subjectivity becomes in Preciado's speech.

4.1 Preciado's Monster

In this section, I introduce the specific figure of the monster that Preciado employs for his speech. He strategically uses intertextual references to Franz Kafka's novella "A Report to an Academy" (Kafka, 1975) and thereby incorporates a sort of ventriloquism into his speech. In Kafka's novella, the narrator is an ape called Red Peter who appears before an audience of scientists to talk about his capture and subsequent efforts to become a member of human society. After his capture and voyage on board of a ship, he is faced with the choice between either the zoo or the cabaret⁸. For Red Peter, the study of human language and human behaviour is what enables him to escape the cage of the zoo, although at the cost of all memories of his former life. Red Peter learned human speech and through this position as a speaking ape made a spectacle of himself. That status as a spectacle and curiosity is the only alternative to the cage that awaits him at the zoo. Likewise, Preciado chooses to make a spectacle of himself in the eyes of normativity in order to avoid the cage of "domesticated transsexuality" (Preciado, 2021, 29).

By quoting from Kafka's novella throughout the speech, Preciado compares his situation to that of Red Peter:

"Just as the ape Red Peter addressed himself to scientists, so today I address myself to you, the academicians of psychoanalysis, from my 'cage' as a trans man. ... I am the monster who speaks to you. The monster you have created with

⁸ This references colonial practices at the time of writing. In fact, the specific company and zoo mentioned in the novella – Hagenbecks – is notorious for its participation in the colonial "human zoos" of the 19th and 20th centuries (Zimmerer & Todzi, 2021).

your discourse and your clinical practices. [...] As a trans body, as a non-binary body, whose right to speak as an expert about my condition, or to produce a discourse or any form of knowledge about myself is not recognized by the medicinal profession, the law, psychoanalysis or psychiatry, I have done as Red Peter did, I have learned the language of Freud and Lacan, the language of the colonial patriarchy, your language, and I am here to address you.” (Preciado, 2021, 18-19)

With the comparison to Red Peter, Preciado is also saying that it is only through speaking in the “language of the colonial patriarchy” that he can be recognised as a speaker. Without recognisable speech, the audience does not see either Red Peter or Preciado as (properly) human and therefore as one of “us”.

In invoking this comparison with Red Peter as a monstrous Other, Preciado implicitly references another seminal text in trans studies: Susan Stryker’s “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix” (Stryker, 2006b). In Stryker’s text, she uses the figure of Frankenstein’s Creation as a comparison to trans people’s situation. This monster figure is linked to modern science’s will to power and its desire for mastery over nature. Stryker thereby emphasises how the development of sex reassignment procedures in medicine is linked to “the pursuit of immortality through the perfection of the body, the fantasy of total mastery through the transcendence of an absolute limit” (Stryker, 2006b, 248). Trans subjectivity for her takes place on the site of bodies that are a product of this “metaphysical quest” (ibid.), and she calls for trans people to embrace derogatory terms like “creature”, “monster”, and “unnatural” and reclaim them (ibid., 246). Preciado’s rhetorical use of Red Peter and invocation of the monstrous thereby answers Stryker’s call for reclamation. By making the association between trans subjects and the monstrous explicit, he turns it into an advantage, since it draws attention to the process by which trans subjects become seen as monstrous and unnatural, pathological. Similarly to Stryker’s use of the Creation, Preciado’s use of Red Peter emphasises that trans subjects have come into existence over the course of modern science’s efforts towards control and mastery.

Both Preciado’s *Can the Monster Speak?* and Stryker’s “Words to Victor Frankenstein” arise out of the context of protest against the treatment of trans people: Preciado’s speech confronting the psychoanalysts, and Stryker’s work being written against the backdrop of disrupting the American Psychiatric Association’s 1993 annual meeting (Stryker, 2006b, 244). Given these parallels, Preciado invokes Stryker’s text both explicitly and implicitly: the engagement with the figure of the monster is one of these echoes of Stryker. However,

Preciado's choice of monster (Red Peter) does produce a subtle difference in emphasis from Stryker's use of Frankenstein's creation. The figure of Red Peter shifts the emphasis towards speech and simulating/assimilating through speech, emphasising speaking as the means of assimilation and resistance.

Following Shildrick, the monstrous within Western discourse serves the function of marking those who are excluded from the normative order as "marginal and dangerous" (Shildrick, 2002, 14). However, Shildrick argues, this act of exclusion betrays that what is marked as monstrous is familiar and known, and that the rejection of the monstrous is at the same time a rejection of the vulnerability of the self (ibid.). As she writes:

"In the face of the potential vulnerabilities exposed by the embodied other, the ideal of the humanist subject of modernity, supposedly fully present to himself, self-sufficient and rational, can be maintained only on the basis of a series of putative exclusions" (ibid.)

It is this aspect of monstrosity, where the monster becomes the symbol of the fragility of the self, that Preciado makes use of in his speech. As the title of the speech suggests⁹, Preciado takes on the role of the monster, which reminds the supposedly "normally gendered" psychoanalysts of the fragility of their own gender identity, which is predicated on the monstrous trans Other. This more widely exposes the fragility of the binary sex/gender system that these identities are invested in. In this way of linking monstrosity to vulnerability, the specific figure of Red Peter also comes to signify the vulnerability of the Western discourse, which relies on the exclusion and marginalisation of those it considers "Other". Red Peter's narrative in Kafka's story comments on the Western colonial discourse of "civilisation", which Preciado here invokes to emphasise the fragility of the Western worldview and order, including its sex/gender system.

4.2 Refusal, Disidentification & Escape from the Discourse

In this subchapter, I trace how Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity is rooted in gestures of refusal of and disidentification with the psychoanalytic and medical discourse of transsexuality. Preciado's speech is set in the context of the history of the relationship between trans people and the medical and psychoanalytical establishment, which is discussed in chapter 2. From the beginning, starting with the early study and classification of "deviant"

⁹ This point is made even more forcefully in the original title in French: "Je suis un monstre qui vous parle" ("I am a monster who speaks to you", my own translation).

behaviour, via the diagnosis “transsexuality”, and up to the current shifts in terminology (from “transgenderism” and “gender dysphoria” towards “gender incongruence”¹⁰), one theme has been present throughout; the relationship is one between the doctor or analyst and patient, or, between the scientist and the object of study.¹¹ Further, the knowledge produced in this context then manifests in the bureaucratic and political structures of contemporary society. The binary sex/gender model that was developed by the sciences therefore underpins the working of society (Butler, 1990).

Because of the way that access to trans healthcare is normally structured, the majority of meetings between trans individuals and psychoanalysts takes place in a setting of a clear difference in power: in order to access gender-affirming procedures, a person must be diagnosed as trans by a psychologist/psychoanalyst. In order for this to happen, the trans person must “fit” the picture of a trans person that the psychoanalyst has, and there is little room for the trans person’s own view of what it means to be trans for them in particular. The psychoanalyst is equally bound by the understanding of trans*-ness that the discipline has instilled in them. The psychoanalyst has the power to withhold the diagnosis and thereby make access to the desired treatments much more difficult both financially and practically. Usually, the professional is cisgendered – a fact Preciado draws attention to already with the first sentence of his speech – and judges whether the patient fits the diagnostic criteria of transgender disorder. The power differential in that context makes it difficult for the trans person to articulate their views “freely”, their experiences as they are, so these could be understood. In short, this diagnosis often comes at the cost of a trans person conforming their narrative about their gender identity to the narrative the professional needs to hear.¹² This situation illustrates the repressive and productive aspects of the status of the trans subject: by folding oneself into the role of the trans subject, one gains access to the possibilities of that subject position, namely, access to certain medical and bureaucratic procedures; a certain

¹⁰ The current edition of the ICD, ICD-11, has replaced the previous editions’ list of diagnoses under F64 “gender identity disorders” (including “transsexualism”, “dual-role transvestism”, and “gender identity disorder of childhood”) with the expansive and more vague diagnosis of “gender incongruence”, split into HA60 “gender incongruence of adolescence or adulthood” and HA61 “gender incongruence of childhood” (World Health Organization, 2019).

¹¹ Although in this thesis I foreground the power differential between doctor and patient in the relationship between trans and medicine and psychology, it is important to note that the trans* people who were involved were not passive but active participants in forming the medical and psychoanalytic understanding of trans. See for instance Jules Gill-Peterson’s *Histories of the Transgender Child* for a trans history that emphasises this perspective (Gill-Peterson, 2018, 16).

¹² This has obvious negative repercussions in the context of therapy, since it from the outset creates an environment of mistrust and suspicion – and manipulation, the opposite of the mutual trust that is necessary for therapeutic work.

amount of legitimacy. At the same time the discourse on trans one may be challenging in private is not questioned at the ‘clinic’, as access to treatment may be the most desired outcome.

The above outlines the frame of unspoken expectations that accompany the encounter between trans subject and psychoanalysts as between patient and doctor. These expectations accompany the position of the trans subject. Instead of fulfilling them in order to gain the status of the speaking trans subject, Preciado’s speech deliberately breaks with them in several ways: his narrative does not meet the expectations of the “trans life narrative” that the psychoanalysts are familiar with, and he also refuses to articulate his narrative of his experiences in ways that the psychoanalysts are familiar with and can understand. Further, this act breaks with the established structures of the encounter between trans subject and psychoanalyst in itself. This refusal and negotiation of the position of the trans subject is central to Preciado’s envisioning and articulation of trans subjectivity. His strategy for negating the trans subject position is based on not bowing to the usual expectations of the encounter between psychoanalyst and trans person (patient). He speaks back to power by providing his lived experience and perspective on transitioning and being a trans person, which is quite different from the perspective psychoanalysis propagates with its authority. And this constitutes a way of challenging who can speak on the subject of trans people with authority: who is the knower and who is the object of knowledge. This, as I have outlined in chapter 2, is one of the main aims and the *raison d’être* of the field of trans studies – to produce knowledge about trans people from the perspective of trans people as subjects and knowers, not mere objects of knowledge.

Through this process, Preciado also signals the refusal and disidentification with the category of the trans subject as characterised by its relationship to the medical and psychoanalytic establishment. He refuses to be in the speaker position of the patient in the relationship between psychoanalyst and trans person. This attitude of refusal is one he develops throughout the speech. He refuses psychoanalysis the status as the main explanatory and healing power, but rather lays the blame for a lack of well-being at the feet of psychoanalysis:

“I do not owe this survival instinct to psychoanalysis or psychology, quite the reverse, I owe it to books, to feminist, punk, anti-racist and lesbian books. My temperament was not much suited to socialization, so, for me, books were authentic guides through the desert of fanaticism and sexual difference.”
(Preciado, 2021, 22-3)

An important part of the rejection of psychoanalysis' status and its power to shape the category of the trans subject is that Preciado refuses to understand and speak of transness and his own gender transition on the terms of the prevalent transitioning discourse. The medicalised transnormativity construes (authorised and supervised) medical transition as the fulcrum of trans lives (Johnson, 2016, 466), which both casts trans subjects into the passive role of patient first and foremost, and also avoids the challenge to the dominant understanding of sex and gender that trans lives pose. Instead of acknowledging that trans lives break with the assumption of a natural alignment between sex and gender, the transition is cast as the cure to the condition of transgenderism with a subsequent return to a natural order. The narrative of "being trapped in the wrong body" is the result of the medicalised reinterpretation of trans subjects to not challenge the dominant binary understanding whereby one's sex is aligned with the gender one identifies with. On that understanding, trans subjects are merely identifying with the wrong gender – a problem that can be fixed by medical transition. As Cárdenas writes, this narrative supports medical intervention and can be summarised as follows: "we are sick, mentally ill, and without medical intervention we are suicidal" (Cárdenas, 2014, 182).

However, Preciado's narrative explicitly refuses to fall into that well-established genre: "Contrary to the claims of colonial, heteropatriarchal psychiatry and psychoanalysis, there was no desire in my childhood to be a 'man' that might legitimize or justify my transition" (Preciado, 2021, 33). Instead he tells a story that explicitly challenges the epistemology of the binary sex/gender system. That framing of trans lives as revolving mainly around the process of transitioning is something he addresses and – again – refuses. He recounts that his relationship with gender roles started with a disidentification with the social role of women, which he characterises as a feminist strategy:

"So, since in the heteropatriarchal binary circus women are offered the role of belle or victim, and since I was not and did not feel myself capable of being one or the other, I decided to stop being a woman. Why couldn't abandoning femininity not become a fundamental tactic of feminism?" (ibid., 24).

This telling politicises understandings of gender and makes Preciado's shift towards being trans a political choice, not a personal, individual affliction. He charges being trans with a political, collective meaning that is lost in the attempts to gain trans rights through attempts to normalise/naturalise certain trans subjects and experiences. Again, unlike the narrative of transgenderism as a kind of medical or psychological condition, this narrative locates the

problem not with the individual subject, but in the system that constructs it. For Preciado, the problem that led to his transition is the structural conditions of the current binary sex/gender system and the possibilities this system affords women. Preciado emphasises that his desire to find “an exit, a way out” (ibid., 25) from the sex/gender system compels him towards disidentification with femininity. Rather than attempting to rework what femininity means (to him), he wants to leave it behind himself entirely. This characterises becoming a trans subject as a strategic choice to refuse and escape the confines of the subject of “woman”.

It is this desire to leave the confines of the binary sex/gender system behind and avoid a return to the category of “woman” that leads Preciado to the use of testosterone:

“So I could move forward, so I could escape this mockery of sexual difference, so I would not be arrested, hands in the air, and forced back to the boundaries of this taxonomy. This is how I came to start injecting myself with testosterone, surrounded by a group of friends who were also seeking an exit. This is how this thing that you call ‘the female condition’ burst out from me at breakneck speed, tumbling head over heels, taking me further than I could ever have imagined.” (ibid., 24-5)

Instead of a trans narrative of transition that would “tame” potential for radical challenge to the binary sex/gender system, the narrative Preciado articulates tries to fundamentally resist belief in that system, and to make that case as strong as possible. In this narrative, trans subjectivity is about escape from subject categories afforded by the binary sex/gender system. These categories lead to the constraints of gender roles and, more widely, to the necessity of choosing and sticking with a gender. He narrates how he has made his life a political practice of resistance to and disidentification from the system of sexual difference that governs contemporary (Western) life.

Preciado’s envisioned trans subjectivity goes beyond an account of personal, individual experience, but is rather a political articulation that aims to inspire and liberate others. He tells this story not to justify his life for the psychoanalysts in the room, but to provide a resource for others. Echoing other texts in trans studies (Stone, 2006; Stryker & Whittle, 2006), he calls for the construction of a counter-knowledge:

“[...] observations about my body and my personal trials and tribulations describe political ways of normalizing or deconstructing gender, sex and sexuality, and may therefore be of interest in forming a dissident knowledge opposed to the hegemonic languages of psychology, psychoanalysis and the neurosciences” (Preciado, 2021, 39).

It is a practice of finding ways to live otherwise and resist the binary sex/gender system. As he writes:

“[...] I would like to avoid the heroic account of my transition. There was nothing heroic in it. I am not a werewolf and I do not possess the immortality of the vampire. The only thing that was heroic was the desire to live – the force with which the desire to change manifested, and still continues to manifest itself through me.” (ibid., 39)

Step by step, Preciado in this speech dissects the usual trans narrative of transition and presents his own version of choosing trans subjectivity as a political practice of resistance. This is the case in the justification for physically changing his body, and in raising the question of physical change in the first place. He challenges the assumption that the physical transition is the centre point of trans life and writes:

“Allow me to reassure you: I have had surgery; carefully, over the course of lengthy political, practical and theoretical sessions, I surgically removed the epistemic apparatus that diagnoses my body and my behaviours as pathological” (ibid., 62).

Here, he turns the medicalised view of trans*-ness on its head and emphasises the rootedness of sex/gender in an epistemology. He refuses the category of the trans subject as developed by medicine and psychoanalysis. Instead, he makes this epistemology visible, showing how that system of binary sex/gender is central to trans subjectivity, and challenges the veracity or naturalness of that epistemology.

As such, he stresses the political, intellectual, and emotional trajectories that led him to being trans. Again, this is in opposition to the familiar story of trans as individual affliction or condition. Instead, he writes:

“[...] I set myself two laws greater than all the rules the patriarchal-colonial society tried to instil in me. The first law, which I considered self-evident during the whole process of my transition, was to do away with the fear of being abnormal that had been planted in my heart as a child. [...] The second law, one that was rather more difficult to observe, was to be wary of all simplification. To cease to assume, as you do, that I know what a man is, what a woman is, what a homosexual or a heterosexual is. To free my thinking from these shackles and experience, try to perceive, to feel, to name, beyond sexual difference” (ibid., 33).

What he describes is a process of negotiating the gendered subject position, characterised by resisting the mindsets and norms of dominant social structures, the political and intellectual task of thinking outside of what one is taught to think of as normal. Here Preciado is articulating an aspect of trans subjectivity that emphasises the radical potential of transness,

not as an identity, although an opposition to the normative subject, the path that the normative self is supposed to take throughout life to fit into society. Preciado is positioning himself against that which is expected of him as a trans subject, thus moving towards a trans subjectivity of refusal. He is showing that the supposedly normal and easy is so only from a particular perspective and can from another viewpoint be artificial and difficult. This practice of resistance makes visible that the categories of normal and deviant are, in fact, constructed:

“In itself, gender transition is easier to accomplish than going to school every day at the same time throughout the long years of childhood and adolescence, easier than a faithful monogamous marriage, easier than pregnancy and childbirth, easier than starting a family, easier than finding a rewarding full-time job, easier than being happy in a consumer society, easier than growing old and being shut away in a retirement home.” (ibid., 40)¹³

Preciado’s articulation of the struggle for an escape from the discourse of binary sex/gender is also informed by the subsequent fear of (re)assimilation into the same. As he writes in his speech, it is the constraints of the normal subjectivity that he wants to escape by way of refusing the binary sex/gender system, and he lands on the subject position of trans man as a result of his search for an escape:

“Assigned female at birth, and living as a supposedly emancipated woman, I began digging a tunnel, I accepted the burden of identifying as transsexual and, consequently, I accepted the fact that my condition, my body, my psyche would, according to the knowledge you profess and defend, be considered pathological.” (ibid., 27)

The search for an escape is motivated by freedom. In the context of the Foucauldian framework of subjectivity, this vision of freedom that motivates Preciado is one of non-subjectivation. Subjectivation is the process of becoming a subject and therefore acquiring agency that is both constrained and enabled by the discourse that produces it. Preciado desires a world where the categories with which the world is ordered no longer govern us. In effect, this would require the dissolution of the power-knowledge formation. In my reading of Preciado’s speech, in the context of the discourse of the binary sex/gender system that produces sexed and gendered subjects, searching for an escape from that to “perceive a horizon” then takes the form of becoming trans. The trans subjectivity Preciado develops in the speech is therefore strongly anti-normative. “Perceiv[ing] a horizon” in this context means

¹³ This is Preciado’s perspective and not a universalist claim, since for some transition can be a disappointment, a life-long and difficult process, an unresolved issue, or in other ways different. There are as many experiences of gender transition as there are individuals undergoing it.

the ability to see the ends of the discourse of the binary sex/gender system that we usually spend our lives in without being aware of its hold on us. It is the glimpse of life “beyond the taxonomic hierarchies”.

“Let me tell you, however, that in this apparent state of constraint I managed to fabricate greater freedom than I had had as a supposedly free woman in the technopatriarchal society of the early twenty-first century, if by freedom we mean the ability to go out, to perceive a horizon, to build a project, to experience if only for a fleeting instant the radical community of all life, all energy, all matter beyond the taxonomic hierarchies invented by human history.” (ibid., 27)

The freedom Preciado is looking for is an absence of rules and categories. However, the position of the trans subject as it exists in the current and historical discourse comes with its own normativity, and its own constraints. Becoming a trans subject does not straightforwardly satisfy this desire, since it is in itself a category. In effect, Preciado’s trans subjectivity expresses the negotiation with the constraints that the category of the trans subject brings with it. The development of the concept of transsexuality through psychoanalysis and medicine, and the concomitant position of the trans subject, necessitates the engagement with it as a discipline in order to navigate and resist these constraints. Yet, it is no longer only psychoanalysis and medicine that speak with authority on the subject of the trans subject. The rise of the trans rights movement has led to greater social acceptance for trans people, and also produced its own forms of trans normativity. Furthermore, that normativity is one way in which trans subjectivity becomes re-assimilated into the very discursive system that Preciado tried to escape from.

That process of re-assimilation into the “rights-bearing trans subject” has been described by Jasbir K. Puar (Puar, 2015). Puar’s careful contextualisation of trans bodies in the context of legislation and discourses of ability and disability enables an understanding of how certain trans bodies become re-assimilated and normalised in the sex/gender system. This is a process of reinterpreting transness and erasing its potential for radicality. By becoming “capacitated”, certain abled, white trans bodies become associated with futurity through body modification. Since futurity is desirable in the techno-capitalist regime, these trans bodies acquire commodity value in the capitalist system and thereby achieve a normalisation as trans bodies. In other words, becoming trans in the context of this re-assimilation into normality is for certain bodies not a mark of radicality or escape anymore, but instead provides the road to normality again. Far from the aim of seeing beyond the bounds of the constraints of normality, these modes of being trans remain within the circle of normativity. That form of

trans subjecthood described by Puar is anathema to Preciado's desire for trans subjectivity as resistance and anti-normativity. What Puar identifies is a counter-narrative to the one of transness as escape and freedom that Preciado foregrounds throughout the speech. This also marks the limits of Preciado's control over his own speech. He wants to describe becoming trans as a way out of the structures of normality of the system of sexual difference. However, Puar's analysis of the re-assimilation/rehabilitation of trans bodies into the capitalist machine through accepted body modification practices shows how the individual trans person's action can be twisted again by the normative context into the bounds of normality. The trans person may have control over their actions and intentions, but the re-interpretation of their actions and intentions is beyond their control.

This is what Preciado fears and struggles against in his speech. It shows in passages such as the following:

“When I was awarded my doctorate at Princeton University and I saw a new group of instructors applaud me, I realized that I had to be circumspect. Here it is again, the cage: gilded this time, but just as solid as those I had known before. My predecessor, Red Peter, claimed that he ‘beat his way through the bushes’, and that is precisely what I did, I beat my way through the bushes of academia...”
(Preciado, 2021, 28)

Preciado, as a highly educated, middle-class white transmasculine, non-disabled trans body fits precisely the description of the kind of body that signifies futurity and capacitation in Puar's account. My reading is that Preciado struggles against this reintegration and reassimilation into normality granted to him by his transition. He attempts to resist this assimilation and its reinterpretation of his actions. On top of the medicalised view of transness and its normative power, Preciado attempts to resist this kind of assimilationist transnormativity as well. The speech is an articulation of trans subjectivity that attempts to negotiate both attempts at capturing and integrating the trans subject into the majority discourse.

One form of resistance to this process is his refusal to be silent (in which he echoes Stone, 2006): “...to be acknowledged as a real man, I would have to hold my tongue and dissolve into the naturalized magma of masculinity, never revealing my dissident history or my political past” (Preciado, 2021, 21). In the absence of his own speech, the interpretation of his actions and being would fall into the hands of the normative discourse of the regime of sexual difference. In this discourse, he could be read as one of the bodies of futurity, a trans body fit for capitalist value extraction, no longer a serious challenge to the sex/gender system of the

dominant medical/psychological regime because nowadays there is a narrative of trans normativity, one legitimising narrative of trans people that both brackets trans people as different from cis people and normalises them. That narrative removes the challenge to the normative order from trans people's existence, and instead their existence *within the parameters of that normalising narrative* becomes a further support to the regime of sexual difference. In a way, their existence becomes the exception that supports the rule.

Preciado aims to thwart a reinterpretation of his existence along these lines by voicing his own narrative of his existence and "turning into a spectacle". He struggles to have his interpretation heard over the attempts to fix his existence into the normative order.

4.3 Changing the Discourse from the Margins

As discussed in the previous subchapters, Preciado refuses the medicalised and psychoanalytic conceptualisation of the trans subject and the attached conceptualisation of the sex/gender binary. However, in the midst of this refusal and rejection of psychoanalysis, there is also a counter current in the speech. Much like Foucault's ambivalent relationship to psychoanalysis as a discipline (Allen, 2018, 170), Preciado also does not wish for the abolishment of psychoanalysis. Reading Preciado as pushing for reform, rather than for abolishment of psychoanalysis as a whole, is supported by statements such as this:

"In other cases, I was able to make part of the journey [towards defining a new epistemology of sexual being] in the company of psychoanalysts I would describe a dissident in practice, but silent and discreet in theory. I would like to think that most of the psychoanalysts who are here today and listening to me are part of that silent, potentially revolutionary group. It is to you, in the first instance, that I address myself." (Preciado, 2021, 55)

In sections like this, Preciado is trying to reach contemporary psychoanalysts and be a catalyst for necessary change and reform in their discipline. The productive aspects of psychoanalysis as a practice that enables the scrutinization and questioning of societal regulation are valuable tools for the project of challenging the binary sex/gender system. Preciado calls for a reform of the discipline so that its tools would be available for that project:

"I ardently appeal for a mutation in psychoanalysis, for the emergence of a mutant psychoanalysis, one equal to the paradigm shift we are experiencing. Perhaps this process of transformation alone, terrible and devastating as it may seem to you, now deserves the name of psychoanalysis." (ibid., 77)

The speech ends with this appeal for disciplinary change.¹⁴ While Preciado clearly values psychoanalysis enough to desire its reform, the phrasing also encapsulates the critique towards it. Because of its position within the web of power-knowledge, psychoanalysis has the status of speaking ‘truth’ and the subsequent power to force others to accept its worldview. Preciado turns this around by suggesting that the “terrible and devastating” transformation he calls for in psychoanalysis should itself be seen as psychoanalytic treatment. He reminds psychoanalysis of its own investments in the practice of self-reflexivity and self-scrutiny, and thereby uses the verbal tools of psychoanalysis for his own ends.

The tone of irreverence that Preciado utilises in his speech is strategic part of negotiating the expectations attached to the trans subject. He starts his speech with these words:

“Esteemed ladies and gentlemen of the École de la Cause Freudienne, and I do not know whether it is worth also extending a greeting to all those who are neither ladies nor gentlemen, because I doubt that there is anyone among you who has publicly and legally repudiated sexual difference and been accepted as a fully fledged psychoanalyst [...]. In this, I am referring to a trans or non-binary psychoanalyst who is accepted by you as an expert. If such a person exists, allow me here and now to offer this dear mutant my warmest greetings.” (ibid., 17)

In these first two sentences of the speech, he points out that there usually are no non-binary or trans psychoanalysts, and thus immediately establishes the direction for his critique: that psychoanalysis rests on the assumption that the system of binary sex/gender is natural and normal, and that those who do not neatly fall into the system’s categories are the outlaws. Instead, he makes visible the absence of trans or non-binary psychoanalysts and thereby turns around what should count as ‘normal’.

The insecure ability to speak and be heard, to qualify as a speaking subject, is one aspect of the problematic position of the trans subject. Given the role as patient, the voice of the trans subject has historically often been erased or filtered through the writing of more respectable subjects (Stone, 2006, 224). Preciado’s speech falls into the tradition of radical trans writing (and speaking) that Sandy Stone’s “Posttranssexual Manifesto” or Susan Stryker’s “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix” fall into: Speaking with self-assurance that demands for the speaker to be taken seriously. As Preciado writes: “I am the monster who gets up from the analyst’s couch and dares to speak, not as a patient, but as a

¹⁴ Webster develops a potential vision of a reformed psychoanalysis based on Preciado’s recent work with particular attention to *Can the Monster Speak?* and refers to the meeting between Preciado and psychoanalysis as “terminal, meaning both at the very limit, the end point, and incurable” (Webster, 2023, 124).

citizen, as your monstrous equal” (Preciado, 2021, 19). Furthermore, he addresses the fact that it is the “regime of sexual difference” that is responsible for making those who do not conform to its rules into monsters. They are the constitutive outside. Trans monstrosity is a result of the belief in the centrality and naturalness of the gender binary. As Preciado writes:

“Psychoanalysis does not merely work in and with this epistemology of sexual difference, in fact, if I may be so bold, it was crucial in the subjugation and the creation of the female and male ‘psyches’, together with the heterosexual and homosexual typologies that form the main axes of the patriarchal-colonial regime. The epistemology of sex, gender and sexual difference is not external to psychoanalysis: it is the inherent and immanent condition on which the whole psychoanalytic theory of sexuality is based.” (ibid., 50)

Because psychoanalysis is entrenched with the “epistemology of sex, gender and sexual difference”, it is also responsible for the marginalisation and monstrosity assigned to those who do not fit into the system designed by this epistemology. That is why the voice of the trans subject, the story of trans subjects that challenges the normality (called “subalterns” by Preciado himself), has such a precarious status:

“I am speaking about all of this publicly because it is vital that the voices of sexual and gender subalterns not be appropriated by the discourse of sexual difference. I know that I have turned my body into a showroom: but I would rather make of my life a literary legend, a biopolitical show, than allow psychiatry, pharmacology, psychoanalysis, medicine or the media to construct an image of me as an educated binary, integrationist homosexual or transsexual, as a sophisticated monster capable of expressing myself in the language of the norm, ladies and gentlemen, academics and psychoanalysts.” (ibid., 39-40)

The speaking position of a trans subject is characterised both by the precariousness and – as the comparison with Red Peter shows – a sort of ventriloquism, whereby Preciado speaks in the language of a system that marks him as a monster, in order to subvert it. That same language that makes him a monster is also the only language available to him if he wants to be heard. That curious status of speech as both constraining and enabling again fits in with the framework of Foucauldian subjectivity. However, the monster has historically also been a harbinger of new things and destruction, a messenger of something unworldly that will disrupt the previous existing status quo. The monster is characterised by exceptionalism, foreshadowing events that are out of the ordinary such as change that is beyond the control of any individual human (Santos, 2023, 80). In the speech, Preciado sets himself up as such a messenger of on-coming change and upheaval:

“We are witnessing a process of transformation in the order of sexual and political anatomy comparable to that which led from the geocentric epistemology of Ptolemy to the heliocentric epistemology of Copernicus. Or the transition, between 1650 and 1870, from the one-sex model to the anatomy of sexual difference. Or the paradigm shift introduced in the early twentieth century by relativity and quantum physics in comparison to Newtonian physics.” (Preciado, 2021, 70)

As in the quote above, Preciado at several points throughout the speech references the scientific paradigm shift from geocentrism to heliocentrism that originated with astronomy and fundamentally changed Western science. The comparisons with the shift from geo- to heliocentrism is meant as a “memento mori” for the unshakeable assumptions that we hold onto. It is a reminder that we live at specific moments in history and that there will come something after us that might disprove our assumptions. Specifically, it is a comparison designed to challenge the psychoanalysts’ beliefs in the fundamental nature of the binary sex/gender system their discipline is based on. The speech is designed to challenge that belief by showing the psychoanalysts that the binary sex/gender system exists and is central to psychoanalysis¹⁵, and to show that there is counterevidence to this belief. The counterevidence that makes up the second half of the speech is Preciado’s account of his own transition. By using the historical legacy of the monster as a herald of change, he calls for psychoanalysis to reckon with the changes to the binary sex/gender system that have been developing in the context of feminism and decolonialism:

“In the context of epistemic transition, you, the esteemed members of l’Académie de Psychanalyse de France and the École de la Cause Freudienne, have an onerous responsibility. It is up to you to decide whether you wish to remain on the side of patriarchal and colonial discourse and to reassert the universality of sex, gender and sexual difference and heterosexual reproduction, or whether you wish to join us, the mutants and the monsters of this world, in a process of criticism and invention of a new epistemology that will allow for the redistribution of sovereignty and the recognition of other forms of political subjectivity.” (ibid., 73)

4.4 Preciado’s Trans Subjectivity and its Ambivalent Wish for “Escape”

In the previous two subchapters, I have shown that Preciado’s envisioned trans subjectivity is articulated with recourse to the figure of the monster. This trans subjectivity is ambivalently attached to the discourse of psychoanalysis, since there are both gestures of resistance and refusal tied to a dream of escaping its grasp entirely, and on the other hand gestures that speak

¹⁵ Here, Preciado is drawing on Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, where Butler discusses the centrality of the heteromatrix to feminist theory, but also specifically to Freud’s work (Butler, 1990).

of an investment in changing the discourse. This ambivalence towards psychoanalytic discourse in the envisioned trans subjectivity is rooted in the specific monster figure of Red Peter that Preciado uses.

Red Peter does not provide a straightforward narrative according to which speech and escaping a cage is unilaterally positive or emancipatory. Rather, his character provides an analogy to thinking through the problematic and imperfect movements towards liberation or emancipation found in Preciado's trans subjectivity. Red Peter's escape from the cage came at the cost of forgetting his past life and adopting a language not his own (with the further ramification that Kafka's ape becomes an alcoholic as a result, which demonstrates the destructiveness of the fantasy of a "civilised culture"). As Preciado points out, Kafka's tale is not a glorification of civilisation but rather "a critique of colonial European humanism and its anthropological taxonomies" (Preciado, 2021, 18). This plays with the dualism of savagery and civilisation, which in a sense echoes the analytical structure of Foucault's "subject creation": We are made subjects discursively and thereby, in that productive moment of suppression and also elevation, we acquire agency in virtue of being a subject, by excluding the other.

Through the use of Red Peter as a figure, the straightforward heroic narrative of moving from unfreedom through an act of liberation to freedom is turned more complicated. The ape manages to leave his cage (which would ordinarily count as the act of liberation), but at the cost of his past life and alcoholism. Becoming a member of human society is not depicted as freedom. As Preciado summarises: "Once captured, the ape says he had no choice: if he did not wish to die locked up in a cage, he had to accept the 'cage' of human subjectivity" (ibid., 18). Likewise, Preciado writes: "I was assigned female at birth and, like the mutant ape, I extricated myself from that confined 'cage', in order to enter another cage, granted, but at least this time through my own initiative" (ibid., 20).

The ambiguities of Preciado's trans subjectivity within a speech-centric, discursive framework become apparent through this figure of Red Peter. Subjectivation is productive and repressive at the same time, and there is no recourse to a pre-discursive self (Butler, 1990). Rather, the subject with its possibility to act is an effect of the discourse. Therefore, being trans is also neither a return to a pre-discursive, innocent, non-constrained self, nor is it a recipe for liberation or escape from the constraints of the discourse itself. It is another cage, a form of agency that squarely lies within the contemporary discourse, not a way to transcend it.

Preciado's trans subjectivity, therefore, is not a revolution, but rather a negotiation with the discourse of the category of the trans subject. It is a negotiation of the possibilities and constraints that lie within the subject position, a refusal of some and an embracing of other options. For Preciado, being trans does lie in opposition to the "regime of sexual difference" and therefore has the potential for disruption, resistance, and producing change. But, again, it is not a recipe for transcending the discourse altogether. Rather, it is a recipe for changing the discourse from a position that is at the margin of the discourse, but not outside of it. As Preciado writes:

"...if you will permit me, with the unusual freedom conferred on me by the fact that I am addressing you from a discursive position as unexpected as it is impossible, that of a gender-dysphoric monster addressing the Academy of Psychoanalysts, I would like to pass at least three ideas to you today, for I have spent my whole life studying the different sexual and gender cages in which human beings imprison themselves" (Preciado, 2021, 43).

This in a sense challenges Preciado's own valorisation of resistance and dreams of escape. The trans subjectivity Preciado envisions is at its core ambivalent on the question of whether it is an escape from the discourse it originated in, or whether it aims to change the discourse by participating in it.

4.5 The Limits of Preciado's Trans Subjectivity

In this section, I continue my analysis of the speech with recourse to postcolonial and intersectional thought. By reading Preciado in relation to postcolonial critique of the concept of the "subject" I highlight the limits of Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity. Further, I problematise the rhetoric of the speech and particularly the phrase: "the trans body is a colony".

The speech *Can the Monster Speak?*, as I have shown above, is an articulation of Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity that negotiates the position of the trans subject. However, Preciado's articulation of trans subjectivity is hasty in how it relates to the legacy of Western colonialism. This becomes apparent in the references to colonialism that Preciado makes in the speech and specifically in the facile comparisons he draws between trans*-ness and coloniality. Preciado's metaphor of "the trans body is a colony" is what originally caught my attention and inspired the initial ideas for writing this thesis, because something about it immediately raised my hackles when I read it. Is it ethical to invoke colonies and coloniality in this way? The answer depends on what one considers the ethics of metaphoricity to be, and,

indeed, what theory of metaphoricity one operates with. On the “classical” view, a metaphor consists of the tenor (“the trans body”) and the vehicle (“a colony”), where the vehicle’s associations are borrowed to compare the two (Richards & Constable, 2001). If this view is adopted, then one may argue that a simplistic invocation and borrowing of a term in this way could be charged for being unethical, for not considering the context of the colony in its own right and for using it merely as a vehicle to elucidate the trans body. In the attempt to expand the concept of the trans body, it sacrifices the specificity of both “trans body” and “colony”.¹⁶ Further one may argue that it also indirectly supports the idea that the two are not interconnected and therefore makes invisible the way that the binary gender system is part of the colonialist world order (Lugones, 2007).

This troubling comparison portrays how Preciado’s speaking position becomes that of the white trans man, however, while referencing the status of underdog, a somewhat uncomfortable positionality:

“This yoke [of accepting a male name] has also brought with it certain advantages which I accept from time to time like a glass of water in a political desert. Those unaware that I am trans treat me with the prerogatives and the deference accorded to white men in patriarchal-colonial society. Doubtless, I could profit from these fatuous favours, but to do so I would have had (an impossible task!) to lose my memory.” (Preciado, 2021, 34)

This I argue, is the least convincing part of the speech. It reads as an attempt to reinterpret and avoid acknowledging that he has profited and does profit by the status of the white man. Preciado acknowledges that no matter how much he disidentifies with the position of the white man, he cannot get away from the fact that he is seen as one and profits from it in ways he cannot control. That shows the external component of subjectivation: One’s subject position influences how one is treated by others. Preciado focuses in this speech on his position as a trans subject and the problematic ramifications of it, but this is not the only position he occupies in his life.

¹⁶ Preciado’s tendency towards sweeping comparisons, false equivalences, and universalisations in the attempt to express solidarity has been criticised in his previous writings, especially in the reviews of *An Apartment on Uranus* (Michalak, 2023; Long, 2020; Brazil, 2020; Wallenhorst, 2020). Marraccini echoes this in her review of *Can the Monster Speak?* (Marraccini, n.d.).

One of these other positions is Preciado's place as a well-known white philosopher who has currency in the higher circles of academia and is referred to as Derrida's pupil.¹⁷ The statement "Preciado studied under Derrida" is reiterated again and again in every introduction of Preciado's work and persona I have encountered: From author's biographies on the dustjackets of his publications to introductory remarks to his 2023 film. The repetition of this is interestingly revealing of the continued tendency to think of philosophy as a game played by Great White Men who apprentice/study under Great White Men until they have achieved mastery of the subject and become Great themselves. Repetition of Derrida's tutelage of Preciado taps into this narrative and thereby establishes Preciado as the successor of Derrida in the philosophical tradition, both securing his own and Derrida's place in the history of Great Philosophers.¹⁸ This is one way in which Preciado speaks with authority and privilege, undermining his claims to marginalisation and the position of subaltern.¹⁹ Regardless of whether it was his intention, on some level he has become an embodiment of that which he never wanted to be. Coupled with this is a pragmatism that he acknowledges, and that stands in contrast with the radical pathos that his speech otherwise carries:

"When I realized that leaving the regime of sexual difference meant leaving the human sphere and entering into a subaltern space of violence and control, I – like Galileo, when he recanted his heliocentric hypotheses – did everything necessary to carry on living as well as I could and I demanded a place within the binary gender regime." (Preciado, 2021, 26-7)

These parts of the speech portray once more the ambivalences of the position of the (white, European, academic) trans subject. The justification for why Preciado does not live his life as an outcast and instead profits from the reality of social injustice because of his outward appearance as a white European, middle-class man. Even worse, the narrative Preciado tells of how the system of sexual difference and binary gender is entwined with colonialism falls short. The narrative does not adequately highlight that the system of sexual difference was fundamental in denying the humanity of everyone outside of the white, bourgeois European context in which it was developed.

¹⁷ In a recent article, Rowlands explores the relationship between Derrida's work and the autotheoretical writing of Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (Rowlands, 2023). This is to my knowledge the first academic work to explicitly focus on Derrida's influence on Preciado.

¹⁸ Interestingly, this relationship to Derrida is not referenced so often in the French context.

¹⁹ And, indeed, presumably this position played a role in giving him the opportunity to speak in front of the *École de la Cause Freudienne* in the first place.

It is Preciado's position as a well-known, radical, and well-known-as-a-radical, philosopher of gender and sexuality that enabled him to give this speech and critique the social institution of psychoanalysis. In that sense, the speech and its reaction are staged within the current discussion over the shift in understanding of sex and gender. They represent the encounter between older, traditional views, and their contemporary challengers, and the shifting power balance between them. Although Preciado is guest within the institution, the resulting discussions that ripple from the speech only further cement the destabilisation of the institution of psychoanalysis and its hegemonic views on sex/gender.

This precisely brings out the paradox at the heart of Preciado's speech: On the one hand, it is precisely the privileged position Preciado holds that enables this articulation of critique and the destabilisation of psychoanalysis' authority with respect to its views on sex and gender. He can speak to the psychoanalysts as a trans subject, and the speech thereby becomes an articulation of trans subjectivity *tout court*. On the other hand, it is that same position of privilege that limits what Preciado can express and articulate with respect to marginalisation. Preciado's subjectivity both enables and constricts, as subjectivity does.

In my interpretation, Preciado attempts to build a coalition between those subject positions that are constructed as "partial or non_subjects" (Bergold-Caldwell & Ludwig, 2023) by the Western binary sex/gender system. Thus, he writes:

"When you have cut down all the trees and mined all the mountains, when you have analysed all your dreams, there will be nothing left for you to break. The Earth then will be a rubbish dump, a vast trans body dismembered and devoured. The bodies of the colonists and your bodies, esteemed psychoanalysts, will be buried with the trans organs you have taken from us. But the organs that we do not have can never be buried. Our utopian organs will live on eternally. They will be the warriors storming the borders." (Preciado, 2021, 37-8)

However, the attempt is problematic. The beginning of this quote is a reference to the Native American saying "When the last tree is cut down, the last fish eaten, and the last stream poisoned, you will realize that you cannot eat money" (Simpson & Speake, 2008). With that reference, Preciado here explicitly equates colonial subjugation of the land to the subjugation of the Western trans body.²⁰ However, that comparison is too reductive a narrative. By

²⁰ The wording Preciado uses echoes Freud's writings on female sexuality, where he compares it to the "dark continent". In that sense, Preciado here draws attention to the way in which colonial metaphor has been used in the history of psychoanalysis. Using this as a starting point, Ranjana Khanna discusses the relationship between psychoanalysis and colonialism (Ranjana, 2003).

conceptualising the process of colonialism through the lens of the category of trans*-ness, he is repeating the Western colonial-imperialist violence of universalising Western taxonomies. María Lugones has theorised this violence in the context of the relationship between coloniality and the binary sex/gender system. She introduced the concept of the “colonial/modern gender system” to mark how the binary gender system was imposed to distinguish between colonised people and the white middle-class European colonisers (Lugones, 2007, 187). Further, the scientific development of the binary sex/gender system was itself produced by using the bodies of non-white people as research objects (Snorton, 2017, 20-30).

If now (white) trans people like Preciado challenge that system, this does not mean they are in the same position as the non-white people who were excluded and dehumanised, or as the land which was colonised. The problematic of the comparison he draws between the trans body and colonised land is apparent when one considers some aspects of the speaking position: Preciado, a white, well-known European philosopher, is here equating the situation of trans people like him with those living in formerly colonised lands. This comparison betrays the unacknowledged speaking position of Preciado from within a position of European white privilege. Accordingly, his concept of trans subjectivity does not adequately acknowledge the entwinement of colonialism and the binary sex/gender system (and the position of trans people within it).²¹ The “colonial/modern gender system” is part of colonial violence, and transsexuality is a concept within that same system. While that system exerts violence both towards trans subjects and towards the subjects of colonialism, the violence is not of the same form and arises under different circumstances. The normative force of that categorising system produces both partial and non_subjects, yet this does not imply a straightforward equitability between the different forms of partial or non_subjecthood. For any attempts at coalition-building between these different forms, it is crucial to think about the differences between them, possible historical entwinement and complicity in violence, and develop ways of acting together. However, invoking the violence directed towards someone else as a metaphor to elucidate one’s own position is rather an exploitation of that violent experience for one’s own end.

²¹ In a review of Preciado’s *An Apartment on Uranus*, Maxi Wallenhorst has made a related criticism: “While of course both [trans and migrant bodies] face violence from the very same institutions, to parallelize them [...] glosses over how these forms of oppression also intersect, overlap, and depend on each other. Preciado keeps name-checking “racialization” but he often doesn’t actually explore the ways in which it’s not secondary to the things central to his writing.” (Wallenhorst, 2020)

Whereas Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity eloquently captures the precarious position and status of the trans subject in the context of the Western binary sex/gender system, it cannot reach beyond these limits. In her critique of Foucault and other French poststructuralist thinkers, Spivak writes: "[i]t is impossible for contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe." (Spivak, 1993, 75). Because of the influence of colonialist power relations and their erasure of non-Western epistemes, it is impossible for the poststructuralist theoretical frame to grasp how "the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe" could "occupy [...] its itinerary" (ibid.). Nevertheless, Preciado's use of metaphor seems to suggest that the constitution of the trans subject as compromised subject could be equated to the process by which the non-Western subaltern becomes unknowable and silent.

I take the problems in Preciado's speech to be indicative of the wider problems that the field of trans studies is grappling with at this time. The concept of the trans subject is in question both as regards its use as a framework for understanding trans*-ness and trans lives, and as regards its status as the proper object of trans studies. Preciado's speech thus showcases the problematic nature of an attempt to speak of *the* trans subject, or *the* trans subjectivity more broadly. It is the problem of language and concepts: What language can trans studies still use to speak about its object? What *is* the object of trans studies? How can it be articulated without reproducing the effects of power-knowledge that shaped the trans subject in the first place? And how can trans studies avoid reproducing the racist colonial ableist assumptions that underpinned the making of the trans subject? While this thesis certainly cannot offer answers to these questions, I will attempt to sketch the possible problems.

The Foucauldian framework of trans studies has enabled much rich work, but it has also been a limiting factor and subject of controversy for trans studies (Love, 2014; Keegan, 2020; Namaste, 2021). Concepts like the trans subject and the subaltern have been important tools in the field, yet, as my analysis shows, they are also simultaneously limiting what is made visible. To speak with Wittgenstein, they are the picture that "[holds] us captive. And we [can] not get outside it, for it lay[s] in our language and language seem[s] to repeat it to us inexorably" (Wittgenstein, 1997, 48e).²² I want to suggest that Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity is emblematic for this: The articulation of trans subjectivity is productive and

²² For this way of thinking about theory, I am indebted to Toril Moi (Moi, 1999) and Salla Aldrin Salskov (Aldrin Salskov, 2022).

radical in some ways, and fails in others, namely in the negotiation of the limitations of the language of trans to the Western context. The Western taxonomical system makes claims to universality and does not see how it is rooted in its own specific cultural context. A failure to see this leads to the inability to conceptualise and articulate what the relationship of trans subjectivity to coloniality is. Without a grasp of the role that the category of trans plays within the Western taxonomical project, and without a concomitant understanding of the imperial-colonial relationship of that Western taxonomical project to the epistemes of the rest of the world, the possibility of articulating a trans subjectivity that does not reproduce epistemic violence is foreclosed.

The key issue at stake when working with the Foucauldian theoretical frame of the subject, power-knowledge, and resistance thereto, is that this theoretical frame is limited due to its primary application in the Western context. It does not adequately consider the dynamics at play in the colonial-imperialist project of exporting Western knowledge categories into other parts of the world as part of the violence of colonialism. As Lugones has argued, the colonial modern sex/gender system is itself part of coloniality and has erased native epistemes. Further, according to Spivak, it is not possible to give voice to the subaltern in the context of colonialism, since the conceptualisation of speech and articulation rely on a Western-centric understanding of speech and the subject of speech.

In the context of trans studies, this raises problematic questions about trans studies' subject and the categories used for speaking about it. Since the modern sex/gender system, from which then the "transsexual" was categorised as its deviant, was developed as part of the colonialist project of dehumanising those Western colonial powers wished to subdue and exploit, was used to destroy native cosmologies, and continues to be available only to those who sufficiently fit into the Eurocentric, white notion of subjecthood; then how is trans studies to conceptualise its subject while keeping its emancipatory aims? If Foucault describes the making of the subject through its subjection to classification, this frame only properly applies in the societies where the classifications originated. The imperial venture of forcefully carrying these categories into the rest of the world brings with it many further processes of violent subjection. Continuing to use the language of these classifications, even with the aim of critique, is thus highly problematic. In this sense, the discussions over trans studies' relationship to the poststructural, queer theoretical framework of trans studies are at the core discussions about trans studies' language and object.

5 Discussion: Trans Studies, Psychoanalysis, and Trans Subjectivity

In this chapter, I will relate my analysis back to trans studies and show what insights can be gleaned from it for the field.

My analysis of Paul B. Preciado's speech has worked with the concept of trans subjectivity. I read the speech as an envisioning of trans subjectivity that Preciado develops in a dispute with psychoanalysis. The trans subjectivity that Preciado develops serves the purpose of dispelling and rejecting the narrative of the transsexual that psychoanalysis as a discipline has historically been attached to. However, in order to achieve this purpose and to be understood, Preciado echoes and subverts the language that shapes psychoanalysis as a discipline. The speech thereby remains tethered to the conceptual frame of the subject. It is within this conceptual frame that it makes sense to speak of "trans subjectivity".

The relationship between trans subjectivity and psychoanalysis is uneasy. The framework of the discipline enables trans subjects to articulate their own subjectivity, to locate themselves, "to begin to *write [themselves]* into the discourses by which [they have] been written" (Stone, 2006, 232, emphasis in original). However, the writing of the trans subject by the discourse (to echo Stone) has historically been a very painful process for the trans subject. As the historical background I sketched in chapter 2 shows, the writing of the trans subject has been driven by labels like "pathological", "repressed", "psychotic", and "unnatural". Or, as Patricia Gherovici has put it: "psychoanalysis has a history of coercive hetero-normatization and pathologization of non-normative sexualities and genders" (Gherovici, 2023, 3). The engagement within trans studies with psychoanalysis, which Preciado is a part of, reflects this fraught history: the engagement with psychoanalysis ranges from clear critique of psychoanalysis' treatment of trans people, via a more conciliatory approach that is vested with hope for reparation, to work that views psychoanalysis' tools for analysing the pathology of the everyday as richly productive.

A key tension point between trans individuals and psychoanalysis lies rooted in the tension between the object of description and the person doing the describing – especially given the fact that the object in question is, in fact, a person and not an object. The taxonomical and classificatory approach of scientific study towards those engaged in sexual and gendered behaviour that lies outside the norm has meant that these individuals are othered and treated

like objects of scientific investigation, instead of being treated as subjects in their own right. This privileges the outside view of purportedly objective scientific study over the subjective experience of the individuals in question. The tension lies in the problem of speech and power: Who is heard and who is not? Whose perspective is used to make sense of the world in the conversation? And how can that power imbalance be contested?

From these questions, and especially the last one, comes the first of three strands of trans studies' engagement with psychoanalysis (which also demonstrates how and why the line between scholarship and activism is particularly blurry in the field of trans studies). This critical strand consists of texts that question and contradict psychoanalytic understandings of trans lives and experience. Key examples in this area are Stone's critique of the narrative of transsexuality as normalising the gender binary (Stone, 2006), and Stryker's "Words to Victor Frankenstein" (Stryker, 2006b), which theorises the affective response of rage to dominant binary conceptions of sex and gender that fail to make sense of trans experience.

Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity echoes Stone's earlier text in several respects. One is the view of trans subjectivity as dissident and revolutionary, or "reconstructive" (Stone, 2006, 230). Trans subjectivity for Stone and Preciado is something radical *per se*, since it by definition stands in opposition to a medical/psychoanalytical discourse that sees the sex/gender binary as fundamental. Secondly, there is the observation that trans subjectivity is under threat, that it occupies a fragile position and is vulnerable to erasure by that same discourse. And a third similarity is the connection between trans subjects' opposition to the discourse and the possibility of reaching beyond that which is knowable in the discourse. Preciado writes of "experience[ing] if only for a fleeting instant the radical community of all life, all energy, all matter beyond the taxonomic hierarchies invented by human history" (Preciado, 2021, 27). Stone envisions a similar future as the one Preciado glimpsed, when she writes: "[W]ere the silenced groups to achieve voice we might well find [...] that the identities of individual, embodied subjects were far less implicated in physical norms, and far more diversely spread across a rich and complex structuration of identity and desire, than it is now possible to express." (Stone, 2006, 232). Yet, while Stone's vision emphasises critique of the *current* discourse, I take it that Preciado seems to dream of an escape from *all* discourse and its distorting effects. In this sense, Preciado's dream is a step beyond Stone's earlier writing. A question that arises, however, is how to think about the role critique has in challenging dominant discourses, and whether critique is always in some way "conditioned" by what it critiques.

Trans studies' engagement with psychoanalysis is not purely antagonistic, however. The work of Jacques Lacan has been taken up in the second, more conciliatory, strand of engagement with psychoanalysis, with some work that attempts to bridge the gap between the two and mediate (Elliot, 2014, 166). In the keyword entry on "psychoanalysis" in the first issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Elliot (Elliot, 2014) gives an overview over some of this work that aims to depathologise transsexuality within psychoanalysis and presents a cautiously optimistic conclusion that "there may be a new beginning for the relationship between psychoanalysis and trans" (167). Both Gherovici (Gherovici, 2011) and Gozlan (Gozlan, 2011) attempt to offer an interpretation of transition and trans narrative that differs from the standard interpretation of trans people as "psychotic". For Gherovici, this happens through a reframing of Lacan's concept of the "sinthome", according to which trans people can become liveable subjects through the construction of the trans narrative as their "sinthome" (which in Lacanian terminology is the process through which a better compromise between opposing drive and repression can be attained) (Elliot, 2014, 167). Gozlan (2011) extends Gherovici's concept of the sinthome to include transsexuality as a creative solution to the experience of suffering that results from conflicting drive and repression. As Elliot concludes, "like Gherovici, Gozlan recasts the process of transitioning as a creative project that includes both surgery and narration – an affirmation that mirrors the experience of many transsexual authors" (Elliot, 2014, 167).

These two strands in the discussions on psychoanalysis in trans studies are invested in criticising it for its distorted and distorting view of gender non-conformity, sometimes with the hope of reform. However, there is also the third strand of literature that attempts to read psychoanalysis as "revealing the sickness and pain at the centre of so-called civilization", thus working as an ally for marginalised positions in the critique of contemporary society and, indeed, in the decolonial project (Morgan, 1999, 220; Ranjana, 2003, 9-10). Shanna T. Carlson's keyword entry in *Transgender Studies Quarterly* on "Psychoanalytic" even goes so far as to write: "psychoanalysis itself may be trans, for various lines of inquiry in transgender studies also involve the critique and questioning of ways in which gender identities fail to encapsulate the body" (Carlson, 2014, 169). This speaks to the positive side of the ambivalent relationship with psychoanalysis, such that scholars like Carlson (and, as I argue below, Preciado) are invested in psychoanalysis as a discipline worth reforming, vested in the recognition that psychoanalysis can offer tools for explanation that are lacking in other theories. According to this view, psychoanalysis as a theory can also offer theoretical tools for

trans studies to capture the contradictory experiences of living, of identity, of the fragmentary nature of the self.

The roots of the academic subject of trans studies in queer theory and the work of Michel Foucault further cement this ambivalence in the field. Foucault works with the language of the “subject” and elucidates, rather than repudiates, the psychoanalytic narrative of the formation of the subject. He emphasises the way in which this process, and psychoanalysis as a discipline among others, is implicated in the workings of power-knowledge. He thus criticises psychoanalysis’ work, while working within its language. This ambivalence towards the discipline has been carried forward to queer studies, to trans studies, and ultimately also to Preciado. Psychoanalysis is ambivalently both responsible for the making of the trans subject, while it also provides the means to question and challenge the same.

In my reading, the engagement with psychoanalysis Preciado offers in *Can the Monster Speak?* veers between all three of these strands regarding the attitude towards psychoanalysis in trans studies. There is the critique of psychoanalysis’ role in the mistreatment of trans people, the call for reform of the discipline, but also the utilisation of psychoanalysis’ language to articulate the process of becoming a trans subject. It is possible to read Preciado’s envisioned trans subjectivity as a strategic choice: that he chooses to speak in the language of psychoanalysis to be comprehensible to his audience, but not out of a deeper investment in psychoanalysis’ way to frame gendered experiences. What supports this reading of distance to psychoanalysis is that Preciado in the speech articulates clear distance to and freedom from psychoanalytic interpretations: “Bullshit. These [psychoanalytic accounts of transsexuality] are no more than grotesque simplifications. I am not at all what you imagine.” (Preciado, 2021, 33). However, this view is not entirely sufficient. He remains attached to psychoanalysis. He calls for discipline reform regarding its investment in the binary sex/gender system, but not for the dissolution of the discipline or a rethinking of its core theoretical framework as a whole. Clearly, for Preciado, too, psychoanalysis and its tools retain an appeal.

It is partly this ambivalent investment in psychoanalysis that is contributing to the current discussions over the state and direction of trans studies. Spivak’s postcolonial critique shows how the language of the “subject” and the accounts of desire and interest that accompany it are not universally applicable or neutral theoretical tools (Spivak, 1993, 68). Yet, the psychoanalytic framework of the subject, the drive, and its repressions, seems to be too

appealing for trans studies as a discipline to leave behind. In the current moment, trans studies seem to be holding on to hope for possible reformation or reconciliation with psychoanalysis on the one hand, while on the other hand being ever more conscious of the very real, violent implications of psychoanalysis' involvement in the colonialist world-building enterprise (Ranjana, 2003), and the ways in which the export of the "colonial/modern gender system" is part of that project (Lugones, 2007).

This tension over the role of psychoanalysis to the field of trans studies is one way to view the current moment where trans studies is described to be "at a crossroads" regarding its aims and purposes (Amin, 2023, 56). This current discussion has been amplified by Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager's polemical dialogue, provocatively titled "After Trans Studies" (Chu & Harsin Drager, 2019). In this article, Chu and Harsin Drager bemoan the stasis of the field and what they frame as the lack of fruitful disagreement. It seems that the public debates over "transgender identity politics", which are largely concerned with opposing the traditional narratives of transsexuality as psychotic, are stifling the development of trans studies' own theoretical innovations (ibid., 104). In this vein, the polemic seems to express a tension that lies in both holding onto and opposing the hold that psychoanalysis' legacy has on trans studies. The question of the state and direction of the field also appears in the theme of the upcoming "2nd International Trans Studies Conference", which will be held in September 2024 (*Call for Submissions*, n.d.). The call for submissions explicitly refers to the field as being "at a critical juncture" and invites scholarship about the origin of the field's terminology and concepts, and the consequences of this history. Therefore, it is timely to reconsider trans studies' theoretical investments in and attachment to the field of psychoanalysis.

6 Conclusion

In this MA Thesis, I have analysed Paul B. Preciado's speech *Can the Monster Speak?*, suggesting that it reads as an articulation of trans subjectivity, which Preciado develops in the encounter with the discipline of psychoanalysis. In chapter 2, I sketched the historical background of the relationship between medicine, psychoanalysis, and trans subjects. I traced the development of the diagnosis of "transsexuality", which continues to shape the medical and psychoanalytic discourse on gender variance. I introduced the trans rights movement and the field of trans studies in the 1990s as a countermovement to the prevalent societal and academic conceptualisation of trans lives. I situated Paul B. Preciado's work in this context and gave an overview of his reception.

Chapter 3 presented the main theoretical framework used in this thesis. Michel Foucault's work on power-knowledge-subject was introduced, which has been deeply influential in both queer studies and trans studies. This work has provided the basis for my core concept "trans subjectivity". I further traced previous envisionings of "trans subjectivity" in the work of Sandy Stone and Susan Stryker. I then problematised this conceptual framework through the work of postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak, the intersectional critique of Jasbir K. Puar, and the decolonial critique of the Western sex/gender system by María Lugones.

In Chapter 4, I analysed *Can the Monster Speak?* in relation to the historical background and theoretical-conceptual frame I introduced in the previous chapters. I discussed Preciado's use of Red Peter as the monster figure with which he articulates his envisioned trans subjectivity. I thereby linked this articulation of trans subjectivity to monstrosity and questions of coloniality. I then showed what this "monstrous trans subjectivity" made visible and articulable with respect to the relationship between trans people and transnormativity. I interpret Preciado's trans subjectivity to be invested in refusal and disidentification from normative discourses about trans lives. From this position of disidentification and discursive marginalisation, the trans subject can then become a source of discursive transformation. This view of the trans subject as a source of change is part of Preciado's ambivalent attachment to the discipline of psychoanalysis. While he calls for disciplinary change, he also remains invested in its tools and possibilities. In the last part of the analysis, I utilised the postcolonial critiques in trans studies and traced the limits of Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity, showing where his strategies for making trans subjectivity visible turn problematic and risk becoming limiting.

In chapter 5, I discussed the findings of my analysis in the context of trans studies as a field described to be at a crossroads. I compared Preciado's envisioned trans subjectivity to the earlier writing by Sandy Stone. I suggested that the strong influence of Michel Foucault's work through queer theory in the field is leading to tensions regarding the current and future directions of the field. Like Preciado's speech, the attachment of trans studies to psychoanalysis is ambivalent due to the historical legacy of psychoanalysis in the oppression of trans people and its part in the colonial enterprise. This has led to the question whether the queer theoretical frame is still useful for the current field.

My use of the concept of "trans subjectivity" has enabled me to illuminate the complicated relationship between psychoanalysis and trans studies. However, it can also be argued that this strong investment in a Foucauldian framework may limit my ability to see and imagine the field beyond its investments in a queer theoretical framework. As such, however, it provided a clarification of what is at stake in the current "critical juncture" (*Call for Submissions*, n.d.), but the scope of this master's thesis does not allow me to develop this question and pointers for a path forward, or an alternative conceptualisation of the field here. I problematised my key concept of "trans subjectivity" with the voices from postcolonial, intersectional, and decolonial critiques. Yet, movements like this, which aim to bring often-marginalised perspectives to bear onto more hegemonic discussions, are often accompanied by their own sets of difficulties, such as problematic gestures of "inviting" voices that become thereby cast as "other" (Ahmed, 2007, 164). I attempted to but am sure that I could not circumvent these in my work. Finally, *Can the Monster Speak?* is still an under-researched text. I hope that this master's thesis will further interest in it, and that this thesis is able to contribute to the analysis of Preciado's conceptual movements and gestures. However, *Can the Monster Speak?* offers many opportunities for further research from other perspectives and in other theoretical frameworks, such as in the vein of M. Michalak's recent re-reading of *An Apartment on Uranus* through Latin American decolonial transfeminism (Michalak, 2023).

Despite a somewhat antagonistic relationship, queer theory has shaped trans studies and its attachment to psychoanalysis. As discussed in this master's thesis, while this conceptual frame has led to productive work, the assumptions that underpin it also risk limiting trans studies' scholarship. Perhaps it is time to leave the frame of the trans subject behind and look for other conceptualisations of the relationship between person, power, agency, and inner and outer world.

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