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Philosophy of Sex and Gender

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Breaking the Boundaries of Definition

“Can The Monster Speak?” is Paul Preciado’s firsthand account of being a transgender man spoken to an academy of psychoanalysts. In a profound speech, he relates his experience to Kafka’s “A Report To An Academy” from 1917, in which the narrator of the text is an ape, who, having learned human language, is appearing before an academy of the greatest scientific authorities to detail his experience in the human world. The ape had no choice in the matter but to accept the cage of human subjectivity in order to address his audience. Similarly, Preciado had to accept the cage of the psychoanalyst’s dictionary in order to report to them what being transgender actually means, contrary to their exclusionary “analyst’s couch” approach (19). He explains how his transition journey, “however torturous and erratic, made it possible for me to experience life beyond the limits... [of] the regime of sexual difference... a cognitive framework that limits our ways of feeling and loving” (27). Preciado perfectly explains the challenge that transgender people (and all people who exist beyond the boundary of the heteronormative, patriarchal framework) face: the challenge of language.

Language itself is not the issue; the challenge lies in breaking through the thick wall which separates cognitive understandings of reality between Western psychiatry, the sword of the heteronormative domination, and the artistic, living reality of being. These languages are so far

apart that Preciado had to completely redefine the boundaries of his own cognitive understanding to even communicate with the representatives of Western psychiatry. Preciado had to “learn the language of Freud and Lacan, the language of the colonial patriarchy...” in order to address them “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, psycho-analysis or psychiatry” (9). From this quote, it can be seen that Preciado recognizes a disparity between his reality and the forces working against him as the main barrier limiting understanding. Therefore, one of the foremost ways to reduce the challenges for transgender people, and more broadly, all people who wish to express themselves without limitation, is to reevaluate the language and discourse which control the social narrative.

There are many nuances involved with this reevaluation. One example is the problem with reducing the definition of transgender from a psychiatric viewpoint to a baseline, generalized understanding. One example is the “Wrong-body Model” of being transgender, which Talia Mae Bettcher, a transgender philosopher, defines as “a misalignment between gender identity and the sexed body” (1). In medical institutions, this is clarified as a problem of the body, not reflective of the person’s gender identity. In either interpretation, this is a model that is highly accepted by the general public but is arguably a huge misunderstanding of what being transgender really is. This model is inaccurate because it confirms gender to a binary, and limits the understanding of gender to a single-minded trajectory from pathology to normalcy, suggesting the genital transition as a culmination of a process of self-discovery. Of course, this may be the case for certain individuals, however, it does not fully articulate the complexity of self-discovery.

It is clear that breaking through the wall of definition must depend on a balance of popular understanding and Western psychiatry. But how is this to be done? It is necessary that the path forward be paved by people who are free, unlimited, and uncontained by language, for no other force besides a living example of that possibility can truly inspire real change. As Preciado says, “Liberty is a tunnel that must be dug by hand. Freedom is a way out” (26). Freedom from the boundaries of language must be “dug by hand” by those very people who are creative enough to imagine the light on the other side, and bold enough to make that seemingly impossible effort.

Works Cited

Bettcher, Talia Mae. "Trapped in the Wrong Theory". The University of Chicago. 2014.

Preciado, Paul. "Can The Monster Speak?". Fitzcarraldo Editions.