

# Blowing Up the Cistem

## *Notes on Blackness and Gender Abolition in Bey's Cistem Failure*

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*Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender*

Marquis Bey

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Marquis Bey's *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender* is a collection of essays that explore the inherent carcerality of gender and the various ways Blackness subverts cisness. Bey homes in on the violence that is the assignation of gender and specifically discusses the coercive assignation as male at birth. The categorization of cisgender becomes a flattening label unfit to describe the wide array of embodiments that go beyond the cis normative presentations of gender. Bey builds on Jack Halberstam's anarchitecture as a method to wreck, unbecome, and batter the fortress of binary gender.

Bey's argument centers Blackness in anti-Blackness as they move toward illuminating whiteness as a necessary subtenant of cisgender. Blackness becomes a critique, a refusal, an inherent nonbinary-ness. Bey positions Blackness as "radical abolition of the violent tethers of the world" (27). Building on Hortense Spillers and her notion of ungendered Blackness, and pulling from their own experiences with gender discipline, Bey argues gender is a territory that throws the subject into cisgender, and we must take steps to throw ourselves out of that terrain. However, this throwing ourselves out of cisgender is dangerous, Bey concludes, because masculinity requires conquest and violent acts become currency. Bey ends with a call to become bad cis subjects and lean into coalitional relation. They offer vicissitudes to think about how those who claim to be

cisgender, have choice, and can mutate and shift into more freeing modes of existing through gender insurrection.

In “How Ya Mama’n’em,” Bey theorizes Black sociality and linguistic expression as nonbinary itself in relation to white Western culture and mutually exclusive categories of femininity and masculinity. Black communities’ syntax provides an opportunity to exist in collective while speaking to a person, as well as give space to a person as not a gendered subject, but the subject being in relation to someone else. Cisgender requires a specific way of being in the world that is directly antagonistic to Blackness. Bey marks a unique potentiality embedded in *they* and *them* that forsakes individualism and neoliberal logics. Blackness and transness require a constant entanglement. Building on racialized gendered discourses, Bey sees Blackness disintegrating the coherence of gender and undermining the immutability of cisness. To be cisgender is to align with the normative scripts of gender; Blackness is to be misaligned. Bey views Blackness as a disruption to racialization, building on Fred Moten’s para-ontological.

*Trans* as a prefix refuses to situate transition in relation to a destination, thus unsettling cisgenderness as the default for racialized subjects. Bey uses the metaphor of Narnia, a space that must obscure to position itself as natural and the vantage point of life. *Cistem Failure* calls on the readers to blow up Narnia; we should destroy that which creates the powers that instruct how we hierarchize. Bey describes cisgender as a regime that expulses gender variance and mutability to define itself; cisgender is a fabrication that obscures itself and presents as natural.

In the essay “RE: [No Subject],” Bey compiles a series of email exchanges that explore the violence of meaning making through gendering. They write, “We are corralled into confining grammars of surveillance, policing and circumscription impeding full-scale liberation” (116). Returning to a project of abandoning individual identity, Bey calls for the reader to forsake the identificatory project and work toward exploring the potentiality Black and trans politics have toward gender abolition and a refusal of individuation. This call for gender abolition specifically centers the mechanisms in place, the histories and discourses, systems, structures, and institutions that create antagonistic hierarchies. The abolition of gender is not a flattening of gender differentiation but a refusal to begin said categorization, the eradication of the vectors endowed with meaning. Abolition is antithetical to gender, as Bey identifies gender itself as carceral: one is imprisoned in order to be visible.

*Cistem Failure* provides tools in which scholars of Black studies, trans studies, and gender studies can pull from toward thinking about gendering and racialization as processes are inseparable. Bey analyzes characters from cartoons and fictional tales that show interesting representations such as *The Power Puff Girls*, *Dragon Ball Z*, *Steven Universe*, and *Narnia*. They provide a series of

assemblages, including reflective writings and media analyses, to think about the question of how Blackness disrupts the normative criteria of cisgender. Building on Spillers's notion of Blackness being ungendered, Bey references Maria Lugones and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, who center coloniality as inherent in the gender binary and discuss the process of becoming human to the colonizer through fitting into binary gender.

*Cistem Failure* provides readers with rich dialogue grounded in feminist theory as it unravels the coloniality of gender and centers Blackness as a disruption to the construction of gender and human. Bey's conceptualization of gender as a prison and the surveillance that comes with it enriches the field of feminist abolition studies to think about how gender and carcerality are inherently entangled. *Cistem Failure* is an incredible contribution to destabilizing cisgender normativity and gender itself, as we move toward more liberating ways of existing through gender abolition.

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