

PREFACE: CISTEM FAILURE

We are not destined to our lodgings, fixed from without, immutably. We are not only what they say we are. The criteria used to classify is insufficient, the taxonomy rife with fissures through which we can, blessedly, fall. I am ever romantic about the ways we move within restraint, a captive capacity that dissolves the captivity, letting us become in ways that might, who knows, unshackle the fetters fashioned by the captors. If only we knew we could move. Even when chained in the hold, on the gang, to the fence, there is always a little wiggle room. Room to wiggle, those minute tremulous reverberations, is when the trap gets worked and where the work is another way to say *I am (not), I am (not), I am (not)*.

I was compelled to pen the words you hold in your hands, reader. Compelled, I say, by the gendered and ungendered, and *nega*-gendered, tugs on my subjectivity. The words' penning is the only way I can make sense of the thoughts, the feelings, the ways what has been called the body moves and lives in the world, albeit in ways that may not be legible quite yet. Or even in ways that are desirable for many. But the words had to be

penned regardless. They are words that do not merely describe, as if they could; they are words that, as words do, inaugurate worlds. What I pen here is an attempt to make something else, some other way to be, real. And to do that, in the words of the late Toni Morrison, *you got to give up the shit that weighs you down*. My, and your, given gendered ontologies have been weighing me, us, down. So ultimately, though this will be terrifying, we are to give it up. And I mean that.

Breathe. It will be okay, I promise.

My compulsion can be traced to many moments and no moments. The tracing isn't what matters, as if finding a telos, a continuous through line, bestows validity. What matters are the intensities and bubbled-up moments that inflect something indicative of a tremor. One of those tremors took place in conversation, in sociality, where the giving of oneself in language to another is a way to emerge into a different subjectivity on coalitional grounds. This conversation with someone much older, with whom I had been meeting for the first time, was nevertheless a conversation with a loved one, a friend, a comrade. Kinfolk, as we say. She, whom I'll call "L," expressed the way transness both was and was not her narrative, a story that was hers yet not hers to claim. I beamed, its sentiments familiar affective kin. And I invited more, because I yearned for more.

L, a butch lesbian—an imperfect nominative, we both admitted—was gracious. She desired, like me, more language than what we have. She desired a way to hold others and ourselves lovingly in language, and shared with me, pointedly: if she, her femme partner, and someone like Kim Kardashian are all hailed under the rubric of cisgender, then something is wrong. *Something is wrong*.

Cisgender cannot capture some of us who are nonetheless hailed by it. Of interest is when the term cannot sustain the subjectivity it lashes against. What happens when one is grabbed by cisness, struggling to free oneself from its grip, wanting not to fall into other hands—even if

one's own—but to fall, fall, fall? What happens when we, collectively, come to the realization that the way we have understood ourselves, and others have understood us, is inadequate—what happens when we can no longer pretend to the contrary that *something is wrong*?

BACK IN THE NINETIES, *The Matrix* was one of the most talked about films of the decade. Its innovation was impeccable, its fight scenes something my grandmother could watch over and over. Allusions and homages abound, from the back-bending evasion of flying bullets to the choice between the red and blue pills. I watched all of them, wanting there to be another world we didn't know of, a virtual nonspace where things were done differently. And honestly, that black and green color scheme was dope too.

Interestingly, something about the film went above my head back then. I missed it entirely. Who knows what might have been had I caught it, had I seen it as a gesture toward another possibility for how I could enter the world? It might have set my world ablaze.

As Neo utters the word “change,” a warning message—“SYSTEM FAILURE”—unexpectedly appears in capital letters over the program algorithm. The decryption freezes, but the zoom proceeds, the film's musical score holding a sustained string note that heightens our sense of what might next occur. Neo continues to speak as the shot pulls into extreme closeup on “SYSTEM FAILURE.” The encroaching visual frame centers on the empty space between the “M” and the “F,” those highly recognizable markers of legal and medical gender. As Neo makes the utopian claim of the speech, stating “a world where anything is possible,” the virtual camera transits *through* the negative space between the coded layers of the “M” and “F” and into the blackness beyond.¹

Cáel M. Keegan meditates at length on the Wachowski sisters, two trans siblings with the filmic gift of cinematic demigods. Muted radical trans politics and anticapitalist articulations emerge through their

submergence. As the visual frame reads “SYSTEM FAILURE,” the camera, as Keegan says, encroaches upon the space between each word, a space between the “M” of “SYSTEM” and the “F” of “FAILURE.” And between the infinitely joyous and generatively tumultuous space is blackness.

What I missed was the gift of other ways to do gender, to undo it, to go in between it, to explore and excavate the abysmal blackness through and beyond gender’s instantiations. What I missed, and what could have engendered me differently, or at least showed me that there was a different way to be engendered, was the trans, the *alternate space beyond or through* gender “where a new—and *black*—world, ‘without border or boundaries,’ might be instantiated.” What I missed, and what I am grateful to Keegan for gifting me, us, with, is the failure of the *cistem*, which is to say, *the fantastic end of the enforced gender and race systems that a post/racial trans* aesthetics speculates toward and pursues.*² What is facilitated when it is blackness that backgrounds, foregrounds, and facilitates system, and better cistem, failure? Welcome to the blackness beyond.

It is astoundingly striking, that scene, and it makes me feel something now, though rather late. I’m after that moment, that scene, as a filmic reel for my life. To transit through the “M” and “F” and into the black space is rich with analytic heft. The gender binary is the system, or cistem, structuring how we are believed to be able to exist. It is what we are given as the world, not understood as a system per se with all the trappings of construction and orchestration but as simply the way of the world. The success of a totalizing system is its masking of itself, its ability to hide its, as it were, systematicity. The successful system is simply there, simply what we have. That is the gender binary, and we have not been permitted to see its systematicity, its forceful, intentional structuration.

The system, the “M” and “F.” To go between and beyond it into the abyss is to initiate the failure of the system. It touts itself as impenetrable, but how easily we traversed its interstices, how easily, indeed, we discovered that it *had* an interstitial space. Intervening in the gaps of the system that

said it had no gaps, we have stalled it, or portended, at the very least, its untenability. What's more, that which invited us into the failure of the system, the failure of the *cistem*, is an abiding, looming blackness. We are invited, then, to think deeply about the inextricability of blackness and *cistem* failure. It is blackness that resides in the cut between "M" and "F," not properly either of them, which is necessarily to say unable to abide its systematicity—blackness, in other words, promotes *cistem* failure.

What this treatise attempts to convey is how the *cistem* is as it is because of its exclusion of blackness, *and*, to be sure, because of how those who rebel against the *cistem* are invited into a dissent by blackness. Reading Keegan's reading, what you hold in your hands is a meditation on blackness as that which is disjoined from, which acts as a disjuncture relative to, which invites and initiates the failure of, the *cistem* defined by the impenetrability of "M" and "F." Extending this into realms of the autobiographical (how closely such questions nuzzle my own life) and the theoretical (how one has come to live the emotional life of ideas, those ideas that assert something new to know about life, or even to unknow about the life we have been given), you, reader, my companion traversing the myriad levels of infernal regimes of gender, will be trekking along a path lined with musings on the ways blackness and cisgender converge with, butt heads against, side-eye, and vanquish one another. If the failure of the *cistem*—the system of cisgender; the orchestral disciplinary endeavor to coercively cohere gendered subjectivity into a mutually exclusionary "M" or "F" deviation from which invites extermination, invalidation, and gaslighting—can be found in the effects of a blackness beyond, what is the relationship between blackness and the *cistem*? Might it be that those proximate to blackness invite the necessary failure of the system of cisgender?

Keegan goes to the end of the thought, conveying the constitutive blackness of the world beyond "M" and "F" where there are no borders or boundaries, of which the *cistem* is paradigmatic. When the failure of

the cistem is impending, blackness is present, and the bringing about of the cistem's failure inaugurates the wondrous cessation of enforced gender. Which is to say, as is this entire treatise that lies before you, gender abolition. Blackness's antagonism toward cisgender and cisgender's normativity, its antiblackness, calls into question the very apparatus of gender itself as an organizing frame. It is a frame that does violence, that curtails. So it is not a matter of massaging the rough edges of the frame; it is a matter of disposing of the frame. That disposal is the concerted, worked-at failure of the cistem.

THE DRIVING THRUST is this, as inelegantly straightforward as it may be: cisgender is a categorical ruse disingenuously hailing those who nevertheless do not and cannot sit comfortably within it. It is a structuration permitting narrow forms of *engendering*—the coming into being through and as gendered embodiment precisely in order to come into being at all. Cisgender requires a physiognomic comportment, indeed, but also a social, intellectual, behavioral, and interpersonal habitus in order for it to maintain its coherency and imply its naturalness. Blackness, in turn, is irreverent toward cisgender. There is a *queerness and transness that constitute Blackness*, as Jian Neo Chen would assert, meaning: *The Black becomes the aporia between sex and gender such that the two never meet in any fashion that would satisfy the dictates of normative heterosexuality*.³ Blackness and cisgender, put simply, have beef.

The nature of this beef is what I am primed to explore. This is not a meditation on black cisgender people, as a misreading might offer as an expectation; nor is this an abdication of the hierarchies embedded in the comportment of certain bodies over others. I offer here a reckoning with the disjunction blackness initiates in the fabric of cisgender. Suspended will be a delineation of check marks and re-re-rehashed criteria for ire at the commonsense assumptions that bestow upon someone cisgender status. *I am not going to argue that the transgendered body has a material specificity that marks it as different from a normatively gendered body*, a cisgender body, for reasons that include the sliding,

never-agreed-upon threshold for departure from cis and arrival in trans, as Gayle Salamon had in mind.⁴ To do this would “assume a body,” in Salamon’s verbiage; it would assume a preexistent delimitation of the boundaries that clearly demarcate the cis from the trans. Cistem failure seeks the withoutness of borders and boundaries in service, unapologetically, of the abolition of the cistem’s gender and gender’s cistem.

There are many things that we already know. We can endlessly cite them in our articles, our monographs, in our Tweets and posts, our think pieces and blogs. We cite the radical feminist knowledge that *sex’s difference from gender makes possible the account of un/alignment that constitutes cisgender and transgender as discrete and self-enclosed identities*. We cite that *whiteness is constitutive of binary gender as a construct*. We cite how we wish to be *against and beyond the constitutively white settler binary cis gender symbolic and social order*. We cite that *this problematizing of gender places her, the black woman, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject*. And we cite: *There is no body, no sexuality and, simply put, no sex outside the long history of Western imperialism’s shattering of the world*.⁵ All right, then, let’s begin from here.

Might this require that we heed the possibility of cisgender itself being mythic in a way that necessitates a grappling with its mythos and putting pressure on the unqualified assertion of a material accrual of privilege? Might it require a recognition of cisgender’s attachment to whiteness and, thus, its incompatibility with blackness in a way that troubles the blanketing of that very privilege presumed to be bestowed to *all* cis people? And might it mean that arriving at, or near, that Spillersian “place for this different social subject” will be a place that many of y’all may not be ready for, an abolitionist place that does not abide the trappings of legibility you snuggle with even when trying to bring about a radically just world? It can no longer be our end goal to say these things without considering deeply what they imply. Because it strikes me that it implies complete and total cistem failure.

In this spirit, *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender* is intent on mining the nexus of blackness and cisgender, its disjunctive relationship and, too, what the two might mean apart from one another. The essays herein are meditations, musings, prayers, and pissed-off rants about a regime that has curtailed all of our flourishings. The essays do not necessarily form a compounding telos wherein each cascades seamlessly into the next. Instead, approach them as a party crawl: “Back in the Day” has some actors and ideas and topics that start off the party; then, by “Heart of Cisness,” the crew might have lost a couple people to the dope music blasting in the last bar or house or club, leaving the rest to hit up the next spot. And by “Blowing Up Narnia,” we got a whole different cast of characters because everyone else dispersed throughout the night; but this new crew is driving the same car, texting the same numbers, drinking the same drinks, bumping to the same music. And it might even be the case that this preface and its cast make some guest appearances by the time we get to “The Coalition of Gender Abolition,” as well as guest appearances throughout the essays. There is no straightforward plan or agenda for the night’s crawl, only a shared impulse to keep the party going all through the night.

The essays will discuss cisgender itself, its fundamental characteristic as a ruse; they will discuss the life of those prescribed masculinity in terms of its constitutive and often overlooked and unmentioned, which is to say its assumed, cisness; they will discuss, sometimes, neither blackness nor cisness explicitly, but know, reader, that they are not absent. It is precisely when they are presumed absent that they are doing their most clever work. Know that they speak to and about you, even if you think yourself far from their content. Know that they bear on you; take that burden, for it is a burden that is intimidatingly relevant and, in its burdensomeness, monumentally transformative. But only if you dare.