

Frontiers of Expression: Imagining a Continuum of Trans Subversion

When I, and many other transgender-identifying people, begin to read theories of gender they tend not to structurally align with what we perceive to be our internal concept of gender. The suggestion that gender is not innate, or that our identity is unavoidably produced by the same cis-normative society we have been victimized by, clashes with the deeply sentimental idea that we are born transgender or that we are “in the wrong body.” As I develop a deeper understanding of the intricacies of gender in society, I am increasingly forced to reckon with the inconsistencies of my own gender identity. If male gender is in fact a category constituted by inherently restrictive conditions, do I truly identify with manhood so much as I do with the failure of manhood? What does it mean to be transgender in a transparently self-constituting society? With the help of revolutionary gender thinkers Judith Butler and Marquis Bey, I seek a revitalized understanding of transness in tandem with imagined possibilities for the future of transgender expression. Transness reflects an embodiment of subversion to the assumptions of cisness inherent to a socially constructed gender binary. Transgender identity emerges from the gender binary, as evidence to its failures as a system intended to contain and control human expression. Consolidated with an experiential understanding of what it means to be a gender failure, transgender subversions can form the basis for imagining a limitless range of dynamic gender expressions.

To reimagine gender as expansive and changeable, we must first understand the categorization of gender in its current state as restrictive and self-producing. In her seminal text, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler provides a feminist analysis of the hetero and cis-normative tendencies of feminist imaginings of gender, which “seeks to provoke critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the movement of thought to which it belongs” (vii). She reveals the exclusionary biases underlying

certain understandings of what it means to have a gender. Butler does this not to discourage this line of questioning, but to highlight the necessary role of self critique in producing less restrictive answers. This is an important distinction toward ensuring that transgender thought does not become caught in a loop of producing increasingly rigid and categorically distinct criteria of a transgender experience. Butler describes any thought or expression that runs the risk of breaking down the gender binary as so unimaginably frightening that such thoughts are excluded entirely from the currently-permitted modes of thinking about gender (ix). This fear lies within the fragility of established gender categories, which rely on a cisgender assumption. That is, an assumption that the parameters of binary gender are capable of containing and controlling the full range of human expression.

In their analysis of the failures of cis assumption, trans scholar Marquis Bey describes the category of gender as breaking under the pressure of its attempt to contain human expression. To analyse the societal function of the cisgender category, they pose the question: “What is an eroded cup that can no longer hold that which it presumed naturally took its shape?” (Bey 21). Here they highlight both the ironic inconsistencies and categorical restrictions of assuming a singularly rigid concept of gender. Bey points out that because any inevitable incongruency within the category of cisness will evidence the failures built into this system, since “cisgender just can’t get its story straight” (22) as it is constantly reacting to its own failures. In fear of subversion undoing its power, cisness positions itself as naturalized and unchanging, and yet is constantly shifting its own criteria for defining this supposedly ‘natural’ gender. Not only does cisgender alignment continue to oppress and fail to serve us, its very assumption “impedes the gloriously slanted magnificence available outside [its] constraints” (Bey 23). This establishes the oppression of diverse gender expression as inherent to the gender binary. The act of attaching an invalid or inhuman quality to

expressions which intentionally or unintentionally subvert its assumptions, is a necessity for upholding the shaky foundations of cisgender logic.

How does transness come to be founded within a social system intent on its destruction? To approach this question, we must understand that transness is not a direct parallel to cisness as we are made to believe by binary modes of thought. Rather, the transgender category can be understood as a grouping of the ever-expanding range of exclusions from the rigid category of cisness. What has complicated this understanding are the retained elements of performativity present in the self concepts of transgender subjects. Butler describes gender performativity as the process by which “the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself” (Butler xvii). Performativity is what naturalizes a connection between behavior, perception, and gender, thus producing effects like gender dysphoria, whereby our internal concept of gender profoundly diverges from how we believe the gender should naturally manifest. Although we are cognitively aware that there are examples of non-conforming cis-aligned people, for example butch women who strongly identify with their womanhood, the current tools at our disposal for conceptualizing non-normative gender as valid are extremely limited. One of the only available methods of making our gender socially legible is by conforming our bodies and behaviors to what our social conditioning has told us a man or a woman look like. Considering these complications, Butler questions if there is an “inbetweenness,” inherent to transgender being “that puts the being of gendered identity into question” altogether (Butler xii). In our desire to replicate gender norms, which have thus far been conceived in relation to the gender binary, transgender people often place ourselves in a state of perpetual gender failure by attempting to align ourselves with cisness. Butler points out that queer thought often pre-emptively idealizes their view of the structures of gender and sex in a way that accidentally misinterprets them (xv). Well intentioned attempts to establish

a stable definition of “woman” that includes transgender women. For example, unintentionally assuming that womanhood is an immutable essence rather than a socially constructed category. First, we must understand exactly how our current structures function and the power they hold in the process of constituting us as subjects, and then we can imagine how to subvert the preexisting concepts of gender. I know my concept of gender has been profoundly and irrevocably influenced by the social construction of gender I have already been subject to. With this knowledge in mind, I strive toward the possibility of a future generation whose subjections are entirely new and limitless.

If we wish to free ourselves from this cycle of reproducing the cisgender binary, it is essential to understand that there is a profound violence built into cisness, which can only be repaired through its destruction as a category. Cisness constantly attempts to hide its exclusive nature, denying the extensive list of qualifications that place certain groups firmly outside its boundaries. One such criteria for the violent exclusion from cisness is that of race. Despite the insistence that cisness only has to do with one’s biological gender, “gender is always a racial arrangement” (Bey 22) and cannot be isolated from other modes of oppression. Human legibilities in our society are constructed under the order of white supremacy. Thus, the cisgender category is, as Bey describes it, “fundamentally, irrevocably antiblack” (Bey 22), in that it inherently denies the validity of black gender, and by its own criteria renders black humanity illegible. Based on my experience in a disabled transness, I propose that the gender of the disabled is subjected to a similar exclusion. Much in the same way that black gender is hyper-masculinized, criminalized, and deemed less legibly human than even transgender non-black expressions, disabled gender is entrenched in the distinct gender assumptions of ableism. Despite any denial of this fact, functionally “blackness, and those proximal to its work,” such as the disabled “bear a trans relationship to gender” (Bey

24), in that they automatically fail at or subvert cisgender by virtue of their existence. Understanding this relationship between blackness and cisness “allows us to eschew a binaristic logic that might reify a distinction between transgender and cisgender: black and white” (Bey 25), acknowledging both the presence and failure of visually legible categorizations of being. Take for example, the ironic failure of definitionally cisgendered people facing violence for being visually misidentified as transgender. This is a crucial thought toward consolidating the current conditions and future imaginations of transgender expression, revealing the failures of cisness in order to necessitate alternatives.

Although we should not place faith in the category of cisness, with some reconfiguration I do believe in the productive power of subjectivity and performativity for imagining a new understanding of gender. Upon defining gender performativity, Butler states that the “the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibilities for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized” (Butler viii). She works to assert gender as something without a fixed truth or meaning, making way for reimaginings with potential to undo the harm caused by defining certain genders and expressions as impossible or illegible. Butler acknowledges the possibility of changes to current workings of performativity (xv), changes which I believe have already begun to take shape. While my gender is deeply entrenched in normative society, at the same time, the increased visibility of radically subversive bodies and gender expressions has expanded the performative nature of my gender. Being exposed to transgender expression has provided certain aspects of my gender with a degree of separation from cisgender reproduction, as I anticipate and reproduce a concept of gender which includes the possibility of radical subversion. It is important to note that by defining transgender expression as subversive I do not mean to create a freeze frame of the performance of subversion. As Butler asserts, “the effort to name the criterion

for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to” (Butler xxiii). Current expressions of transness should not represent a criterion of subversion, but the possibility of subversion. In fact, by acknowledging current modes of transgender expression as an inherently subversive embodiment to the gender binary, I suggest the creation of a continuum of subversion wherein each set of gender expressions subverts the last.

By combining theoretical reconceptualizations of gender with the complicated conditions of the internal transgender experience, we can imagine a future for trans expression. If we can acknowledge the inherently violent and exclusionary nature of our current binary cisgender assumptions, we may not be able to undo the social construction of our genders, but we can imagine a future society whose concepts of gender are expansive and non-violent. A future which does away with the category of cisness altogether through an insistence upon radically subversive expressions. I implore us to never become uncritical of our categories of gender, to constantly challenge and change them through radical subversion. I hope that my children will see my concept of gender as valid in its relation to my context, but highly open to and in need of reinvention.

Works Cited

Bey, Marquis. "Heart of Cisness." *CISTEM Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2022.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1999.