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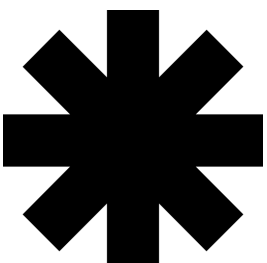
BEYOND NEGATIVITY: WHAT COMES AFTER GENDER NIHILISM?



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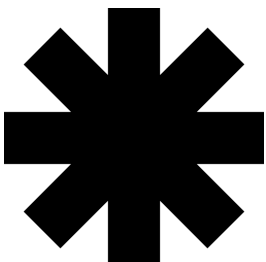
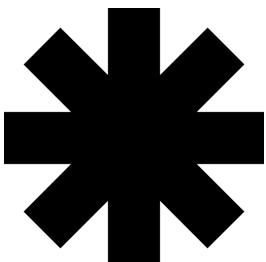
BEYOND NEGATIVITY:

WHAT COMES AFTER GENDER NIHILISM?

ALYSON ESCALANTE





I've spent quite a lot of time trying to figure out how to respond to my previous work Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto. For the last year or so, I've had a very strong conviction that I must respond to it, but have struggled to do so adequately. I wrote an addendum that is now attached to the original article where it is hosted on Libcom. I had felt it was necessary to try to explain the context in which Gender Nihilism was written, and to explain the criticisms it had generated. I've spent the years since the original posting of Gender Nihilism ruminating on the many criticisms it received, as well reflecting on the many people who reported finding it useful, insightful, and radical.

In my mind, Gender Nihilism has a mixed legacy. It is, sometimes to my frustration, the most popular work I have ever written, and it

has received greater distribution than I could ever have imagined. Given the surprising popularity of the article, it has been my conviction that I have an obligation to write something which could correct some of the errors of the original theory. This essay is my attempt to do so.

In broad strokes, my thoughts on Gender Nihilism and the ideas that developed around it are as follows:

Gender nihilism correctly diagnosed a problem. What I at the time called "the proliferation of identity" designates, I believe, a real trend within LGBT and queer discourse in which there is a tendency towards endlessly developing taxonomies to map out difference. This difference is indeed conceptualized as an ontological difference, that reflects some sort

revolutionary-transfeminism/.

Wittig, Monique. The Straight Mind and Other Essays. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.

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https://medium.com/@engenderedfears/beyond-negativity-what-comes-after-gender-nihilism-bbd80a5fc05d

hypersexuality and deviance. This means recognizing that these things can only be overcome by a communist politics oriented towards the future. Abandon nihilism, abandon hopelessness, demand and build a better world.

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of stable subject from which knowledge of that difference can be divined via the correct discourses of identity. That is a real problem that plagues LGBT activism to this day. In that sense, the criticism forwarded in the article still maintains relevance.

Gender nihilism could not, however, go beyond this initial diagnosis. It failed at the crucial task of establishing a theory of the relationship between this ideology of difference and the material conditions from which gender emerges. Put more simply, Gender Nihilism could accurately point out a problem, but it was unequipped to explain what the source of that problem is.

Rather than actually attempt to materially investigate the class interests at play in production of gendered difference, gender

nihilism settled with saying "If the problem is proliferation then the solution must be its opposite, therefore our task is to negate endlessly." This solution could never have been adequate because it responds to an ideological issue at the level of ideology. Fighting ideology with counter-ideology, rather than eliminating and reshaping the material conditions from which the first ideology emerged. This was never a useful solution or contribution to theories of resistance to gender.

The work to be done, if we want to revitalize the critical insight of gender nihilism is to accurately diagnose the material base from which the ideology of difference and taxonomy emerges.

I hope that this essay will attempt to

Nihilism must be a materialist struggle against patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism which understands and is attentive to the complex interrelations between these structures and which refuses to reduce any one of them to any other. This requires daring imaginations of new futures, discussion and communication and theoretical development which demands not just abolition but a way to actually achieve it, and a clear set of materialist theoretical principles and praxis to unite around. The abolition of gender will only be achieved as a result of the abolition of the material conditions which reinforce it with their ideologies of sexual difference. This means destroying the capitalist system which produces the nuclear family as a fundamental social structure. This means overcoming colonialism and white supremacy which rely of gendered discourses to justify their violence and establish ideologies of

what might be needed to undo the forms of economic exploitation of women which Wittig outlines. Wittig's heterosexual society is also a capitalist society. Only real, concrete, and organized struggle can move us forward. Mere negation, senseless violence, or embrace of unintelligibility cannot be enough. In short we must move beyond negativity. The project at hand is to adequately account for the violence of gender, the necessity of its abolition, and the strategies for achieving that abolition in material terms. Only then will we have the ability to not only achieve abolition, but to change the world.

So, what comes after Gender Nihilism? It is certainly not a politics of radical negation, it is not a refusal to engage in positive political struggle, it is not a refusal to define our demands. Rather, what comes after Gender

investigate that material base, and to provide insight into what a materialist project (which takes the critiques in my original argument seriously) would look like. In order to do this I will first reevaluate the original critique I forwarded in Gender Nihilism to reassess its current relevance. Second, I will turn to the work of Monique Wittig in order to provide a materialist account of ideologies of sexual difference. Finally I will examine what a materialist, and thoroughly non-nihilist project of resistance to such an ideology and its material base might look like.

WHAT WAS GENDER NIHILISM?:

Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto opens with the claim that "The current politics of trans liberation have staked their claims on a redemptive understanding of identity." This

statement still seems to largely reflect the contemporary situation within activism and theory focused on trans liberation and LGBT issues on the whole. Quite simply, the politics surrounding issues of gender and sexuality are still a politics centered around a notion of recognition. The central concern is whether or not LGBT individuals are recognized by liberal society writ large as subjects. This is obviously a concern which cannot be simply glossed over. The question of who is granted subject status is of utmost political concern. At the same time, politics cannot be reduced to this question.

A significant amount of writing about LGBT and queer identity is still primarily focused with expanding recognition through articulating an endless set of new identities. How many think pieces have been penned

move will be a move towards communism: upbringings in private households replaced by communal labor, undoing the many generations of degradation and coercive differentiation." In a profoundly insightful move, Gleeson connects the necessity of abolition to the necessity of communist struggle.

I am convinced that Gleeson is correct about this. The struggle for the abolition of gender cannot be separated from the struggle for communism. A properly materialist assessment of the conditions which produce gender reveals the extent to which gender is not merely a linguistic or discursive phenomena. Gender is a material relationship that can only be combatted materially. The communist movement's focus on the abolition of the family is precisely

> heteronormativity, and through ensuring the inter-generational procession of wealth and access to fixed capital, also anti-blackness. Upbringings and intimacies existing outside of norms which have developed along with capitalism are widely disparaged, and culturally subordinated. For as long as heterosexual parents are relied on for giving queer kids upbringing, widespread dispossession will be the rule.

As such, opposition to the family provides one concrete path forward. What I find so powerful about Gleeson's account is that this opposition is tied directly into the struggle for communism. She again writes, "This

which critique the terminology of lesbian, gay, and bisexual as being inadequate for the recognition of the vast multiplicities of genders which we are now supposed to recognize as ontologically distinct realities? Even in mainstream LGBT and queer media we see a proliferation of theories like the split attraction model; each an attempt to provide a precise definition of each individual's own sexuality and gender. Each meant to provide, in a sense, a recognition of the specificity of one's experience. This approach does not, however, stop merely at the recognition of experience. Rather it shapes that experience into a comprehensive identity which is understood as being ontologically distinct from the countless other infinitely precise sexualities and genders.

Again, this phenomena seems to largely be

driven by a desire for recognition. In fact, the goal seems to be the creation of recognition that is entirely non-reductionist; a recognition which captures the specificity of my own experience and sense of self to the fullest extent possible. Thus the proliferation of identity which Gender Nihilism first railed against can perhaps be understood as a demand for recognition taken to an absurd extent.

It is important to emphasize that questions of recognition are not trivial. After all, we need merely make a quick return to Hegel to realize the extent to which recognition is central to our own subjectivity. Gender Nihilism, I think, failed to take into account that this redemptive notion of identity has developed in response to a real need for recognition. Yet Gender Nihilism was correct

I hope, that the picture I have painted of Gender Nihilism at this point is complex. I insist that the ideas put forward in The Anti-Manifesto were not entirely off base, but lacked a theoretical grounding, and I have attempted in this essay to provide a materialist account which might correct the mistakes of Gender Nihilism. As such we are left with the need for the abolition of gender, the need to push back against reformist projects that simply seek to make an expanded notion of gender. What remains to be created is the establishment of a path forward.

I want to suggest that Gleeson is correct to note that communist opposition to the family provides a crucial path forward. She argues,

> The family serves as a unique bastion organizing

those struggling so intensely to fight for their liberation might sink into pessimism. Yet I want to echo Gleeson's critique. Gleeson notes that, "between these writers, we are still left with only the skeleton of a strategy. Abolitionist politics are becoming more timely than ever, however, and so this stance is due urgent development." This is certainly the case, and Gender Nihilism offered little hope in providing adequate development of this strategy. She also suggests that such strategical work has been developed in other radical literature, particularly in the writings of prison abolitionists. Gender Nihilism could not, of course, draw on the politics of prison abolition as a result of its rejection of politics on the whole. It thus seems that Gender Nihilism's own idealist grounding precludes the possibility for it to produce a strategy at all.

to note that this demand for recognition via the recognition of each individual's personal identity as ontologically distinct is a demand for recognition that subtly naturalizes the relationships of power and class which create that identity in the first place.

The demand "recognize my identity as being as valid as other identities" presumes identity exists as some unassailable and natural phenomena. For example, in the demand that non-binary identity be seen as equally valid to man or woman as identities, there is presumption that we ought not to be critical of the notions of man and woman in the first place. The impulse to simply create more and more identity categories can only be understood as a liberating political project if we understand the project of placing people into identity categories on the basis of gender

and sexuality to be a politically liberatory act in the first place.

Gender Nihilism was originally an attempt to argue that this naturalization of identity was in fact an attempt to expand modes of control, theories of deviance, and mechanisms for punishment. This is what is meant by the statement, "All we do when we expand gender categories is to create new more nuanced channels through which power can operate. We do not liberate ourselves, we ensnare ourselves in countless and even more nuanced and powerful norms. Each one a new chain." Quite simply, Gender Nihilism was the insistence that if the cost of recognition was the expansion of gender as a fundamentally violent apparatus of categorization, then recognition was not worth it.

which produces this ideology. These insights demonstrate the way that the valorization of difference, and potentially even the demand for recognition of difference as foundational to one's subjectivity, can operate as ideological justifications for material exploitation. Suddenly the impulse towards categorization and taxonomy is no longer some free floating and amorphous "discourse" but takes on a function within a material contradiction.

MOVING PAST NIHILISM:

Gender Nihilism, as a form of political nihilism, was profoundly pessimistic. In *Abolitionism in the 21st Century: From Communization as the End of Sex, to Revolutionary Transfeminism*, Jules Joanne Gleeson notes that this pessimism can be found in other works of transfeminist theory. It is unsurprising that

In this formulation, the process of categorization which Gender Nihilism simply referred to as "gender" is in fact an ideology of sexual difference which exists in order to obscure and naturalize the economic and social exploitation of women. The processes of categorization are thus materially grounded in class struggle, and emerge to serve the material interests of men as a class. This is the profound materialist insight which Gender Nihilism could never get to on its own. As such, Wittig provides the framework necessary for the criticism which Gender Nihilism puts forth to have teeth; her work can direct that criticism towards not just the ideology of difference which is operative in the process of categorization, but to the relationship and class struggle

This is where the nihilism in Gender Nihilism came in. At the time that I wrote the article, it seemed sensible to me that we might escape the entire game of categorization through a rejection of identity on the whole. The entire third section of my original article outlines a notion of self-abolition through embracing unintelligibility and refusing the put forth a positive politics of identity. In essence, a nihilistic embrace of meaningless resistance was the only possible way forward.

This was, quite frankly, a naive understanding of what resistance and identity might look like. I do not disagree with my original claim in the second section of the article that gender abolition presents the best possible solution to the problem both of gendered violence on the whole, but also to the problem of recognition. Where I now diverge from

my previous thought is in terms of what the project bringing about such abolition might look like.

An embrace of unintelligibility, of nihilism, of a rejection of meaning and stability might have presented a useful method of resistance, if gender operated merely at the level of ideals and ideology. If gender was nothing more than the belief in stable ontological identities, then perhaps a rejection of that belief might be enough. But gender is more than a belief. Gender represents a material reality which divides the world not just at the level of the ideal but at the level of labor, economics, and life itself. Gender divides the world into those who do specific types of labor and those who don't, into those are financially independent subjects and those who are financially dependent. This division

difference functions as censorship in our culture by masking, on the ground of nature, the social opposition between men and women. Masculine/feminine, male/female are the categories which serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order. Every system of domination establishes divisions at the material and economic level. Furthermore, the divisions are abstracted and turned into concepts by the masters… for there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is the oppression that creates sex and not the

that provides a materialist foundation for a more comprehensive theory of gender.

In order to truly understand how gender operates materially we must turn to another of Wittig's essays: *The Category of Sex*. Here, Wittig truly sets about to the task of giving a materialist account of gender in profoundly dialectical terms. She writes, "the perenniality of the sexes and the perenniality of slaves and masters proceed from the same belief, and, as there are no slaves without masters, there are no women without men." Thus men and women are understood through a dialectical notion of class. The material base from which gender as a process of categorization emerges is thus the material contradiction expressed in this relationship. She continues:

> the ideology of sexual

does not occur merely at the level of ideals but in the day to day material matter lives of individuals.

If gender operates not merely at the ideological or symbolic level, then a response which does operate only at that level is inadequate. As such, I am quite convinced that the model of resistance proposed in Gender Nihilism needs to be rejected, and a new model developed on the basis of a material investigation into the material base which produces the ideologies of gender and difference which Gender Nihilism was so obsessed with rebutting. The rest of this essay will attempt to do that work.

A MATERIALIST THEORY OF GENDER:

Gender Nihilism did very little to give a

solid definition of gender. While it certainly opposed something referred to as gender, it did not go about adequately explaining exactly what that thing was. In the brief moment that the article does devote to this task, it settles for citing Judith Butler, who writes that gender is, "the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes." While that is certainly a jargon laden definition, it is not a definition which provides a comprehensive notion of gender.

From this definition we are left asking several questions. What is an apparatus? In what realm does it operate; ideal, symbolic, material, etc? What does that production

between this theory and the theory put forth in Gender Nihilism is obvious.

Wittig is, thankfully, not satisfied with merely noting that woman is not a natural identity; she goes further to investigate exactly why this phenomena of gendered categorization takes place. In order to do this, Wittig seeks to "define what we call oppression in materialist terms" by "making it evident that women are a class, which is to say that the category 'woman' as well as the category 'man' are political and economic categories not eternal ones. Our fight aims to suppress men as a class, not through a genocidal, but a political struggle. Once the class 'men' disappears, 'women' as a class will disappear as well, for there are no slaves without masters." It is this shift to understanding the phenomena of gender as an issue of class and class struggle

they are women; that is to say we do not live in a world wherein there are first women and then afterwards there is an oppression of women. Rather, Wittig insists that "what we take for the cause or origin of oppression is in fact only the mark imposed by the oppressor: the myth of woman plus its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women. Thus, this mark does not predate oppression." Women, do not constitute a pre-existing and naturally delineated group of people, but are "an imaginary formation which reinterprets physical features(in themselves as neutral as any other but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived." Thus, for Wittig, the assertion of "woman" as an identity cannot in fact be a particularly useful starting point because it risks naturalizing the forces which produce it. I hope the resonance

and normalization look like? Through which institutions is it enacted? While Butler certainly has tackled these questions in her own work, Gender Nihilism never set out to do so, and never even bothered to summarize Butler's own answers. As such, we are left trying to deduce exactly *what gender is* for Gender Nihilism. It seems that the answer to this question is that for Gender Nihilism, gender is the symbolic division of individuals into various categories, as well as the mechanisms of enforcement that ensure compliance with these categories. Gender would then be understood as the discourses which dictate assignment to male or female, or in the new world of identity proliferation, to any other newly recognized categories. As such, Gender Nihilism primarily understands gender itself to be a process of taxonomy and categorization.

This understanding of gender does seem to recognize real processes which do in fact take place, but it does not attempt to explain why these processes operate the way they do, what class interests this operation serves, or what the relationship between these processes and material concerns about the reproduction of society might be. Gender Nihilism takes for granted that these processes are violent enactments of power, but due to its grounding in a faulty and misapplied Foucauldian notion of displaced and dispersed power, never asks whose power is being enacted and whose interest this all serves.

All of this is a lengthy way to say that the theory of gender in Gender Nihilism was not an adequately materialist theory of gender. It correctly noted that there is a certain ideological process of categorization

and naturalization of difference which is occurring, but it did not go beyond this. We must now go beyond that initial critique. Thankfully, much of the work of providing a materialist theory of gender has already been done. The french radical feminist theorist Monique Wittig's own writing on gender, sexuality, and materialism has laid a powerful foundation for the project we we must undertake.

Wittig's project has a similar starting point to gender nihilism; it seeks to argue against a sort of naturalization of identity which has become popular in feminist politics. Wittig begins her essay "One Is Not Born a Woman" by explaining that "a materialist feminist approach to women's oppression destroys the idea that women are a 'natural group.'" For Wittig, women are not oppressed because