

GENDER NIHILISM

AN ANTI-MANIFESTO



2024

**ALYSON
ESCALANTE**

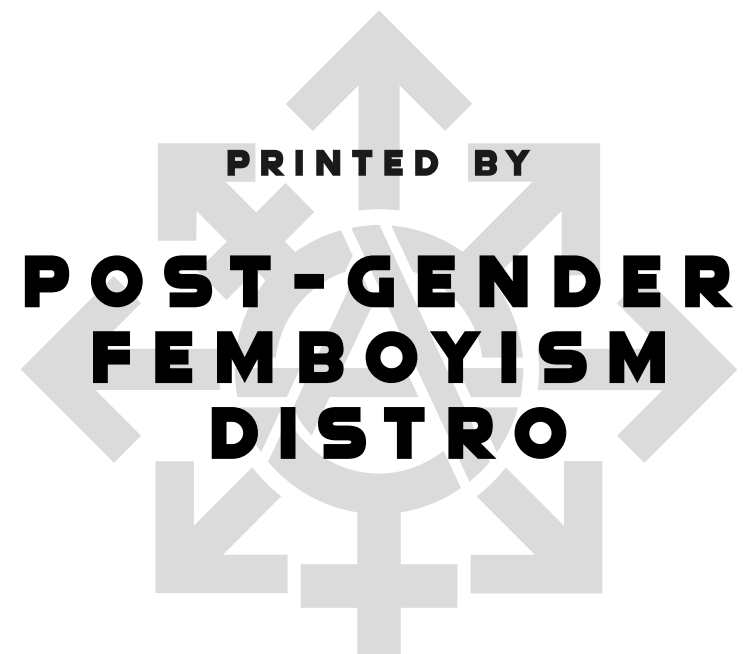
**GENDER NIHILISM
AN ANTI-MANIFESTO
ALYSON ESCALANTE
2015**

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NEVER HAVE BEEN. ONLY BY
RIDDING THIS WORLD OF THE
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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 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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this opposition is tied directly into the struggle for communism. She again writes, "This 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 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 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

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.

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 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

Gender Nihilism

An Anti-Manifesto

Alyson Escalante

2015

oppresses. It is the oppression that creates sex and not the contrary

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 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 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,

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 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 perennality of the sexes and the perennality 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 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

Introduction

We are at an impasse. The current politics of trans liberation have staked their claims on a redemptive understanding of identity. Whether through a doctor or psychologist’s diagnosis, or through a personal self affirmation in the form of a social utterance, we have come to believe that there is some internal truth to gender that we must divine.

An endless set of positive political projects have marked the road we currently travel; an infinite set of pronouns, pride flags, and labels. The current movement within trans politics has sought to try to broaden gender categories, in the hope that we can alleviate their harm. This is naive.

Judith Butler refers to gender as, “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.” If the current liberal politics of our trans comrades and siblings are rooted in trying to expand the social dimensions created by this apparatus, our work is a demand to see it burned to the ground.

We are radicals who have had enough with attempts to salvage gender. We do not believe we can make it work for us. We look at the transmisogyny we have faced in our own lives, the gendered violence that our comrades, both trans and cis have faced, and we realize that the apparatus itself makes such violence inevitable. We have had enough.

We are not looking to create a better system, for we are not interested in positive politics at all. All we demand in the present is a relentless attack on gender and the modes of social meaning and intelligibility it creates.

At the core of this Gender Nihilism lies several principles that will be explored in detail here: Antihumanism as foundation and cornerstone, gender abolition as a demand, and radical negativity as method.

Antihumanism

Antihumanism is a cornerstone which holds gender nihilist analysis together. It is the point from which we begin to understand our present situation; it is crucial. By antihumanism, we mean a rejection of essentialism. There is no essential human. There is no human nature. There is no transcendent self. To be a subject is not to share in common a metaphysical state of being (ontology) with other subjects.

The self, the subject is a product of power. The “I” in “I am a man” or “I am a woman” is not an “I” which transcends those statements. Those statements do not reveal a truth about the “I,” rather they constitute the “I.” Man and Woman do not exist as labels for certain metaphysical or essential categories of being, they are rather discursive, social, and linguistic symbols which are historically contingent. They evolve and change over time; their implications have always been determined by power.

Who we are, the very core of our being, might perhaps not be found in the categorical realm of being at all. The self is a convergence of power and discourses. Every word you use to define yourself, every category of identity within which you find yourself place, is the result of a historical development of power. Gender, race, sexuality, and every other normative category is not referencing a truth about the body of the subject or about the soul of the subject. These categories construct the subject and the self. There is no static self, no consistent “I,” no history transcending subject. We can only refer to a self with the language given to us, and that language has radically fluctuated throughout history, and continues to fluctuate in our day to day life.

We are nothing but the convergence of many different discourses and languages which are utterly beyond our control, yet we experience the sensation of agency. We navigate these discourses, occasionally subverting, always surviving. The ability to navigate does not indicate a metaphysical self which acts upon

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 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 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

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 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.

a sense of agency, it only indicates that there is symbolic and discursive looseness surrounding our constitution.

We thus understand gender through these terms. We see gender as a specific set of discourses embodied in medicine, psychiatry, the social sciences, religion, and our daily interactions with others. We do not see gender as a feature of our “true selves,” but as a whole order of meaning and intelligibility which we find ourselves operating in. We do not look at gender as a thing which a stable self can be said to possess. On the contrary we say that gender is done and participated in, and that this doing is a creative act by which the self is constructed and given social significance and meaning.

Our radicalism cannot stop here, we further state that historical evidence can be provided to show that gender operates in such a manner. The work of many decolonial feminists has been influential in demonstrating the ways that western gender categories were violently forced onto indigenous societies, and how this required a complete linguistic and discursive shift. Colonialism produced new gender categories, and with them new violent means of reinforcing a certain set of gendered norms. The visual and cultural aspects of masculinity and femininity have changed over the centuries. There is no static gender.

There is a practical component to all of this. The question of humanism vs antihumanism is the question upon which the debate between liberal feminism and nihilist gender abolitionism will be based.

The liberal feminist says “I am a woman” and by that means that they are spiritually, ontologically, metaphysically, genetically, or any other modes of “essentially” a woman.

The gender nihilist says “I am a woman” and means that they are located within a certain position in a matrix of power which constitutes them as such.

The liberal feminist is not aware of the ways power creates gender, and thus clings to gender as a means of legitimizing themselves in the eyes of power. They rely on trying to use various systems of

knowledge (genetic sciences, metaphysical claims about the soul, kantian ontology) in order to prove to power they can operate within it.

The gender nihilist, the gender abolitionist, looks at the system of gender itself and see's the violence at its core. We say no to a positive embrace of gender. We want to see it gone. We know appealing to the current formulations of power is always a liberal trap. We refuse to legitimize ourselves.

It is imperative that this be understood. Antihumanism does not deny the lived experience of many of our trans siblings who have had an experience of gender since a young age. Rather we acknowledge that such an experience of gender was always already determined through the terms of power. We look to our own childhood experiences. We see that even in the transgressive statement of "We are women" wherein we deny the category power has imposed onto our bodies, we speak the language of gender. We reference an idea of "woman" which does not exist within us as a stable truth, but references the discourses by which we are constituted.

Thus we affirm that there is no true self that can be divined prior to discourse, prior to encounters with others, prior to the mediation of the symbolic. We are products of power, so what are we to do? So we end our exploration of antihumanism with a return to the words of Butler:

"My agency does not consist in denying this condition of my constitution. If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility."

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 who are financially independent subjects and those who are financially dependent. This division 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,

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.

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.

Gender Abolition

If we accept that gender is not to be found within ourselves as a transcendent truth, but rather exists outside us in the realm of discourse, what are we to strive for? To say gender is discursive is to say that gender occurs not as a metaphysical truth within the subject, but occurs as a means of mediating social interaction. Gender is a frame, a subset of language, and set of symbols and signs, communicated between us, constructing us and being reconstructed by us constantly.

Thus the apparatus of gender operates cyclically; as we are constituted through it, so too do our daily actions, rituals, norms, and performances reconstitute it. It is this realization which allows for a movement against the cycle itself to manifest. Such a movement must understand the deeply penetrative and pervasive nature of the apparatus. Normalization has an insidious way of naturalizing, accounting for, and subsuming resistance.

At this point it becomes tempting to embrace a certain liberal politics of expansion. Countless theorists and activists have laid stake to the claim that our experience of transgender embodiment might be able to pose a threat to the process of normalization that is gender. We have heard the suggestion that non-binary identity, trans identity, and queer identity might be able to create a subversion of gender. This cannot be the case.

In staking our claim on identity labels of non-binary, we find ourselves always again caught back in the realm of gender. To take on identity in a rejection of the gender binary is still to accept the binary as a point of reference. In the resistance to it, one only reconstructs the normative status of the binary. Norms have already accounted for dissent; they lay the frameworks and languages through which dissent can be expressed. It is not merely that our verbal dissent occurs in the language of gender, but that the actions we take to subvert gender in dress and affect are themselves only subversive through their reference to the norm.

If an identity politics of non-binary identity cannot liberate us, it is also true that a queer or trans identity politics offers us no hope. Both fall into the same trap of referencing the norm by trying to “do” gender differently. The very basis of such politics is grounded in the logic of identity, which is itself a product of modern and contemporary discourses of power. As we have already shown quite thoroughly, there can be no stable identity which we can reference. Thus any appeal to a revolutionary or emancipatory identity is only an appeal to certain discourses. In this case, that discourse is gender.

This is not to say that those who identify as trans, queer, or non-binary are at fault for gender. This is the mistake of the traditional radical feminist approach. We repudiate such claims, as they merely attack those most hurt by gender. Even if deviation from the norm is always accounted for and neutralized, it sure as hell is still punished. The queer, the trans, the non-binary body is still the site of massive violence. Our siblings and comrades still are murdered all around us, still live in poverty, still live in the shadows. We do not denounce them, for that would be to denounce ourselves. Instead we call for an honest discussion about the limits of our politics and a demand for a new way forward.

With this attitude at the forefront, it is not merely certain formulations of identity politics which we seek to combat, but the need for identity altogether. Our claim is that the ever expanding list of personal preferred pronouns, the growing and ever more nuanced labels for various expressions of sexuality and gender, and the attempt to construct new identity categories more broadly is not worth the effort.

If we have shown that identity is not a truth but a social and discursive construction, we can then realize that the creation of these new identities is not the sudden discovery of previously unknown lived experience, but rather the creation of new terms upon which we can be constituted. All we do when we expand gender categories is to create new more nuanced channels through which

ity 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 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 to

hilism 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 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 sexual-

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.

To use this terminology is not hyperbolic; the violence of gender cannot be overestimated. Each trans woman murdered, each intersex infant coercively operated on, each queer kid thrown onto the streets is a victim of gender. The deviance from the norm is always punished. Even though gender has accounted for deviation, it still punishes it. Expansions of norms is an expansion of deviance; it is an expansion of ways we can fall outside a discursive ideal. Infinite gender identities create infinite new spaces of deviation which will be violently punished. Gender must punish deviance, thus gender must go.

And thus we arrive at the need for the abolition of gender. If all of our attempts at positive projects of expansion have fallen short and only snared us in a new set of traps, then there must be another approach. That the expansion of gender has failed, does not imply that contraction would serve our purposes. Such an impulse is purely reactionary and must be done away with.

The reactionary radical feminist sees gender abolition as such a contraction. For them, we must abolish gender so that sex (the physical characteristics of the body) can be a stable material basis upon which we can be grouped. We reject this whole heartedly. Sex itself is grounded in discursive groupings, given an authority through medicine, and violently imposed onto the bodies of intersex individuals. We decry this violence.

No, a return to a simpler and smaller understanding of gender (even if supposedly material conception) will not do. It is the very normative grouping of bodies in the first place which we push back against. Neither contraction nor expansion will save us. Our only path is that of destruction.

Radical Negativity

At the heart of our gender abolition is a negativity. We seek not to abolish gender so that a true self can be returned to; there is no such self. It is not as though the abolition of gender will free us to exist as true or genuine selves, freed from certain norms. Such a conclusion would be at odds with the entirety of our antihumanist claims. And thus we must take a leap into the void.

A moment of lucid clarity is required here. If what we are is a product of discourses of power, and we seek to abolish and destroy those discourses, we are taking the greatest risk possible. We are diving into an unknown. The very terms, symbols, ideas, and realities by which we have been shaped and created will burn in flames, and we cannot know or predict what we will be when we come out the other side.

This is why we must embrace an attitude of radical negativity. All the previous attempts at positive and expansionist gender politics have failed us. We must cease to presume a knowledge of what liberation or emancipation might look like, for those ideas are themselves grounded upon an idea of the self which cannot stand up to scrutiny; it is an idea which for the longest time has been used to limit our horizons. Only pure rejection, the move away from any sort of knowable or intelligible future can allow us the possibility for a future at all.

While this risk is a powerful one, it is necessary. Yet in plunging into the unknown, we enter the waters of unintelligibility. These waters are not without their dangers; and there is a real possibility for a radical loss self. The very terms by which we recognize each other may be dissolved. But there is no other way out of this dilemma. We are daily being attacked by a process of normalization that codes us as deviant. If we do not lose ourselves in the movement of negativity, we will be destroyed by the status quo. We have only one option, risks be damned.

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 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 Ni-*

This powerfully captures the predicament that we are in at this moment. While the risk of embracing negativity is high, we know the alternative will destroy us. If we lose ourselves in the process, we have merely suffered the same fate we would have otherwise. Thus it is with reckless abandon that we refuse to postulate about what a future might hold, and what we might be within that future. A rejection of meaning, a rejection of known possibility, a rejection of being itself. Nihilism. That is our stance and method.

Relentless critique of positive gender politics is thus a starting point, but one which must occur cautiously. For if we are to criticize their own normative underpinnings in favor of an alternative, we only fall prey once again to the neutralizing power of normalization. Thus we answer the demand for a clearly stated alternative and for a program of actions to be taken with a resolute “no.” The days of manifestos and platforms are over. The negation of all things, ourselves included, is the only means through which we will ever be able to gain anything

<http://libcom.org/library/gender-nihilism-anti-manifesto>

Beyond Negativity: What Comes After Gender Nihilism?

Alyson Escalante

Addendum to Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto

Alyson Escalante

November 2015

It's been a few months since I first wrote and attempted to distribute *Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto*. In that time, the reactions to this piece have been diverse and divisive. While there have certainly been some who have praised it as useful, there has been some very pointed (and often very important) criticisms of the piece. It is in light of this criticism that I am writing this addendum. My piece lacked a few important things, namely: context, an explicit address of race, and explicit articulation of gender as a colonial product, and perhaps a clarification as to the nature of the piece itself. I hope to add those here.

First, it would be deceptive to pretend that I am unaware of the amount of critiques which also have called my character, social location, and motivations into account. Let me address these. I am writing from an academic context, I study trans theory in an academic context, I am planning and aiming for a career in the academy. I understand the academy is a massively corrupt and oppressive institution and I understand its products are imperfect. I think we need to walk a fine line of realizing these products have

value, and that they are never the end all or authoritative voice in any context.

I have also been accused of anti-blackness for various reasons only slightly related to the anti-manifesto, but this is being used to make a tacit critique of the piece. Let me acknowledge that as a non-black person of color, I am inherently bound in anti-blackness to the degree to which my social location is dependent on its structural instantiation, and my ideology is informed by that location. I will not contest how black folks within the online community I was part of have perceived me, it is not my place to say whether I am anti-black or not. I will say I try hard to interrogate my own anti-blackness and step down when a failure of that interrogation causes me to place myself into contexts and conversations I ought not be. It is ultimately not up to me, or any other non-black person to decide what this means. That is all I have to say on that.

This leads me to the first important addition to the text: context. I wrote the anti-manifesto out of desperation. Like many trans women before me (Susan Stryker has articulated this phenomena beautifully), I turned to theory to try to explain and contextualize my lived experience. Gender Nihilism was conceived in community, through discussion between myself and a group of comrades primarily composed of other trans women of color. It was an attempt to articulate how gender had affected us all and to expose the violence of that. What we discussed was largely centered on a few thinkers, but one who was very important to us but did not make it into my piece was Maria Lugones. Through her work on the coloniality of gender, we had tried to articulate how the gender we refer to in gender nihilism is not a term inclusive of indigenous and non-western genders, but is a specific regime on knowledge imposed onto bodies through colonization. For the sake of time, I did not include this in the Anti-Manifesto; for those of us having this conversation this assumption and framing of decolonial critique of gender was implicit.

This was a mistake, not everyone had this context. Without this context it quite understandably appeared that my critique of gender was not of a specific colonial phenomena but rather of all the diverse, and multiplicitous phenomena which that term could possible call to mind. This was wrong of me to exclude, this was a mistake and this is why this addendum is necessary. If you want to understand this context I highly suggest you engage the work of Maria Lugones, especially Towards a Decolonial Feminism. I no longer blog, but the work is easy and I trust that if you are interested you can explore it yourself. I also implore you to listen to the voices of the other folks involved in Gender Nihilism. I think its telling that I am presented as the voice of the gender nihilism, when two of the other largest contributors are indigenous trans women. Their voices matter in this debate more than mine, yet people have completely and consistently centered my voice and perspective. This is harmful.

Finally, this piece was not meant to tell anyone how to think about gender, it was the result of a collective analysis by a specific group of people which came to conclusions that allowed us to understand our lives. If you don't like that understanding, feel free to discard it. I do not ask or demand you agree with me. I am happy that discussion and discourse towards these ideas continues. I made mistakes with omitting crucial contextual framings which caused my piece to be at least tacitly complicit in whiteness and coloniality. I am not back to defend myself, I simply wanted to point out where you could pursue a way forward in thinking through these ideas to avoid that mistake. Keep resisting, keep struggling, keep discussing, keep surviving. I hope I have not made that more difficult, and I sincerely hope I may have at least somewhat helped.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YeYm5TuNQ5WWWhHQuZu7iBAr4P87teHqlzRRzkYFf78s/edit>