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Gender Egoism: On Ownness and Identity

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15–19 minutes

“The violence of language consists in its effort to capture the ineffable and, hence, to destroy it, to seize hold of that which must remain elusive for language to operate as a living thing.” — Judith Butler

“There are not two sexes, there are n sexes; there are as many sexes as there are assemblages. And since each of us enters into several assemblages, each of us has n sexes. When children discover that they are reduced to one sex, male or female, they discover their powerlessness ... They have been damaged; their countless sexes have been stolen!” — Gilles Deleuze



There's a spectre haunting gender discourse. The spectre of nihilism.

When [*Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto*](#) was released, it made larger

waves than any other modern work on feminist theory or gender discourse. There was something unique about it that scratched our collective radical itch. Politics around acceptance, validity, and gender essentialism had failed to really provide any meaningful liberation of gender from its socially imposed normality; meanwhile trans men and women are still under constant threats of violence, non-binary genders are still colonially dismissed by many leftists, the “two gender” memes are everywhere, and diversity efforts have been swallowed up by pinkwashing. We’re either appropriated, we’re disrespected, we’re the blunt of a joke, we fear violence, or we become another statistic that gets buried within algorithms of social media.

Trans people of all types still find themselves in a never-ending battle between their authenticity and the weapons of ideology.

Authoritarian policing still exists in these small anarchist niches when individuals are replaced by abstracts – ironically, always for the “ultimate well being” of those whose narratives they dismiss. It seems clear to me that should capitalism and civilization fall, transphobia would still continue, or perhaps worsen. It’s not just consumer culture killing trans people: it’s the complexities of personal, internalized, and systemic ideologies that perpetuate transphobia, which we engage with more often than we may realize.

Then there’s those who moan about “identity politics” in leftist, post-left, and right-wing circles alike. This always means different things depending on who you ask, but the gist is essentially if you believe in “trans liberation” then you believe in identity politics because you aren’t “woke” enough to see transness as a social construct.. The anti-idpol type will say we need to prioritize economic or state oppression, because this has more of a “material reality” than trans issues (whatever the hell that’s supposed to mean). There are some decent criticisms of toxic leftism that come out of identity politics discourse, such as identitarian deference in which we have to prove our expertise to expound upon our own narratives. Ultimately, though, “identity politics” is too broad in what it aims to articulate, and far too arbitrary, to be a worthy enemy of those who aim for the liberation of trans people.

What we crave and demand is an ability to express ourselves freely and authentically as unique individuals. I myself continue to live my dual role – authentically female in all of my private moments – as well as the role of the “male” that is imposed on me when I enter the workspace or by those activists who would dismiss me as a “gay man” and ignore my own narratives completely, and therefore, my gender itself. We saw something similar when Deep Green Resistance told trans women they were not allowed at an event for Marxist women.

Even feminist theory, a vast school of thought that includes nihilists and anti-humanists, has been stigmatized as something to dismiss entirely lest the explorer be associated with irrational activists, TERFy Marxists, and (gasp) a tendency towards free expression (i.e., the infamous rainbow hair dye). Many will unfortunately miss out on the similarities between Simone de Beauvoir and Max Stirner, and you’d be hard-pressed to find many familiar with Dora Marsden, despite being perhaps the most prominent egoist feminist before the days of gender nihilism. Here is where gender nihilism was able to make its debut: by repackaging much of feminist theory without the feminist label, written through a perspective of anti-humanism and annihilation.



Entering the Gender Void

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.

– Alyson Escalante, Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto

The most intriguing part of gender nihilism is its core in antihumanism. Any fan of Max Stirner might find it extremely meaningful by bringing the concepts of "spooks" into the gender world. Gender becomes a "phantasm," because when you get to the core of it, there's so many ways that our hormones, identity, DNA, genitals, social performance, and expression can be put together that just having two genders is absurd (not to mention colonial, given that many indigenous tribes have long since recognized more than two genders). Take one little pill and even our hormonal makeup can be made to be how we see fit. There are as many genders as there are unique individuals, and for good reason. However, if we see simply try to claim gender as a phantasm, according to the usual egoist discourse at the time, to be the "most egoist" we're "supposed to" reject it as a phantasm. And so the egoist says they're a gender nihilist, and that trans and NB people need to "be realistic" and fully deconstruct gender entirely, or else you're propping up a system of violence as depicted by the anti-manifesto, and denying everyone else's egoism. A lot of objective ethics for those that are so-called nihilists.

However, Alyson is not to blame for the misinterpretations of egoists and post-leftists and nihilists of her work. She put in as much effort as she could have both within the work and when discussing it to make it clear that she still respects the reality of gender issues, and that she identifies as a trans woman. In fact, [in her own response to it](#), she

seems to have moved from antihumanism to an even further materialist analysis, leaving much to be desired over your standard Marxist feminist theory. Not quite the direction I'd take, but maybe this piece will help shake that up.

Gender nihilism can be seen as our drive towards the Creative Nothing. Our demand to remove these boxes which limit us. But it also understands that simply saying you don't believe in gender is hardly any better than the "colorblind" liberals who think they "can't see race" while, of course, supporting various aspects of white supremacy. In gender blindness, we fail to see the trans women experiencing gender euphoria when she gets her first prescription for hormones. A "gender nihilist" might say that trans woman is perpetuating violence by upholding gender instead of deconstructing it, but the reality is those pills are her freedom from the socially-imposed mental violence of dysphoria. We also fail to see the debilitating dysphoria experienced by the 15 year old non-binary kid who doesn't fit either binary gender role, and we fail to see that gender still goes right on existing in the minds of everyone else, so the trans person fearing violence walking down the sidewalk does not have their burden eased by someone on the internet deciding that gender is a social construct. Not to mention we may fail to see the ways that we contribute to gendered violence even as a gender nihilist, which sadly happens more often than not.

A total eradication of gender in a classless, communist, nihilist anti-society may sound alluring, but as Alyson points out in her materialist response, gender has a reality that isn't going away anytime soon, and we can't ignore its affects on people in the real world. Gender is a big complex tangled web of ideologies and violence and conceptualizations, and, like the spectacle, it's still there if we ignore it.

So what do we do with that information? Alyson says herself, "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." Alyson later retracts that in her response, with a totally opposite demand that we "Abandon nihilism, abandon

hopelessness, demand and build a better world.”

Yet, isn’t gender nihilism now just a new social model, a new better system, towards a better world? Isn’t the relentless attack on gender from an optimistic standpoint that gender can be deconstructed in a vacuum, as if it weren’t tangled up in the ideologies of the spectacle? We want a relentless assault on all forms of class, and we want to include gender oppression with that whether it’s in gender nihilism or gender abolition, but if we are to embrace any sort of cosmic pessimism in that nihilism, it should be one that disenchants our demand for others to adhere to our individual beliefs to recognize the multiplicity of identity that will exist regardless. Let our critiques be immanent and our insurrections internal, because no matter how much we point out that gender is a social construct, it’s still there. We don’t need to be lashing out at each other for not being “gender nihilist enough” because like it or not, we currently live in a gendered world, even if that gender is just a weed grown out from the void.

I want to stay within nihilism, not go “past it.” I want to throw gender into the fires of nothingness, not to abolish it, but to see through gender essentialism and make gender my property, to enjoy or to discard as I see fit. It might be easy to imagine and desire for a genderqueer world in which gender oppression does not exist, but the reality is that all we could ever hope to become is one that has become post-misogynistic and post-transphobic – those identities that many of us find empowerment through do not need to be abolished, and may never be abolished, and we can attack the forms of oppression that we mean to when we say “abolish gender” regardless.

Gender Egoism: Having Your Gender and Eating It, Too

If we must deconstruct gender, let’s do so *immanently*. We can find empowerment through gender identity without contradicting our self-interest. We can criticize gender essentialism without policing trans people. We can take up gender as our property, rather than hold the very concept of gender as something sacred. We can make the case for anti-humanism, and we can go beyond humanism to our

uniqueness. Or we can reject the concept of gender if it has no use for us individually. It does not oppress others to find meaning and validation within identity. There are infinite genders to explore because there's infinite ways that our identities can be composed, and ultimately that's for each unique individual to decide on their own, not for us to impose our decisions on others – haven't we had enough of gender colonialism from patriarchy and transmisogyny?

Some might find it unsatisfactory to leave the fate of gender to individual decisions, because the idea of gender egoism is new. But regardless, I leave the decision of gender up the reader. Do you want to keep gender, reject it, enjoy it? Do you experience gender dysphoria or gender euphoria? Does the concept of being seeing through gendered lenses create its own unique oppression against you? If we're really moving past ethics through nihilism, then shouldn't all these narratives and experiences be permissible and recognized in their own right? At the end of the day it's only you that has the authority here to answer these questions related to your own uniqueness, and I just ask that you allow others the same respect even if it might not be what you would choose for them.

Our limited idea of how gender is "supposed to work", our insistence on concrete lenses with which we must see all gender identities as problematic, these are products of hyper-humanism and authoritarianism.

In our egoism, in our nihilism, be relentlessly authentic. Be wholly you. Express yourself as you see fit. Identify with whatever gender you enjoy. Reject gender as a whole. Keep in mind with both that gender is still a social construct and that you are so much more than the human being gendered. If anyone tells you you're wrong, they aren't interested in your experience, and they are limited by their own. They don't know your full extent, nor theirs. They may know the super-sensual nothingness into which all of identity can be destroyed, but they don't know that identity can then be our property, our plaything, to do with and enjoy as we see fit.

Identity can be a beautiful thing. It lets me relate to you. My identity is pushing me to write these words to you now so that maybe someone will find meaning. It can also be tricky when that identity is based on

something outside of myself.

But ultimately, I am a gender egoist.

I am a trans woman, because I still live within a gendered world and this is how I'd describe my experience navigating that world.

I am a gender nihilist because I know that gender can be deconstructed to its empty core.

I am an egoist because I love myself so selfishly and care so much about my own cause that I can selfishly listen to the narratives of others and enjoy their unique company and insights and identities as my property to be consumed, and then enjoy their love as my own for good measure.

I'll still aim to build a world without gender-based oppression. I cannot force anyone else to let go of gender anymore than I can force someone to give up any other aspect of their unique identities, but I can have fun with my own.

Gender is validating to some, and problematic to others. It can be both the source of gendered violence and the means to survive gendered violence. Gender does not need to be a "fixed identity" — we can use it as a playful mask in a reality of aesthetic ontological masks, and kill it simultaneously. Or we can deconstruct it if we so choose in a rejection of all identity, but in doing so, gender is only deconstructed *for us*, we cannot force that deconstruction on others, only articulate and explain our meaning. Nor can we force any other perspective. We're all egoists because we're all Unique, and, as such, we all live our own cause. I'm a believer in chasing meaning and loving my fellow egoists and taking up collective causes as my own because the well-being of my friends is important to my selfishness, and for that I write this piece in hopes that someone reads it and have it set them on a path towards their own gender validation or destruction.

Whatever you do: Do it beautifully, do it authentically, and fucking enjoy it. You're unique and valid either way.

~ Kas

"Each choose that method which expresses their selfhood best."

Condemn no other because they express their Self otherwise."

Voltairine de Cleyre