

February 2018 – Automatic Writing

29–36 minutes

This will be the first in a set of pieces responding to the development of “gender nihilism” as a distinct (if decidedly heterogenous) tendency in discourse on gender, largely among trans and genderqueer adherents of various ultra-left and post-left tendencies. Escalante’s [‘Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto’](#) seems to have achieved the status of a core or foundational text for this tendency, being the most widely cited and circulated of the texts gathered under this label. The below is an effort to gather my various thoughts on this text as a contribution to the development of what I regard as an interesting, if problematic, set of perspectives around issues of identity, gender abolition, and liberation.

The text below is taken from libcom. My comments are in bold. Minor formatting changes have been made for presentation purposes.

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.

[Are we at an impasse? This is the core claim from which the piece draws its imperative force (“we are at an impasse... therefore we must...” – who’s “we” btw?), and it’s merely asserted. I find it difficult to see how you could look at the present state of gender relations and not see plenty of motion in the system. Whatever you think of what’s happening, something is happening. Which makes it difficult to contextualise, as it’s clearly addressing a conjuncture, but not one I’m able to recognise.]

Incidentally, this need to pose itself in the imperative mood (the

[The discourse of the agitator, hardly an “anti-political” position) is my central objection to this argument. As I see it, a critique of the form of the political imperative wrt gender-as-lived as implicated in the reproduction of gender coercion is the key point at which gender nihilism must break with the abolitionism of the 2nd wave in order not to reproduce its limitations. There can be no “you must” in this regard that doesn’t implicate itself with (that is: act as a moment of) the entire apparatus of social policing which we wish to see disappear.]

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.

[Is it? The problem with liberalism is not that it does nothing to mitigate harms. Whether we like it or not, liberal trans politics performs all kinds of functions vital for our survival and social reproduction. Radical critique shouldn’t need to dismiss this reality.]

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. **[Same.]**

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.

[What does it mean to “attack intelligibility” (or burn it to the ground)? The purpose of this rhetoric seems purely affective.]

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.

[All good here, and well-stated.]

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 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.

[This is sufficiently knotty that I'm unsure whether or in what sense I agree or disagree with it (beyond that it is a curiously disembodied account of what “we” are). But knottiness comes with the territory.]

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.

[It would be nice if we could lose the stereotype of the naive liberal on display here. It's possible to affirm the entire Foucauldian-Butlerian analysis of power and still land out at a non-innocent strategic liberalism. Indeed, at some points at least, this seems to be what the more directly political moments of Butler amount to: Derridean democracy-to-come-ism reworked as a praxis of permanent queer agonism to renew and expand the liberal state's grid of intelligibility. It is this more sophisticated and *knowing* version of liberalism, and its strategic acceptance of the permanent existence of an abjected outside, that abolitionism must engage and reject. Anti-essentialism is insufficient.]

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? **[We are producer-products of power. This distinction will become significant.]** 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.”

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.

[In other words: everyone must think like me.

If “a movement against the cycle” is dependent on “this realisation” (i.e. the belief in specific obscure and esoteric post-structuralist critiques) then we’re back at an activism requiring the propagation of our specific form of consciousness across the

world.

My position, on the contrary, is that gender nihilism is already implicit in the activity of a multitude of subjects struggling to differentiate themselves from the terms by which they are constituted, without necessarily being conscious that they are doing any such thing. It is the tendencies, whether conscious or non-conscious, towards the dissipation of fetish-forms immanent to social practice which are significant for gender nihilism, not its own propagation.

If a movement against the cycle is dependent on the spread of Gender Nihilism as a specific ideal form of consciousness then we're fucked. Nothing like this is ever going to happen.]

At this point it becomes tempting to embrace a certain liberal politics of expansion. **[This “everything I don’t like is liberalism” stuff is its own kind of identity politics.]** 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, is it 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 all true, more or less. But it's also *all there is*. There is no uncontaminated point of resistance outside the mesh of power. To proceed as though such a thing were possible is to misunderstand the notion of power being deployed.]

This is not to say that those who identify as trans, queer, or non-binary are at fault for gender. **[Right, but only because agency is basically impossible in this analysis.]** 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 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.

[Here's the central theoretical problem with this analysis: power is thought of only as something *done to us*, not something we do. It is both, simultaneously. This seems to be a common move among North American insurrecto engagements with Foucault (e.g. much of baeden): to affirm a Foucauldian networked-immanence conception of power as *the cold monster bearing down upon us*. Consequently *literally everything we do* only oppresses us more, except for some privileged gesture such as "attack" which somehow still manages to constitute itself as a point of pure oppositionality.

Power, for Foucault, is the action of action upon action. It is inevitable and inescapable (and neither good nor bad). From this position, there can be no opposing oneself to power as such, and no reason one would want to. Foucault reduces oppositional identities to the fantasy projections they always were. This is a good thing.]

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.

[Note the shift from power to violence, as though one implied the other. They don't. There is no reason, on the account given, to assume that direct violence is a necessary feature of gender rather than a contingent feature of the present stage of historical development of gender relations. That gender is a mode in which we are constituted in discourse does not imply that violence of the kind described is an inevitable feature of this constitution.

The ground on which the claim that gender is inevitably violent must be argued is not discursive constitution but *material*

production. Gender, as a set of discourses or apparatuses, is produced by, and reproductive of, a set of relations of exploitation. Man and woman are ideal representations of divisions of labour within these material relations of exploitation, by which they are naturalised and maintained, congealed as social roles maintained by various apparatuses of governance. Gender is violent inasmuch as its underlying material relations depend upon violence for their existence.

Gender cannot be a domain of freedom or self-actualisation because it is an aspect of a capitalist society that can exist only by negating the possibility of free exercise of our productive capacities. It is a dimension of our alienation, not in language (or not only) but as the material condition of our existence. Gender is violent because it is a mode of positive being in a capitalist world constitutionally hostile to life, in which all attempts to live on other terms (such as through flight from gender roles) tend to encounter a limit of direct disciplinary violence or social death, at least for the overwhelming majority. All gender roles are *modes of alienated being*, of our violent separation from ourselves and our capacities, and are expressive of that alienation and the violence upon which it is dependent.

Without this analysis, we are left with a kind of *state reductionism* in which discourses and apparatuses merely exist in order to exist. From this perspective, the key questions regarding the degrees and kinds of change in gender relations that can be accommodated by social structure are essentially unanswerable. There is no reason to suppose that the state *in itself* (which is a phantom of an anarchism *reduced to the rejection of authority*; there is no state-in-itself, only a state within a process of production) has any particular dependence on gender, nor any particular investment in its continuance beyond inertia. It is *the structural dependence of capital on gendered divisions of labour* (its dependence on unevenly distributed socially reproductive work outside the wage relation, producing distinct *kinds of person*) that limits the freedom of the system to develop beyond the coercive

imposition of gender, and justifies pessimism in this regard. Not simply that gender is a binary, but *what gender is a binary in order to do.*

It should be obvious from the above that gender nihilism (as the refusal of intelligibility in terms of gender) cannot in itself produce the abolition of gender (gender nihilism is not gender abolition). That requires communism.]

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.

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.

[This to me describes roughly what is at stake experientially in a process of communication. The dissolution of the terms by which we recognise one-another (i.e. of capitalist-world forms of belonging) and the like are precisely the effect the re-organisation of society on a communist material base will have, likely over a relatively short period of historical time. I have no idea what it's supposed to mean as a voluntaristic minority practice under capitalist conditions though. I'm not sure it's possible to do gender (or not-gender or whatever) as a leap into an experiential void, and would recommend psychedelics as a much better bet if ego death is what you're after.

One thing I've learned from embracing my own version of gender nihilism is that reality remains obstinately, frustratingly, stultifyingly *knowable*, regardless of one's subjective attitude to it. The world remains indifferent to consciousness' vault beyond it, and one remains despite oneself stuck working through the same boring problematics: "if I don't pass as a woman everyone will treat me as a man". Just like yesterday. Just like tomorrow.

For me, the problem with all this is that, rhetoric aside, it's far too much of a *politics*. The whole drive behind the argument stems from a set of transcendent political commitments (gender abolition, trans liberation). From this point of departure it antihumanisms itself out of any possibility of agency, ends up at nihilism, *and then tries to get nihilism to produce a liberation politics* (albeit a disavowed one). Unsurprisingly, this ends up with total incoherence (Why exactly do I have to attack anything? Is it even possible on these terms to conceive of a society, or any particular aspect of one, which shouldn't be burned to the ground?) and calls to leap out of reality itself, which it nonetheless insists upon (as any politics, even a politics pretending to be an anti-politics, must) as a set of practical imperatives (in an addendum, Escalante claims that "this piece was not meant to tell anyone how to think about gender", but

this is clearly totally contrary to both the letter and spirit of her argument).

What this is, in the end, is another form of gender policing, yet another installment of the endless saga of trans people giving each other shit for doing gender wrong, this time in perhaps the most absurd articulation possible: not *voidy* enough (you fuckin' liberal!). What needs to be grasped is that the problem with gender policing is one of *form not content*: the fact that we are policed, not how we are policed. All interventions that rely on the propagation of a (wannabe) compulsory ontology against which gender practices are to be judged (including voidy nihilism vs. humanist positivity) must deploy the same mechanisms of social policing and draw us into acting through/as them. Avoiding this is not a question of political metaphysics (which in any case seem to primarily function here to disavow complicity) but of the orientation of material practices.

No subjective attitude to – or approach to performance or expression of – gender can make it go away. No demand that someone effect the abolition of gender through the way they navigate it can ever be met. This is true whoever makes the demand, which can only ever be a demand for purposeless self-torture.

Instead, I want to situate gender nihilism within the *abolitionist impulse* – the occurrence of the desire to be free of the whole game – without *telos* or transcendent justification. This might occur in any number of affective registers, from “ugh can I just not?” to “fuck the entire social order!”, I don’t much care (though I do find myself increasingly bored with anarcho-shoutyness as an expressive mode). What I am interested in is the practices of *detachment* and *withdrawl* that transmute this impulse into self-differentiating distance from given modes of positive social being – and the refusal of the attendant *labour* of self-surveillance and knowledge-production – *for themselves*, without subordination to political goals. Non-politics, not anti-politics.

It is enough to be sick of the work of gender and to wish to avoid

it wherever possible. It is enough to recognise that the frantic obsession with ontologising all forms of gender non-conformity and fluidity, and producing rules determining their proper relations to one-another (Is a non-passing nb transmasc more or less privileged than a cis-passing binary transfem? Better check the lookup tables...), is not for the benefit of these, but the crisis reaction of the apparatus of governance to breakdowns of its categories appearing *in the guise of allegedly queer politics*, and to want as little to do with it as possible. It is enough to refuse the work of *assimilation* (what is called “recognition”), and to put one’s energies instead towards the pursuit of whatever strategies make themselves available for the realisation of less alienated immediate relations. Let’s call it a *soft insurrectionism*: less of the compulsive bloodying one’s forehead against the brick wall of indifferent totality, more of the refusal to give one’s energies to the production of one’s own negation, and the taking of whatever opportunities make themselves available to live as fully as possible. There is *enough work* that cannot be avoided in sustaining whatever survival strategy one has chosen in relation to gender, without taking on a hopeless and impossible additional burden for some spurious political purpose, without subjecting oneself to *yet another* hostile overseeing gaze whose demands can never be satisfied.

[One less effort, if you would be nihilists.\]](#)