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Gender Nihilism

Automatic Writing

February 12, 2015

”NOTHING can/will define me! Free to be EVERY-
THING!!!”

– Miley Cyrus

I wish to speak of something without knowing quite what it is. A disposition; a sensibility; a micropolitical strategy; a navigational heuristic; a performative absence; a forgetting, perhaps; a queer site of refusal and resistance; a creative potential; an experiment, a mode of living within, despite and against the regime of gender, which I’m going to call “gender nihilism”.

Gender nihilism designates a kind of radical agnosticism at the level of (gender) identity; a refusal of the injunction to know what one is, to objectify oneself as knowledge, and to make oneself known; a persistent “no comment” to the police who surround and suffuse us, and marshal against us a vast array of tactics – promises, threats, insults, lies, seductions, manipulations, forms of violence – to extract a confession. It names a possibility latent within any particular gender position: that of disidentification, of non-identification.

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Silence too is performative.¹ If gender is in some sense the effect of the repetition of gendered expressions, what is the effect of the repetition of a silence when the question of one's gender is posed? It is not an escape. Norms continue to inscribe gendered meanings on the body, to produce modes of embodiment, and to act upon expression. One remains both a relay for and a product of gender as a form of power.² It is more like a strike or an act of sabotage, a refusal to function as a site of production for a particular kind of knowledge and an effort to disrupt one's normal functioning as a force of production.

There is nothing natural about having a gender. The shift from sovereignty – whose mode of action is necropolitical and whose instrument is law – to discipline – in which the fashioning and

¹ One stock example of performativity is the “I do” of a wedding ceremony. Consider how the same ceremony also incorporates a performative silence to sanction the legality of the marriage: the moment after “speak now or forever hold your peace”.

² A question arises here: if we assert that gender cannot be escaped, are we not legislating against the identities of those who claim for themselves a position outside of the gender binary, or outside of gender as such - those who call themselves agender, non-binary, or third gender, for example? This, I think, is a problem that arises in all forms of gender identification, which I call the problem of 'lived ontology'. That is: any particular assertion of gender identity involves claims about what kind of genders can exist and which cannot, whose implications extend beyond the self to the whole social body. For example, a trans person's insistence that their anatomy does not dictate their gender troubles the gender of a cis person who understands their gender as grounded in biological fact, while in turn forms of lived gender fluidity trouble some trans people's understanding of their lived gender as grounded in fixed interior truth. The various forms of gender identity in the world are mutually incoherent, and in some cases mutually canceling. This should not be seen as a problem, rather we should seek to understand the ways that a variety of mutually incompatible forms of gender dissidence each open up their own spaces of freedom and effect their own disruptions of the gender regime. I intend to return to this topic in a more systematic way in the future, but provisionally we can say that all genders are in some sense impossible, and that the extension of recognition despite or even because of that impossibility is one of the ways in which we can collaborate and support one-another to performatively open up possibilities that are barred by gender norms.

control of life (rather than consignment to death) becomes the primary concern of power, and the norm its instrument – as the dominant form of power required the expansion of modes of inquiry and knowledge production. Simply: that which is to be disciplined must be rendered intelligible to disciplinary powers; the norm must be defined and delimited and deviance understood in order to be corrected and eliminated. Gender, sex, sexuality are conceptual instruments of this form of power. The belief that one must have a gender, that is, that one must know oneself in gendered terms and be capable of transmitting that knowledge, that gender self-knowledge is a necessary condition for a livable life, and that the absence of such knowledge is a form of crisis, is a historical phenomenon and an effect of power. Gender nihilism is the lived refutation of that belief, the demonstration that life can be lived without such knowledge, and that such a life can flourish.

If the disciplinary society aimed at the elimination of troublesome difference through institutional power, the new capitalism, the society of control, produces a fresh twist on the politics of intelligibility. Control is interested not in the elimination of difference but in its assimilation, the recuperation and reincorporation of renegades into the market, the state, the family and so on by adding additional axioms which conditionally and selectively allow access to the norm. Homosexuality no longer requires a cure, rather the marriage norm is expanded to include gays who conform to certain norms of acceptable difference, while the rest are further abjected. Disciplinary power is tactile and direct, control is remote and abstract. It effects biopolitical control through the modulation of differential access to markets, food, shelter, recognition, rights, protections.

If the assertion of abjected identities, and the hybridisation and invention of new identities directly confronted disciplinary power, such gestures are increasingly incorporated by new forms of control. The assertion of identity becomes the means by which a population delimits itself and renders itself intelligible to power

and begins a trajectory of assimilation which assigns it a place within marketing strategies, state institutions, culture and social life.³ It thereby structures oppositional politics according to a logic of recognition, drawing renegade flows back toward the state and the reproduction of the present.

Gender nihilism is disinterested in recognition. Recognition is always “recognition as...” and therefore remains always conditional: “I recognise you as...” is always conditional on a prior identification, always implies a “because you are...”, and always retains the possibility that recognition will be withdrawn if you become something else. The power of recognition is also simultaneously the power of misrecognition and non-recognition, and the goal of recognition, whether demanded or asked for, exposes one permanently to these forms of violence. However forcefully we assert “I am...”, we remain vulnerable to “You are not...”, “You are instead...”⁴

Gender nihilism has no positive content. In itself it does not prescribe or recommend any particular way of being in the world. It makes no claims about what it is. If identification is drawing a circle in the sand saying “here are the things I am, there are the things I am not”, gender nihilism simply lets the circle be washed away by the waves. *The gender nihilist is therefore indifferent to the names they are called and the genders they signify.* * Gender nihilism opens the entire space of gendered possibility as a terrain for exploration, but does not replace fidelity to an identity with fidelity to an ethics of exploration. One can stay where one is just as surely as one can set off at a sprint. In this sense it is less a nomadism than a home-

³ Of course, this process is not inevitable. Identity categories can be queered and re-queered to resist assimilation. And identity-based movements can exceed containment and threaten power. My aim here is not to proscribe identification, but to question its necessity and sketch an alternative.

⁴ This condition is perhaps never fully escapable. As social beings we are always minimally vulnerable. We never fully control how we are affected by the names we are called. In this sense perhaps gender nihilism designates a horizon rather than an actuality. In any case, it is certainly not a delusion of invulnerability.

lessness.⁵ It opens up gender as a space of play, or of combat, without mandating either. It’s mode of address is “you can...” – “you should...” and “you must...” only emerge when other components are bolted on. It is futural in the sense that it refuses the conception of historicity that grounds identity (“I am what I always have been”) which is always in any case a founding myth, a constantly reworked fiction that establishes continuity with the past. Gender nihilism is at ease with rupture. It allows us to treat our histories as a resource, an archive of past styles, ways of living, memories, experiences, beliefs to be reworked and refashioned in any way desired, but is not innately a postmodernist, or futurist, or accelerationist disposition towards novelty or innovation.

Gender nihilism is political but it is not a politics. It is queer by definition, but proposes no ideal queerness, nor any queer horizon towards which to direct itself. It is a negation that doesn’t presuppose some future dialectical turn. Clearly it is in various ways a marginal and precarious position and thus its structural position pushes towards certain forms of alliance, and indeed may in itself open unique political possibilities. In this sense gender nihilism may be a valuable conceptual component in a political assemblage, but one ambivalent to the particular political projects it connects with.⁶

*** EDIT 11/11/15 The italicized sentence is one I no longer endorses since it prescribes indifference as an ideal way of living queerness - precisely the kind of prescriptivism this text seeks to escape. I have struck it out because, while I feel it can safely be removed from the text without loss of coherence, I don’t believe in simply deleting problematic/contentious mistakes so it appears as if I never said them.

⁵ My point is not that a nomad ethics is not desirable (I think it is, and there is clearly an affinity or compatibility between the two), simply that this question is external to the proposition of gender nihilism.

⁶ Indeed I write this in part because I am convinced of the political value of nihilism both as a point to pass through and as a position to act from, but that’s another essay.