

Science Fiction Double Feature: Trans Liberation on Twin Earth

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1 Introduction and Motivation

When we speak of *women* or *men*, who and what are we talking about? When our social advocacy and analysis engage with feminist, queer, or trans issues, we almost immediately find ourselves making reference to *women*, *men*, and *gender* in order to articulate positions and formulate key concepts. When we critique traditional sexism, we would like to be able to speak of the subordination of women, of attitudes toward women, of disparate impact on women, of women's shared interests, and so on. When we advocate for the rights of transgender and queer people, we would like to be able to understand what it is to identify as a man or a woman (or as not a man or not a woman), to name gendered oppression, to make sense of what it is to experience a gender transition, and so on.

But when we try to clarify the meanings of *woman*, *man*, and *gender*, we find that the main desiderata for such a semantics pull in apparently conflicting directions. On the one hand, it seems like the concepts of womanhood, manhood, and gender have *something* to do with sex biology and the social norms governing it. Without this, it's hard to see what about genders makes them genders, and so hard to make sense of what is distinctive about gendered oppression and about certain aspects of transgender subjectivity. On the other hand, we want to admit at least the conceptual possibility of gender coming apart from both sex biology and related social norms. This seems necessary at the level of individuals if we want to recognize the legitimacy of a full range of trans identities, and at the level of a society if we want to recognize the conceptual coherence of radical proposals to make membership in gender categories such as *woman* and *man* fully voluntary and consensual.

The rest of Section 1 sets up the problem. We begin by laying out some desiderata that an analysis of *woman* and *man* should satisfy: descriptively, it should link these gender categories to sex biology and social norms without reducing it to either. Politically, it should allow us to make sense of the activist view that gendering should be consensual. In section 2, we identify a feature, found in many existing analyses of *woman* and *man*, that we will go on to suggest is problematic. Using a thought experiment in the style of Putnam’s [1973, 1975] ‘Twin Earth’, we argue that none of them can meet all of the desiderata in section 1. In Section 3, we propose a positive account capable of meeting all the desiderata outlined in Section 1. According to our theory, the genders *woman* and *man* are individuated not by their contemporary connections to sex biology, but by their historical continuity with categories that were originally closely connected to sex biology. Our conclusion summarizes different aspects of the problem we set out to solve, and outlines directions for future research.

1.1 Genders Have To Do With Sex Biology And Social Norms

Many feminist theorists have distinguished between *gender*, a social category, and *sex*, a biological one. Classifying people as *women* or *men* (or neither or both) is a matter of gender, above and beyond attributing biological sex traits associated with distinct roles in reproduction. Gender is, as the slogan goes, the ‘social interpretation of sex’.¹

This formulation emphasizes that gender is not determined by sex biology, but it also presupposes that there is *some* connection between gender and sex biology. The connection seems more or less indispensable if we want the notion of a gender to have any special meaning at all. Human societies categorize people by all sorts of distinctions of rank, caste, clan, title, station, and order, but most of these distinctions are not distinctions of gender: *woman* and *man* are genders, while *noble*, *commoner*, *slave*, and *citizen* are not. Why is this? How, for that matter, do we recognize two categories of people in two different societies, subject to different laws and customs, and known by different words, as both picking out the

¹We are proposing a theory of social categories like *woman* and *man*. As George [2016] discusses, the term ‘gender’ is overloaded in potentially confusing ways; it is used to refer to various more-or-less psychological notions of personal gender identity, to various aspects of gendered behavior or gender presentation, and to systems of gender norms that connect these various components of the gender system to each other and to sex biology. Although we will make reference to some of these alternative meanings of ‘gender’, we aren’t trying here to offer a theory of any of them.

women in those societies? If we translate ‘mulieres’ in a classical Latin text using modern English ‘women’, then we have, plausibly, translated correctly. If we instead translate substantive uses of ‘plebeius’ with ‘woman’ (and use ‘women’ in our translations of sentences about ‘plebs’), then we have erred. What makes us right in the first case, and wrong in the second?

Or consider another pair of examples, involving the link between the concept of *gender* and the concept of *transgender*. Consider the case of Publius Clodius (né Claudius) Pulcher undertaking to transition, by means of adoption, from patrician to plebeian status. Some might argue that this case is *analogous* to a gender transition, but it seems clear that wasn’t one, and that it is not an event that belongs specially to transgender history. Likewise, (Sir) Patrick Stewart’s having been made Knight Bachelor does not place him within the special scope of transgender politics, and trans activists who opposed or were indifferent to Stewart’s being knighted cannot reasonably be accused of hypocrisy for failing to offer him solidarity as a fellow trans person. Why are some social category transitions gender transitions, while others are not?

The answer, in all these cases, seems to come back to sex biology. Not every woman has a vulva and ovaries, or lacks a penis and testes. Not every woman has two X chromosomes, or lacks a Y chromosome. Not every adult woman has relatively developed breasts and the capacity to bear children, or lacks relatively developed facial hair and the ability to sire them. But what justifies, or at least seems in practice to motivate, the move of identifying a category of people within a society as the women of that society (rather than as its citizens, slaves, nobles, or commoners), is some kind of connection with some biological traits of this sort. The same kind of connection with biology is more generally implicated in our understanding that some social categories and not others count as *genders*.

1.2 Gender Is Not Merely Sex Biology Or Conformity To Social Norms

We’ve argued that genders ought to have something to do with sex biology – that, for example, what makes a category within a society the category of women in that society ought to have some connection to biological characteristics associated with a female reproductive role. But gender is not merely sex biology, as numerous feminist scholars have argued [Beauvoir, 1952, Rubin, 1975, Mead,

1935, MacKinnon, 1989].² Queer and transgender activists emphasize the importance of distinguishing gender from sex biology at an individual level: someone's biological traits do not determine whether they are a man, a woman, or neither.

Furthermore, an individual's gender does not depend on their conformity to the gender stereotypes of their time and place: a woman who wears work jeans and fixes motorcycles is no more or less a woman than one who wears dresses and bakes cupcakes; a man who wears eyeliner and lipsyncs to Ke\$ha is no more or less a man than one who wears Axe Body Spray and headbangs to Slayer. But if your gender is not your sex biology, and it is not a matter of your conforming to social norms, what is it?

Imagine three characters – call them Ada, Blaise, and Cass. All three have 46,XX karyotypes, and have genitalia, gonads, fat distribution, and so on typical of this karyotype. All three speak in relatively deep voices, sport crew cuts, and wear trousers and button-up shirts bought in the 'Men's' section. All three are uninterested in men as sexual or romantic partners, but are attracted to women (and to similar assortments of nonbinary or ambiguous people). All three have the experience of being 'sir'-ed by strangers about half the time, and 'ma'am'-ed the other half of the time. None of them has ever taken exogenous sex hormones or had any surgical interventions intended to change their sex characteristics, and none has any particular plans to do either of these things. All three were raised as girls, and experienced adolescences made predictably unpleasant by a society that considered them all girls, and brought to bear its various toxic assumptions of compulsory femininity and compulsory androsexuality.³

Ada insists that she is a woman, and bristles when called 'sir' or 'him'. Blaise insists that he is a man and bristles when called 'ma'am' or 'her'. Cass insists that they are nonbinary. Perhaps, when pressed with 'But which are you *really*?', they

²Some feminist philosophers are skeptical about the sex/gender distinction, about the independence of sex from gendered social norms, or about the meaningfulness of distinguishing exactly two sex categories [Butler, 1999, Jaggar, 1983, Mikkola, 2011, Fausto-Sterling, 1993, 2000, Grosz, 1994, Prokhorovnik, 2002]. But our appeal to sexes is minimal. While we are committed to the existence of sex characteristics such as hormone levels, genitals, and the 46th chromosome, nothing we say requires sex categories to be exclusive, exhaustive, immutable, or two in number, or that sex categories or sex characteristics be wholly independent of social interpretation. It suffices that the biological sex characteristics be *some* understood family of characteristics which don't, on their own, furnish material for a complete account of the genders.

³The term 'compulsory heterosexuality', coined by Rich [1980], refers to the societal expectation that all women be heterosexual – i.e., sexually oriented toward men. We use the term *compulsory androsexuality* to discuss the expectation that someone perceived as a woman be sexually oriented toward men, without having to assume that the person is a woman.



Figure 1: Brantz [2017] on Consensual and Coercive Gendering

answer that they're 'a cactus' with a laugh that hides more than a little frustration. They bristle about equally at 'sir' and 'ma'am' (when pressed, they may suggest 'elder' and 'comrade' as alternatives), and are about equally uncomfortable with feminine and masculine gendered pronouns.

We think that, barring exceptional circumstances, the facts described above give us good reason to presume that these characters have distinct gender-category membership: Ada is a cisgender butch lesbian, Blaise is an unremarkably masculine heterosexual trans man, and Cass is a nonbinary person who is from time to time compelled to awkwardly struggle for a succinct, socially acceptable description of their patterns of attraction. In the next section, we spell out the central political principle behind these claims about Ada, Blaise, and Cass. We hope you agree, but what matters here is that this assessment of these characters' genders is produced by the practices of certain sizable cultural spaces, and is a consequence of many of our political commitments. Our main goal in this article is to show that these commitments and practices are self-consistent.

1.3 Self-Identification and Consensual Gendering

Many queer and trans activists oppose the coercive assignment of people to gender categories. They hope to create a world where gender ascription is based on **self-identification**, or voluntarily opting into the category in question. Bornstein [Bornstein, 1994], for instance, advocates an ideal that she calls 'consensual gender' (playing off the phrase 'consensual sex'), and contrasts it with the current

practice, where gender categories are imposed on people without their consent.⁴

We're born: a doctor assigns us a gender. It's documented by the state, enforced by the legal profession, sanctified by the church, and it's bought and sold in the media. We have no say in our gender – we're not allowed to question it, play with it, work it out with our friends, lovers, or family.

Gender is not consensual. [Bornstein, 1994, 123].

By contrast, Bornstein writes, consensual gender 'is respecting each other's definitions of gender,' 'doesn't force its way in on anyone,' and 'welcomes all people as gender outcasts – whoever is willing to admit to it' [Bornstein, 1994, 124]. (Similar ideas appear in [Serano, 2007b, 166], [Feinberg, 1998, 1], and [Bettcher, 2009] and are ubiquitous in trans activism and social justice internet culture.)

Our current methods for sorting people into gender categories are non-consensual in several different ways. First, children are assigned a sex and a gender at or before birth, long before they are able to consent or to refuse. Second, people are marked from infancy onward (with gendered names and pronouns, color-coded clothing, etc.) so that others can identify their sex and gender with minimal effort—all without regard for their privacy—and coercively pushed into one of two gender roles, with burdensome expectations for behavior and appearance.

Finally, if, having reached an age where consent is possible, someone rejects their original assignment, they are liable to have their gender self-ascriptions met with denial or suspicion, or to have respect for them made contingent on stereotype conformity or body modification.

Under a system of self-identification, things would play out very differently. On a weak understanding of what the ideals of consent require, children might be presumptively assigned to gender categories at birth, but their proclamations about their own gender would be sufficient for moving them from one category to another. A stronger ideal is explored in the satirical children's book *X: A Fabulous Child's Story*, where parents raise 'Xperimental' child, baby X, without classifying it as a boy or a girl, or imposing any gendered expectations on it [Gould, 1978]. (Today, some families are raising baby Xes of their own [Green and Friedman, 2013].)

⁴The term 'consensual gender' is a little infelicitous, insofar as it suggests that category *membership*, rather than category *ascription*, should be consensual. It's not clear that a person's *being* male or female is the kind of thing that admits of consent—maybe it is determined by features of their personality beyond anyone's conscious control. But one person's *sorting* another into a gender category can be consensual or not.

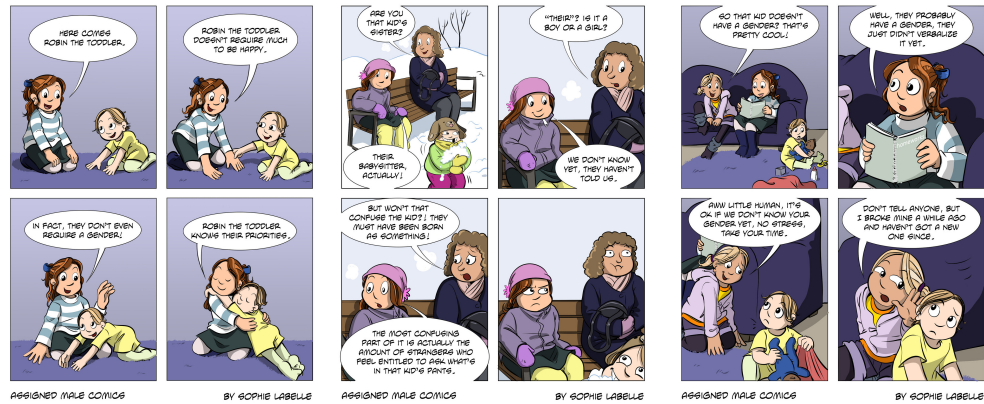


Figure 2: Labelle [2018a,b,c] on Consensual and Coercive Gendering

Activist cartoonists Brantz [2017] and Labelle [2018a,b,c,d,e,f] provide other depictions of this stronger ideal. Brantz (Figure 1.3) satirizes pre-natal ‘gender-reveal parties’, where expectant parents reveal a pink or blue color-coded signal (such as dyed cake, or a balloon inside a box) revealing whether their fetus is a boy or a girl. Regardless of physiology, Brantz suggests, the only correct answer is ‘however they identify’. Labelle (Figures 1.3 and 1.3) depicts a happy toddler who has not yet expressed any affirmative gender identity being referred to as ‘they’, and engaged happily in play, largely oblivious to others’ distress at being unable to gender them.

As trans people have by steps pushed past medical and media gatekeepers to a measure of voice and visibility on our own terms (see Stone [2006], Serano [2007a], and Bettcher [2007]), many of us have publicly insisted that self-identification suffices, and that our declared genders are not diminished, invalidated, or called into question by our appearances, our medical circumstances, or our dispositions regarding these (see, e.g., Jones [2013], Taylor [2013], and Finch [2013] for representative activist writings on these themes).⁵

The thought motivating all these authors is that imposing gender from the outside is wrong; individuals should have a say about which categories they belong

⁵That is, we have come to distinguish *social* transition from *medical* transition, to insist that neither of these is a prerequisite for the other, and that there is no right or wrong list of life changes required for a legitimate social transition (e.g., people should not have to change their grooming and attire to change their pronouns or update their identity documents). See Beemyn and Rankin [2011] and James et al. [2015] for extended discussion of how varied trans people are in their medical and social needs.

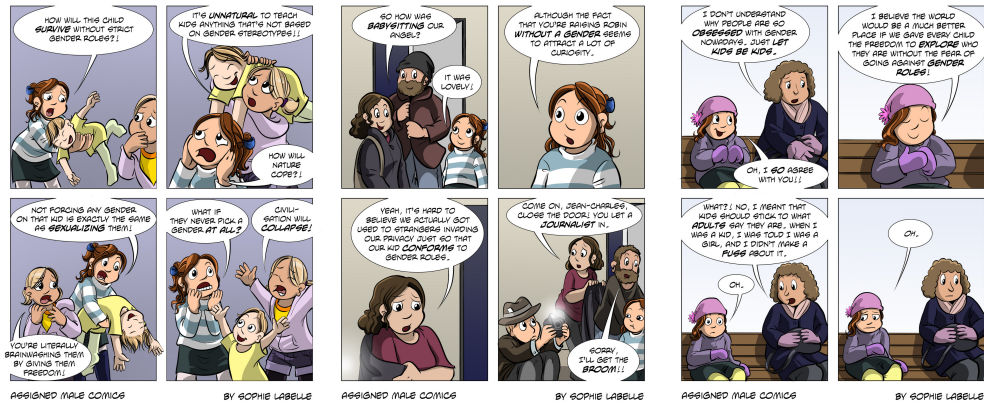


Figure 3: Labelle [2018d,e,f] on Consensual and Coercive Gendering (continued)

to, including gender categories like *woman* and *man*. Recognized membership in categories like *woman* and *man* should be adjudicated based on the communicated wishes of the person being gendered, not the perceptions and projections of outsiders. A child with typical female physiology who is not assigned a gender at birth (suppose they receive roughly the baby X upbringing), but in time comes, of her own accord, to identify as a girl (and, later, as a woman) is still choosing how she is gendered, just as much as a child of typical male physiology who has the same upbringing arrives at the same self-identification. Neither individual should be required to undergo any medical interventions to legitimize her category membership.⁶

Before we proceed, it's worth noting explicitly that the activist 'party line' is not that nonverbal infants (or people who have otherwise never communicated a gender self-identification) have no gender, but only that their membership in gender categories is *unknown*. Likewise, it does not exclude the possibility of a person being mistaken about their gender (as many trans people feel we were at some prior point in our lives), or even lying about their gender (as many of us were compelled to do prior to beginning our public transitions). The view is that communicated sincere self-identification is necessary and sufficient to justify *ascription* of category membership or non-membership.⁷ A commitment to con-

⁶This is consistent with the claim that the just society should provide access to medical transition interventions, which can be tremendously important for any of a variety of reasons. It merely says that the just society shouldn't demand such interventions as a condition of category membership.

⁷An earlier-circulated version of this paper was not sufficiently careful in making this distinc-

sensual gendering is first and foremost a claim about our political responsibilities with respect to our labeling practices, but it is *in principle* possible for the resulting pattern of membership and non-membership ascriptions to be wholly accurate.

1.4 The Incoherence Objection

We, the authors, find the idea of consensual gendering politically compelling. Some trans-antagonistic and trans-suspicious activists and philosophers, however, have gone beyond claiming that this practice is politically unpalatable (we of course disagree) or that it is not the current practice (this is demonstrably true, outside of certain pockets of queer culture), to argue that it is in principle incoherent. This incoherence claim is often used to suggest that advocates of consensual gendering must really be getting at something else, and to ascribe to us confused or nefarious motives. We will respond to these objections by developing a theory of the gender-categories *woman* and *man* that allows category ascription to be fully consensual, and discuss how this approach can accommodate and make sense of other kinds of genders.

At this point, readers tend to express one of two diametrically opposed objections to our project. One is from the standpoint of skeptics about consensual gendering; the other is from the standpoint of its proponents.

If you object to consensual gendering, you be disappointed that this paper does not defend it. Our aim is more modest: to encourage you to take the ideas of queer and trans activists seriously, by showing that philosophers have been too quick to dismiss them as incoherent or naïve. You may or may not agree with our desiderata for an account of gender, but, if you are tolerant of the kinds of semantic and metaphysical tools that have been left lying around in the workshop of analytic philosophy, we hope to convince you, at least, that a person or community *could* coherently conceive of gender in a way that meets these desiderata.

If you already advocate consensual gendering, you might be appalled that we think it needs defending. Why should trans people need the permission of academic philosophers to live as they please? As a matter of fact, we don't think anyone's permission is required for trans legitimacy; neither of us waited for the approval of the philosophical community before starting our transitions. However, we believe that philosophical foundations are valuable to queer, feminist, and transgender activism. We also think of our theory not as a replacement for more direct forms of activism, but as a supplement to them. These foundations

tion, as [Barnes, forthcoming, fn 22] points out.

can help us combat arguments that have too often been used to undermine the legitimacy of trans people's lives and identities. So, whatever your views on consensual gendering, we hope you will hear us out.

Consider Reilly-Cooper [2015], who argues that consensual gendering immediately collapses into incoherence.

If we take an individual's self-declared gender identity as the sole necessary and sufficient condition for membership in a gender class, the result is that *the meaning of the word "woman" is reduced to a subjective mental state, to a feeling in a person's head.* ... If the word woman is defined as "someone who thinks they are a woman", then the word woman becomes meaningless, and can no longer be the name of anything. The political implication of that is that *women as a class disappear.*

(emphasis Reilly-Cooper's)

A common further inference from these incoherence claims is that individual trans people's self-identifications must reflect beliefs about which of their behaviors or dispositions are incompatible with their assigned genders. On this view, it would be incoherent for Cass to understand the similarities between themselves, Blaise, and Ada, and nevertheless assert that they are neither a woman nor a man, while Ada is the former and Blaise is the latter. We are told that Cass must *really* purport to possess some personality trait that is in principle incompatible with womanhood. This would deny Ada either that personality trait or her status as a woman in good standing, both of which would be appalling, and if Cass's identifying as nonbinary in fact necessitated all of this, it would be a serious criticism of Cass. Versions of this claim are found in popular articles [Reilly-Cooper, 2016], [Jensen, 2015], and [Stock, 2018], and in at least one semi-recent academic article [McKittrick, 2007].

These authors typically refuse to consider more than three options: gender is a biological reproductive category; gender category membership is a matter of conforming to stereotypes; or gender category membership is some kind of private mental state – where they take this third option to be incoherent or otherwise unacceptable. Allen [2018] lays out the options as follows, in a blog post on Medium.

But, once one divorces gender from biological sex like this, it is very difficult to see what the gender categories man and woman are. Either

being a woman is associated with gender roles, social roles and behaviour which women typically perform, or it is based on something internal to a person, the feeling of being a woman, perhaps.

Allen argues that feelings about womanhood are legitimate only if they have an identifiable biological basis since

‘woman’ has no meaning if it can mean different things to different individuals in virtue of private, subjective feelings when no-one has a way to ascertain whether the feelings reported by different people are of the same type.

and concludes that

We either need to bring biology back into the picture... or we need to be done with gender entirely and say that ‘woman’ picks out neither a natural nor a socially constructed kind.

[Reilly-Cooper, 2016] offers an even narrower range of options.

Gender is the value system that ties desirable (and sometimes undesirable?) behaviours and characteristics to reproductive function. Once we’ve decoupled those behaviours and characteristics from reproductive function – which we should – and once we’ve rejected the idea that there are just two types of personality and that one is superior to the other – which we should – what can it possibly mean to continue to call this stuff ‘gender’?

These arguments are not, alas, idle exercises in philosophical skepticism with no connection to public debate. Opposition to consensual gendering is a recurring feature of transphobic and trans-exclusionary advocacy and harassment. Trans-exclusionary feminists have opposed reforms to laws like the UK’s 2004 Gender Recognition Act [Hinsliff, 2018] and New Zealand’s Births, Deaths, Marriages and Relationships Registration Bill [Small] that would make it simpler for trans people to change the gender markers on their legal IDs. In the US, a 2017 memo from the Department of Health and Human Services proposes to block trans people from legal gender recognition altogether, suggesting that “The sex listed on a person’s birth certificate, as originally issued, shall constitute definitive proof of a person’s sex unless rebutted by reliable genetic evidence” on the grounds that (only) such a definition is “is clear, grounded in science, objective and administrable” [Green et al., 2018].

The costs are cultural as well as narrowly legal. Arguments against consensual gendering are intimately connected with accusations that trans women (or on those perceived to be trans woman) have a reductive view of womanhood, with efforts to paint trans men as confused tomboys or self-hating lesbians, with dismissals of nonbinary folks as ‘special snowflakes’, and with numerous other lines of attack. We can attest that we have, in both activist and philosophical spaces, had the experience of people ignoring our testimony as trans people and explaining to us what our gender identifications must *really* mean. Thus, the allegation of incoherence underlies the use of a kind of interpretive charity as a tool of testimonial injustice and collective defamation.

We will show that this incoherence-based dismissal is not warranted, by developing an account that allows for the possibility of gendering everyone by self-identification.⁸ In part 2, we will point to features of popular theories of *woman* and *man* that, we argue, make them ill-suited to accommodate the possibility of consensual gendering. In part 3, we develop a positive theory of *woman* and *man* which shares the advantages of previously developed theories, but allows for the possibility of fully consensual gendering for everyone.

2 Defining Genders

Many contemporary theories of the categories *woman* and *man* share two key features.

First, they are *material*: their criteria of womanhood and manhood make reference only to facts about sex biology, outward appearance, behavioral dispositions, social norms, experience of privilege and subordination and the like. That is, they refer exclusively to the material circumstances of biology, behavior, and power relations within the society.

Second, they are *ahistorical*: they entail that who counts as a man or a woman at a given time is determined by facts about sex, social norms, power relations etc. *at that time*.⁹ In metaphysics jargon, gender properties in a community C at a time *t* *strongly globally supervene* on the state of C at *t*, together with the

⁸We are claiming only that this is a metaphysical and semantic possibility. We leave open the possibility that nontrivial fully consensual gendering might lead to an intrinsically unstable social configuration. It might be that adopting fully consensual gendering would lead to the end of the gender categories through lack of interest, but we don’t take this question to bear directly on the question of coherence.

⁹Here *times* may be short spans, rather than instants.

individual's biological traits and position within C at t : whenever two worlds have the same overall pattern of sex, social norms, etc. at a time, they also have the same distribution of genders at that time [see McLaughlin and Bennett, 2014, 4.2.3].

Materiality and ahistoricity seem like appealing features for any analysis of gender. They pin gender classification to a manageable set of relevant ingredients – sex, social norms, and power. They are shared, trivially, by naïve biological accounts of gender, such as those that equate manhood and womanhood with particular genomic properties or a particular genital configuration. They are also shared (or approximately shared) by many leading definitions of *woman* and *man* in the feminist literature.

Haslanger [2012] defends one prominent pair of material, ahistorical definitions.

(SH) S is a *woman* iff_{df} S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is 'marked' as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction.

S is a *man* iff_{df} S is systematically privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is 'marked' as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male's biological role in reproduction [Haslanger, 2012, 230].

Other material, ahistorical accounts are given by Hale [1996], Daly [207] and Stoljar [1995], who characterize womanhood in terms of sufficiently approximating clusters of anatomical and social characteristics, and by Saul [2012], who claims that attributions of womanhood or manhood are correct just in case the object of the attribution is relevantly similar to most of those possessing certain biological markers (where standards of relevant similarity are contextually determined). These theories are not *essentially* ahistorical, since one could include historical features in either the cluster of relevant properties or the contextually supplied standards of similarity, but discussion in these papers is focused almost exclusively on material, ahistorical membership criteria.¹⁰

¹⁰The one exception to this rule is appeal to self-identification in Hale and Saul, which we do not have the space to treat in detail. We will note that self-identification raises a circularity worry: if being a woman is defined in part by a person's tendency to identify *as a woman*, something

Although ahistorical, material accounts are both common and intuitively appealing, we will argue that they are too limited, and should be replaced with a historical account.

2.1 Twin Planets

We want to put some pressure on accounts that seek to give a complete semantics of a kind term in terms of some constrained set of facts (the material facts) in the here-and-now, without any regard for the history associated with those kind terms and the corresponding kind-concepts. Put this way, our project bears an obvious resemblance to externalist, anti-descriptivist, causal-history-dependent accounts of kind terms and proper names, so it should be unsurprising that our main thought experiment borrows certain aspects of its science-fiction setup from Hilary Putnam's [1973, 1975] 'Twin Earth' thought experiments.

Imagine two (more or less monocultural) worlds. The first, Patriarcha, is like many contemporary Earth societies: nominally liberal and egalitarian, but with persistent social roles that systematically disadvantage some people relative to others based on their physical characteristics. Patriarchal society is divided into *blokes*, a privileged group of people assumed to possess typically male biological traits, and *sheilas*, a subordinated group of people assumed to possess typically female biological traits. Children are typically classified as blokes or sheilas at or before birth, usually based on inspection of their genitals. Blokes are stereotyped as strong and aggressive; sheilas are stereotyped as weak, nurturing, and decorative. (The sociobiologists of Patriarcha design elaborate justifications for these stereotypes, which we need not rehash here.) It seems intuitively correct to say that the blokes on Patriarcha are men, while the sheilas are women, and definitions like **(SH)** bear this out.

The second world, Amazonia, is a mirror image Patriarcha. It too is nominally liberal and egalitarian, but with two persistent social roles (assigned at or before birth based on genitals) that favor some people and disadvantage others. Amazonian society is divided into *grrrls*, a privileged group of people assumed to possess typically female biological traits, and *bois*, a subordinated group of people assumed to possess typically male biological traits. Grrrls are stereotyped as strong and aggressive; Amazonian sociobiologists argue that this is a hard-wired

further needs to be said about the object of this identification. Our proposal in Section 3.3 resolves this type of circularity by separating out the category *woman* as a persistent social entity and object of identification from the criteria for *being a woman*.

consequence of the innate drive to defend one's young. Bois, meanwhile, are stereotyped as weak, nurturing, and decorative; Amazonian sociobiologists conjecture that bois, who evolved to compete for female attention, are naturally suited to be decorative, invest in the hard work of housecleaning and childcare, and cater to grrrls' needs.

According to our intuition about the ordinary use of the terms 'woman' and 'man', grrrls are women and bois are men. Haslanger's definitions (**SH**) entail that Amazonia contains no women and no men, since grrrls are not systematically subordinated and bois are not systematically advantaged. Haslanger's account could be modified to give verdicts that agree with our intuition [see Mikkola, 2009], but whether we so modify it is beside the point; on any reasonable theory, bois are not women, and grrrls are not men.

Now imagine that Patriarcha and Amazonia become more progressive about gender, but only in a very limited way. Rather than abolishing gendered associations altogether, both worlds liberalize the criteria for membership in their (previously) female-associated and male-associated categories. People born with typically male biological traits are allowed to transition to the *sheila* and *grrrl* categories; people born with typically female biological traits are allowed to transition to the *bloke* and *boi* categories. Eventually, assignment of roles at birth is abandoned, and children are identified simply as *kids* until they affirmatively express an identity as grrrls or bois (in the Amazonian case) or blokes or sheilas (in the Patriarchal case). We will assume that most kids, perhaps all, eventually pick one recognized role or the other.

Through all these changes, the roles themselves remain largely intact, but the demographics of the two worlds shift until there is no correlation at all between gender role and biological sex characteristics. The *bloke* and *grrrl* categories may be composed disproportionately (though not exclusively) of rough-and-tumble types who are relatively well-equipped to satisfy their norms, but roughly half of all blokes and half of all grrrls possess typically female biology. (Similarly for sheilas and bois, with appropriate substitutions.) Patriarchs and Amazons continue to treat gender categories as important (and, problematically, they still use them as a basis for differential treatment), but they come to accept that there is no necessary connection between biology and gender.¹¹

The demographic shifts on Patriarcha and Amazonia uncouple *grrrl*, *boi*, *bloke*,

¹¹For simplicity, we ignore the issue of medical transition. We can stipulate that both Patriarchal and Amazonian society place difficult-to-justify constraints on bodily self-determination which prevent anyone from medically transitioning.

and *sheila* from their biological associations without destroying them as categories. Membership in these categories has come to more closely resemble a consensual gendering arrangement, although unjust discriminatory norms for the categories persist. Since blokes are men and sheilas are women before the demographic shift, it seems that blokes are men and sheilas are women after the demographic shift too. Furthermore, since grrrls are not men (and plausibly are women) and bois are not women (and plausibly are men) before the demographic shift, it seems that grrrls are still not men (and plausibly are women) and bois are still not women (and plausibly are men) after the demographic shift.

While the preservation of the manhood of blokes, the non-manhood of grrrls, and so on across this shift is not logically necessitated by what we've said so far about Patriarcha and Amazonia, we take this picture to fit best with our understanding of the legitimacy of trans identities and the conceptual possibility of determining gender by self-identification, rather than biology. If future circumstances conspire so that trans people outnumber cis people, while people who are neither men nor women remain a relatively small minority, then the (cis or trans) men of that future will still be men, and the (cis or trans) women will still be women – saying otherwise seems to treat trans identities as probationary or second-rate.¹² Since it seems that 'bloke' and 'sheila' just are the words in Patriarchal English that pick out men and women, the preceding considerations ought to apply equally to blokes and sheilas, and, once this is granted, the formal symmetries involve make it hard to avoid treating grrrls and bois analogously.

But now we come to a problem: after the demographic shift, the *grrrl* and *bloke* categories are indistinguishable in ahistorical, material terms. On the input side, there is no longer any significant difference between the characteristics that result in someone's being classified as a grrrl on Amazonia and the characteristics that result in their being classified as a bloke on Patriarcha. Membership in both categories is determined by self-identification. And on the output side, the same social norms govern grrrls and blokes, and both groups represent the same diversity of sex characteristics. (Likewise for bois and sheilas). So by any material, ahistorical account, Patriarchal blokes are men if and only if Amazonian grrrls are men. Our position that blokes are men and grrrls aren't (and are probably women besides), is thus incompatible with any account of this type.

Our thought experiment is fanciful, but it makes a serious point. On the one

¹²Bettcher [2013, 241] articulates a positive version of the requirement that trans women's should gender status not be treated as second-rate. She writes that "'trans woman' applies *unproblematically* and *without qualification* to *all* self-identified trans women', and 'being a trans woman is a sufficient condition for being a woman' (emphasis Bettcher's).

hand, a commitment to the possibility of consensual gendering and the full authenticity of trans identities seems to require that gender categories can survive changes in membership criteria and demographic makeup that sever gender from sex. On the other hand, a theoretical commitment to a ahistorical, material approach, together with the details of the Patriarcha and Amazonia examples, seems to entail that gender categories will not reliably survive changes of this kind. Something has to give.

3 Sketch of a Theory of Genders

Below, we try to resolve the tension between the goal of individual level independence of sex and gender, and the need for gender categories to be in some way rooted in sex distinctions. Our account will appeal to a historical theory of gender to explain how even after the demographic shifts on Amazonia and Patriarcha, the blokes of Patriarcha can remain men, while the grrrls of Amazonia remain non-men.

We begin with a review of some themes from Bach [2012], who, like us, holds that genders have historical essences. After sketching Bach's theory and highlighting some of its problems, we'll discuss our alternative (but related) approach.

3.1 Bach's Theory

For Bach, to be a woman or a man is to be a member of a historical lineage. To explain what this means, he draws on the analogy of Nissan Sentra transmission. "A hunk of steel comes to belong to the historical kind Sentra Transmission if it is a reproduction of a lineage of Sentra Transmissions – if it is sculpted and pounded according to a historically specified Nissan design plan [Bach, 2012, 259]." Similarly, a human counts as a woman if that human is a copy of other women. A person need not conform to any given gender stereotype in order to count as a woman; rather

If a particular female has undergone the ontogenetic process through which one exemplifies a participatory relation to a lineage of women, then even if she fails to exemplify any of the properties of women's historical gender role, she is still a woman because she has the right history [Bach, 2012, 261]

Bach's theory is historical at the individual level; he holds that to be a woman or a man is to arise from the right type of historical lineage [Bach, 2012, 246]. It is also historical at a more abstract level. Among the components of a gender system that Bach proposes to analyze historically are binary sex categories; gender stereotypes; gender identities; gender socialization; social and legal institutions; artifacts like dolls, dresses, toy soldiers; and binary gender roles [Bach, 2012, 247-248].

All of these things count as gendered, according to Bach, because they are reproductions of earlier elements in a certain type of historical lineage. One might wonder what exactly this reproduction consists in. What makes an individual woman a copy of her mother, female peers, or female authority figures (so that she counts as a woman) but not a copy of her father, male peers, or male authority figures (so that she does not also count as a man)? We can understand what it is for one skirt or toy truck to be copied from another, but what is it for one binary sex category or gender identity to be copied from another?

Bach's discussion of reproduction emphasizes two points. First, he claims that items in the social ontology (including categories, stereotypes, identities, etc.) count as gendered insofar as they help support a self-sustaining gender system. Second, he claims that individuals get their genders by being either genetically constituted or socially conditioned in a way that gives them the function of conforming to gender roles. (To have the function of conforming to a gender role isn't to conform to it, but to be such that the internal standards of the gender system say that you should.)

We represent Bach's theory by the drawing in Figure 1. The concept *woman* at a given time applies to all the people who are women at that time. Those people get to be women by being copies of the previous generation's women (presumably through a process of identity formation based on the previous generation's *woman* category). These categories count as *woman* categories because they play the appropriate role in preserving a self-sustaining gender system.

By treating genders as lineages, Bach is able to accommodate a great deal of gender diversity: there is no physical or psychological property that individual women must share with each other. But Bach's account still tells us something about what it is to be a gender and how genders relate to sex biology: in order to count as a stable gender system, a system must be connected to binary sex roles.

Bach's approach has a number of limitations that make it unsuitable for our purposes. First consider Amazonia and Patriarcha: once the *sheila* category is detached from sex biology, what makes sheilas women (or, indeed, makes *sheila* a gender at all)? An analogous problem arises for the more quotidian example

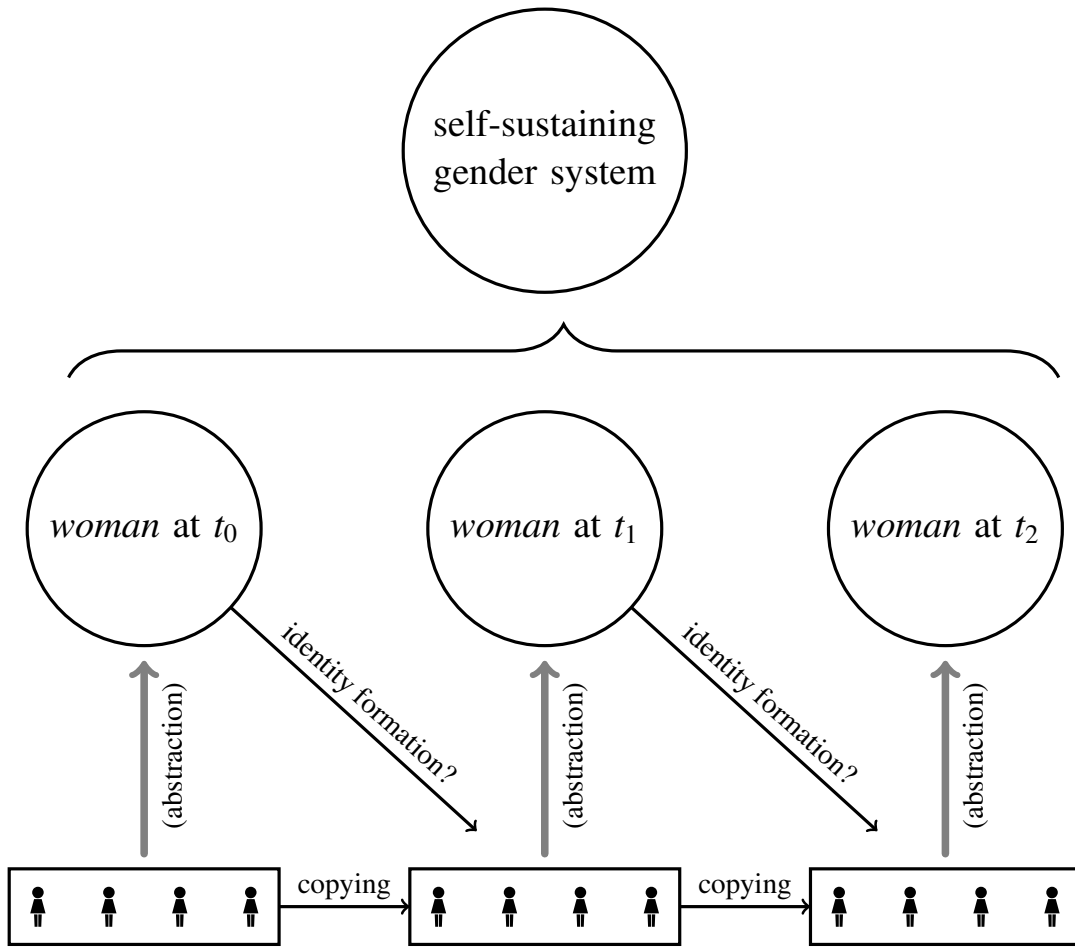


Figure 4: Bach's theory of lineages.

of Ada, Blaise, and Cass. What makes it the case that Ada springs from the woman lineage (and not the man lineage), while Blaise springs from the man lineage (and not the woman lineage), and Cass springs from neither? Bach’s explicit discussion of trans politics suggests that trans people become men or women by making themselves into copies of men or women, or in Bach’s terminology “initiating those ontogenetic processes that transform individuals into reproductions of whichever gender lineage they were not originally assigned [Bach, 2012, 269].” For him, people in the midst of a gender transition are borderline cases of men and women. So while his theory allows for individuals to have some control over their gender category membership, it can’t simultaneously do justice to Ada, Blaise, and Cass, all of whom this kind of account will have to assign to the same gender. Worse, it’s hard to see how, on Bach’s account, gender category membership can be granted without sufficiently good copying of stereotypically male or female traits. If we want butch women – including butch trans women – to count as women, Bach’s account will not do the job.

One further difficulty is worth noting: Bach doesn’t offer an account of non-binary gender identities. His comments on intermediate status suggest a way for people to be neither men nor women, but it’s hard to see how this can make sense of the diversity of nonbinary identities, including culturally persistent “third genders”. Bach’s theory seems to reduce nonbinary status to non-conformity to one’s assigned gender norms, erasing the nuances of nonbinary experience and endorsing exactly the picture that drives the political attack on nonbinary identity in [Reilly-Cooper, 2016].

Below, we outline our own theory, which is similar to Bach’s, but does a much better job accounting for the possibility of consensual gendering.

3.2 Our Historical Theory of *Woman* and *Man*

Our proposal begins with ahistorical, material gender concepts that link gender to sex, but adds historical modifications that allow for the legitimacy of gendering based on self-identification. To begin, we say that:

A Primordial F (M) Category is a material, ahistorical recognized category within a society for which membership is adjudicated by members of the society based primarily on biological traits understood as directly or indirectly associated with a specifically female (male) reproductive role, or on being perceived (perhaps inaccurately) to have any of these characteristics.

The *woman* and *man* concepts of **(SH)** are plausibly characterized as picking out primordial F and M categories, respectively.¹³ At the earliest stage of our story above, *grrrl* and *sheila* were plausibly primordial F categories, and *boi* and *bloke* were plausibly primordial M categories.

Unlike Bach's theory, our theory is not historical at the level of individuals. We do not claim that to be a woman is to belong to a certain lineage. Rather, our theory is historical at the level of categories, which are not just arbitrary sets of individuals (or set-intensions), but social objects recognized by the community. In order for something to count as an F (M) category, the community must have the expressive resources to pick out the category, and moreover must ascribe it meaning as a social institution.

We hold that gender categories can persist through change, just as individuals do. Instead of talking in terms of reproduction, therefore, we talk in terms of persistence. And unless it undergoes a drastic change, an F(M) category that persists will remain an F(M) category. Thus, we can say that:

A Historical F (M) Category is a category descended (perhaps trivially)¹⁴ from a Primordial F (M) category by the right sort of causal continuity.

Like the christenings sometimes supposed to lie at the beginnings of the causal chains in a causal theory of names [see Kripke, 1980], the primordial classes are something of an idealization. A more mature version of this account would, no doubt, recognize them as part of the 'clean' version of the story that serves to motivate the concept, but that may in many actual societies be more a matter of mythology than of history. The genesis and maintenance of these types of classes in the real world is poorly understood, but is presumably complex in ways that are at odds with hypothesizing an era of perfectly ahistorical primordial gender classes. On an intuitive level, we want to say that some classes that do not literally conform to this mythology have a history that is, for all interesting cultural purposes, closely enough approximated by it to allow them to count as historical F (M) classes. The exact implementation of this is left as a problem for the future.

We also leave open the general question of what constitutes the right sort of causal continuity (just as Bach has left open the question of what counts as reproducing a lineage), but we can point to particular cases where the right sort of

¹³We can reasonably say that **(SH)** makes category membership *primarily* a matter of biological traits, even though it also depends partly on domination and subordination.

¹⁴We take being the category G at time *t* to be the trivial case of being descended from G as it existed at *t*.

causal continuity is present. Here on Earth, gender categories are handed off from one generation to the next by a variety of social and institutional practices, including gender markers on legal documents, gendered personal names, gendered clothing and other gendered artifacts, and informal social norms that govern the conduct of male and female people. (See Bach's paper for an extended discussion of some of these mechanisms.) Similarly, we assume that on Patriarcha and Amazonia, the categories *bloke*, *sheila*, *grrrl* and *boi* have the right sort of continuity across the demographic shift.

In any contemporary anglophone society, *woman* and *man* pick out important F and M categories. In order to make sense of the inclination to speak of Amazonian grrrls or Patriarchal sheilas as women, we would like to have a notion of when it is appropriate to identify an F (M) category in one society as the correct 'translation' of an F (M) category in another society. Unfortunately, we are not at present equipped to offer a full theory of correspondence of gender categories across societies, so we will limit ourselves to a first attempt at the problem of women and men. We propose that the English terms *woman* and *man* (and presumably the corresponding words in other languages) do not refer to specific categories, but express properties held by categories that occupy a certain social historical positions in their societies. The definition below provides that attempt: it covers the simple case where a society has a unique F (M) category, and is silent otherwise.

The Category of Women¹⁵ (preliminary definition) in a society/community C is the unique historical F category in C, if C has a unique historical F category.

The Category of Men (preliminary definition) in a society/community C is the unique historical M category in C, if C has a unique historical M category.

Nothing in our account of historical F (M) categories requires that a society have only one F category and only one M category. If a society ends up with more than one historical F category, how are we to decide which one (if any) to identify as the category of women? Sometimes, there will be a 'main' F category that wins out, where we can develop the notion of a 'main' F category in one of several ways; for example:

¹⁵If we think, following Haslanger, that subordination is essential to womanhood, and dominance or privilege essential to manhood, this would be one plausible point at which to build in these requirements.

The Category of Women (salience definition) in a society/community *C* is the most salient historical *F* category in *C*, if *C* has a unique such *F* category.

The Category of Women (generality definition) in a society/community *C* is the most general historical *F* category in *C*, of which all others are conceived of as (at least approximately) special cases, if *C* has a unique such *F* category.

The Category of Women (cardinality definition) in a society/community *C* is the historical *F* category in *C* that under non-anomalous circumstances has the most numerous generally recognized members, if *C* has a unique such *F* category.

(Analogous extensions are possible for the category of men.)

When there is not even a clear ‘main’ historical *F* category, things get harder. In a society with two (more-or-less) disjoint historical *F* categories of roughly equal status, how should we make sense of the notion of *woman*? One option is to say that the membership of *woman* is indeterminate; another is to identify *woman* as the union/disjunction of all of a society’s historical *F* categories; and yet another is to say that *woman* is inapplicable in such a society—that there truly are no women. Since such scenarios are not our focus here, we leave all these options on the table, and move on.

The structure of our account is shown in figure 2. At the left is a primordial *F* (*M*) category, which gains its status as an *F* category by being anchored to biological sex characteristics. As time passes, historical *F* categories (depicted at the center and right) evolve from the primordial category. Gender categories are handed down from one generation to the next using a variety of social institutions – practices of printing gender markers on legal document, social expectations linked to gender, and so forth. The *F* categories continue to count as *F* categories because there is a path of historical continuity linking each category to its progenitor and leading back to a primordial *F* category, which is in turn anchored to biological sex characteristics. If there are no other *F* categories, then each *F* category pictured is the category of women at the time when it exists.

Our theory delivers the right verdicts in the case of Amazonia and Patriarcha. Before the demographic shift, *sheila* and *grrrl* are the only primordial *F* categories in their respective societies, while *bloke* and *boi* are the only primordial *M* categories. Therefore, sheilas and grrrls are women, while blokes and bois are men.

Since most characteristics of the genders on Patriarcha and Amazonia are relatively stable across the demographic shift, *sheila* and *grrrl* persist and remain

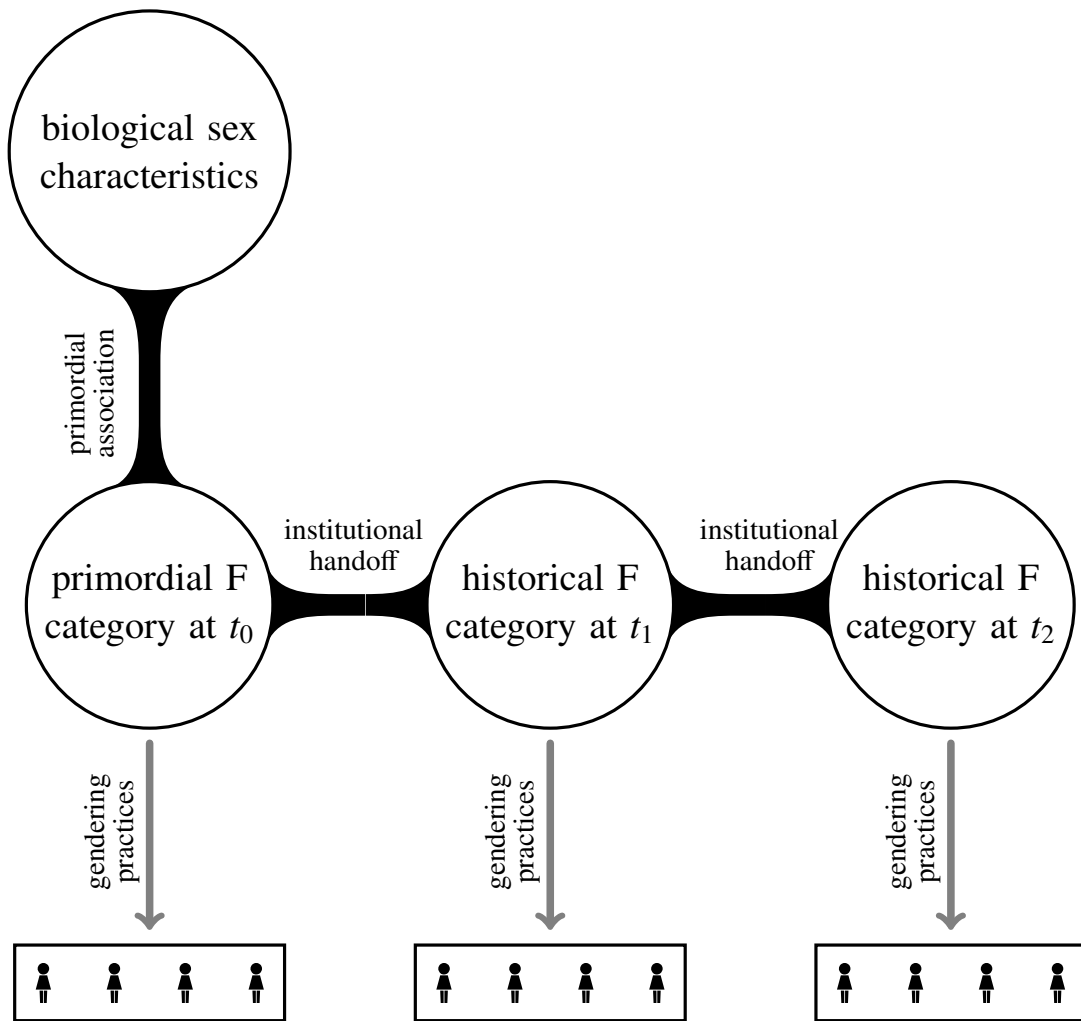


Figure 5: Our theory of women and men.

historical F categories, while *bloke* and *boi* remain historical M categories. No other categories are introduced, so (we may reasonably assume) each society has only one historical M category and one historical F category; thus, even by our preliminary definitions of *woman* and *man*, sheilas and grrrls are still women, while blokes and bois are still men.

Returning to the motivations of section 1, we can see that our characterization accounts for the link between gender and sex biology by ensuring that at some point in history, biological sex characteristics must play an important role in the society's criteria for gender category membership. Yet it allows for the possibility of consensual gendering at a societal level.

So far, we have advanced a theory of what it is for a category to be a gender, and of what it is for a gender to be a category of women or a category of men, but we have said nothing about which people are women (or men, or nonbinary. . .).¹⁶ Barnes [forthcoming] argues that a theory of gender categories is not and need not be a theory of category membership. While this is true, we aim to show that it's coherent to claim Ada is a woman, Blaise is a man, and Cass is neither. For this, we need some theory of category membership Section 3.3 surveys several options, each compatible with our theory of gender categories, which yield this judgment. Our aim is not to adjudicate among these theories, but to provide a sense of what's possible.

3.3 Belonging to Gender Categories

Societies generally have some practices for adjudicating membership in the categories they recognize, so let's begin with that:

X is Gendered as a G in community C (where G is any gender category of C)
iff C's practices of adjudicating category membership would place X in the G category.

X is Gendered as a woman (man) in community C iff there is a category G in C such that X is gendered as a G and G is the category of women (men) in C.

Haslanger's theory equates being a woman (man, G) with being gendered as a woman (man, G). This has worrying consequences, as philosophers like Saul

¹⁶This is analogous to the situation of having a theory what sort of social entity the United States or Harvard University is, but not of what is involved in an individual being a US national or a Harvard student.

[2012] and Diaz-Leon [2016] point out. It may turn out that Ada is not a woman, if the heteronormative society around her refuses to recognize her womanhood. Blaise may count as a woman and not a man, if people around him coercively gender him as a woman. Cass may end up counting as a woman, a man, or both, when the people around them gender them without their consent.

One response to this problem, proposed by Dembroff [2017], is to accept that these unfortunate verdicts are true the actual world, but to point out that things don't have to be this way. Insofar it is true that *Ada is not a woman*, *Cass is a woman*, or *Blaise is not a man*, these are *oppressive truths*, which we can and should alter by changing our gendering practices. Even if category membership isn't actually decided by self-identification, it could be.

Another option is to change our account of the relationship between gendering and category membership. For instance, Saul [2012] suggests that ascribing a gender G to someone (e.g., calling them a woman or a man) is true iff the person is relevantly similar to those who are habitually gendered as Gs. Saul's theory can be combined with an ideal of consensual gendering, since there might be a norm requiring that we treat self-identification as relevant in most or all contexts. Another version of this strategy, proposed by Diaz-Leon [2016], has it that the extensions of *woman* and *man* are partly normative—i.e., a matter of which moral and political standards govern our context. It's easy to see how this theory might fit with a norm of consensual gendering—the norms governing gendering might require that classification be consensual.

Both strategies – accepting that there are oppressive truths about gender, but that these truths can be changed, and claiming that people's membership in gender categories depends partly on facts about how they ought to be gendered – explain how consensual gendering is a coherent possibility. Having made room for consensual gendering in the Twin Earth case, and in the case of Ada, Blaise and Cass, we now turn to consider how we might generalize our account of the genders *woman* and *man* to a more comprehensive theory of gender categories.

3.4 Other Genders

So far, we have limited our analysis to F and M categories, and the connected concepts of femaleness (or womanhood) and maleness (or manhood). These options do not exhaust the diversity of attested genders; there are also categories like *burrnesha*, *genderfluid person*, *demigirl*, and *demiguy* – some with relatively long traditions; others which have achieved recognition only recently. Within a single community, the available gender categories need not be exclusive or exhaustive,

and may stand in interesting relations of containment or partial overlap. For example, some genderfluid people might also be men, others women, and still others neither or both.

What other genders might there be alongside *woman* and *man*, and how might they come into existence? A good account ought to have room for additional genders, and ought to make sense of how it is that they are genders at all.

One way to be a gender category is to have membership adjudicated based on certain features of reproductive biology, (like our primordial F and M categories), or to be historically descended from such a category (like our historical F and M categories). We suspect that there are metaphysically possible scenarios where sexes other than *male* and *female* give rise to primordial gender categories, but not just any feature of reproductive biology will do; *prepubescent child* and *post-menopausal woman* do not count as genders despite being adjudicated based on reproductive features.

We propose that, in general, primordial gender categories must be adjudicated based on cultural conventions that putatively divide of the population into *sexes*, where the famously fraught traditional sorts *female* and *male* are representative examples of sexes. If some intersex conditions (or families of such conditions) are likewise understood as sexes in a given society, then that society might associate them with distinct primordial gender categories. (See Fausto-Sterling [1993] for an argument that this is possible.) Sexes might likewise be grounded in biological traits that result from deliberate human intervention, in which case it is possible to have primordial gender categories characterized in terms of surgical or pharmacological modifications of one's sex characteristics. (See Ayala and Vasilyeva [2015] for a sketch of how this might work, with fluid and mutable category membership.)

In speaking of sexes, we don't mean to commit ourselves to biological essentialism. What counts as a sex is arguably determined in part by social factors, as is the determination of membership in culturally available sexes. A complete version of the sketch we provide here would include a theory of which putatively biological categories count as sexes *within a given society*.¹⁷

¹⁷For instance, perhaps sexes ought to be specifiable in terms of reproductive capacities, or in terms of biological traits associated with reproductive capacities. We might claim that in order to count as a system of sexes, a system of categories must separate fertile individuals with paradigm female biological traits from fertile individuals with paradigm male biological traits; or have some particular kind of social salience; or be thought of as a *partition* of the population, in that the normal order of affairs is thought to involve every individual belonging to exactly one of the categories, with exceptions regarded as rare and fundamentally aberrant. These are a few possibilities

Beginning with sexes is a start. But gender categories need not be derived from sexes by any direct historical chain. Consider, for example, the category *genderfluid*, popularized under this name in relatively recent history, which is characterized (very roughly) by personal affinity for or identification with different genders that varies over time. The *genderfluid* identity is not plausibly analyzed, or even idealized, as being rooted in any primordial gender category. Instead, what makes it a gender is the way that it is understood within a system of existing gender categories. If somebody sometimes conceives of and presents themselves as a woman, or like a woman, and other times conceives of and presents themselves as a man, or like a man, this makes them an exemplar of (one sort of) genderfluidity, and one reason for accepting *genderfluid* as a gender status is that *woman* and *man* are (historical) gender categories. Something similar could be said about gender classifications like *demigirl*, *demiguy*, *bigender*, and perhaps some traditional third-gender categories.

So something can be a gender by fitting into a system of things that already count as genders. This idea helps us make sense of the way some people, especially in online subcultural spaces, use random organisms or inanimate objects as gender labels. Consider, for example, the way Dillon [2007] characterizes herself as having the gender *cactus*.

A while back I complained about wanting to replace my gender with a set of outward-facing spikes. . . actually cactus works way better than male or female as a gender for me. It's a little tongue in cheek, but I mean, *look at this*. Cacti:

- care more about sunlight and water and safety than appearances, but still blossom in (bright pink, for many species) flowers when they feel like it
- are covered in spines to protect them from being consumed, but need the touch of the animals that know how to interact with them safely
- won't hurt you if you don't hurt them!

...

among many, and we will not evaluate them here.

What seems to be going on here is that ‘I’m a cactus’ is, in some (metaphorical, humorous) sense, is the best reply that the Dillon can offer for the question ‘Are you a man or a woman?’, and perhaps for the question ‘What is your gender?’ Taken as a, gender *cactus* has this ‘best reply’ characteristic in common with (explanatory expansions of) *genderfluid*, *demigirl*, and the like. It might lean more heavily on metaphor and humor than the latter two, but this only shows that metaphor and humor are important communicative resources, especially when we find ourselves near the limits of established vocabulary, or discussing emotionally charged topics. Given that we are only aware of one case of somebody claiming the gender label *cactus*, and that a highly qualified one, we do not want to endorse the view that *cactus* is a gender. But if we want to accept more established non-binary genders as genuine, it does not seem to us implausible or absurd that *cactus could be* a gender, if it obtained some minimal level of social stability and subcultural recognition.

Once *genderfluid* or *cactus* comes into existence as a gender, it seems capable of surviving as a gender by the same type of historical process as *woman* and *man*, even if it evolves to no longer be even roughly definable in terms of concepts like *woman* and *man* (perhaps by outliving those two categories). The following recursive definition captures our discussion of ways for gender categories into existence, and gathers it into a first-pass definition of *gender*:

(Primordial Case) If G is is an ahistorical category within a society for which membership is adjudicated by members of the society based primarily on biological traits understood as directly or indirectly associated with a person’s sex in that society, or on being perceived (perhaps inaccurately) to have any of these characteristics, then G is a gender.

(Historical Case) If G is a category (which may reasonably be idealized as being) descended (perhaps trivially) from a previously established gender by the right sort of causal continuity, then G is a gender.

(Symbiotic Case) If G is a category defined primarily in terms of previously established genders, situated as an alternative to previously established genders, or understood as a potentially indispensable clarification or qualification of some previously established gender or genders, then G is a gender.

(Minimal Closure Clause) Nothing is a gender of any society/community except as provided for above.

This seems to us to provide for the full range of genders that we are aware of, but still requires that every gender ultimately be linked to a system of primordial sex-biology-based genders, and excludes other sorts of social categories from being genders. This remains only an initial attempt, and each case requires further clarification and refinement. We also don't wish to seriously endorse the minimal closure clause, as we may have left out some important ways for things to be genders. The 'nothing else' provision should be taken as part of a preliminary exercise, and not as a political exclusion of other putative genders as invalid or second-rate. Still, we think the general approach shows promise: something gets to be a gender by being a classification of people based on sex biology, or by connecting back to such a sex-based category by some (finite) number of steps of dependency. The admissible kinds of dependency include, at least, being historically derived in a suitable way from something already established as a gender, and being a suitable kind of reply to the 'What is your gender?' question, but there may be others that we have not considered.

4 Conclusion

We began by identifying desiderata for a metaphysics and semantics of gender suitable for queer and feminist theory and activism: such a theory ought to accommodate the conceptual possibility of fully consensual membership in gender categories (so that people might be gendered based entirely on self-identification) while still enabling us to make sense of gender as a distinct social phenomenon connected with sex. We then argued that material, ahistorical theories cannot satisfy the first of these desiderata, and sketched a historical theory that succeeds at fulfilling both. However, many details remain to be filled in.

One set of questions concerns our general theory of gender categories. Our theory of primordial genders is an idealization—we assume the existence of categories adjudicated based *primarily* on *presumed* reproductive role, but we've said little about what it takes for adjudication to be based primarily on one factor rather than another, or about what we require of ascribers' presumptions. We have not specified what kind of historical continuity or symbiotic dependency suffice to bring a category into the network of genders. We claim that categories like those identified *man*, *woman*, and *genderfluid* in a given real-world society, or the *grrl*, *boi*, *bloke*, and *sheila* categories on Amazonia and Patriarcha, meet sufficient conditions, but we haven't tried to specify necessary and sufficient conditions.

Another set of questions concerns the identities of gender categories across

times and communities. In our Amazonia and Patriarcha cases, we stipulate a great deal of historical continuity in order to ensure that the four gender categories remain gender categories, and that we can identify them with their historical predecessors. We also stipulate links with sex biology in order to ensure that they count as categories of women or of men (and in particular, that ‘bloke’ and ‘sheila’ are appropriately translated as ‘woman’ and ‘man’ respectively, while ‘boi’ and ‘grrrl’ are not). There may be tricky cases concerning identity across time, where the norms for a gender category change more drastically, where gender categories split and merge over history. And there are certainly tricky cases for identity across communities; which third-gender categories in which societies count as categories of nonbinary people, if any?

A third set of questions concerns gender membership. What is it to belong to a gender category G? We might equate belonging to a gender G with being habitually gendered as a G, with being relevantly like those who are habitually gendered as Gs, or with being someone who ought to be gendered as a G.

Our main aim has been modest: to defend the coherence of consensual gendering. A theory of gender for the actual world will need to contend with the fact that gendering is typically not consensual, that gender remains tied to reproductive role, and that gendering practices are often used to prop up unjust social norms. But for now, we hope to have persuaded you that a better world, where people are sorted into gender categories based on their own wishes rather than the projections of other people, is possible.

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