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Genders as genres

Understanding dynamic categories

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A painting depicting a person with a large pack on their back, looking out from a cave opening. The scene is framed by the dark, textured interior of the cave, with light streaming in from the opening. The person is wearing a red hat and dark clothing. The landscape outside is a valley with green hills, a small white building, and a blue sky with white clouds. The overall style is impressionistic with visible brushstrokes.

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Understanding
Dynamic Categories

Alex Thinius

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Alex Thinius

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Carl Spitzweg: *Gnom, Eisenbahn betrachtend / Gnome Watching Railway Train [1848]*. Oil on Wood-Panel. Painting. Common Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

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What does it mean to be of a particular gender? I answer this question with an account of genders as *dynamic categories*, exploring the analogy between what genders are (e.g., men or women) and what genres are (e.g., Novels, Ballads, or Hip-Hop). For instance, due to its relation to other and earlier pieces, we recognize, e.g., a particular song as Hip-Hop. However, the piece will also develop that genre further. Likewise, e.g., the category of men emerges, persists and transforms through a specific sort of response of individuals to earlier supposed men, which emerges in social interactions.

Drawing on critical and (trans-)feminist theory, phenomenologist, enactivist, and systems theoretical approaches, I show that gender categories themselves develop in a dynamic between three elements: (1) at any given time, there is an *enactment class* of individuals ambiguously belonging to the category in question; (2) these individuals are, in an embodied and intersubjective way, enacted as *practical reinterpretations* of earlier members of that category; (3) this unfolds in a matrix of hermeneutic and material *relations*, which loop with both the class and the enaction.

Thereby, *that* an individual is gendered, emerges between two levels of enaction, that of bodily people and that of the dynamic between them. As *what* an individual is gendered in enaction, however, is constituted by relations within and beyond that situation. This responsive realization gives rise to feedbacking histories of acts, people, relations, and enactment classes, thus explaining how gender can be both solid and open to change.

Genders as Genres
Understanding Dynamic Categories

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. ir. K.I.J. Maex
ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel
op woensdag 7 juli 2021, te 13.00 uur

door Alexander Christian Thinius
geboren te Ahlen

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	dr. S. Niklas	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	dr. V.L.M. Vasterling	Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen

Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book figures out what genders are and how they exist; and it aims to offer a consistent conception of what it can mean to say that genders are dynamic categories akin genres. The book contributes to academic debates that aim to understand and explain the situation in which we are, aiming to do justice to our shared existence, so that we can deliberate on how to ameliorate it towards emancipation into a less domination-ridden form of social existence. The point of this book is, thus, *not* directly to figure out what sort of life you or anyone should lead, what sort of person one should be, who suffers the most, who is ‘backwards’ and who is ‘progressive’, or whether or not you ought to abstain or participate in ‘family’, ‘friendship’, ‘womanhood’, ‘male identity’, ‘identity’ or any other phenomena related to gender.¹ While we are sorted on, comfortably sitting in, confined to, moving through, or trespassing differently precarious seats in differently structured decks, we remain all in the same boat when, in theory and practice, “on the open sea [we] must reconstruct [our] ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom.”²

As any contribution to academic discourses, despite being carefully researched, argued in good faith, and aiming to do justice to the phenomena in a coherent as well as plausible (or even true) manner, this book is likely to fall short in some respects. I wish for the shortcomings of this book to be

¹ This seems important to stress. For instance, while in 2019, the Congregation for Catholic Education released a call for a “path of dialogue” with “gender theory”, entitled *Male and Female He Created Them*, in the Netherlands, in 2020, Radboud University Nijmegen apparently risked its traditional affiliation with the Catholic church over setting up a research center to understand “Geslacht en gender” with a special focus on transgender. For references on this, cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, “‘Male and Female He Created Them’: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education”; Ginneken and Winters, “Komst transgendercentrum speelt rol in ruzie tussen Radboud en bisschoppen: ‘Het is kleinzielig, op het infantiele af.’”

² Neurath, “Anti-Spengler,” 199.

critiqued as delivering elucidating, insightful intellectual failures that help us make progress.

Recently, I read somewhere that it is a generic cliché of academic acknowledgements to mention that ‘it takes a village to write a dissertation.’ Cliché or not: it remains an often-underappreciated fact – from becoming acquainted with the ancestors in undergraduate studies through its conception in the MA, and up to its formation in postgraduate research. Over time, some villagers leave and some remain – I am deeply grateful for all of their respective acts of support. My PhD supervisors Prof. Beate Rössler and Prof. Robin Celikates have supported this project greatly, and I would like to thank them for this, for taking my project on in an enthusiastic way, challenging my position along the way, giving me advice and support, also in extra-theoretical academic matters, expressing their trust in my philosophical abilities, and “putting up with me for four years”, despite some doubts and differences in intuitions and favored methods, and despite the sort of trouble that pursuing this project might have stirred up. Thanks to Rudolf Owen Müllan-Hughes for an excellent job of improving the English in this book. Thanks to Divya Nadkarni for superlative support with editing parts of the manuscript at several stages and helping me with the typeset. Thanks to Nadia de Vries and Jelle Bruineberg for improving my summary in Dutch.

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Earlier versions of my research have been presented to audiences at *Wijsgerig Festival Drift*, LOVA summer school in anthropology, ASCA conference 2018, PPA/UvA, Tübingen, Nijmegen, Sheffield, Oxford, and Cambridge MA, Summer School Gender Studies in Utrecht 2017, Summer School in Budapest 2018 at CEU on *The Biological and the Social 1900 to today*. I thank the organizers, audiences, and participants!

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