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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 dark, rocky cave opening. The person is wearing a red hat and dark clothing. The view outside the cave shows a bright, hazy landscape with green hills, a small white building, and a blue sky with white clouds. The cave's interior is dark and textured with brown and black tones.

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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

Promotiecommissie

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

Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen

Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements xi

What Does It Mean To Be of a Particular Gender? 1

- 1) The Motivation: The Crisis of the Significance of Gender..... 10
- 2) The Academic Desideratum: How to Conceptualize Gender Categories?..... 22
- 3) The Proposal: A Genre Approach to Social Categories such as Gender 30
- 4) Road Map and Chapter Breakdown of the Book..... 49

Chapter 1 Gender and the Practical Structuration of Existence..... 53

- 1) Genders in our Existence: Types of Beings and Styles of Existing 54
- 2) Gender in Structural Categories 58
- 3) The Practice Theoretical Approach to Structuration: Hegemonic Masculinity 72
- 4) Genders as Enacted in Practice: Practice Genres, Matrices, Sharing..... 86
- 5) Genders as Dynamic Categories Within Hermeneutic and Material Matrices 97

Chapter 2 Gender Emerges in Participatory Sense-Making 101

- 1) Participatory Sense-Making: A Perspectivist Reading 104
- 2) Gender Emerges Only If Enacted in Social Interactions 117
- 3) Consequences for Gender if it Emerges from Participatory Sense-Making..... 124
- 4) Conclusion 135

Chapter 3	Genders At Large: Change Through Realization and Constitution by Context	137
1)	Two Points from Adorno: Didactic Reflection and Change Through Realization	142
2)	Genre vs. Aesthetic Form: Constituted by Context	151
3)	Clarifications	158
4)	Genders as Dynamic Developments and the Transtextual Constitution of Genderedness.....	165
Chapter 4	Bodies like us are Situation and Capacity: Taking On <i>The Second Sex</i>	169
1)	The Stakes of Embodiment Discourses and the Embodiment Trilemma	171
2)	Introducing the Existential Phenomenological Approach.....	179
3)	Bodies As Capacities: De Beauvoir Without Sex vs. Gender	180
4)	De Beauvoir and Biology Today: A Qualified Defense of Existentialism plus Agential Systems Theory.....	201
5)	Conclusion: The Body As Situation and Capacity.....	208
Chapter 5	Practical Reinterpretation: What Could That Be?	211
1)	Exemplars of Reinterpretation	215
2)	Resemblance Clusters, Typicality, and Four Faces of Practical Reinterpretation	224
3)	Clarification: The Special Rooftops, Interactions, Perspectives, and Constitution.....	240
4)	Conclusions	243
Chapter 6	Exemplifying the Genre Approach to Genders: <i>Geschlecht</i> and Civilization.....	251
1)	Snapshot 2008: James, Bündchen, and the Vogue Affair	253
2)	Static Reconstruction: Flip Sides of Gender as <i>Geschlecht</i> and Civilization.....	259

3)	Genesis and History of the Present: Multidirectional Dynamics Shape Gender for the Center of the British Empire	272
4)	Force, Materiality, and Multi-Perspectivity of Practical Reinterpretations: Gender in Colonized Societies.....	279
5)	Dynamic Gender Categories in Globalization: ‘Transitions’ of Trans* At Large	291
6)	Conclusion	297
Coda:	What it Means To Be of a Particular Gender	299
1)	The Point of the Project.....	299
2)	The Picture of Dynamic Categories in Detail: Genders as Genres	303
3)	Concluding Remarks: Potentials in Our Tense Gender Situation	312
Summary	Genders as Genres: Understanding Dynamic Categories	323
Samenvatting	Genders als genres: Het begrip van dynamische categorieën.....	326
Bibliography	329

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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Episodes of my PhD research have been conducted abroad, during stays at Sheffield University in the UK from September to December 2018, and at MIT in the US in the fall of 2019. I am especially grateful to Komarine Romdenh-Romluc for reading my drafts and being generously available for discussions during my stay. I thank Prof. Jenny Saul for giving me feedback

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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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