1 Introduction and Motivation

What is it to be a woman? What is it to be a man? When our political advocacy or social analysis engages 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 about the class of women,\(^1\) 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

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\(^{1}\)Throughout this paper, we use the word ‘class’ in something loosely like the social theorist’s sense, and not at all the mathematician’s sense. Classes for us are not especially set-like, and are not subject to principles of extensionality or comprehension. A single social class can have different members at different times, and two distinct social classes can, in principle, have exactly the same members at a given time. Furthermore, not every collection of individuals comprises a class, even if those individuals share a property; there is no class of people with an odd number of coins in their left pocket, since this property is not typically used to group individuals together and form social expectations about them. We use ‘category’ interchangeably with ‘class’.

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woman (or as not a man or not a woman), to make sense of what it is to experience a gender transition, to talk about the genders to which a person experiences sexual or romantic attraction, 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 conflicting directions. On the one hand, it seems like the concepts of womanhood, manhood, and gender have something to do with sex biology – 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 transgender subjectivity. On the other hand, we want to admit at least the conceptual possibility of gender and sex biology coming apart – this seems necessary at the level of individuals if we want to recognize the legitimacy 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, or of calls for the abolition of genders.

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 without reducing them to sex biology, and politically, it should help us explain and combat traditional sexism while also allowing us to make sense of the activist view that gendering should be consensual. We go on to motivate and discuss some existing analyses of woman and man in the feminist literature, explain what these analyses have in common, and argue that none of them succeeds in meeting all of our desiderata. In Section 2, we use a thought experiment somewhat in the style of Putnam’s [1973, 1975] ‘Twin Earth’ to sharpen our critique of existing theories. In Section 3, we propose a positive account that we believe can satisfy 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 classes 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 Something To Do With Sex Biology

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’.

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 women in those societies? If we translate ‘mulieres’ in a 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?

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 leads us, more generally, to classify

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2We are proposing a theory of what might be called ‘gender classes’ – distinct 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. Our uses of the count noun ‘gender’ are primarily concerned with the classes, and our interest here is in the nature of the classes and their membership criteria.

3The case of ‘mulier’ and ‘woman’ suggests another alternative – something about causal linkage between the two classes in the two non-causally-isolated societies. But this seems inessential. If we encounter or imagine an unfamiliar culture that imposes a binary gender division upon its population, our willingness (under suitable circumstances) to identify this division as a gender division, and to recognize its genders as men and women, does not depend on our hypothesizing an unbroken chain of transmission from the gender concepts of some earlier society that also influenced our own.
some classes and not others as *genders*.

At this point, one natural move would be to declare that the concept of genders is ill-formed, and to regard the identification of *mulieres* with *women* as loose translation aimed at heuristic and intuitive value, and not at literal accuracy. There are a number of reasons for resisting this move, among them that the notions of *gender*, *man*, and *woman* seem to be doing real useful work in a number of projects of activism, social critique, and social analysis. We discuss some of the purposes served by the concepts of *woman* and *man* below.

### 1.1.1 Combatting Traditional Sexism and Formulating a Feminist Politics

Although traditional sexism takes many forms and affects many people, its effects can often be understood as effects on women or men *as a class*. The classes *woman* and *man* are important for identifying issues of special feminist interest, for describing social realities of gendered oppression, and for using legal and social institutions to combat sexism.

When we speak of the social structures within a sexist society, we speak of structures that (among other things) privilege men and disadvantage women. Discriminatory laws and policies often make explicit reference to women and men as classes of people to whom distinct rules apply. Some workplace dress codes, for instance, distinguish acceptable women’s clothing from acceptable men’s clothing, and place different burdens on these two genders. Sexist behavior can also operate by explicit appeal to social (rather than legal) norms governing women and men. For example, in the landmark US Supreme Court case *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, the respondent’s colleagues denied her a promotion because, they claimed, she was ‘overcompensated for being a woman’ and objected to her swearing ‘because it’s a lady using foul language’ [US Supreme Court, 1989]. Even in the absence of explicit discrimination against women (or men), showing that a situation has a disparate impact on women or men is a way of establishing that situation as a topic of feminist concern; for instance, although sexual harassment is a harm that affects both men and women, the disproportionate targeting of women makes sexual harassment a special concern of feminism.

Membership in the categories *woman* and *man* can mark people as targets for a variety of sexist harms and benefits. A young girl who is forced to marry against her will, a surgeon whose supervisor systematically belittles her intelligence, an exotic dancer whose clients fail to respect her boundaries, and a would-be mother whose reproductive rights are taken from her by forced sterilization are all marked for this oppressive treatment by virtue of their association with the
category woman. Similarly, a reader of lads’ magazines whose sexual tastes are pandered to, an economist who is granted deference and authority as soon as he walks into a room, and a husband who relies on his wife to do the housework are all marked for unfair benefits by virtue of their association with the category man. Membership in the class man may also mark people for sexist harms: A youth who is beaten by his peers for looking effeminate, a father whose employer refuses him paternity leave, and a teenager who is shot because the police see him as threatening all suffer in part because others identify them as men, and treat them accordingly.

Not only do the categories woman and man play an important causal role in sexist treatment, they also play an important conceptual role in formulating feminist theses about solidarity, equality, privilege, subordination, etc. Feminism is ‘a doctrine suggesting that women are systematically disadvantaged in modern society and advocating equal opportunities for men and women’ [Abercrombie et al., 2006, 96], ‘the radical notion that women are people’ [Shear, 1986], and so forth. Indeed, women and men are referenced in traditional formulations of almost every area of feminism. The topic of women and men does not exhaust the legitimate subject matter of feminism, and sometimes it may be possible and desirable to reformulate key concepts without explicit reference to these classes, but it would be extremely difficult to develop a general-purpose theoretical and descriptive feminist project without referencing these classes at all.

The practical importance of gender concepts to the feminist project has motivated a number of feminist philosophers to offer definitions or semantic analyses of woman and man. Sally Haslanger [2012, 393], for example, explicitly situates her proposed definitions of woman and man as ameliorative: they are supposed to be the results of a two-stage project that first identifies the legitimate purposes served by a set of categories (such as woman or man), and then defines the categories in the way that best serves those purposes. In the case of woman and man, Haslanger’s key purpose is to capture what different sexist oppressions have in common, in order to more effectively combat them.

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4This is not to say that they are marked for oppressive treatment only by virtue of their association with the category woman. Some of our examples involve the interaction of multiple oppressions, requiring an intersectional perspective [see Crenshaw, 1991]; for example, in addition to its associations with gender, forced sterilization in the US was connected with broader classist, ablist, and racist oppressions in the society. But in all of our examples (suitably fleshed out and narrowed in scope), the person is singled out partly for being a woman; to take the sterilization example again, many sterilizations of women in the US had a gendered element [Kluchin, 2009, 17].
1.1.2 Identifying the Scope of Transgender Politics

Transgender politics, as usually articulated, makes frequent reference to notions like belonging to a gender, identifying with a gender, and gender transition. Focusing on the last of these, we find it is understood as something like a shift between recognized or publicly proclaimed membership in one gender and recognized or publicly proclaimed membership in another. In order to make sense of what does and doesn’t count as an example of transition, we then seem to need some notion of what is and isn’t a gender, lest we bring in all sorts of gender-irrelevant membership in social categories and changes of social status.

Consider briefly two examples. When Publius Clodius (né Claudius) Pulcher undertook to transition, by means of adoption, from patrician to plebeian status, what he did may have been transgressive and disputed in ways that invite interesting analogies with transgender experience, but it was not a gender transition, and 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.

If we wish to make sense of these exclusions, while at the same time accepting the normative and social-scientific value of recognizing something in common among instances of gender transition across times and cultures, we will need to make sense of how plebeian and knight are not genders in the way that man and woman (and their various equivalents in other languages and cultures) are. This distinction, as already noted, seems like it must rest on some association between genders and sex characteristics.

1.2 Gender is not Merely Sex Biology

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 the whole point of introducing gender is that it be distinct from sex biology. The notion of gender as not purely biological does nontrivial work both for the project of combatting traditional sexism and for the project of trans liberation.

The genders woman and man play different causal roles from any purely biological categories, which makes gender concepts an important resource for ex-
plaining traditional sexism. Genders have follow-on social effects that are hard to attribute to sex alone. A woman may be underpaid as a direct result of gender discrimination, even if her sex biology plays no direct role in determining how much she is paid. A man may be insecure as a result of trying to conform to the norms of masculinity, even if this insecurity has nothing to do with his genital configuration, chromosomes, or hormone levels, but stems instead from his recognizing himself as a man, to whom norms of masculinity apply.

Not only do the genders woman and man have different causal roles from biological sex characteristics, they also have extensions that go beyond what can be inferred from biological facts. Kessler and McKenna [1978] argue that when classifying people into genders, different people and different cultures disagree about which emphasis to place on which cues. (‘Cues’ is a word that encompasses physical characteristics like genitals, breasts and body/facial hair, behavioral characteristics like a preference for activities with gendered connotations, and clothing choices like wearing skirts.) Furthermore, Kessler and McKenna argue, the same cue may be differently interpreted depending on the context of other cues in which it appears. Therefore, the classification of people into men and women is not purely a matter of biology; it is culturally mediated.5

We could interpret the cultural variation in reading gender cues as merely epistemic – perhaps there is an underlying biological fact about sex that we track noisily through our gender attributions – but after considering the practices of various communities, Kessler and McKenna opt for a metaphysical interpretation. If there were an underlying biological fact that gender attributions were meant to indicate (say, the presence or absence of a penis), then knowing that fact would be enough to settle which gender attribution was correct. But any gender attribution is in principle compatible with any material fact, including facts about the biological markers commonly associated with sex. Ordinary people often refuse to change their attribution of gender to a trans person, even if they learn that the trans person’s genitals are not what they first expected [Kessler and McKenna, 1978, 17, 154]. Biologists study a variety of sex-linked traits, but Kessler and McKenna argue that even biologists’ gender attributions do reliably not track their attributions of any one sex-linked trait [Kessler and McKenna, 1978, chapter 5]. So gender attributions do not behave as though they aim to track an independent fact about sex.

5Note that Kessler and McKenna themselves do not distinguish between sex and gender, arguing that since the words ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are used interchangeably in the broader culture, and since they believe sex is socially constructed, the use of these two terms would be more confusing than enlightening [Kessler and McKenna, 1978, 7].
Another reason for distinguishing gender from sex biology is the ubiquity of cases where sex comes apart from social role. In many cultures, there are people with male-typical sex characteristics who live as women, and people with female-typical sex characteristics who live as men. The need to uncouple gender from sex becomes more acute if we take seriously the needs of diverse trans people and the legitimacy of their gender identities. We return to these problems in Section 1.4 below, where we discuss the ideal of a society in which membership in the categories woman and man is adjudicated solely by the consent of the gendered, and not by anyone’s sex characteristics. So not only do the categories woman and man do separate explanatory work from any categories definable purely in terms of sex biology; they also have different extensions.

The ideas discussed in sections 1.1 and 1.2 already create a significant tension: gender’s association with sex biology is what makes gender gender, but the conceptual value of gender in work on trans liberation and opposition to traditional sexism stems exactly from the possibility of uncoupling it from sex. We have a proposal for how this tension might be resolved, but, first let us see how, if we combine one popular approach to gender definitions with a commitment to fully consensual gender, this tension becomes even more acute.

1.3 Defining Genders

Feminist scholars have various ways of characterizing the genders woman and man as distinct from mere tallyings-up of female and male biological traits. We will focus on the account proposed by Sally Haslanger [2012] both because it belongs to a larger, well-developed philosophical project, and because it has been influential in analytic feminist philosophy. Haslanger’s account shares certain key strengths and weaknesses with the other accounts we consider below.

Haslanger offers the ameliorative definitions (SH): 6

(SH) S is a woman iff S is systematically subordinated along some dimen-

Since the main goal of Haslanger’s ameliorative project is to combat traditional sexism, she builds the concept of sexist oppression directly into the concepts of woman and man. Other definitions of woman and man, including (JH) and (JS) below, treat their connection with oppression as contingent, rather than as analytic and necessary. We disagree with Halanger; we think that the classes woman and man could persist even in the absence of sexist oppression. But most what we say could be adapted to accord with a more Haslangerian approach. (See [Mikkola, 2009] for arguments that the Haslangerian approach is not an effective strategy against traditional sexism, and see our Section 4.3 for an argument that alternative approaches are just as effective as the Haslangerian one.)
sion (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 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].

Haslanger’s attempt to pin down what it is to be a woman or man has two key properties that we would like to highlight, and that we think are (with certain caveats and exceptions) typical of analyses of woman and man.

First, the 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. In (SH), this is just all there is to determining an individual’s gender. We say an account of this sort is material.

Second, who counts as a man or a woman at a given time, according to these definitions, is determined by facts about sex, social norms, etc. at that time. 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 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]. We will say that accounts that display this supervenience property (including SH) are ahistorical.

Materiality and ahistoricality 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 other definitions of woman and man in the feminist literature; we consider two notable examples below.

Hale [1996] analyzes ‘the dominant culture’s concept of woman’ as a cluster concept in order to explain how women can vary with respect to properties like sexual orientation while remaining women.
There are a number of defining characteristics of the category *woman*. None of these characteristics is a necessary or sufficient condition. My list includes thirteen characteristics, clustered into several groups, differently weighted; some of these characteristics may be satisfied to differing degrees. [Hale, 1996, 52]

Hale’s characteristics include sex-linked traits (absence of a penis, presence of breasts, reproductive organs that allow for pregnancy, an estrogen- and progesterone-dominant balance of ‘sex’ hormones, XX chromosomes), gender identity (that is, identifying as a woman), and gender role traits (occupation considered acceptable for a woman, leisure pursuits considered acceptable for a woman, heterosexual relationships, feminine appearance, feminine mannerisms, and using textual cues such as female pronouns that mark one as a woman).

Saul’s reply to Haslanger, which places a greater explicit focus on trans politics, offers a contextualist account of the categories *woman* and *man*:

\[(\text{JS})\]

\[X \text{ is a woman} \text{ is true in a context } C \text{ iff } X \text{ is human and relevantly similar (according to the standards at work in } C\) \text{) to most of those possessing all of the biological markers of female sex.}\]

\[X \text{ is a man} \text{ is true in a context } C \text{ iff } X \text{ is human and relevantly similar (according to the standards at work in } C\) \text{) to most of those possessing all of the biological markers of male sex. [Saul, 2012, 201]}\]

Like Haslanger’s definition, (\text{JH}) and (\text{JS}) are ahistorical and (more or less) material. (\text{JH}) is straightforwardly ahistorical: whether someone falls under the dominant culture’s conception of *woman* depends only on whether they now have the appropriate sex traits, identity, and gender role traits, and all the criteria in (\text{JH}) are material except one: gender identity. (\text{JS}) in principle allows any relevant properties into the concept of resemblance, but in practice, the only property Saul considers aside from ahistorical, material circumstances is self-identification. So both (\text{JH}) and (\text{JS}) are ahistorical, and are material \textit{but for self-identification}.

Appeal to self-identification raises a new challenge. If we are trying to analyze the concept of womanhood, and we define it in terms of identifying \textit{as a woman}, then we will need to say something further about the object of this identification. If the object of identification is itself the concept of womanhood, then we risk

\[\text{Daly [forthcoming]} \text{ and [Stoljar, 1995] also advance theories of gender that involve the approximate satisfaction of property clusters.}\]
circularity; if not, then until we clarify what it is to identify as a woman, our definition is incomplete. There are a variety of more and less sophisticated off-the-shelf tools available for resolving apparent circularities of this general sort, but the choice of solution will have implications for what it is to identify as a woman, and so, on any account where membership depends partly on self-identification, for what it is to be a woman. Our proposal in Section 3.3 resolves this type of circularity by separating out the class *woman* as a persistent social entity and object of identification from the criteria for *being a woman*.

Although ahistorical, material accounts are both common and intuitively appealing, we will argue in Section 2 that they are ultimately too limited, and should be given up. To fully articulate their limitations, we turn to another set of motivations, inspired by trans feminism.

### 1.4 Consensual Gendering

Many activists oppose, or at least express reservations regarding, the coercive assignment of people to gender categories. They envision and hope to create a world where category ascription is voluntary. Different authors have come at this more or less directly, and embraced it more or less completely or explicitly. Julia Serano, for example, decries a condition she calls ‘gender entitlement,’ which goes beyond [gender entitled people’s] sense of self-ownership regarding their own gender, and broaches territory in which they consider themselves to be the ultimate arbiters of which people are allowed to call themselves women or men [Serano, 2007, 166].

By way of example, Serano notes that she would be gender entitled ‘if [a] person introduced themselves as ‘Ms. Jones,’ but I chose to view the gender I’d initially perceived them as (i.e., male) to be more authentic and legitimate than their female identity,’ or ‘if I were to learn that ‘Mr. Jones’ was transsexual and had been born female, and if that knowledge led me to re-gender him as female rather than male’ [Serano, 2007, 166].

Kate Bornstein both articulates a critique of non-consensual gendering and proposes a positive alternative. (Our terminology owes much to her formula: ‘gender should be safe, sane, and consensual.’) Illustrating how gender is not now consensual, Bornstein writes,

> 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, 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].

Leslie Feinberg also advocates for a right of personal choice in matters of gender:

Each person should have a right to choose between pink or blue tinted gender categories, as well as all the other hues of the palette. At this moment in time, that right is denied to us. But together, we could make it a reality. [Feinberg, 1998, 1]

All three authors contrast the way gender categories currently work with the way they would if assignment to those categories were fully consensual. In the world as it exists now, children are assigned a sex and a gender at or before birth, long before they are able to consent or to refuse. This category assignment is often announced with great fanfare, and is considered an appropriate and normal topic of inquiry. Upon assignment of a gender, infants may be marked linguistically (by assignment of a gendered names or the use of pronouns), visually (e.g., by a color-coded baby blanket), or otherwise, in order to allow others to infer their assigned gender with minimal effort. On the basis of their assigned and inferred gender, children are then subject to norms that push them into one of two roles, with different clothes, toys, behavioral expectations, and so on for girls vs. boys.

Under a system of consensual gendering, things would play out very differently. The contrast is explored in Lois Gould’s satirical children’s book X: A Fabulous Child’s Story. Gould lampoons the gendering of children, imagining a new kind of ‘Xperimental’ child, baby X, whose parents refuse to gender it as either a boy or a girl [Gould, 1978]. X and its parents must overcome social obstacles: choosing clothes and toys that do not mark X as a boy or a girl, developing gender-neutral expectations for how X is to behave, and handling stigma against a child who fails to conform to the gender expectations of others, much of it stemming from a deep sense of alarm that many express at having to deal with X without being able to think of it as a boy or a girl. Today, some families are raising baby Xes of their own [Green and Friedman, 2013]. One such parent, Rose Fox [2015],
characterizes their newborn as ‘gender unknown’, explaining that ‘Using “they” for [our child] is the least bad option ... We’re just keeping their gender private until they figure out what it is and decide to be public about it.’

The thought motivating all these authors is that imposing gender from the outside is wrong; individuals should have a say in which categories they belong to, including the categories woman and man. Membership in categories like woman and man should be adjudicated based on the consent of the person characterized, not the perceptions and projections of outsiders.

Note that making one’s own decisions about one’s gender, in the sense we that concerns us here, need not involve electing any specific medical interventions. Trans communities often distinguish between medical transition – using medical resources to modify sex-linked aspects of one’s body – and social transition – a broad category which includes various aspects of living and representing oneself as one’s identified gender, potentially (though not necessarily) including changes in some combination of dress, grooming, name, or pronouns. (Note also that ‘medical transition’ does not refer to a single medical intervention, but rather to any combination of various relevant procedures and treatments, any of which an individual may or may not undergo depending on their particular situation.)

The examples of [Gould, 1978] and [Fox, 2015] suggest a system in which people are not gendered until such time as they consent to be gendered, so that gender is only ascribed on an opt-in basis. An alternative, weaker notion of consensual gendering would allow for some practices of default gendering of, e.g., nonverbal infants, but would require us to accept the testimony of people of any age that such ascriptions had been in error, or at any rate were no longer welcome, along with any requests for different ascriptions. On this approach, it will be acceptable to gender people in the absence of explicit consent, as long as we fully accept their freedom to opt out of and opt into being gendered in any given way. For purposes of the thought experiment that we will develop, we must insist that the stronger notion of consensual gendering is conceptually coherent, but nothing here hinges on one’s view of which approach one finds more politically appealing.

The attentive reader may have noticed that there are two different ideas in play here: that of ascription of genders on a consensual basis, and that of admission into genders on a consensual basis. In the ideal social order, does a person simply never have any gender until they publicly claim one, or is it just improper to ascribe a gender to somebody who has not yet made a public disclosure of their (possibly pre-existing) gender? This will turn out not to matter much for the project of Sections 2, 3.1, and 3.2. It is discussed, in connection with the ideas of Section 3.3, in Appendix B.

A study performed by Beemyn and Rankin [2011] illustrates how varied trans people are in their approaches to medical and social transition. Beemyn and Rankin report that hormones are popular among the FTM (female-to-male) and MTF (male-to-female) individuals they surveyed; in each of these groups, 87% were either taking hormones or about to start [123, 132]. The use of surgery varied more between the groups: 81% of the FTM individuals had had or planned to have chest (‘top’) surgery, but the vast majority had no desire for genital (‘bottom’) surgery in the fore-
child with typical female physiology who is not assigned a gender at birth (suppose they receive roughly the baby X upbringing, at least until they express preferences to the contrary), but in time comes, of her own accord, to identify as a girl (and, later, as a woman) is still choosing her own gender. So is a child of typical male physiology who arrives at the same decisions. At an appropriate age, either individual may or may not seek out medical interventions related to her biological sex characteristics, and may or may not conceive of these as connected with her sense of herself as a girl or woman. But seeking out medical interventions is not in any way necessitated by either child’s choice of gender (although, of course, informed consent should also be a requirement for such medical interventions).

A great deal of activist discourse either tacitly or explicitly endorses consensual gendering, or some similar notion of self-determination regarding membership in gender classes. Call those who believe in consensual gendering ‘Q Activists’. (We see many strands of Q activism in recent intersectional and queer activist discourse, but do not wish to associate Q activism with any specific real-life people or organizations.)

The Q Activist holds that failing to conform to gendered stereotypes of appearance and behavior does not invalidate one’s gender, and that to claim otherwise amounts to pernicious gender discrimination. They are, further, committed to the view that the freedom to determine one’s own gender ought to be offered equally to cisgender and transgender members of each gender class (to do otherwise is to impose an unfair double standard, and to do otherwise in the most obvious way is to make trans legitimacy contingent on a kind of passing). They impose no biological requirements on gender categorization (to do so would, among other things, delegitimize the identities of those trans people who are, for whatever reason, unable or disinclined to medically transition).

To further illustrate the commitments of Q Activism, let us introduce two characters – call them Ada and Blaise. Ada and Blaise both have 46, XX karyotypes,
and have external genitalia, gonads, fat distribution, and so on typical of this karyotype. Both speak in relatively deep voices, make no particular effort to cut, remove or conceal their not-too-thick but still conspicuous facial hair, and sport crew cuts. Both dress in trousers and button-down shirts bought out of the ‘Men’s’ section. Both are more-or-less exclusively sexually and romantically attracted to women. Both have the experience of being ‘sir’-ed by strangers about half the time, and ‘ma’am’-ed the other half of the time. Neither has ever taken exogenous hormones or had a mastectomy, and neither has any particular plans to do either of these things. Both were raised as girls, and experienced adolescences made predictably unpleasant by a society that considered them both girls and brought to bear its various toxic assumptions of compulsory femininity and compulsory androsexuality. 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 ‘she’.

Barring certain exceptional circumstances, the Q Activist will regard the facts described above as very good reason to presume that Ada is a cisgender butch lesbian, and that Blaise is an unremarkably masculine heterosexual trans man. (In gendering Ada and Blaise this way, our hypothetical Q activist follows the standard practice, or at least the accepted best-practices, of many queer- and trans-positive spaces and communities.) To dispute Ada’s womanhood on the basis of her failure to conform to stereotyped femininity is transparently sexist. To dispute Blaise’s manhood on the basis of any ways in which he might fail to perform traditional masculinity is also to be rejected – if Blaise were a cisgender man, it would be obviously improper to demand that he prove it by acting manly, and to hold a transgender man to a different standard would be a clear case of cissexist discrim-

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11The term ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, coined by Adrienne 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 be sexually oriented toward men (on the basis of their being perceived to be a woman, in the cases of both Ada and Blaise) without having to make assumptions about their gender.

12The reader is free to invent any number of variations on this story, symmetrically adjusting the biology, sexual preferences, and appearance of our two characters as they like. We might even stipulate that Ada and Blaise both take low doses of exogenous testosterone, the former for purposes of, say, athletic performance enhancement, and that both got their testosterone through similar illegal channels. One might think ill of Ada’s decision in this scenario for a number of reasons, but none of those reasons justify denying her her status as a woman. (It could exclude her from participating in women’s athletic competitions, but this is because she is a woman using a prohibited performance-enhancing drug, not because she’s a non-woman.)

13Although Blaise is a man and not a woman, he may still have special claims on the feminist project, a legitimate sense of special solidarity with women in certain feminist causes, and so on. We briefly consider this family of issues in the conclusion.
ination. Blaise might have any number of reasons for not medically transitioning, including limited financial resources, intolerable medical risk factors, lack of access to supportive medical professionals, squeamishness, contentment with the current configuration of his body, uncertainty, or lack of motivation. But regardless of Blaise’s reasons, the Q Activist will regard his lack of medical transition as irrelevant to the legitimacy of his gender identity, both because they recognize the assignment of genders based on biological traits as one of the main problems to be confronted, and because they recognize that decisions about which medical interventions (if any) to seek are fundamentally personal.

The Q Activist, as we’ve described them, now seems vulnerable to accusations of incoherence. If being a woman (man) has no requirements in terms of biology, behavior, life history, or attitudes, preferences, or dispositions related to any of these, then how is it anything at all? Even granting that identifying as a woman (man) is sufficient to make it so, what can be (non-vacuously) involved in such a self-identification, if not such attitudes, preferences, and dispositions? One of our goals in the following sections is to defend the Q Activist against this charge of incoherence – you may or may not agree with the Q Activist’s (and 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.

As an aside, let us briefly note a tempting sociological conjecture: one might suspect that, if gender assignment is made fully consensual, and if in addition discriminatory gender-based constraints are eliminated, the genders will quickly disappear. At this point, it is not immediately clear what the significance of belonging to one gender or the other will be, so it is not clear why people would be either invested in gender membership or attentive to it. Once such investment and attention lapses, it is hard to see how the genders would persist. As a claim about the trajectories of hypothetical human societies, this conjecture might be right, although we are reluctant to endorse it without a more complete understanding of how and why people value gender class membership. But whether, as a sociological matter, consensual gendering (combined with an end to gender inequality) can be counted upon to cause the end of gender is irrelevant to our semantic and metaphysical point. We are concerned with the metaphysical possibility and conceptual coherence of a society in which genders exist and membership in them is consensual, and not with any question of how stable such a society would be.

Like the Q Activist, we find the idea of consensual gendering politically compelling. Nonconsensual gendering seems to be at odds with both our feminist
values and our broader investment in respect for individuals, and, while we don’t want to commit ourselves to the view that self-identification trumps all other considerations in all circumstances, the idea of consensual gendering motivates a strong presumption in favor of classifying people as the gender or genders they identify with, if any. Even if you have different political inclinations, however, we hope you will be willing to provisionally grant the possibility of consensual gendering – to grant that communities make nontrivial political decisions about how to adjudicate membership in the woman and man categories, and that a community that maintains classes can make the criteria for assigning class membership more or less flexible, out to the limit of a fully ‘open borders’ approach. As already noted, though, accommodating this possibility within a fully developed analysis of woman and man is challenging, especially if that analysis is constrained by the material, ahistorical approach. We now illustrate and explore these difficulties with an extended thought experiment.

2 Twin Planets

We want to put some pressure on accounts that 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. Designation of a person as a bloke or a sheila typically occurs at or before birth, usually on the basis of an inspection of their genitals. Blokes are stereotyped as strong and aggressive; sheilas are stereotyped as weak, nurturing, and decorative. (The sociobiologists of Patriarcha have elaborate justifications for these stereotypes, which we need not repeat here.) It seems intuitively correct to say that the blokes on Patriarcha are men, while the sheilas are women,
and definitions like (SH) and (JS) 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 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. Designation of a person as a grrrl or a boi typically occurs at or before birth, usually on the basis of an inspection of their genitals. Grrrls are stereotyped as strong and aggressive; Amazonian sociobiologists argue that this is only natural, since female creatures have an innate drive to defend their young. Bois, meanwhile, are stereotyped as weak, nurturing, and decorative; Amazonian sociobiologists conjecture that in a world where male creatures must compete for female attention, it is only natural for bois to make themselves physically attractive, invest in the hard work of housecleaning and childcare, and cater to grrrls’ needs in order to win the attention of a mate.

According to our intuition about the ordinary use of the terms ‘woman’ and ‘man’, grrrls are women and bois are men. Saul’s definitions (JS) agree with this intuition, while Haslanger’s (SH) tell us that Amazonia contains no women and no men. Grrrls are not systematically subordinated based on their observed or imagined bodily features; rather, they are systematically advantaged along multiple dimensions. Therefore on Haslanger’s account, grrrls do not count as women, and for parallel reasons, bois do not count as men. Regardless of whether we follow intuition (and Saul) in saying there are women and men on Amazonia, or follow Haslanger in saying there are not, this much is clear (and is delivered by both (JS) and (SH)): 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 such time as they affirmatively express an identity as grrrls or bois (in the Amazonian case) or as blokes or sheilas (in the Patriarchal case). We will assume that most, perhaps all, kids do eventually pick one recognized role or the other – perhaps failure to pick a role by late adolescence is stigmatized and regarded as a sign of immaturity, or perhaps some other social and psychological forces induce most people to eventually make
a choice.

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. While those in the sheila and boi categories are disproportionately (though not exclusively) soft, nurturing types who are relatively well-equipped satisfy the corresponding norms, roughly half of all sheilas and half of all bois possess typically female biology. Patriarchs and Amazons continue to treat gender categories as important, but they come to accept that there is no necessary connection between biology and gender.

The demographic shifts on Patriarcha and Amazonia uncouple the grrrl, boi, bloke, and sheila categories from their biological associations without destroying them as categories. (There are, of course, many other ways such an uncoupling could be achieved.) Membership in these categories has come to more closely resemble a consensual gender 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 consensual gendering. Trans men are still men, and are not less of men, regardless of their biology, and likewise, trans women are women. If at some future time circumstances conspire so that trans people outnumber cis people, while people who identify as 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 of that future will still be women – saying otherwise seems to treat the status of trans identities

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\[14\] For 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.
women as women (or trans men as men) as somehow probationary or second-rate. Since it seems that ‘bloke’ and ‘sheila’ just are the words in Patriarchal English that pick out our man and woman concepts, 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 class and the bloke class 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 classes 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. (The same applies mutatis mutandis to bois and sheilas). So by any material, ahistorical account, there Patriarchal blokes are men if and only if Amazonian grrrls are, and Patriarchal sheilas are women if and only if Amazonian bois are. 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 hand, a commitment to the possibility of consensual gender 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 an 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.

Likewise, people who are not assigned a gender at birth, but eventually opt into status as women, are still women regardless of their biology.

Bettcher [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).

Some readers will be reluctant to follow us this far, but we hope they will at least grant that it is something that the typical Q Activist would be inclined to endorse and that, but for some quibbling about the details of our setup, it ought to follow from the commitments that motivate the Q Activist position. That is, even the reader who will not follow us this far should be willing to provisionally accept this step as part of an exploration of the conceptual system of the Q Activist community.
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 classes to be in some way rooted in sex distinctions. Our account will 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.

3.1 A Theory of Women and Men

Our proposal begins with ahistorical, material class concepts. But we add modifications to make the criteria for class membership more flexible, while holding on to essential features that make the concepts explanatory. To begin, we say that:

A Primordial F (M) Class 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 primordial F and M classes, respectively. At the earliest stage of our story above, grrrl and sheila were plausibly primordial F classes, and boi and bloke were plausibly primordial M classes.

As an aside, although we want to be a bit vague about the notion of recognized category at work throughout this section, we intend it to denote something more substantial than an arbitrary set (or set-intension) that the community has the expressive resources to pick out. A recognized category must bear substantial meaning as a distinguished, established social institution.

Next, we take a page from Theodore Bach [2012], who holds that genders have historical essences. (Unlike Bach, we claim that gender is a social kind rather than a natural kind.) Whether something counts as the class of women or the class of men depends partly on its causal history. The class bloke on Patriarcha before the demographic shift just is the class of men. Since only relatively modest modifications are made to the class during the demographic shift, it persists, and is still the class of men afterwards. On Amazonia, either there is no class of

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18 We can reasonably say that (SH) makes class membership primarily a matter of biological traits, even though class membership also depends partly on domination and subordination.
men, or else the class boi is the class of men. The relatively modest changes in
class input and output conditions are neither enough to bring a class of men into
existence, nor to identify it with the class grrrl. Even though bloke and grrrl are
materially similar after the shift, they have different histories, and this makes them
importantly non-equivalent classes.

The historical component is important for our project, so, before we get into
the details of how it will be used, it may be worth emphasizing that it is not
outlandish or unprecedented. Examples of historical kinds can be drawn from
many fields outside the philosophy of gender. Here is an incomplete list:

**Clades** Cormorants belong to the clade Dinosauria in that they descend from the
last common ancestor of all the canonical members of Dinosauria. Pterodactyls
and alligators lack this property, and are not among the Dinosauria.

**Religions and Denominations** Suppose that two religious reformers, Smith and
Jones, found a movement together, establishing its rituals and doctrines, but later
find themselves in irreconcilable disagreement over a single point of theology,
and part ways. The resulting denominations, the Smithites and the Jonesists, are
indistinguishable in all other matters of doctrine, and in all matters of religious
practice.¹⁹ Hundreds of years later, both denominations (still indistinguishable in
their practices) become more tolerant of theological dissent, and declare them-
selves officially neutral on the question that provoked the split. This step does not
merge the Smithites and Jonesists.²⁰ The non-identity of the groups survives even
at a point when all that distinguishes them is their distinct histories.

**Clubs** Consider two distinct secret societies: the Order of the Most Sacred
Knucklebones (founded in April 1984 by Ada) and the Ewe and Modem (Founded
in October 1984 by Blaise). Suppose each meets at exactly 7:06 PM every other
Thursday (alternating Thursdays with each other), and that they rent the same
meeting space. In spite of their material similarities, they remain different soci-
eties, by virtue of their historical links to different founding events. They will
remain distinct even if it comes to pass that they have exactly the same members,
and that exactly the same people sit on the leadership councils of both societies.

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¹⁹ Their rituals and practices presumably differ in that they involve or tolerate verbal professions
of views on the question that provoked the split, but we assume this is the only distinction.

²⁰ It may make a negotiated organizational merger more likely, but it does not necessitate it.
Genres  Even though *Journey to the West* (typically attributed to Wu Cheng’en) is, in its ahistorical features, like fantasy novels, with a plot that incorporates unexplained supernatural forces, epic journeys, gold rings with magical powers, and various elements borrowed from folklore, it is arguably not a fantasy novel, because it predates both the conventions of the fantasy genre and the conventions of the novel.

Here is a definition that captures the idea of genders as historical kinds:

**A Historical F (M) Class** is a class that is descended (perhaps trivially)\(^{21}\) from a Primordial F (M) class by the right sort of causal continuity.

We leave open the general question of what constitutes the right sort of causal continuity. Perhaps there are ship-of-Theseus cases where a series of small modifications turns a primordial F (M) class into something that loses its status as a historical F (M) class, either because both the input and output conditions are stretched too far, or by virtue of some changes in the broader system of gender classes. There are also many ways that conditions maintaining continuity might be connected (or not) to individual members of the class, and we leave aside which exact ones are appropriate to this setting.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{21}\)We take being the class G at time \(t\) to be the trivial case of being descended from G as it existed at \(t\).

\(^{22}\)It may be instructive to revisit the example of secret societies, and consider various ways that the propagation of such a society may involve, or fail to involve, its current membership:

**Lineal Descent:** On this model, there is some finite supply of founding members, and, outside of these founding members, a person is eligible to become a member if and only if they are the child of a member. The society persists as long as it continues to have members.

**Selection of Successors:** On this model, established members appoint a committee to draw up a list of new prospective members, and extend invitations to everyone on the list. The society persists as long as it continues to have members.

**Chartered Criteria:** On this model, the secret society’s rules include criteria of eligibility for membership, and anybody meeting these criteria is free to claim membership and begin attending meetings. The qualifications of potential members might be assessed by existing members of the society, or by a team of non-member lawyers and private investigators retained by the society for this purpose. The society might even have an endowment to pay its specialist non-members so that the society can persist, and eventually admit new members, even if all the members at a given time simultaneously perish. The eligibility criteria might be fixed once and for all by an unalterable founding document, or there might be some procedure enabling amendments.

Just as there are many different ways a secret society can maintain its institutional continuity over time, so, generally, different kinds of historical/causal continuity may be relevant for different
Whatever a filled-in account says about causal continuity, we assume that *bloke*, *sheila*, *grrrl* and *boi* all have the right sort of continuity across the demographic shift.

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.

Looking at any contemporary anglophone society, *woman* and *man* name important F and M classes, respectively, within that society. 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) class in one society as the correct ‘translation’ of an F (M) class in another society. Unfortunately, we are not, at present equipped to offer a full theory of correspondence of gender classes across societies, so we will limit ourselves to a first attempt at the problem of women and men. The definition below provides that attempt: it covers the simple case where a society has a unique F (M) class, and is silent otherwise.

**The Class of Women**<sup>23</sup>(preliminary definition) in a society/community C is the unique historical F class in C, if C has a unique historical F class.

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

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<sup>23</sup>If 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.
This preliminary characterization fulfills both of the feminist motivations of Section 1. It draws an explanatory link between gender and sex biology because, at some point in history, biological sex characteristics must play an important role in the criteria by which the society adjudicates membership in gender categories. Yet it allows that genders are not in general merely generalizations from biological sex characteristics: what is required is not an particular association with sex in the here-and-now, but only historical continuity. Unlike primordial gender classes, historical gender classes can persist even if membership is no longer determined in a way that has anything to do with biological sex characteristics. Thus, on this picture, it possible to have sex-independent genders of men and women that allow for purely consensual determination of membership.

Nothing in our account of historical F (M) classes requires that a society have only one F class and only one M class. If a society ends up with more than one historical F class, how are we to decide which one (if any) to identify as the class of women? If one is the ‘main’ F class, then the natural thing to do is to say that it wins out. There are, of course, various ways to develop the notion of a ‘main’ F class, of which the following are a few (admittedly imprecise) examples (illustrated for the case of women, but analogous for men):

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

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

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

These might be modified or combined in various ways.

When there is not even a clear ‘main’ historical F class, things get harder. In a society with two (more-or-less) disjoint historical F classes of roughly equal size,\(^{24}\) how are we to make sense of the notion of woman? We have several options. One is to say that the membership of woman is indeterminate. Another is to...

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\(^{24}\)Perhaps infants of female biology are sorted into different classes based on birth month, and the assignment of birth months to classes and the age-mortality structure of the society are such that different classes will have slight populations edges at different times of year, depending on which has most recently received an influx of fresh infants.
identify *woman* as the union/disjunction of all of a society’s historical F classes.\(^{25}\)

Still another option is to say that *woman* is inapplicable in such a society – that it truly has no women. Since such scenarios are not our focus here, we leave all these options on the table, and move on.

However we generalize our account to societies with multiple F (M) classes, it delivers the right verdicts in the case of Amazonia and Patriarcha. Before the demographic shift, *sheila* and *grrrl* are the only primordial F classes in their respective societies, while *bloke* and *boi* are the only primordial M classes. Since most characteristics of the genders on Patriarcha and Amazonia are relatively stable across the demographic shift, *sheila* and *grrrl* persist and remain historical F classes, while *bloke* and *boi* remain historical M classes. (Since there were never any other primordial gender classes, these are the only historical gender classes to consider.) No other classes are introduced, so (we may reasonably assume) each society has only one historical M class and one historical F class. However we choose to handle the hard cases of multiple M or F classes, we correctly identify which class in each setting is the class of women, and which is the class of men. We have thus allowed the classes of women and men to survive a shift in practices of gender assignment that makes gender fully consensual.

In Section 3.2 below, we consider how we might generalize our account of the genders *woman* and *man* to a more comprehensive theory of gender categories. Readers who are interested only in the cases of *woman* and *man* may skip to Section 3.3, which discusses crucial details of class membership.

### 3.2 Other Genders

So far, our account of gender classes has been limited to F classes, which pattern with our notions of femaleness or womanhood, and M classes, which pattern with our notions of maleness or manhood. These options do not exhaust the diversity of attested genders. Examples of gender categories beyond *woman* and *man* include\(^{26}\) *hijra*, *burrnesha*, *genderfluid person*, *demigirl*, and *demiguy*.\(^{27}\) Some of

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\(^{25}\) We probably don’t want to assume that social classes of this sort are closed under a union-like operation. It would be better to implement this approach by saying that to be a woman is to belong to any of one’s society’s F classes. This would make it possible to be a woman in a society where no one class can properly be said to be the class of women.

\(^{26}\) There are also categories which have something to do with gender, but do not seem to count as genders, such as *queen regnant* and *father of daughters*. It is, presumably, desirable to avoid an account which forces us to recognize these as genders, and we think our account excludes many cases of this sort, but we won’t explicitly discuss the details of such cases below.

\(^{27}\) See Appendix A for glosses of these terms.
these classes have relatively long traditions; others, although they may describe individual tendencies that have existed throughout human history, appear, in their capacity as recognized classes, to be recent subcultural innovations (discoveries?). Further, even restricting attention to 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.

We have given a theory of woman and man, but how much can we say about genders more generally? What other genders might there be, 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.

As a first attempt, we might try to simply copy our definitions of F and M classes, but, where those definitions appeal to male and female reproductive biology, instead require only that the primordial form of a gender class have membership adjudicated based on some feature of reproductive biology. This would suggest the following approach:

A Primordial Gender (preliminary definition) 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, or on being perceived (perhaps inaccurately) to have any of these characteristics.

A Historical Gender (preliminary definition) is a class (which may reasonably be idealized as being) descended (perhaps trivially) from a primordial gender by the right sort of causal continuity.

Classes based on male and female reproductive roles count as primordial, since both male and female are sexes. Categories based on other sorts of properties connected with reproductive biology, such as prepubescent child or postmenopausal woman, do not count as primordial gender classes, since (at least in our society), these categories are not understood as sexes.28

28There are some reasons to be uneasy about about various aspects of our appeal to sexes here, but it turns out that not much hinges on the details. What we need for the examples of immediate concern is a way to recognize male-type biological sex traits and female-type biological sex characteristics as legitimate bases for genders, while excluding as genders some other reproductive-biology-associated categories that a society may recognize as biological/medical categories, like prepubescent child and sterilized male. Within this project, talk of ‘sexes’ distinguishes between biological features or categories that have the right source of social salience, and those that lack it.
We suspect that there are metaphysically possible scenarios where sexes other than male and female give rise to primordial gender classes. What counts as a sex is arguably determined in part by social factors, as is the determination of membership in culturally available sexes. Fausto-Sterling [1993] argues that there is nothing particularly natural about our choice to carve the range of human reproductive traits into two sexes, rather than five, and that another society could easily count certain intersex conditions as sexes in their own right. Ayala and Vasilyeva [2015] argue for a concept of ‘extended sex’, whereby sex traits can be lost or gained through technological intervention, and the range of human technological capabilities creates trouble for those who want to partition human beings neatly into the sex categories male and female.29

If some intersex conditions count as sexes (or could count as sexes in the appropriate social setting), then a society that recognizes them as sexes and associates them with distinct gender classes will have additional primordial gender classes. There might be sexes grounded in biological traits that result from deliberate human intervention, in which case it is possible to have primordial gender classes characterized in terms of surgical or pharmacological modifications of one’s sex characteristics, leaving open the possibility of, e.g., a distinct primordial gender class for castrati. Our definition of ‘historical gender class’ brings in classes that can be idealized as descendants of these finer-grained primordial classes. The inclusion of additional sexes may provide a reasonable (or at least good enough) model of some traditional ‘third gender’ categories.

If we are only concerned with gender classes plausibly rooted in biological characteristics (however acquired), the above definitions may be more or less sufficient. But it appears that not all gender categories are of this kind. Consider, for example, genderfluid. This gender description, popularized under this name in relatively recent history, 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

29We will need a theory of what biological categories count as sexes within a society. The most obvious requirement here is that sexes ought to be specifiable in terms of reproductive capacities, or in terms of biological traits associated with reproductive capacities. A number of other restrictions seem promising: perhaps to count as a system of sexes, a system of these sorts of categories needs to at least separate fertile individuals with paradigm female biological traits from fertile individuals with paradigm male biological traits, or needs to be granted some particular kind of social salience, or needs to 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 among many, and we will not evaluate them here.
gender class, at least on the preliminary definition. We could imagine a fictional scenario in which a primordial class was characterized by natural or medically assisted change in one’s sex biology over time (or, rather, change other than ‘normal’ change associated with typical female and male development), but, as far as we know, there is no reason to think that the ‘genderfluid’ label is rooted in such a primordial class, nor does mythologizing it as rooted in such a class seem especially elucidatory. Instead, what makes ‘genderfluid’ a gender label is the way that it is to be conceived of in terms of a system of gender classes that includes historical gender classes. If somebody sometime 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 classes. Something similar could be said about gender classifications like *demigirl*, *demiguy*, *bigender*, and perhaps some traditional third-gender categories.

This notion of a something being a gender by virtue of its relation to a system of things that already count as genders can also help us to make conceptual sense of at least some uses of random organisms or inanimate objects as gender labels in (especially) online subcultural spaces. Consider, for example, the way Dillon [2007] characterizes themself 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!

... What seems to be going on here is that ‘I’m a cactus’ is, in some (metaphorical, humorous) sense, 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 involved 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 it could be, if it obtained some minimal level of social stability and subcultural recognition.

Let us take what we have learned from our exploration of genderfluid and cactus, and try to build a third case:

A Symbiotic Gender (preliminary definition) is a category that is defined primarily in terms of historical genders (either in terms of specific historical genders, or in terms of the structure of the system of historical genders), situated as an alternative to established historical genders, or understood as a potentially indispensable clarification or qualification of some historical gender or genders.

We could then say that all symbiotic genders and historical genders are genders, and that nothing else is a gender. This will cover the cases discussed so far, but we (tentatively) prefer a different approach. We would like (suitable) historical descendants of symbiotic genders to be genders even if they no longer fully function as symbiotic genders. Under the above definition, if the concept of, e.g., genderfluid evolves to no longer be even roughly definable in terms of concepts like man and woman, or if it just outlives man and woman, will, for this reason, reason cease to be a symbiotic gender. At present, if it is not a symbiotic gender, we have no basis for considering it a gender at all. This seems to be the wrong result: if the relationship between genderfluid, man, and woman changes over time, that should not stop genderfluid from remaining a gender. Further, we would like for symbiotic genders to be able to depend on other symbiotic genders. If cactus or demiguy is a symbiotic gender, then we want somebody whose gender is fluid between woman and one of these options to count as genderfluid, but as it stands this will not come out, since symbiotic genders can only have symbiotic dependencies on historical genders.

The upshot of the above considerations is that we would like the system of genders to be closed under the derivation of both historical genders and symbi-
otic genders. This could be achieved by something like the following recursive definition:

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

(Historical Case) If G is a category within society/community C which is (or may reasonably be idealized as being) descended (perhaps trivially) from a gender (of C or of one of its predecessors or influences) by the right sort of causal continuity, then G is a gender of C.

(Symbiotic Case) If G is a category within society/community C that is defined primarily in terms of genders of C (either in terms of specific genders, or in terms of the structure of the system of genders), situated as an alternative to genders of C, or understood as a potentially indispensable clarification or qualification of a gender or genders of C, then G is a gender of C.

(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 must ultimately go back to the base case of a system of primordial sex-biology-based genders, and still plausibly excludes other sorts of social classes 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 there seems to be a good chance that we’ve 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.
3.3 Belonging to Gender Classes

We have advanced a theory of what it is for a class to be a gender, but have said nothing about the facts of a gender’s membership. We are in the awkward position of being reasonably well-equipped to say something about what it is to be the class of women in a society, but of not being able to say much of anything about what it is for an individual to be a woman.\(^{30}\) How are we to link the property of being a class of women or men with the extensions of the English words *woman* or *man* for purposes of talking about a society?

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

**X is Gendered as a G in community C** (where G is any gender class of C) iff

- C’s practices of adjudicating class membership would place X in the G class.

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

The details may need to be adjusted depending on our approach to the various hard cases mentioned in our discussion of societies with more than one F (M) class, but if we can identify a class as the class of women (men), being gendered as a woman (man) is simply a matter of being regarded as a member of that class by one’s community.\(^{31}\)

For some purposes, equating being gendered as a woman (man, G) with being a woman (man, G) may be a good enough account of gender class membership. Returning to our thought experiment, this would suffice to model the core difference between Amazonia and Patriarcha. Before the demographic shifts, everybody regarded as a bloke, and nobody regarded as a grrrl, is gendered as a man because the blokes (but not the grrrls) are the class of men in their society, and likewise everybody regarded as a sheila is gendered as a woman, and nobody regarded as a boi is. After the shift, this connection doesn’t change, because, as

\(^{30}\)This is analogous to the situation of having a theory what sort of social entity the United States or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is, but not of what is involved in an individual being a US national or an MIT student.

\(^{31}\)If we want to take the approach where we do not identify any one competitor as the class of women (men), but instead frame things in terms of the disjunction of all F (M) classes, we would presumably say that to be gendered as a woman (man) is for there to be at least one F (M) class G such that one is gendered as a G. A similar disjunctive approach could be applied to any of the definitions of class membership discussed below.
already noted, blokes (but not grrrls) are still a class of men, and sheilas (but not bois) are still a class of women. That is, even the simple approach of identifying being gendered as a G with being a G already solves the problems posed by our Twin Planets example. This result is inherited by all of the more complex approaches discussed below.

We might ask if it generally suffices to equate being gendered into a class with in fact belonging to that class. It is a natural impulse to say that a gender class is a social construct specific to a society, so, if that society has norms for adjudicating membership in that class, who are we to contradict it? We might grant that, in principle, there are ways for an entire linguistic community to be systematically wrong about how it adjudicates membership in one of its categories. But, granting the possibility of systematic error, is there any reason to think that this possibility arises in the case of gender?

Some readers may find it sufficient for their purposes to equate being a G with being gendered as a G. But if we want to broadly respect claims of transgender identity, we should say that a society can simply be wrong about how it adjudicates class membership. On the Q activist view, a trans man in a transphobic community where he is misgendered by nearly everybody – including all the leading legal and epistemic authorities of the community – is still genuinely a man. If this is right, we cannot identify being a woman (or man) with being gendered as a woman (or man).

The above problem is not particular to our account. For example, Haslanger builds the perception of biology into her definitions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’, so this problem arises for her. Haslanger’s critics Saul [2012] and Diaz-Leon [2016] notice the problem and propose solutions to it. With slight modifications, their solutions can be attached to our above framework, retaining the structure they use to address the misgendering problem, while plugging in our notion of being gendered as a member of a class in where before they had various other notions of being gendered or of perceived biological sex. In light of this, we regard our main analysis above as separable from the exact choice of a solution. Below, though, we work through some sample approaches.

First, as a kind of baseline, consider Haslanger’s proposal (SH). Recall that, for Haslanger, being a woman (man) is about experiencing subordination (privi-

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32 For one promising example, consider the case where the category is a natural kind about which certain false beliefs are universal. Whales are not fish even in a society where everyone thinks they are.

33 Perhaps he must at least be recognized as a man by himself, although even here there is room for doubt.
lege) for which one is ‘marked’ by one’s perceived biological sex characteristics. A possible adjustment to Haslanger’s theory, which allows for the possibility of our Amazonia/Patriarcha scenario, is to substitute being gendered as a woman (man) for the component of actual or perceived biology:

\[(\text{SH}') \quad \text{S is woman (man) iff } S \text{ is systematically subordinated (privileged) along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is ‘marked’ as a target for this treatment by virtue of being gendered as a woman (man) in their society.}\]

This illustrates our general strategy: rather than building our definition of woman or man upon actual or perceived biological sex characteristics, we can instead build it upon being gendered as a woman or man. The genders woman and man will connect back to actual or perceived sex characteristics historically, but need not reflect any specific connection with them in the present. If we change nothing else about our favored definition, we can reasonably hope that we have retained most of its benefits (and flaws) outside of those directly connected to the concerns motivating the substitution.

As noted, (SH) is somewhat disappointing in its treatment of transgender identities, and (SH') inherits these problems. There have been various attempts to remedy this, and they can typically be adapted in the same way. Consider, for example, Saul’s proposal (JS). Under (JS), a trans woman can truly utter the sentence ‘I am a woman’ in a context where making the same assertions of gender identity is a salient dimension of similarity – even if the people around her do not agree that she is a woman. We will come to a serious problem with this in a second, but first note that those who favor Saul’s approach can easily enough combine its account of class membership with our account of woman and man classes. This is illustrated by (JS'):

\[(\text{JS}') \quad \text{X is a G is true in a context } C \text{ iff } X \text{ is human and relevantly similar (according to the standards at work in } C) \text{ to most of those who are gendered as Gs consistently and with a high level of confidence.}\]

\[X \text{ is a woman (man) is true in a context } C \text{ iff } X \text{ is human and relevantly similar (according to the standards at work in } C) \text{ to most of those who are gendered as women (men) consistently and with a high level of confidence.}\]

Here, saying ‘I am a woman’ remains sufficient to render somebody a woman
as long as similarity of identification is salient. All that has changed is that the standard of comparison is no longer determined by female biology, but rather by whatever the society’s baseline standards for gendering people as women are.

To our minds, Saul’s proposal (JS) and our modification (JS′) both grant too much power to those who would deny the legitimacy of trans people’s identities. (Saul herself agrees that this is a problem, and holds back from endorsing (JS) because of it [Saul, 2012, 209-210].) Suppose, for instance, that a group of right-wing politicians decides the salient dimension of similarity is having the same sex descriptor written on one’s birth certificate. Given their context, politicians could, on a Saul-type account, truly claim that trans women are not women. A theory of the extension of woman should give us more grounds to critique the politicians. They may be right in their own context, but something is badly wrong with their context.

A natural response is to make the extensions of woman and man a partly normative matter – i.e., a matter of which moral and political standards govern our context. This is what Diaz-Leon [2016] suggests: ‘we should understand the relevant standards at issue in a context as those that are relevant for practical purposes (where these are broadly conceived to include theoretical, prudential, moral, political, and even aesthetic values).’

One of Haslanger’s examples, drawn from a separate debate about aesthetics, provides a useful analogy. Haslanger imagines a mother telling her daughter, who is dressing for the first day of school, ‘crop-tops are not cute and you won’t be a dork if you wear your track suit’ [Haslanger, 2012, 408]. While the mother is wrong by the standards of the daughter’s social milieu, this does not rule out the possibility that she gets something importantly right. Haslanger considers (but stops short of endorsing) a proposal to privilege some milieus as morally and politically superior to others. Haslanger also considers another way of grounding critique: we might privilege whatever standards are shared, and use those shared standards to criticize other proposed standards [Haslanger, 2012, 424-425]. Whichever analogy we choose, however, appealing to moral and political considerations gives the mother the resources to critique the daughter’s concepts.34 Similarly, while trans women don’t count as women by the standards of many social milieus, we can draw on moral and political considerations to critique those standards.

34We needn’t think the mother is right here to appreciate this point – what is of interest is that, when the mother denies a cuteness ascription, what she is saying is something (possibly something mistaken) partly grounded by moral and political principles or values, which isn’t directly refuted by any observation about the facts on the ground in the daughter’s milieu.
There are other precedents of seemingly descriptive terms whose extensions are determined partly by normative criteria. Consider a few examples:

‘Food’ Haslanger argues that cows are not in the extension of food, even though they count as food in our society, since our society’s meat-eating practices are morally unacceptable [Haslanger, 2012, 461].

‘Pest’ Duffy [1995] argues that the double-crested cormorant is considered a pest by fish farmers because it competes with them for resources, but is also listed as an endangered or protected species in some states. McNaught [1987] documents how visitors to Yellowstone National Park shifted from fearing wolves as dangerous pests to valuing them as beautiful and worthy of protection. In both cases, what is in dispute is not any material fact, but rather some normative evaluation.

‘Art’ On some theories, an object must have certain aesthetic properties to count as art. Beardsley [1982], for instance, holds that something is art just in case it is capable of causing aesthetic experience, or belongs to a class of things that are capable of causing aesthetic experience. Insofar as the concept of an aesthetic experience is normative, the concept of art will be normative too. Critics sometimes decry works as non-art on the grounds that they lack aesthetic merit (for a few examples, see [Spalding, 2012] and [Martin, 1999]).

‘Pet’ The Captive Animals’ Protection Society (CAPS) has published a pamphlet titled ‘Exotic Animals Are Not Pets’ [The Captive Animals’ Protection Society, 2012]. The pamphlet defends its thesis on normative grounds: although humans do sometimes buy exotic animals in pet stores, keep them indoors, and feed them, CAPS argues, this practice is morally wrong on environmental and animal welfare grounds.

35 A reader sufficiently unable to sympathize with this Haslanger’s normative position might consider the case of a dispute between two people in a human society in which cannibalism is tolerated but often regarded with suspicion. In arguing about the merits of tighter restrictions on the consumption of human flesh and the sale of human flesh for consumption, it’s not hard to imagine the advocate of such regulations declaring that ‘humans are not food’ as a normative claim, while agreeing with the opponent of the regulations about all the facts concerning the nutritional properties of human flesh, the level of risk of disease transmission associated with eating the flesh of a member of one’s own species, and the current state of the market and the law.
‘State’ The decision whether to apply the language of statehood to a given self-proclaimed government, or a given *de facto* self-governing territory, is not fully resolved by material facts – either the facts on the ground of territorial control and administration, or the facts of recognition by members of the international community, except perhaps in extreme cases of complete recognition or no recognition in control. Two people can agree on every material particular regarding a disputed territory, but disagree as to whether it is a state, for the reason that the make different normative judgments regarding its *worthiness* of recognition.

Putting these considerations together, we are finally able to specify the extensions of genders, including *woman* and *man*.

X is a G iff X ought to be gendered as a G, if their society were doing the most morally and politically adequate job possible of gendering people in an acceptable way, holding fixed the society’s inventory of genders, its treatment of people on the basis of how they are gendered, and, as much as possible, all features of the society that could be held fixed while hypothetically changing its gendering practices and idealizing X’s self-knowledge and willingness to offer sincere testimony regarding that self-knowledge.

X is a woman (man) iff X ought to be gendered as a woman (man), if their society were doing the most morally and politically adequate job possible of gendering people in an acceptable way, holding fixed the society’s inventory of genders, its treatment of people on the basis of how they are gendered, and, as much as possible, all features of the society that could be held fixed while hypothetically changing its gendering practices and idealizing X’s self-knowledge and willingness to offer sincere testimony regarding that self-knowledge.

Some spelling-out is in order, concerning both what we have chosen to idealize and what we have chosen to hold fixed. We idealize self-knowledge and

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36 Similar points could be made regarding the attribution of political statuses to individuals. Consider, for example, the claims of the brothers Renly and Stannis Baratheon during the War of the Five Kings in the *Game of Thrones* television series. In calling himself King, Renly does not deny that Stannis is his older brother, but appeals to his own kingly merits: ‘He inspires no love or loyalty. He’s not a king. I am.’ Stannis, meanwhile, has a more legalistic focus: ‘The Iron Throne is mine by right. All those that deny that are my foes.’ The dispute between the two brothers (and their followers) is in part a dispute about who *ought to be recognized* as king, and, perhaps, about which values take priority in making such a determination.
willingness to offer testimony mainly in order to accommodate ‘I didn’t yet know I was trans’, narratives, and to address the possibility of somebody deliberately keeping their gender secret. We flesh out the details in Appendix B.

The ‘holding fixed...’ qualification is a first stab at a kind of ‘feasibility’ constraint. If somebody is committed to gender abolitionism – the view that there ought to be no women or men, and perhaps that there ought to be no gender classes at all – they will likely say that the way for a society to do the most morally and politically adequate job of gendering people is for it to never gender anybody as a woman or man. Without the feasibility constraint, our definition would say that if gender abolitionism is correct, there are already no women or men. But it doesn’t seem at all right to say that the gender abolitionist is committed to this: the (hypothetical) moral truth of abolitionism should not have as a consequence that abolition is already complete.

So instead of defining the extensions of genders by appealing to an ideal theory about what the extensions of those terms would be in a morally perfect world, we define them in terms of a more realistic theory about what the extensions of those terms would be in the best world that is compatible with facts about the gender categories already in place. Our theory says people’s genders are the ones they would be assigned not on the best possible way of gendering them, but on the best feasible way of gendering them. Our concept of feasibility is similar to the one expressed in [Wiens, 2015]: ‘realizing a state of affairs is feasible only if it can be realized given facts about the (financial, technological, motivational, institutional, etc.) resources at our disposal.’ To Wiens’s list, we might add ‘conceptual’; since gender categories as they exist now constitute a finite conceptual resource.

As noted, this ‘holding fixed...’ condition is only a first stab: the details of exactly what hypothetical changes in a society to consider are nontrivial, and involve both normative questions and an assortment of well-known formal problems in the logic of counterfactuals and deontic modalities. These problems are not in-substantial, but they stem from our inclusion of normativity, not from our account of gender classes, and it seems to us that any similarly normative account of individual gender must eventually address them.

A crucial moral of this section is that making decisions about how to gender people involves taking on normative commitments. This general point is compatible with a wide variety of normative views. Our own normative outlook is more or less aligned with contemporary trans feminism: we think that people are presumptively the best authorities on their own genders. On this view, sincere reports of self-identification will be the best grounds for deciding how to gender people, so the fact of the matter will typically be that somebody belongs to whatever gen-
der they say they belong to. But none of this is a commitment of our theory of class membership – but only of that theory combined with our own politics.

4 Conclusion

We began by identifying two desiderata for a metaphysics and semantics of gender suitable for queer and feminist theory and activism: such a theory ought to make sense of gender as a distinct social phenomenon connected with sex, and it ought to accommodate the conceptual possibility of fully consensual membership in gender categories. We then argued that there is a tension between these desiderata: the first demands a clear connection between gender and sex, while the second requires that we grant them a certain kind of independence. We have sketched an account of gender that fulfills both desiderata while avoiding the tension. Our theory inherits many of the virtues of the material, ahistorical views discussed in the first Section ((SH), (JH), and (JS)), but avoids some of their problems. However, have left many details unresolved. Below, we review the structure of our account in a way that calls attention to its modularity, and highlights the main open questions.

4.1 The Structure of Our Account

Our account of the classes man and woman can be divided into two logically independent parts: a historical theory of the classes themselves, and a normative theory of class membership. We depict the relationship between these ingredients schematically in figure 4.1.

The upper left part of the diagram shows a primordial F (M) class, which gains its status as an F (M) class by being anchored to biological sex characteristics. As time passes, historical F (M) classes (depicted at the upper center and upper right) evolve from the primordial class. They count as F(M) classes because there is a path can of historical continuity linking each class to its progenitor and leading back to a primordial F(M) class, which is in turn anchored to biological sex characteristics. If there are no other F (M) classes, then each F (M) class pictured is the class of women (men) at the time when it exists.

Our ability to label these classes as F (M) classes, and to say that they comprise classes of women (men), does not allow us to determine their extensions – not

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37Our hedges here relate to a concern that there are ways in which people may not be reliable reporters of their own genders. See Appendix B for details.
Figure 1: The structure of our theory of women and men.
even in the case of the primordial F (M) class. (Even if the society of origin for the primordial F (M) class aims for class membership to track the presence or absence of biological sex characteristics, it may not succeed in its aim.) We have drawn the extensions of the various F(M) classes at the bottom of the diagram, and depicted the connection between each class and its extensions a vertical line.\textsuperscript{38}

Following Diaz-Leon [2016], we have argued that the membership criteria for classes are normative. However, our theory of gender classes is compatible with a range of alternative theories about the relationship between genders and their membership are possible, including versions of the simple account proposed by Haslanger [2012] and the contextualist account proposed by Saul [2012].

In summary, our account consists of a horizontal part (the historical theory of gender classes) and a vertical part (the normative theory of class membership). While these parts are logically independent, they fit together into a coherent view designed to vindicate the concept of consensual gender. The historical theory of gender classes explains how consensual gender is possible, while the normative theory of class membership connects the values underlying the consensual gender project to the gender classification of people in the actual world. Together these two parts of our account provide a philosophical foundation for some important strands of trans and feminist activism.

Next, we discuss how our account might fit into a more fully developed theory of gender, and how it connects with the formulation of a feminist project.

4.2 Towards a More General Picture

Our paper answers the question: ‘What is it to be a woman (or a man)?’ We claim that to be a woman (man) is to belong to a gender class identifiable with the class of women (men). This immediately raises four problems:

\textbf{(Delimitation Problem)} What makes a class a \textit{gender} class, as opposed to some other sort of class?

\textbf{(Counterpart Problem)} When can two gender classes in different societies, or different historical stages of the same society, be identified with each other as the same gender?

\textsuperscript{38}Not pictured are links that connect the current members of a gender category to its historical continuity conditions. We wish to leave open the possibility that such links exist and are worth theorizing about.

41
(Woman/Man Problem) What, if anything, are the essential characteristics of the classes *woman* and *man*?

(Membership Problem) What is it to belong to a gender class?

Our historical theory of gender classes partly addresses the delimitation, counterpart, and man/woman problems, while our normative theory of class membership partly addresses the membership problem, but for each of the problems, much remains to be filled in.

4.2.1 The Delimitation Problem

We recognize two ways for a class to count as a gender: either it is a primordial gender class whose membership is adjudicated mainly on the basis of sex biology, or it is connected to one or more primordial gender classes by a suitable network of relationships. These relationships may involve either historical continuity (the historical case) or something like competition within the same system of classes (the symbiotic case). But we assume (by idealization or mythology, if not in historical fact) that all genders ‘bottom out’ in some system of more-or-less directly biological classes, upon which an arbitrary number of layers of historical or symbiotic dependency may be stacked.

There are many open questions about how to fill in the details of this picture. First, what kinds of non-ideal approximations of the primordial case need to be built in, and what problems arise when we try to build them in? We have not attempted to answer this question, but we consider it a promising area for future research.

Second, what sort of historical continuity suffices to bring a class into the network of genders? So far, we have discussed a few examples of historical continuity, but have not attempted to pin down a complete account. In the case of Amazonia and Patriarcha, we assumed that historical continuity obtains in a case of (sufficiently gradual) transition from strict gender assignment based on sex characteristics to fully consensual membership, provided enough other characteristics of the gender are held stable. If the history of our actual *man* and *woman* classes is any indication, the historical continuity condition should be satisfied even when a class undergoes fairly drastic changes in norms of expected behavior.

Third, what sort of symbiotic dependency suffices to bring a class into the network of genders? We have suggested *genderfluid* within a pre-existing gender system as a paradigm case of symbiotic dependency, and have suggested that a
symbiotic dependency is established by something being a best-reply to some question like ‘To which gender do you belong?’ That is, symbiotic establishment of a class involves setting up a class as a designation that clarifies a person’s relationship with established classes, but need not be a historical continuation of a prior gender class. There is considerable room to make this more precise.

4.2.2 The Counterpart and Woman/Man Problems

We have not attempted to provide a general solution to the counterpart problem, and the development of such a solution remains a major open issue in our account. We have, however, committed ourselves to two substantive theses. First, our Amazonia and Patriarcha cases presuppose that the kind of historical continuity that preserves the status of a class as a gender class typically maintains its identity with its historical predecessors. For example a class that starts out as a class of women and continues to exist as a gender class can be expected to remain a class of women. This does not yet settle hard cases about what happens when gender classes split and merge over history.

Second, our treatment of the Amazonia and Patriarcha cases commits us to the claim that two distinct classes in different, perhaps causally isolated, societies can nonetheless both be classes of women, or both be classes of men. The idea is that the class of women (men) is a class that exists in historical continuity with a class whose membership is primarily adjudicated on the basis of female (male) sex characteristics. This is complicated by various cases involving societies with multiple such classes, and these harder cases remain problems for future research.

4.2.3 The Membership Problem

Our discussion of the membership problem has two themes. First, we observe that for any gender G, being gendered as a G can be used to connect a variety of different approaches to class membership with our theory of gender classes. In particular, we’ve discussed how accounts along the lines of (SH) and (JS), which make reference to actual perceived possession of certain biological characteristics, can be adapted by substituting being gendered as a G for the biological criterion.

Second, we endorse the normative approach, inspired by Diaz-Leon [2016], on which people’s genders are determined by how they ought to be gendered, holding fixed certain facts about the existing gender categories. We believe that our normative proposal does the greatest justice to the value that trans activism places on self-identification, and to the way that non-question-begging arguments
within feminism about gender attribution almost invariably appeal to normative considerations.

Once we’ve opted for the normative approach, a number of questions remain open. Our concept of how people ought to be gendered must be drawn from non-ideal ethical theory, and must hold certain facts about the real world and its gender system fixed. What is the best way to characterize which facts we must hold fixed? And if we are right to value well-informed and well-considered self-identification, what exactly are the boundaries of informed and considered, and what precisely is the nature of self-identification? We leave these questions for future research. However we fill in the details of our normative theory, theories of this type have an advantage which is already recognized in the feminist literature: they explain how misgendering a person can count as mistaken, even if the misgendering accords with policies of gendering people that are widespread in society.

Before moving on, we want to emphasize that our normative theory is one of the many options compatible with the theory of gender classes that is the primary focus of this paper; most readers who favor different approaches to the membership problem should still be able to use our theory of classes.

4.3 Formulating a Feminist Politics

Feminist efforts to define woman (and man) often attempt to make it analytically true that feminist politics simply is support for and solidarity with women, or (perhaps equivalently) so that women are the solidarity class directly relevant to feminism. The definition (SH), for example, seems to be tailored to the goal of defining the feminist project in terms of advocacy for women: the women are exactly those who are subordinated by patriarchal oppression. A society that doesn’t need feminism (because it has eliminated patriarchal oppression) will thus be a society without women.

Unlike Haslanger, we have chosen not to bake oppression into the definition of woman and man: nowhere in our official account is there an analytic connection between being a woman and being systematically disadvantaged. For a number of reasons, we think that this is not a problem.

Even if oppression is in no way intrinsic to womanhood, it is easy enough to define feminism in a way that makes analytic the special connection between the

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39One could build in such a connection by hand, as Haslanger does, and we have done our best to indicate where our account could be tweaked in to achieve this. Readers disposed to pursue a more Haslangerian approach should thus be equipped to take advantage of many of the components of our account, and we welcome them to do so.
feminist project and ending the oppression of women, e.g., by simply defining feminism as the project of opposing the subordination of women as a class on the basis of their individual womanhood. Alternatively, we could try to treat the connection between feminism and women as synthetic — e.g., by saying that feminism is a movement to end oppression and double standards based on sex or gender, and then observing that, in the actual world, women are the largest class of people disproportionately harmed by sexist oppression. Either approach is compatible with our theory, but we favor the second.

Our main reason for resisting a definition of feminism in terms of women is that it is not at all clear that only women (understood in any sense compatible with the conventions of a mainstream or activist community) have claims on feminism. To pick one obvious point of concern, the feminist movement has long concerned itself with the particular needs and rights of those liable to become pregnant. But many people who do not identify as women (e.g., because they identify as trans men, or as nonbinary) still possess all the biological prerequisites for pregnancy-liability, and it seems improper to exclude their rights in this area from the purview of feminism, or to invalidate their stated identities declaring that for purposes of the feminist project they are really women. This suggests that at least some non-women will have claims on feminism.

Another reason not to define feminism in terms of women is that, although the patriarchal order advantages men as a class, even cisgender men suffer genuine harms from gendered division of labor and the coercive imposition of gender norms. For example, men engaged in stereotypically feminine behavior may be marked as targets for censure or violence specifically because they are men engaged in this behavior. Even if one is not persuaded by any actual cases, there is some reason to think that feminism allows for the possibility of non-women having claims on feminism: if we come into contact with Amazonia, we presumably ought to support the bois’ liberation movement, and to support it as feminists. Amazonian bois are not women, but our commitment to their liberation stems from our general feminist opposition to sexist oppression.

So the best approach we can think of is to define the feminist project as the project of fighting oppression on the basis of (actual or perceived) sex characteristics or (actual or perceived) gender class membership, where ‘on the basis of’ can be developed in any of a number of ways. Thus, oppression specific to liability
to become pregnant and oppression specific to being a woman are both legitimate concerns of feminism, even though the set of those liable to become pregnant is neither a subset nor a superset of the set of women.

On our definition, it is not a conceptual truth that feminism is specially concerned with women or femaleness. This is, at first glance, at odds with the shape of the word *feminism* and with the practical issues that have formed the focus of feminist politics, but it’s not obvious that it’s a real problem. As already noted, the focus on women and femaleness is easily explained as resulting from contingent facts about the oppression of women. As for the word *feminism*, its shape can be treated as an etymological curiosity that, as a historical matter, results from this fact, and not as anything that creates a special commitment regarding its semantics.\(^{41}\) Critically, though, nothing in our account of *woman* commits us to this move – those who would resist it can define feminism as the movement that fights oppression on the basis of any combination of (actual or perceived) female sex traits and (actual or perceived) womanhood.

### A Genders and Gender-Related Categories Mentioned

Below, we provide brief descriptions of many of the genders and gender-related categories mentioned above. These descriptions are brief and informal, and readers are referred to the more detailed social-scientific, philosophical, and biomedical literatures, along with the various available testimonies of living and dead persons belonging to these categories. Any survey of this kind suffers from certain risks, because the power to promote and preserve testimonial and observational evidence is not equally distributed among gender categories. In most human societies, the ‘official record’ has historically favored the testimony and perspectives of men, while marginalizing that of women and others. In the case of transgender categories in contemporary western societies, those with control over the popular and academic literature have often chosen to focus on certain types of testimony based more on their own biases and interests than on good standards of thorough

\(^{41}\)We take this to be in keeping with a standard third-wave feminist rebuttal to so-called ‘men’s rights advocates’, who are wont to complain that ‘feminism’ by its nature unfairly fails to engage with the ways in which the current order can be harmful to men. Third-wave feminists have often responded that they are both aware of and concerned with the ways that the patriarchal order is harmful to men (although not typically to anything like the degree to which it is harmful to women), that they are in fact doing more to promote social reforms that will address these harms than the ‘men’s rights advocates’ are, and that they take all of this to stem from their feminist commitments.
or representative data collection, and have often relied on evidence provided by medical or psychiatric professionals whose positions of real or perceived power have made transgender individuals interacting with them reluctant or unable to provide complete and candid testimony. These difficulties are amplified for many culture-specific gender categories, where the most comprehensive available literature is in many cases the result of the efforts of researchers none of whom belong to the human communities being studied.

**Bigender** As a recognized gender description, ‘bigender’ (also written ‘bi-gender’) is, as far as we know, of recent vintage, but it has nontrivial subcultural recognition. This description is most often defined as identification with two distinct gender categories. There is considerable possible variation as to what two gender categories involved, and the two need not be *man*, and *woman*. A person who is bigender between two categories $\lambda$ and $\mu$ may or may not also be genderfluid between $\lambda$ and $\mu$.

**Boy** The English word ‘boy’ is used to refer to non-adult members of the *man* class. An adult member of this class may be called a ‘boy’ as well, with variously condescending, infantilizing, casual, or affectionate associations, depending on the exact context of use.

**Burrnesha** ‘Burrnesha’ is a term of Albanian origin used by some English-language sources for a traditional transmasculine gender category (that is, a category associated with biological characteristics at birth that its society regards as *female*, and with behavioral norms or stereotypes otherwise associated with those regarded as *men* or *male*) associated with various communities in the Balkan region. This gender category is typically associated with rights, privileges, and expectations similar to those associated with *men*, but also involves a requirement of celibacy. To the best of our knowledge, the burrnesha role is not specially associated with any form of body modification or medical transition. This category is known by various names in different languages of the Balkans, and, besides ‘burrnesha’, English language

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42For some discussion of the ways that these forces have (mis)informed perceptions of transgender experience, see [Stone, 2006] and [Serano, 2007].
43Serano [2007] offers an important, if incomplete and imperfect, discussion of some problems that can be seen as connected with this.
44Bigender itself is not usually understood as counting towards the two. We suspect that a fully satisfying characterization of the criteria of bigenderness will require a certain amount of recursion and perhaps a distinction between first-order and higher-order gender identification, but we leave these problems for another time.
sources sometimes use the term ‘sworn virgin’. For representative literature, see [Malfatto and Prtoric, 2014] and [Grémieux, 1993].

**Cisgender** The term ‘cisgender’ denotes the the complement or opposite of the category *transgender*. Its exact extension will vary with one’s precise understanding of ‘transgender’, and with the degree to which one admits borderline or none-of-the-above cases. Paradigm examples of cisgender individuals are *women* or *girls* born with stereotypically *female* sex biology who have continuously identified as (and been identified as) *women* or *girls* for their entire lives, and *men* or *boys* born with stereotypically *male* sex biology who have continuously identified as (and been identified as) *men* or *boys* for their entire lives.\(^{45}\)

**Demigirl** The term ‘demigirl’ refers to a person who identifies partly as a woman, girl, or member of some other feminine category. Demigirls may also be *bigender* (if, in addition to (partly) identifying as a woman or girl, they identify as a member of some other category) or *genderfluid* (if their relationship with *woman*, *girl*, or some other gender category varies across time).

**Demiguy** The term ‘demiguy’ (or variant ‘demiboy’) refers to a person who identifies partly as a man, boy, guy, or member of some other masculine category. Like *demigirls*, demiguys may also be *bigender* or *genderfluid*.

**Female** In species with reproductive biology based on the production of two distinct types of gametes by organisms typically capable of producing one type each, the sex term ‘female’ is used to designate individuals producing the larger of the two gamete types, and non-gamete-producing individuals deemed (for reasons of varying degrees of well-motivated-ness) to more closely resemble them. In humans, paradigmatically female biological traits include the presence of two X chromosomes in each somatic cell nucleus, a balance of steroid hormones featuring relatively high levels of estrogens and low levels of androgens, gonads housed within the abdomen, the presence of a uterus capable of sustaining a developing human fetus, relatively reduced levels of muscle development and body and facial hair, relatively developed breasts with a capacity to lactate, the development of the embryonic genital tubercle into a relatively small organ which does not contain the

\(^{45}\)Taking all such individuals a paradigm examples probably does not do justice to ‘I didn’t yet realize I was trans’ situations. See Section 3.3 for some discussion of how these issues might be clarified and addressed.
opening of the urethra, and so on, although different individuals will display more or fewer of these. Inconveniently, the term ‘female’ is also used as a blanket gender term for women and girls.

**Genderfluid** (sometimes rendered ‘gender fluid’) is a gender category that can roughly be described as involving variation in gender over time.

**Girl** The English word ‘girl’ is used to refer to non-adult members of the woman class. An adult member of this class may be called a ‘girl’ as well, with variously condescending, infantilizing, casual, or affectionate associations, depending on the exact context of use.

**Hijra** ‘Hijra’ is a term of Hindi/Urdu origin used by some English-language sources for a traditional roughly transfeminine gender category (that is, a category associated with biological characteristics at birth that its society regards as male, and with behavioral norms or stereotypes otherwise associated with those regarded as women or female) associated with various communities in the South Asian region. Traditional expectations for this gender category include the wearing of clothing typically associated with women, and participation in distinct hijra communities. It is legally recognized as a distinct gender in a number of jurisdictions. The hijra role is stereotypically associated with either typically male or ambiguous sex biology at birth, and, in some cases, with body modification practices involving the removal of the gonads and external genitalia. For representative literature, see [Reddy, 2005] and [Revathi, 2010].

**Male** In species with reproductive biology based on the production of two distinct types of gametes by organisms typically capable of producing one type each, the sex term ‘male’ is used to designate individuals producing the larger of the two gamete types, and non-gamete-producing individuals deemed (for reasons of varying degrees of well-motivated-ness) to more closely resemble them. In humans, paradigmatically male biological traits include the presence of one X chromosome and one Y chromosome in each somatic cell nucleus, a balance of steroid hormones featuring relatively low levels of estrogens and high levels of androgens, external gonads, the absence of a uterus capable of sustaining a developing human fetus, relatively heightened levels of muscle development and body and facial hair, relatively undeveloped breasts with absent or diminished capacity to lactate, the development of the embryonic genital tubercle into a relatively large organ
which contains the opening of the urethra, and so on, although different individuals will display more or fewer of these. Inconveniently, the term ‘male’ is also used as a blanket gender term for men and boys.

**Man** In descriptions of many human communities, ‘man’ designates a gender class whose typical or stereotypical members have a canonical male assortment of biological traits. The English term ‘man’ is typically reserved for adult members of the gender class in question. Non-adult members are more often called ‘boys’.

**Transgender** The word ‘transgender’ is associated with a number of overlapping definitions and usages. On narrower usages, undisputed instances include people who are assigned to one gender category early in life, and end up belonging to, aspiring to, or identifying with a different gender category – one that is atypical for someone with their (past or present) sex biology. It is often used as an umbrella category that covers various other groups of people who in some way vary from the sex- or gender-related norms and expectations of their society, although there is not anything like a consensus about which such people do or don’t fall under this umbrella. ‘Transgender’ and ‘trans’ may or may not be treated as interchangeable, depending on one’s precise subcultural and linguistic community.

**Woman** In descriptions of many human communities, ‘woman’ designates a gender class whose typical or stereotypical members have a canonical female assortment of biological traits. The English term ‘woman’ is typically reserved for adult members of the gender class in question. Non-adult members are more often called ‘girls’.

## B Errors, Omissions, Secrets, and Lies

Recall our account of gender class membership:

X is a G iff X ought to be gendered as a G, if their society were doing the most morally and politically adequate job possible of gendering people in an acceptable way, holding fixed the society’s inventory of genders, its treatment of people on the basis of how they are gendered, and, as much as possible, all features of the society that could be held fixed while hypothetically changing its gendering practices and idealizing X’s self-knowledge and willingness to offer sincere testimony regarding that self-knowledge.
We have already discussed the role of normativity in our definition, and the nature of the feasibility constraint, but we haven’t yet explained why we idealize X’s self-knowledge and willingness to offer testimony. We have chosen this idealization because it allows the facts of gender to come apart from the best practices of gendering in cases where gendering decisions are based on incomplete or inaccurate information. Below, we sketch how such cases might arise in the context of our own (transfeminist, roughly Q activist) politics.

In Section 1.4, we introduced a norm of consensual gendering. However, we elided the distinction between consensual gender ascription and consensual gender membership. We wish to to endorse the following norm of consensual gender ascription:

**Consensual Gendering Norm** For all genders G and all people X, if X sincerely and voluntarily requests to be gendered as a G, then one ought to gender X as a G, and one ought not gender X as a G unless X has consented to be gendered as a G.\(^{46}\)

On the other hand, we wish to hold back from endorsing the following norm of consensual gender membership:

**Consensual Membership in Genders** For all genders G and all people X, if X sincerely and voluntarily requests to be gendered as a G, then X is a G, and X is not a G unless X has consented to be gendered as a G.

In order to endorse the Consensual Gendering Norm while withholding endorsement from Consensual Membership in Genders, we must qualify our definition of ‘X is a G’ with a clause that idealizes X’s self-knowledge and willingness to offer testimony. Otherwise, we would be committed to the view that people’s genders simply are whatever genders ought to be ascribed to them, and the Consensual Gendering Norm would entail Consensual Membership in Genders.

Why hold back from endorsing Consensual Membership in Genders? There are examples where Consensual Gendering Norm requires gender ascriptions that turn out to be false. If we accepted Consensual Membership in Genders, we would have to treat these gender ascriptions as true.\(^{47}\) Let us turn to one such example.

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\(^{46}\)We have not framed this norm with a biconditional because we want to allow for the possibility of it being permissible but not obligatory to gender X as a G, if X professes to be perfectly willing to accept gendering as a G, but lacks sufficient motivation to request it.

\(^{47}\)We need to be careful here, as we don’t want to completely uncouple belonging from ascription. We do not, for example, want the respectful gendering of trans people to be a kind of
Recall our characters Ada and Blaise, who are stipulated to have indistinguishable dispositions (outside of the matter of gendering) and outward appearances, and to have had the same sorts of early lives being gendered as girls and young women, although Ada is a cis woman while Blaise is a trans man. Suppose that Blaise, while recounting various unpleasant adolescent experiences, says ‘back then, I did not yet realize that I was a man’. Suppose that as adolescents, Ada and Blaise had similar life histories, that neither of them had consented to be called a man, and that both had arguably consented (at least implicitly) to being called women.

The Consensual Gendering Norm says that at this point in the past, the proper course of action based on available information was to gender Ada and Blaise the same way, most likely as women. So far, this seems correct: if Blaise was in fact characterizing himself as a woman, then respecting that was, at the time, the best we could know to do. But Consensual Membership in Genders, in combination with the other details of the case, entails that Blaise was actually a woman (or at any rate not a man, and at least as much of a woman as Ada) at that point in the past, contrary to Blaise’s present-day testimony that he was already a man.

Intuitively, Consensual Membership in Genders gets it wrong. The adolescent Blaise was a man, although lack of consent or public self-identification made it improper (at least under normal circumstances) to call him a man. This situation might have persisted even after Blaise came to regard himself as a man, if for a time he was closeted and publicly identified himself as a woman.

Our idealization of self-knowledge and willingness to offer sincere testimony allows us to do justice to Blaise’s present-day testimony. Blaise may, looking

courtesy fiction, at odds with some actual facts, but maintained as a pretense, with which we are obligated to play along for some reason. We want our theory of gender membership to require that our norm of gendering bear the same sort of relationship to the facts of gender membership that the epistemic and conversational norms for declarative assertion generally bear to the reality they report on. If there are cases where, e.g., we ought to call somebody a woman when they are in fact a man, it ought to be because the evidence, perhaps in combination with well-motivated general standards of testimonial deference, has genuinely led us astray.

48 Note that there was, as yet, no generally available evidence to distinguish Blaise’s gender from Ada’s, and we take it that even those with reservations about consensual gendering would be reluctant to say it was proper to gender Ada as a man.

49 This might be a point at which it is tempting to relax the Consensual Gendering Norm slightly: to suggest that people close to Blaise might, given the right evidence, be within their rights to push his boundaries with respect to gender identification in order to nudge him in the direction of self-discovery. We’re both aware of the value of such nudges in many personal histories, and uneasy with the paternalistic outlook they appear to incorporate. In any case, we think that the issue can safely be left aside for now.

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back, recognize in his past self the dispositions or similar traits that would ultimately give rise to his characterizing himself as a man. If Blaise is right about this\textsuperscript{50} then, although he had not yet come to identify as a man, it was already the case that, under suitable circumstances, he would come to identify as a man. His actual self-knowledge and willingness to offer testimony did not make him the kind of person who we ought to gender as a man, but their idealized versions would have.\textsuperscript{51} There is, obviously, a great deal of work to be done in fleshing out the exact notion of idealization in play here, but we hope that this sketch at least motivates the inclusion of some such idealization provision in our treatment of belonging to genders.

The approach sketched above takes care of another potentially troubling case. It seems quite possible for a relatively gender-conforming cisgender person to go through an extended period of their life without ever having reason to give their full and explicit consent to be gendered as a member of the gender they were assigned at birth – the question may simply never have arisen.\textsuperscript{52} The Consensual Gendering Norm says that we should avoid ascribing any gender to such a person until they make their preferences clear – that the thing to do in the absence of a clear statement of self-identification is not to go by behavioral or physiological cues, but to either ask the person’s gender, or talk around it until clarification is offered. So far, this seems reasonable, but, as this norm has not yet been widely adopted, many people may never have had cause to offer such clarification, and we do not want to say that they therefore do not yet belong to their birth-assigned genders. Fortunately, even when such individuals have not yet consented to their gender assignments, they would consent if asked, and, under our treatment of belonging to genders, this suffices to derive the right results about their genders.

\textsuperscript{50}He could, of course, be wrong – our recollections of our past selves are never perfect. But, under normal circumstances, Blaise is still the best authority on his past self, so, as a default, the proper thing to do here is to take his word for it.

\textsuperscript{51}None of this should be taken as committing us to the view that all trans people were always members of their current genders. Our self-knowledge can evolve over time, but so, too, can our selves, and if the latter sort of personal development is implicated in somebody’s transition, then it will be perfectly correct for them describe their past self as having belonged to a different gender.

\textsuperscript{52}How much of an issue this is will depend on how stringent our notions of requesting and consenting are. We take it that many cisgender people consistently, if less-than-explicitly, represent themselves as a members of a gender, and have at one time or another made some statement like ‘I am a woman’ or ‘I am a man’. If these sorts of behaviors constitute requesting and consenting, then the gap between norms of gendering and facts of gender for the cisgender population may not be all that daunting to begin with.
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