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TALKING IDENTITY

Until the middle of the twentieth century, no one who was asked about a person's identity would have mentioned race, sex, class, nationality, region, or religion. When George Eliot writes in *Middlemarch* that Rosamond "was almost losing the sense of her identity," it's because Rosamond is faced with profoundly new experiences when she learns that Will Ladislaw, the man she thinks she loves, is hopelessly devoted to someone else.[1] Identity here is utterly particular and personal. The identities we think of today, on the other hand, are shared, often, with millions or billions of others. They are social.

One looks in vain for talk of such identities in the social science of the early twentieth century. In *Mind, Self, and Society*, published in 1934, George Herbert Mead outlined an influential theory of the self as the product of an "I" responding to the social demands of others, which, once internalized, formed what he called the "me." But in that great classic of early twentieth-century social thought, you'll never find the word "identity" used in our modern sense. Talk of identity really takes off in developmental psychology after the Second World War, with the influential work of the psychologist Erik Erikson. In his first book, *Childhood and Society*, published in 1950, he uses the term in more than one way; crucially, though, he recognizes the importance of social roles and group memberships in shaping one's sense of self, which he called, in psychoanalytic language, an "ego identity." Later on, Erikson explored the crises of identity in the lives of Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi, and published books with titles like

Identity and the Life Cycle (1959), *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), and *Dimensions of a New Identity* (1974).

Erikson, who grew up in southwest Germany, told a tale of his own origins that sits right at the heart of our contemporary notions.

> My stepfather was the only professional man (and a highly respected one) in an intensely Jewish small bourgeois family, while I (coming from a racially mixed Scandinavian background) was blond and blue-eyed, and grew flagrantly tall. Before long, then, I acquired the nickname "goy" in my stepfather's temple; while to my schoolmates, I was a "Jew."

I'm guessing that, while his Jewish confreres did use the Yiddish word for a gentile, those German kids didn't always use a word as polite as "Jew." His biological father had been a Dane named Salomonsen; his adopted father's name was Homburger. But at some point he took the last name of Erikson, which, as his daughter once observed drily, suggested that he was father to himself. In a sense, then, he was his own creation.[2] Identity, we can surely conclude, was a fraught issue for him personally.

In his first book, Erikson offered a theory as to why, as he put it, "we"—and given our subject, it's worth noticing that he seems to mean "we Americans"—"began to conceptualize questions of identity." He thought that identity had become a problem in the United States because the country was "trying to make a super-identity out of all the identities imported by its constituent immigrants"; and, he continued, "we do so at a time when rapidly increasing mechanization threatens these essentially agrarian and patrician identities in their lands of origin."[3] It's a good story. But I do not believe it. As we shall see throughout this book, identity, in our sense, was a problem long before we began to talk about it in this modern way.

If Erikson, weaving between personal and collective forms of identity, gave the term broad currency, the influential American sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner was among the first to offer a detailed definition of social identity as such. "It seems that what is meant by a 'position' is the social identity which has been assigned to a person by members of his group," he wrote in a 1957 essay. And he proposed an account of what this means, practically, in social life. First, he thought, people "observe or impute to a person certain characteristics," which allows them to "answer the question 'Who is he?'" Next, "these observed or imputed characteristics are . . . interpreted in terms of a set of culturally prescribed *categories*."

> In this manner the individual is "pigeonholed"; that is, he is held to be a certain "type" of person, a teacher, Negro, boy, man, or woman. The process by which the individual is classified by others in his group, in terms of the culturally prescribed categories, can be called the assignment of a "social identity." The types or categories to which he has been assigned *are* his social identities. . . . Corresponding to different social identities are differing sets of expectations, differing configurations of rights and obligations.[4]

As you'll see, I think that Gouldner got a lot right.

Appeals to identity swelled through the sixties and, by the end of the seventies, many societies had political movements grounded in gender and sexuality, race, religion, and ethnicity (even as class politics frequently receded into the background). In more than a few places, regionally based movements that sought to undo often long-established states spoke the language of national identity. In Europe alone, there's Scottish, Welsh, Catalan, Basque, Padanian, and Flemish nationalism; near the end of the twentieth century, Yugoslavia collapsed into a collection of distinct countries; there are rumblings in Brittany, Corsica, and Normandy . . . and that's far from a complete list.

A LITTLE THEORY

I have been writing and ruminating on questions of identity for more than three decades now. My theoretical thinking about identity began, actually, with thoughts about race, because I was genuinely puzzled by the different ways in which people in different places responded to my appearance. That wasn't so much the case in Asante, where, so it seemed to me, one local parent was usually enough to belong. Jerry Rawlings, Ghana's head of state from 1981 to 2001, had a father from Scotland; he wasn't chosen by the people originally—he came to power twice through coups d'état—but his fellow countrymen eventually elected him to the presidency twice. Unlike my three sisters, born, like my father, in Asante, I have never been a Ghanaian citizen. I was born in England, before Ghana's independence, with an English mother, and showed up in Asante at the age of one. So I'd have had to apply for Ghanaian citizenship, and my parents never applied for me. By the time it was up to me, I was used to being a Ghanaian with a British passport. My father, as president of the Ghana Bar Association, was once involved in writing one of our many constitutions. "Why don't you change the rules, so that I can be both Ghanaian and British?" I asked him. "Citizenship," he told me, "is unitary." I could see I wasn't going to get anywhere with him! But, despite my lack of that legal connection, sometimes, when I do something noteworthy, I am claimed, at least by some, for the place that is home to half my ancestry.

The story in England was complex, too. In my grandmother's village, Minchinhampton, in Gloucestershire, where I spent much time in my childhood, those we knew never appeared to doubt our right to be there. My aunt and uncle lived in this picturesque market town in the West of England, too. My aunt had been born there. My grandfather had spent time as a child at a house in the valley, which belonged to his uncle, whose mill had once woven cloth for the tunics of British soldiers and green baize for billiard tables. My great-grandfather, Alfred Cripps, had briefly served as the member of parliament for Stroud, a few miles to the north, and *his* great-grandfather, Joseph Cripps, had represented Cirencester, a few more miles east, for much of the first half of the nineteenth century. And there were Crippses in that area—some buried in Cirencester churchyard—dating back to the seventeenth century.

But the skins and the African ancestry I shared with my sisters marked us out as different, in ways we weren't always conscious of. I recall going to a sports day, a few decades ago, at a school in Dorset I'd attended as a preteen, and coming upon an elderly man who had been headmaster in my day. "You won't remember me," I apologized, as I introduced myself to him. Hearing my name, he brightened and took my hand warmly. "Of course I remember you," he said. "You were our first colored head boy." When I was young, the idea that you could be properly English and not white seemed fairly uncommon. Even in the first decade of the twenty-first century, I remember the puzzled response of an older Englishwoman who had just heard a paper on race I gave at the Aristotelian Society in London. She just didn't understand how I could really be English. And no talk of thirteenth-century ancestors in Oxfordshire could persuade her!

In America, once I got there, things seemed at first relatively simple. I had an African father and so, like President Obama later, I was black. But the story here, too, is complicated . . . and has changed over the years, in part because of the rise of the idea of mixed-race people as an identity group. Color and citizenship, however, were quite separate matters: after the Civil War no sensible person doubted you could be black and American, at least so far as the law was concerned, despite a persistent undercurrent of white racial nationalism. I'll say more about the ideas of race that shaped these experiences later, but I

hope it's clear why I might have ended up puzzled about how to make sense of them.

When I turned, over the years, to thinking about nationality and class and culture and religion as sources of identity, and added in gender and sexual orientation, I began to see three ways in which these very disparate ways of grouping people do have some important things in common.

LABELS AND WHY THEY MATTER

The first is obvious: every identity comes with labels, so understanding identities requires first that you have some idea about how to apply them. Explaining to someone what Ewes or Jains or *kothis* are begins with some suggestion as to what it is about people that makes each label appropriate for them. That way, you could look for someone of that identity, or try to decide, of someone you'd met, whether the label applied.

So, the label "Ewe" (usually pronounced eh-vey or eh-wey) is an ethnic label, what social scientists call an "ethnonym"; which means that if your parents are both Ewe, you're Ewe, too. It applies, in the first place, to people who speak one of the many dialects of a language that is called "Ewe," most of whom live in Ghana or Togo, though there are some in many other parts of West Africa and, increasingly, around the world. As is typical of ethnic labels, there can be arguments about whether it applies to someone. If only one of your parents is Ewe and you never learned any of the many dialects of the Ewe language, are you Ewe? Does it matter (given that the Ewe are patrilineal) if the parent was your mother rather than your father? And, since Ewe belongs to a larger group of languages (usually called "Gbe" because that's the word for language in all of them) that shade off into one another, it's not easy to say exactly where the boundaries between Ewe people and

other Gbe-speaking people lie. (Imagine looking for the boundaries of Southern speech in America or a cockney accent in London and you'll grasp the difficulty.) Nevertheless, large numbers of people in Ghana and Togo will claim that they're Ewe and many of their neighbors will agree.

That's because of the second important thing identities share: they matter to people. And they matter, first, because having an identity can give you a sense of how you fit into the social world. Every identity makes it possible, that is, for you to speak as one "I" among some "us": to belong to some "we." But a further crucial aspect of what identities offer is that they give you reasons for doing things. That's true about being a Jain, which means you belong to a particular Indian religious tradition. Most Jains are the children of two Jains (just as most Ewes are the children of two Ewes), but there's much more to it than that. And anyone can join who is willing to follow the path set by the *jinas*, souls who have been liberated by conquering their passions and can spend a blissful eternity at the summit of the universe. Jains are typically expected to heed five *vratas*, which are vows or forms of devotion. These are: nonviolence, not lying, not stealing, chastity, and nonpossessiveness. (Like taboos, which are also central to many identities, the *vratas* define who you are by *what* as well as *who* you are *not*. There's a lot of "Thou shalt not's" in the Ten Commandments, too.)[5]

The detailed content of each of these ideals depends, among other things, on whether you are a layperson on the one hand, or a monk or nun on the other. The general point, though, is that there are things people do and don't do *because they are Jains*. By this, I mean only that they themselves think from time to time, "I should be faithful to my spouse . . . or speak the truth . . . or avoid harming this animal . . . because I am a Jain." They do that, in part, because they know they live in a world where not everyone is a Jain, and that other people with other religions may have different ideas about how to behave.

Though there are Ewe religious traditions (lots of different ones), being Ewe isn't, by contrast, a religious identity, and doesn't come

with the same sort of specified ethical codes. Ewes can be Muslim, Protestant, or Catholic, and many practice the traditional rites that go by the name of voodoo. (Like the Haitians, they borrowed this word from the Fon peoples, who are their neighbors. It means "spirit.") But, all the same, Ewe people sometimes say to themselves, "As an Ewe, I should . . ." and go on to specify something they believe they should do or refrain from doing. They do things, in short, because they are Ewe. And this, too, depends, in part, on their recognition that not everyone is Ewe, and that non-Ewes may well behave differently.

People who give reasons like these—"Because I'm a this, I should do that"—are not just accepting the fact that the label applies to them; they are giving what a philosopher would call "normative significance" to their membership in that group. They're saying that the identity matters for practical life: for their emotions and their deeds. And one of the commonest ways in which it matters is that they feel some sort of solidarity with other members of the group. Their common identity gives them reason, they think, to care about and help one another. It creates what you could call norms of identification: rules about how you should behave, given your identity.

But just as there's usually contest or conflict about the boundaries of the group, about who's in and who's out, there's almost always disagreement about what normative significance an identity has. How much can one Ewe or one Jain legitimately ask of another? Does being Ewe mean you ought to teach the Ewe language to your children? Most Jains think that their religion requires them to be vegetarian, but not all agree that you must also avoid milk products. And so on. While each Ewe or each Jain will have done things because of their identity, they won't always do the same things. Still, because these identities sometimes help them answer the question "What should I do?" they're important in shaping their everyday lives.

One further reason that's true is the third feature all identities share: not only does your identity give *you* reasons to do things, it can give others reasons to do things *to* you. I've already mentioned

something people can do to you because of your identity: they can help you just because you share an identity with them. But among the most significant things people do with identities is use them as the basis of hierarchies of status and respect and of structures of power. Caste in South Asia means some people are born into a higher status than others—as Brahmins, for example. These are members of the priestly caste, who are "polluted" by contact with members of castes that are regarded as lower. In many places in the world one ethnic or racial group regards its members as superior to others, and assumes the right to better treatment. The English poet Shelley, in "Ozymandias," refers to the "frown / and wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command" on the stone face of the sculpture of a long-dead Pharaoh. The royal ancestry of this "king of kings" would have meant that he was used to obedience. Dominant identities can mean that people will treat you as a source of authority; subordinate identities can mean you and your interests will be trampled upon or ignored.

And so an important form of struggle over identity occurs when people challenge the assumptions that lead to unequal distributions of power. The world is full of burdensome identities, whose price is that other people treat you with disrespect. *Kothis* in India know this very well. They are people who, though assigned a male identity at birth, themselves identify as feminine, and experience erotic attraction to men who are more typically masculine. And *kothis* have been subjected over the years to insult and abuse, and to rejection by their families; many of them have been forced by their marginal position into sex work. In recent years, emerging ideas about gender and sexuality—about homosexuality, intersexuality, and transgender identity, and about the complexity of the connection between biological sex and human behavior—have created movements that seek to alleviate the social exclusion of people whose gender and sexuality fall outside traditional norms. The Indian Supreme Court has even declared that individuals are entitled to be recognized as male, female, or third-gender, as they themselves decide.

Once identities exist, people tend to form a picture of a typical member of the group. Stereotypes develop. They may have more or less foundation in reality, but they are almost always critically wrong about something. *Kothis*, some Indians think, really want to be women: they are, many people suppose, what Europeans and Americans would now often call "transsexual." But that's not necessarily so. Ewes, other Ghanaians fear, are particularly likely to use "juju"—witchcraft or "black magic"—against their enemies. But witchcraft is traditional all over Ghana, so this isn't, actually, much of a distinction. (I once wrote an account of my father's funeral, in the course of which I discussed how we had to deal with the threat of witchcraft in our family. We, as you know, were Asante, not Ewe.)[6] People believe that Jains are so obsessed with nonviolence that they insist on covering their faces with white cloth to avoid killing insects by ingesting them. In fact, most Jains don't wear the *muhapatti*, as the white cloth is called, and its use has a variety of rationales that have nothing to do with saving the lives of insects.

In sum, identities come, first, with labels and ideas about why and to whom they should be applied. Second, your identity shapes your thoughts about how you should behave; and, third, it affects the way other people treat you. Finally, all these dimensions of identity are contestable, always up for dispute: who's in, what they're like, how they should behave and be treated.

WOMAN, MAN, OTHER?

This picture of identity is, in effect, a generalization of ways of thinking about gender that have been pioneered by feminist scholars. Feminism made use of theoretical ideas in the pursuit of women's equality and liberation from old patterns of oppression. All human societies have some form of gender system—some way of thinking

about the significance of the distinction between men and women. But feminist theories allow us to see what all the multitudinous systems of gender have in common while, at the same time, allowing us to keep track of their differences.

Let's rehearse some details. The vast majority of human bodies can be recognized as belonging to one of two biological kinds. Simply examining the genitalia—the organs of sexual reproduction—will usually allow you to see that someone is biologically male (because he has a penis, scrotum, and testicles), or biologically female (because she has a vagina, labia, uterus, and ovaries). In adults, you may be able to make the discrimination at a glance: the breasts of the biological females will grow at puberty, facial hair will develop in the males, their voices will deepen, and so on. Chromosomal analysis will also usually allow you to discover that the males have an X and a Y chromosome and the females two X's. Knowing all this, ordinary people and medical experts alike can apply the labels "woman" and "man."

But these turn out to be only two of the great variety of regularly occurring combinations of sex chromosomes and sexual morphology. In the standard case, the sex organs of human males and females initially develop in the same way in the embryo, and in the early stages the structure that will eventually become either an ovary or a testis is called the "indifferent gonad." In the typical male fetus, genes on the Y chromosome trigger changes that produce the male testis, and thus the production of hormones that influence the development of other sex-related structures. Absent this stimulus, the indifferent gonad turns into an ovary. It's the presence of the Y chromosome, then, that makes you a male.

That's the basic story. But there are many variations. One possibility is that, despite the presence of a Y chromosome, female external genitalia emerge. This can happen for a variety of reasons, one of which is androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS), which means that your cells are not normally sensitive to male sex hormones. XY

people with AIS can have either male or female external genitalia, or something in between, but the females aren't fertile because they have testes in place of ovaries.

There are other ways in which a mismatch between external appearance and your sex chromosomes can develop. Maternal androgens can turn the genitalia in the male direction, producing someone who is XX but externally male. So a fertilized human egg that is clearly XY can end up producing someone who looks like a woman and one that is XX can produce someone who looks like a man. And there are various other possible combinations: penis and ovaries, vagina and abdominal testes, external genitalia that are intermediate, and so on.

And that's all assuming you start out with two sex chromosomes. In fact, there are some people who are XO, having just one X chromosome. This is Turner syndrome, and people who have it have the bodies of women, though they're usually infertile and often shorter than average. (You need at least one X chromosome to survive—the Y chromosome is much smaller than the X and lacks some of the genes on the X that are essential for human life—which is why there are no OY males.) People with Turner syndrome sometimes have medical problems; but among the best-known people with the condition are a world champion gymnast, Missy Marlowe, who has been a spokesperson for the Turner Syndrome Society, and the Oscar-winning actress Linda Hunt.

Then there are people with an extra X chromosome—XXY or XXX—and, rarely, even more. Because in normal female cells only one of the X chromosomes is active (the other existing in a contracted and largely inactive form called a "Barr body"), these extra X's don't usually make a huge difference: if you have a Y chromosome, you'll look male; if you don't, you'll look female. While all these variations are rare, they do mean that even at the level of physical morphology, there just isn't a sharp division of human beings into two sexes.

All societies start with this spectrum of morphological possibilities. They are a basic part of our human biology. Because the intermediate cases are statistically rare, many people in smaller communities may never interact with anyone but XY males and XX females, with a sexual morphology in the standard range. Given this variability, it's not surprising that different societies have come up with different ways of assigning people to a gender. In many places, surgeons have often tried to "tidy up" the genitalia of babies born with nonstandard sexual bodies, soon after birth. So they've sought to bring everybody into a binary system, in which everyone is more or less clearly male or female. Not everyone agrees that this is a good idea.

In India, *kothis* have long been treated as neither men nor women; and *kothi* interacts with another form of South Asian gender identity, whose label is *hijra*.[7] *Hijras*, as a committee of Indian government experts put it in 2014, "are biological males who reject their 'masculine' identity in due course of time to identify either as women, or 'not-men,' or 'in-between man and woman,' or 'neither man nor woman.'"[8] But *hijras* have a long tradition of living as a community with rites of entry, dressing in women's clothes, and wearing women's makeup. *Kothis*, on the other hand, generally cross-dress only in private or when socializing with one another. Many don't cross-dress at all. Sometimes *hijras* have sought gender-reassignment surgery; in the past, many underwent castration. Notice that neither of these terms corresponds to our terms "transgender" or "homosexual," since (to mention only one difference) the South Asian categories don't cover what we would call either F-to-M transsexuals or lesbians.

Anjum, one of the protagonists of Arundhati Roy's extravagantly rambling novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, is what would once have been called a hermaphrodite: she is raised as a boy named Aftab because her mother seeks to conceal the fact that she has both male and female sexual organs.[9] But the boy, Aftab, doesn't want to be a boy, though he doesn't yet know what he *does* want to be. And then, one spring morning,

Aftab saw a tall, slim-hipped woman, wearing bright lipstick, gold high heels and a shiny green satin salwar kameez, buying bangles from Mir the eagle-seller. . . . Aftab had never seen anyone like the tall woman with the lipstick. . . .

He wanted to be her.[10]

Aftab follows this colorful *hijra* home to the Khwabgah—the town house where the *hijras* of her part of Delhi live—and finds there a whole community of people to whom she somehow knows she belongs. Being *hijra* is more than having a male body and feminine style: as we learn through the novel, *hijras* have a role in Indian life, and so identifying as one entails more than just dressing up. I am relaying the account of a fictional character; but Anjum, I'm told, is based on a real person.

On the other side of the globe, too, some of the Indian tribes of North America once recognized a variety of genders. The Navajo, in the nineteenth century, for example, called intersexes who were masculine *dilbaa*, and those who were feminine *nádleehí*.[11] They took up special roles in religious life. More recently, many American Indian activists have come to use the neologism "Two Spirit" to speak of those who do not fit easily into the categories of man and woman, in one way or another. The term reflects the fact that people who were neither men nor women, but had something—a spirit—from each, played special religious roles in many American Indian societies. And this is how a lot of contemporary American Indians, whom many other Americans would call lesbian, gay, or trans, now choose to identify themselves.

What feminist theorists taught us to see was that when we speak of men and women, or of other genders, we're not talking just about bodies. In calling a child a girl or a boy—in applying that label—every society is assuming more than that the child has a certain sexual morphology. And so we distinguish now between sex (the biological situation) and gender (the whole set of ideas about what women and

men will be like and about how they should behave). Some researchers have argued that one out of every hundred children is intersex in some way.[12] In a world of more than 7 billion people, 1 percent of the population is a whole lot of individuals. So midwives and obstetricians and others who witness many births may well come across such cases from time to time and have to decide what (if anything) they should do about them. But even in a world of XX females and XY males, gender would impose a great deal of structure on thinking about what women and men are, or should be, like.

Why? Because identities, as I said, involve labels and stereotypes. That is obvious in the case of gender. If you're labeled a man, in most societies, you are supposed to be sexually interested in women, to walk and use your hands in a "manly" way, to be more physically aggressive than women, and so on. Women should be sexually interested in men, walk and talk in a feminine way, be gentler than men, and all the rest. I have been using the words "male" and "female" to talk about bodily differences: but we need words to mark these other forms of difference built upon that foundation. So I'm going to continue using "masculine" and "feminine" to talk about the forms of thought, feeling, and behavior that our pictures of gender lead us to expect in men and in women, respectively. Men are—and are supposed to be—well, masculine. Men should lead, women should follow; women obey, men command. And that "supposed to be" and those "shoulds" are both descriptive (this is what we expect men and women to be like) and normative (this is what we think is right). But, once more, people disagree about these traditional claims about what men and women—and people who think they are neither—should be like. And these notions clearly vary across time and space; many contemporary New Yorkers will assume that a woman might be tough as nails and that a man could be, in Shakespeare's phrase, "as mild and gentle as the cradle-babe."

Labels, stereotypes, and ideas about how you should behave: these, I said, are there in every identity. And gender has the last of the traits

I mentioned, too; it involves ideas not just about how you should behave, but also about how others should behave toward you. In the old days, there was a gentlemanly code (reflecting hierarchies of power) of opening doors and holding out chairs and paying for meals, and such. New norms of treatment have emerged, some relating to how women interact with one another, or how men interact with men, some relating to how women and men interact. Next time you're in a crowded elevator in a modern cosmopolitan city, watch to see whether the men stay back to let the women exit first. Now imagine the life of a woman who insists, in the name of challenging older stereotypes, on refusing such offers. Identities, in this way, can be said to have both a subjective dimension and an objective one: an identity cannot simply be imposed upon me, willy-nilly, but neither is an identity simply up to me, a contrivance that I can shape however I please.

The shape of one identity can also be contoured by your other identities. To be an Ewe woman is not just a matter of being a woman *and* being an Ewe, in some easy act of addition. An Ewe woman faces certain expectations—expectations to meet and expectations to be met—that are peculiar to Ewe womanhood. To be Chinese and gay means something different if you're a native of San Francisco than it does if you're a native of Zhumadian, in China's Henan Province, where, not long ago, a hospital institutionalized a man for "sexual preference disorder" and forced him to undergo conversion therapy. The social import of an identity can vary with wealth, age, disability, weight, employment status, and any other social coordinate you might think of. In political contexts, though, an identity group can be avowedly global ("Workers of the world, unite!"; "Women of the world, rise up!"), sometimes with older forms of identity melded into larger, newer composite ones (people of color; LGBTQ). Identity is here enlisted for purposes of solidarity. To be sure, being a member of an identity group that is, in certain respects, subordinated doesn't necessarily make you sympathetic toward another (black Americans, often for religious reasons, are more likely to oppose same-sex marriage than whites), and sometimes the fiercest antipathy toward an identity group (as with squabbles among religious sects over "heresies") emanates from an intimately adjacent one.

These complex interactions between identities—which we see in the case of *kothis*, say, where ideas of sexuality and gender both matter—are one reason that Kimberlé Crenshaw, a feminist legal theorist and civil rights activist, introduced the idea of *intersectionality*. She wanted to talk about the ways in which our many identities interact to produce effects that are not simply the sum of each of them. Being a black lesbian is not a matter of combining African-American, female, and homosexual norms of identification: LGBTQ norms of identification can depend on your race and your gender. Nor are the negative social responses to black lesbians simply a combination of the racist and homophobic responses that also affect black gay men and the sexist responses experienced by middle-class white women.[13] Racism can make white men fear black men and abuse black women. Homophobia can lead men in South Africa to rape gay women but murder gay men. Sexism in the 1950s kept middle-class white women at home and sent working-class black women to work for them. Examples of intersectionality proliferate.

The fact of intersectionality raises a problem for one of the ways people bring their identities to bear nowadays. Say that Joe, who's a white man, claims to speak *as a man*, or *as a white person*. What does that mean, beyond the fact that he's speaking *and* he's male or white? Having an identity doesn't, by itself, authorize you to speak on behalf of everyone of that identity. The privilege of representing a group has to be granted somehow. So, absent evidence that he's somehow been given or otherwise earned the authority, it can't mean that Joe is speaking for all white people or for all men. You might think that he has at least the authority of experience to speak about what it's like to live as a white man. Is that something that a white man can discuss

with special knowledge, just because he's been through it? Not if we take the point about intersectionality. For, to the extent that how people treat you affects your experience, intersectionality makes it likely that there will be differences in the experience of, say, gay white men and straight white men; and, if Joe had grown up in Northern Ireland, as a gay white Catholic man, his gay white Protestant male friends might well have rather different experiences, too. And, once you think about it a little, you can see that, while your identity affects your experience, there's no guarantee that what you've learned from it is going to be the same as what other people of the same identity have learned.

Yet the familiar fact that our identities are multiple and can interact in complicated ways is consistent with a pretty frugal account of what, conceptually, any identity consists in: taking a label and a picture of how to apply it that entrains norms about how people who have the label should behave and how they should be treated.

HABITUS

None of that is new, of course. "Woman," "Ewe," "Jain," "*kothi*," "*hijra*," were like that long before scholars started talking about social identities. From Shakespeare to Gilbert and Sullivan, there's a long history of pride in being English that echoes portentously from Henry V's speech at Harfleur addressing his troops as "good yeoman, whose limbs were made in England," to the more comical strains of *H.M.S. Pinafore*, where the Boatswain affirms that Ralph, the humble cabin boy,

> . . . has said it
> And it's greatly to his credit,
> That he is an Englishman.

As a teenager, I delighted in a satiric recording by Michael Flanders and Donald Swann who insisted, "the English are best," and sang cheerfully that they "wouldn't give tuppence for all of the rest!" What's new is thinking of these diverse sorts of labels—Englishman, woman, *kothi*, and so on—as things of the same kind. The rise of identity is the rise of that thought.

Once you think that thought, you can ask questions about the social and psychological significance of identities. And a great deal of modern psychology and sociology has been about just that. To complete my sketch of a theory of identity, I want to point to three important discoveries that have emerged in the course of such research.

The first is about how central identity is to the way we deploy our bodies. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu put it this way. Each of us has what he called a *habitus*: a set of dispositions to respond more or less spontaneously to the world in particular ways, without much thought. Your habitus is trained into you starting from childhood. Parents tell you not to speak with your mouth full, to sit up straight, not to touch your food with your left hand, and so on, and thus form table manners that are likely to stick with you all your life.[14] Once they are inculcated, these habits aren't consciously associated with an identity: middle-class English people don't consciously decide to hold their knives in their right hands in order to act English, any more than Ghanaians use only their right hands to eat in order to display that they're Ghanaian. But these habits were nevertheless shaped by their identities.

Bourdieu held a prestigious chair at Paris's Collège de France and had a career in the heart of the French academic elite, but he grew up in a village in southwest France, the son of a farmer turned postman, and retained a critical distance from the social codes that surrounded him as an adult. He saw the habitus as grounded in the distinctive way in which a person used his or her body, what he called the "bodily hexis," "a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking."[15] (I wouldn't bother to introduce this horrible jargon if it weren't going to be useful later!) But it also includes

modes of speech, such as what he once called the French "intellectuals' new style of speech—a little hesitant, even mumbling, interrogative ('*non?*') and faltering," that had replaced "the old professorial style (with its long sentences, imperfect subjunctives, etc.)"[16]

You learn how to dress as a man or as a woman in ways that are shaped by the clothes you are given as a child, which themselves are selected because of your gender. You learn how to walk, in part, by watching other boys or girls walking. If a man wears makeup—as the Prophet Muhammad wore kohl around his eyes and Maasai men paint their faces with ochre—he'll wear it in the way other men do; in most societies, women wear different styles of makeup from men. But none of this is particularly conscious: when I buy a jacket, I'm not thinking, "Must dress like a man." When I walk, I don't consciously reflect that I'm not walking like a woman. Nevertheless, my clothes and my gait reflect my gender and the models of masculinity I have relied on. As Aftab/Anjum reminds us, it is through our identifications that we recognize our models.

Gender norms are enforced in myriad ways. I recall a lesson delivered, when I was eight or nine, by the decidedly old-fashioned headmaster of a school I then attended. His name was Reverend Hankey (you can imagine what a group of prepubescent boys made of that) and one day he gave us a stern lecture that there was to be no roughhousing—"ragging" he called it, in the argot of the day—in the combination room where we hung out between classes. A few days later, he came into the room and found me sitting on the chest of a fellow student, who, if memory serves me right, we called "Piggy," because his family name was Hogsflesh. I was tickling Piggy as he struggled to escape. We were summoned to the headmaster's office, where my fellow ragger went first. I heard the sound of four whacks on his bottom with a bamboo cane. So I girded myself up for the same. But after the third whack, Reverend Hankey stopped. "I'm giving you one less than Hogsflesh," he pronounced solemnly. "I said no ragging. But if you are going to rag, it's better to be on top." (The

school, if not Reverend Hankey's ideals of masculinity, dissolved a few years later.)

Girls in Japan see other girls covering their mouths when they laugh. They do likewise. If they don't, they are corrected. But because of this, some gay men in Japan also cover their mouths when they laugh, and this reflects the fact that they identify to some degree with women. Because the ways in which men and women dress and walk in different social groups are different, you end up walking and dressing in ways that reflect your identity, not just your gender but your class and your ethnicity. The swagger of some inner-city African-American men is as much a reflection of class as of race and gender. The *Encyclopedia of African American Popular Culture* meticulously describes the style of the "pimp walk" as a "demonstration of cool masculinity . . . a cocksure combination of leisurely strutting, black aesthetics and public performance . . ."[17] A woman who walked that way would strike others as strange; and most patients would be skeptical of doctors who walked that way, whatever their race or social origins.

Among the most significant elements of your bodily hexis, Bourdieu thought, were habits of using your mouth; people acquire a distinctive accent, a recognizable way of speaking, that reflects dimensions of their social identity.[18] An accent can distinguish a class or even a profession, as does the speech of the ludicrous cavalry officer, Wellesley Ponto, in Thackeray's 1848 *Book of Snobs*. Thackeray describes him as "a gaunt and bony youth," who explains frankly why he needs his father to pay off the debts he has acquired living up to the style of his more prosperous fellow officers.

> "Gad!" says he, "our wedgment's so doothid exthpenthif. Must hunt, you know. A man couldn't live in the wedgment if he didn't. Mess expenses enawmuth."

Thackeray was satirizing such people, but the accent was real. And the drawl and the lisp were meant to express an aristocratic indifference

to haste and a languorous unwillingness to waste energy in conversation. The stiff upper lip here was not just figurative. Bourdieu in his work offered another example of a connection between the overall habitus of one class and another, in a fascinating discussion of the distinction between two words in French that can both refer to the mouth, *bouche* and *gueule*. The sociologist John Thompson summarizes the analysis very nicely:

> In French there is a distinction between a closed, pinched mouth (*la bouche*) and a large open mouth (*la gueule*). Individuals from working-class backgrounds tend to draw a socially and sexually overdetermined opposition between these terms: *la bouche* is associated with the bourgeois and the feminine (e.g., tight-lipped), whereas *la gueule* is associated with the popular and the masculine (e.g., "big mouth," "loud mouth").

As a result, speaking like a bourgeois can seem to a working-class Frenchman to betray his masculinity.[19]

Most of us do not think of our accent as something we consciously chose, nor do we usually reflect upon the fact that the reason we speak the way we do reflects many dimensions of identity beyond the region and the class we come from. Our accent is part of our habitus, one of the routine ways in which we use our bodies. I mentioned in the introduction that my English accent has sometimes puzzled taxi drivers, in part because they're not used to brown-skinned people sounding like members of the English upper middle classes; but, like most people, I speak in the way my school friends spoke when I was growing up. It's unusual to acquire the fluency of a native speaker in a new language as an adult. But a Ghanaian man I know, who has lived in Japan for a long time, told me that he once approached a Japanese woman who was having trouble with a bicycle with a flat tire. When he first started speaking to her, she didn't look up. His Japanese sounded quite normal to her. When she finally glanced up

at him, he could see a look of astonishment cross her face. She hadn't expected to see a black-skinned foreigner. (For the record, the story turns out well: she's now his wife.)

Habitus and identity are connected by the fact that we recognize certain forms of behavior—accents, but also ways of walking, styles of dress—as the signs of certain forms of identity and that our identities shape our habitus unconsciously. I've said that identities matter because they give us reasons to do things, reasons we think about consciously. But the connection between identity and habitus means that identities matter in unreflective ways as well. The distinguished American social psychologist Claude Steele describes how a young black graduate student at the University of Chicago, troubled by the fearful responses of white people, takes to whistling Vivaldi as he walks down the street. The student signals his knowledge of "high culture," and white people (who might not know it's Vivaldi), recognize this is classical music. "While hardly being aware of it," Steele writes, they drop "the stereotype of violence-proneness. . . . Fear fades from their demeanor."[20] Sociolinguists have catalogued the many ways in which people adjust their verbal style in response to the social identities of people they're talking to, again while hardly being aware of it. I've been told that I adjust my accent in an American direction when I'm telling New York taxi drivers where I want to go. It doesn't matter that I apparently have a terrible American accent. I'm trying—without consciously meaning to—to make myself easier to understand for people who are often, like me, immigrants, and are working to understand the local dialect of English.

ESSENTIALISM

The second important psychological truth also comes with a fancy name: essentialism. Psychological research has revealed that, long

before anyone instructs children to group people into categories, they're programmed to do it anyway. By the age of two, children distinguish between males and females and expect them to behave differently. And once they classify people, they behave as if each person in the group shares some inner something—an essence—that explains why they all have so much in common. "Essentialism is the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly," the developmental psychologist Susan Gelman says, "but that gives an object its identity, and is responsible for other similarities that category members share."[21] Children everywhere are full-fledged essentialists by the time they are four to six years old.

It's not that they don't notice the superficial, visible features of people. Far from it. The color of hair and skin and other aspects of physical appearance play a role in determining what sorts of people are grouped together. I know of a distinguished black New York literary agent who finds children in the elevator of her building reaching out to her for a hug: in their world black women are nannies, and nannies are there for the hugging. What essentialism means is that children assume that these superficial differences—the ones that lead to applying the label—reflect deeper, inward differences that explain a great deal of how people behave.

Research with young children suggests that one of our most basic strategies for making sense of the world is to form the sorts of generalizations that linguists call "generics"—generalizations like "Tigers eat people," and "Women are gentle." It also turns out that it's very hard to say what makes generics true. They're not equivalent to universal claims like "All tigers eat people." After all, most tigers have not eaten a person; in fact, very, very few have. As for whether women are gentle: well, which women? Certainly not the fierce Amazon regiment (whom the Fon charmingly called "our mothers,") that served the nineteenth-century kings of Dahomey. So the generic claim that "Women are gentle" doesn't mean *all* women are gentle; and "Tigers

eat people" doesn't mean that *most* tigers eat people. In fact, as my friend the philosopher Sarah-Jane Leslie has pointed out, an epidemiologist can sincerely say, "Mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus," while knowing that 99 percent of them *don't* carry it.

Generics work by a basic kind of association of ideas. So thinking "Tigers eat people" means that, faced with a tiger, your default response is going to be to think about its eating someone—perhaps even you. "Mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus" will have your doctor checking your temperature when she sees your mosquito bites.[22] As these examples suggest, one thing that makes it more likely that we'll accept a generic is if the property it mentions is one that we have a reason to be concerned about: like people-eating or pathogen-spreading.

But it also helps if we think of the class (tigers, women, mosquitoes) as a kind, as a group of organisms with a shared essence. And getting children to think of a group of *people* as a kind is very easy. The psychologist Marjorie Rhodes and her colleagues did the following simple experiment. They showed four-year-olds pictures of a fictional kind of person they called a Zarpie. The pictures were male and female, black, white, Latino, and Asian, young and old. With one group of kids, the experimenters made lots of generic remarks about these imaginary people—"Zarpies are scared of ladybugs," and the like. With another group of kids, they avoided generics. ("Look at this Zarpie! He's afraid of ladybugs!") A couple of days later they showed the kids a Zarpie and said that he made a buzzing sound. It turned out that the kids who'd heard a lot of generics about Zarpies were much more likely to believe that *all* Zarpies made buzzing sounds. Generic talk encouraged them to think of Zarpies as a kind of person. And once kids think of Zarpies as a kind of person, they're more likely to infer that the behavior of one Zarpie reflects the nature of all Zarpies, that buzzing flows from the Zarpie essence.[23]

Let's put the lessons of the last two paragraphs together. I can get you to think of people—even a group of diverse-looking people of both sexes and all ages—as a kind, by making generic remarks about

them. And you're more likely to accept a generic claim about a group if what it says is something negative or worrying. We humans are more likely, then, to essentialize groups about which we have negative thoughts; and more likely to have negative thoughts about groups we've essentialized. There's an unfortunate vicious circle for you. (The next time someone tells you that "Muslims are terrorists," you might want to bear that in mind.)

The plain fact is that we're really good at conjuring up Zarpies, and viewing them with suspicion. Take the Cagots, of the French and Spanish Pyrenees. Though they largely melted away in the nineteenth century, through migration and assimilation, the Cagots were, for a millennium, treated as pariahs, relegated to disfavored districts, even forced to use separate doors in churches, where they received the Communion wafer at the end of a stick. Because contact with the Cagots was contaminating, they were severely punished for drinking from the same water basin as others, for farming, or even for walking barefoot on the streets. Songs about them—one, recorded in the mid-nineteenth century, goes: "Down with the Cagots, / Let's destroy them all! / Let's destroy the Cagots, / And down with them all!"—made it clear how you should regard them, but didn't tell you why. What distinguished them from their neighbors? Not their appearance. (That's why they were forced to identify themselves with badges pinned to their clothing, often duck or goose feet, or fabric facsimiles.) Not their family names. Not their language. Not their religion. The real mystery of the Cagots, Graham Robb concludes in his history of France, "was the fact that they had no distinguishing features at all."[24]

In large ways and small, essentialism shapes our public history, and it shapes our personal histories as well. It's there in the responses of some white people to Claude Steele's black graduate student on the streets around the University of Chicago. It's evident, too, in the ways we are prone to assume, in the domain of gender, that "boys will be boys" and men, men. We expect all kinds of gendered behavior

in ways that suggest that there is an inner something that not only explains why (as we might imagine) men look like one another and behave in similar ways. And when we first discover some who don't—men who don't desire women, for example—we can be taken aback. Our next step is usually not to abandon the thought that men desire women, but to note an exception, while sticking to the old generalization. Only later are we likely to adopt a new category, gay men, that allows us to return to the old generalization, now about a new group, straight men. (So our second step is likely to be presupposing that everyone is either gay or straight, which turns out not to be exactly true either.)

In the course of this book, we'll encounter this most basic of our cognitive habits over and over again. So it's worth insisting from the start that essentialism about identities is usually wrong: in general, there isn't some inner essence that explains why people of a certain social identity are the way they are. We've seen already that there's more than one way to come to be a man or a woman. The story of why Ewes speak Ewe or Jains practice their religion doesn't begin with a shared inner something that explains why they do those things. And most of the things that most people do aren't done *because* they are women or men, of this or that ethnicity or race or religion. Like the imaginary Zarpies, most groups of real people, defined by the large-scale identities that shape our social world, are enormously diverse.

THE FOUR-DAY-OLD TRIBE

The last lesson in the psychology of identity I want to mention was demonstrated in an experiment that took place over a few days in the beautiful, hilly woods of the San Bois Mountains of Oklahoma, in 1953. That summer, a team of researchers assembled two groups of eleven-year-old boys at adjoining but separate campsites, in a place

called Robbers Cave State Park. The boys were from the Oklahoma City area. They hadn't met before, but they came from similar backgrounds—they were Protestant, white, and middle-class. All this was by careful design. The researchers were studying the formation of what social psychologists call in-groups and out-groups—the way that tension developed between them and the way it might be alleviated—and the Robbers Cave experiment is a classic piece of social science.

The camp area was remote and densely wooded; the boys had been there for about a week before they learned that there was another camp of boys nearby. The two groups then challenged each other to competitive games, like baseball and tug-of-war. In the next four days, a couple of things happened. The groups gave themselves names—they were the Rattlers and the Eagles—and a fierce antagonism arose between them. Flags were torched; cabins were raided; rocks were collected as weapons for an anticipated attack.[25]

Notice that the boys felt no need for a collective name until they learned about the presence of those other boys on the campgrounds. But, as our theory predicts, to form identities they needed labels. Among the Rattlers, an ethos of "toughness" developed, after they discovered one of the higher-status boys in the group had incurred a minor injury without mentioning it to anyone; being toughs, they also started to curse. The Eagles, having defeated the foul-mouthed Rattlers in a baseball game, decided to distinguish themselves by *not* cursing. These quasi-cultural differences could be recognized in the way each group talked about itself and the other group: the scrappy, macho Rattlers regarded the Eagles as "sissies" and "little babies"; the pious and clean-living Eagles considered the Rattlers to be "bums."[26] Labels came first, then, but essences followed fast. The boys didn't develop opposing identities because they had different norms; they developed different norms because they had opposing identities. As far as identity goes, it turns out a lot can happen in four days.

Our third psychological truth, then, is just that we humans ascribe a great deal of significance to the distinction between those who share our identities and those who don't, the insiders and the outsiders, and that we do this with identities new (like Rattlers or Eagles) and long-established, large and small, superficial and profound.

There's a whole list of psychological tendencies that go with this distinction between in-groups and out-groups. It may seem obvious, for example, that people tend to favor those of their own identity and to look down on out-group members. But given the scale of many groups, this should be more surprising than it is. Why would a Hindu give preference to another Hindu he does not know over a Muslim neighbor? There are a billion Hindus, and you have only a few hundred neighbors. And yet, everywhere in the world, we take this sort of partiality for granted.

There's a commonsense way of talking about all this. We're *clannish* creatures. We don't just belong to human kinds; we prefer our own kind and we're easily persuaded to take against outsiders. Evolutionary psychologists think these tendencies were once adaptive; they helped people survive by creating groups they could rely on to deal with the hazards of prehistoric life, including the existence of other groups competing for resources. Something like that is probably right. But whatever the explanation, it seems pretty clear that we're not just prone to essentialism, we also have these clannish tendencies, and each of us has a habitus shaped by our various identities.

The little theory of identity I just sketched and those three psychological observations helped me as I set out to think about the particular forms of identity that are the main subjects of this book. Having these ideas at hand will help us chart our way through religion, nation, race, class, and culture as sources of identity. I'm going to start with religion, because many modern religious identities connect us with some of the oldest human stories. You could debate whether, in that sense, religious identities are older than national, racial, and cultural ones; what's certain is that all of these modern forms of identity connect with religion.

In the chapters that follow, I'll be exploring a variety of ways in which identities can go awry, and can be enlisted for ill. So let me offer this stipulation as we set out: however much identity bedevils us, we cannot do without it. You'll recall the old joke. A man goes to see a psychiatrist. He says, "Doctor, my brother's crazy—he thinks he's a chicken." The psychiatrist says, "Well, why don't you bring him in?" And the fellow replies, "Oh, I would, but we need him out there laying the eggs." Social identities may be founded in error, but they give us contours, comity, values, a sense of purpose and meaning: we need those eggs.

TWO

CREED

Did he find four separating forces between his temporary guest and him?

Name, age, race, creed. . . .

What, reduced to their simplest reciprocal form, were Bloom's thoughts about Stephen's thoughts about Bloom and about Stephen's thoughts about Bloom's thoughts about Stephen?

He thought that he thought that he was a jew whereas he knew that he knew that he knew that he was not.

James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922)

Perhaps you know this poem? Constantine Cavafy—if you'll permit me to introduce just one more character in closing—was a writer whose every identity came with an asterisk, a quality he shared with Svevo. Born two years after Svevo, he died only a few years after him. Cavafy was a Greek who never lived in Greece. A government clerk of Eastern Orthodox Christian upbringing in a tributary state of a Muslim empire that was under British occupation for most of his life, he spent his evenings on foot, looking for pagan gods in their incarnate, carnal versions. He was a poet who resisted publication, save for broadsheets he circulated among close friends; a man whose homeland was a neighborhood, and a dream. Much of his poetry is a map of Alexandria overlaid with a map of the classical world—modern Alexandria and ancient Athens—in the way that Leopold Bloom's Dublin neighborhood underlies Odysseus's Ithaca. No single sentence captures this Alexandrian genius better than E. M. Forster's evocation of him as "a Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe."[1] And I conjure Cavafy, here, at journey's end, because I want to persuade you that he is representative precisely in all his seeming anomalousness.

Poems, like identities, never have just one interpretation. But in Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians" I see a reflection on the promise and the peril of identity. All day the anticipation and the anxiety build as the locals wait for the barbarians, who are coming to take over the city. The emperor in his crown, the consuls in their scarlet togas, the silent senate and the voiceless orators wait with the

assembled masses to accept their arrival. And then, as evening falls, and they do not appear, what is left is only disappointment. We never see the barbarians. We never learn what they are actually like. But we do see the power of our imagination of the stranger. And, Cavafy hints, it's possible that the mere prospect of their arrival could have saved us from ourselves.

As we have seen throughout these pages, the labels we adhere to, the labels that adhere, willy-nilly, to us, work through and in spite of the mistakes we make about them. Cavafy was not exactly gay, not exactly Greek or Egyptian, not exactly Orthodox or pagan. But each of these labels tells you something about him, if you listen carefully to his own inflection of these modes of being. And Cavafy's Alexandria, like Svevo's Trieste, like the marvelous city I live in, was exactly the sort of cultural hodgepodge that could provide the space for him to be each of these things in his own way, negotiating with his friends and acquaintances, struggling with his city; it allowed him to shape a self that was not merely captured but also liberated by the identities that enmeshed him. In my final chapter, I argued that our largest cultural identities can free us only if we recognize that we have to make their meanings together and for ourselves. You do not get to be Western without choosing your way among myriad options, just as you do not get to be Christian or Buddhist, American or Ghanaian, gay or straight, even a man or a woman, without recognizing that each of these identities can be lived in more than one way.

Cavafy's own community—cosmopolitan Alexandria—has long since vanished; the end of the British protectorate and the rise of Arab nationalism made the city less hospitable to its motley crew of strangers. In Naguib Mahfouz's 1967 novel *Miramar*, an Alexandrian Greek, mistress of the eponymous *pensione*, reflects of her people, "They're gone, every one of them." Mr. Amer, an aging Egyptian friend and tenant, tries to console her. "*We* are your people now," he says. "That sort of thing is happening everywhere."[2] It is, indeed. But so, alas, is a move in the other direction: a choice for an imaginary purity, a

clinging to an unreal essence, an insistence on a single significance for labels whose meanings need to be kept open and contestable. If essentialism is a misstep in the realms of creed, color, country, class, and culture, as it is in the domain of gender and sexuality, then it is never true that identity leaves us no choices. The existentialists were right: existence precedes essence; we are before we are anything in particular. But the fact that identities come without essences does not mean they come without entanglements. And the fact that they need interpreting and negotiating does not mean that each of us can do with them whatever we will.

For these labels belong to communities; they are a social possession. And morality and political prudence require us to try to make them work for us all. Over the course of my lifetime, I have watched, learned from, and participated in the reshaping of what it means to be women and men (and yes, sometimes neither) in the various interconnected places I have lived my life. Without the reshaping of gender that has increasingly liberated us all from old patriarchal assumptions, I could not have lived my life as a gay man, married to another man, making a life, in public and in private ways, together. This life has been made possible through other people's struggle, in ways both large and small, and by my taking small risks with friends, employers, and family. If I had stayed in Ghana, where I grew up, I would, like other lesbian and gay Ghanaians, have a long road still to travel. But in the meanwhile, women in Asante, who were always more autonomous than in many other parts of the world, have seen their options grow and prosper, in part by recognizing that much that was once assumed impossible for women, because they were women—because of what a woman essentially was—could be *made* possible; and that a world of empowered women is enriching for men as well.

There is a liberal fantasy in which identities are merely chosen, so we are all free to be what we choose to be. But identities without demands would be useless to us. Identities work only because, once

they get their grip on us, they command us, speaking to us as an inner voice; and because others, seeing who they think we are, call on us, too. If you do not care for the shapes your identities have taken, you cannot simply refuse them; they are not yours alone. You have to work with others inside and outside the labeled group in order to reframe them so they fit you better; and you can do that collective work only if you recognize that the results must serve others as well.

In the poem "Walls," Cavafy writes:

> Without reflection, without sorrow, without shame,
> they've built around me great, high walls.
> And I sit here now and despair.
> I think of nothing else: this fate consumes my mind:
> because I had so many things to do out there.[3]

We all have many things to "do out there" in the world. And the problem is not walls as such but walls that hedge us in; walls we played no part in designing, walls without doors and windows, walls that block our vision and obstruct our way, walls that will not let in fresh and enlivening air.

The modes of identity we've considered can all become forms of confinement, conceptual mistakes underwriting moral ones. But they can also give contours to our freedom, as working-class and LGBTQ and national and religious identities have done in struggles all around the world. Women, negotiating intersectionality, have worked together across class and language and religion and nation in the global struggle against oppression and inequality. Social identities connect the small scale where we live our lives alongside our kith and kin with larger movements, causes, and concerns. They can make a wider world intelligible, alive, and urgent. They can expand our horizons to communities larger than the ones we personally inhabit. And our lives *must* make sense at the largest of all scales as well. We are denizens of an age in which our actions, in the realm of ideology as

in the realm of technology, increasingly have global effects. When it comes to the compass of our concern and compassion, humanity as a whole is not too broad a horizon.

We live with 7 billion fellow humans on a small, warming planet. The cosmopolitan impulse that draws on our common humanity is no longer a luxury; it has become a necessity. And, in encapsulating that ancient ideal, I can draw on someone who's a frequent presence in courses in Western Civ., the dramatist Terence: a slave from Roman Africa, a Latin interpreter of Greek comedies, a writer from classical Europe who called himself, like Anton Wilhelm Amo, "the African." Here's how Publius Terentius Afer, writing more than two millennia ago, put it:

> *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.*
> I am human, I think nothing human alien to me.

Now there's an identity that should bind us all.