

The Gender Thing: Apparatuses and Intra-agential Ethos

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Abstract

In international governance circles it has become common to refer to gender interventions as “the gender thing.” The article takes this formulation as an opportunity to interrogate what a new materialist approach, such as that formulated in Laura Zannotti’s *Ontological Entanglements, Agency, and Ethics in International Relations*, could mean for international feminist theory and praxis. It first discusses the different ways in which gender emerges as an ‘apparatus’, juxtaposing Foucauldian formulations of gender as a biopolitical tool to Barad’s conceptualization of an apparatus as a measuring instrument and her understanding of gender as an apparatus of bodily production. Second, the article explores Zannotti’s development of the notion of intra-agential ethos and brings it into conversation with reflections on ethics and praxis in feminist IR. It critiques the erasure of languages of power from Barad’s theory and the failure to attend to difference in Zannotti’s notion of an intra-agential ethos. It concludes with an interpretation of what could be meant by references to “the gender thing” in international governance circles and develops connecting points between Zannotti’s intra-agential ethos and international feminist praxis.

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The Gender Thing: Apparatuses and Intra-agential Ethos

‘The international community came to bring this gender thing about.’ This quote from a Liberian gender expert introduces a recent article by Rahel Kunz,¹ in which she shows that, in Liberia, international gender expertise has been framed as a project of ‘civilisation’ that has come to normalize gender roles. Because gender equality policies and programming thus exercise power, Kunz is critical of ‘this gender thing.’ However, juxtapose her findings to the understandings of gender experts in Nigeria: During a 2018 workshop on ‘Inclusive and Collaborative Peacebuilding’ in Abuja, one participant argued for teaching clerics and traditional rulers ‘some of these gender things’ in order to advance girls’ education across religious divides, while another warned against ‘overdoing the gender thing.’²

Gender emerges as productive in different ways in these statements—propelling traditional gender roles and colonial attitudes in one case, and promising a potentially liberating advancement of girls’ education in the other, at least if applied in moderation. In a sense, these different assessments mirror scholarly debates on gender mainstreaming and gender expertise that consider such interventions useful strategies for the advancement of gender equality goals on the one hand, and pernicious traps effecting co-optations, normalizations, and

¹ Rahel Kunz, ‘Messy Feminist Knowledge Politics: A Double Reading of Post-Conflict Gender Mainstreaming in Liberia’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, no. 1 (1 January 2020): 63–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1669476>.

² The workshop took place in the context of a research project on ‘Gender and Conflict,’ coordinated at the Graduate Institute, Geneva, with funding from the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development.’ Quotes are from the author’s notes. The judgment of ‘overdoing the gender thing’ pertained to a Nigerian novel where a girl celebrates when her brother dies, because she can now go to school.

de-politicizations on the other.³ Yet the formulations also have something in common: in both instances gender emerges as a *thing*, suggesting an element of materiality. Can we dismiss this framing as simply a colloquial expression denoting a fad or an obsession with gender? Or is it more? I do not want to put unintended meanings into the mouths of West African gender experts; but their formulations do make me pause to ask what it means to say that gender is a thing.

To begin with, it seems counterintuitive, and also troubling, that gender—a concept that has been theorized as thoroughly social, as mobile, fluid, and multiple—should become rigid in a way that the word thing implies. But perhaps our sense of materiality is too limited; perhaps something is gained by drawing on new materialisms that theorize matter as emergent, inviting us to shift from an ontology of being to an ontology of not just becoming but of mattering. In this paper, I would therefore like to explore what the gender thing could mean for feminist theory and praxis, and I do so with the help of Laura Zanotti's book *Ontological Entanglements, Agency, and Ethics in International Relations*. What could be gained by thinking of the gender thing as an apparatus in the sense introduced by Zanotti? Could such an understanding shed light on the multifarious and seemingly contradictory outcomes that gender seems to bring about? Moreover, could the idea of an intra-agential ethos suggested by Zanotti help us re-conceive a feminist kind of governmentality, and could it provide guidance for feminist conduct?

I proceed in two steps. First, I engage with Zanotti's merger of two understandings of an apparatus following Foucault and Barad. I introduce the Foucaultian conceptualization of an apparatus through Jemima Repo's treatment of the biopolitics of gender and juxtapose it to Barad's conceptualization of an apparatus as a measuring instrument and her understanding of gender as an apparatus of bodily production. Second, I explore Zanotti's development of the

³ Rahel Kunz and Elisabeth Prügl, 'Introduction: Gender Experts and Gender Expertise', *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 2, no. 1 (February 2019): 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510819X15471289106077>.

notion of intra-agential ethos and bring it into conversation with reflections on ethics and praxis in feminist IR. I conclude by drawing out the meanings of these conceptualizations for understanding gender as a thing and of their uses for feminist praxis.

The Gender Thing as an Apparatus

Speaking with Barad and Foucault, Zanotti invites us to adopt an understanding of a world in which ontology and epistemology collapse into each other. She achieves this by suggesting that what exists—practices for Foucault, phenomena for Barad—is entangled with how we know about them. Consequently, how we know becomes a central pre-occupation because it shapes our practices and thus brings the world into being. This positioning against what Zanotti calls ‘substantialism’ is in line with a long tradition of feminist theorizing in which gender constructions and the gendered productivity of discourses and practices are a central pre-occupation. But Zanotti’s intervention adds to feminist language; it brings into focus in particular the notion of an apparatus and invites us to think more deeply about the uses of this concept for feminist theorizing. Like many IR feminists, Zanotti starts from Foucault, but she also adds insights from Barad, arguably conflating their different understandings of an apparatus. These differences are worth elaborating to help me assess what it means to think of gender as a thing.

A Biopolitical Apparatus

The idea that gender might constitute an apparatus in the Foucaultian sense suffuses feminist scholarship in the wake of Judith Butler’s theorizing of gender as a performance.⁴ It also has been picked up extensively in feminist literature on gender and international governance.⁵ Jemima Repo’s thought-provoking book

⁴ Especially Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁵ For example, Elisabeth Prügl, ‘Diversity Management and Gender Mainstreaming as Technologies of Government’, *Politics & Gender* 7, no. 1 (March 2011): 71–89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000565>. In IPE and development, see Penny Griffin, ‘The Everyday Practices of Global Finance: Gender and Regulatory Politics of “Diversity”’, *International Affairs* 95, no. 6 (1

on the biopolitics of gender offers an excellent starting point for thinking through the suggestion that gender might be a thing taking the form of an apparatus and allows me to assess the usefulness of Foucaultian dimension in Zanotti's approach. Repo interrupts our feminist attachment to gender as a theoretical resource with the provocation that 'gender is not and has never been an essential concept for feminism'.⁶ Rejecting thus an understanding of gender as a neutral theoretical category that can be thought independently of its history, she argues instead that gender needs to be thought of as biopolitical, i.e. it is a particular historical strategy, a technology deployed to regulate biological life that emerged in the post-World War II period. This historical/political aspect of gender is not in the foreground in contemporary feminist theorizing of gender as a social construction or relation. Thinking of gender as biopolitical gives it historical specificity: it is no longer a generic noun indicating a universal (albeit taking different shapes in context) but perhaps a thing fabricated at a particular time, a political technology ready to be put to use for the projects of that time.

While Repo's purpose is not to explore the materiality of gender thus constituted, her argument can be read that way. In her genealogical exploration of the biopolitics of gender, she shows how the concept emerged in mid-20th century sexology, how sex and gender got separated in psychoanalysis, how Anglo-American feminists appropriated the term, and how it became a tool of neoliberal governmentality in the hands of the European Union. What interests

November 2019): 1215–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz180>; Tine Davids and Anouka van Eerdewijk, 'The Smothering of Feminist Knowledge: Gender Mainstreaming Articulated through Neoliberal Governmentalities', in *The Politics of Knowledge Transfer: Gender Training and Gender Expertise*, ed. María Bustelo, Lucy Ferguson, and Maxime Forest (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 80–96; Kate Bedford, *Developing Partnerships: Gender, Sexuality, and the Reformed World Bank* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

For security studies see Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender, UN Peacebuilding, and the Politics of Space: Locating Legitimacy* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Dianne Otto, 'The Exile of Inclusion: Reflections on Gender Issues in International Law over the Last Decade', *Melbourne Journal of International Law* 10, no. 1 (2009): 11.

⁶ Jemima Repo, *The Biopolitics of Gender* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 177.

me here is that she also shows that gender, through these processes, appears to have taken on the shape, no longer of an identity, but of a tool that can be used: Zanotti might suggest that it has become an apparatus. Repo employs the term apparatus in conjunction with sex and gender (and to some extent sexuality, when talking about Foucault) throughout her text, though she uses it loosely. We learn about apparatuses of gender and sex, which seem to co-exist with other apparatuses, such as Rubin's sex/gender system and the Oedipus complex; she also diagnoses an 'equality apparatus' in the European Union, and a 'neoliberal apparatus' with distinctive rationalities.⁷

For Repo, apparatuses are the tools that allow biopower to do its work: they are 'apparatuses of power' or 'apparatuses of biopower'.⁸ They are instruments 'deployable by different political strategies' (p. 22). Unlike Zanotti, who embraces Barad's understanding of apparatuses, arguing that it subsumes Foucault's, Repo holds on to the meaning that Foucault has given to apparatuses (a translation of French word *dispositifs*). Giorgio Agamben's summary of this meaning is worth quoting at some length because makes visible the difference of Foucault's understanding from that of Barad (further explored below). Agamben identifies three elements in Foucault's definition of an apparatus:

- a. It is a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and nonlinguistic, under the same heading: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions, and so on. The apparatus itself is the network that is established between these elements.
- b. The apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation.
- c. As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge.⁹

⁷ Repo, 88, 90, 124, 148-150.

⁸ Repo, *The Biopolitics of Gender* passim.

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2009), 2-3.

Repo's treatment of the apparatus of gender is reflected in this definition: gender is introduced as a network involving shifting discourses, institutions, laws, etc. that are connected. It is strategic, advancing certain projects of power—from post-War capitalism, to demographic goals and neoliberalism—in conjunction with gender difference; and it involves relations of knowledge and power—from sexology and psychotherapy to feminism and gender expertise. Gender thus emerges as a large, tentacled machine, akin to the security apparatus or the law.¹⁰ It is a thing in this sense, a network of relations, statements, artifacts, and much more. And the thing is strategic, propelling seemingly contradictory projects of power, from the normalization of gender roles to educational empowerment.

An Apparatus of Bodily Production

If the gender thing emerges as a biopolitical apparatus in a Foucaultian treatment, why would we want to follow Zanotti and add a Baradian understanding of the apparatus as an instrument of measurement?¹¹ Barad's starting point is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which suggests that gender is not merely discursive, but that it materializes sex. In Butler's words,¹² gender is an apparatus of production whereby sex is established as natural and pre-discursive. Although she thus tightly links sex and gender, for Butler the apparatus of gender seems to be largely cultural: 'This production of sex as prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the *apparatus of cultural construction* designated by gender'.¹³ Barad seeks to correct what she considers an overemphasis on language in Butler's work and a sense that she

¹⁰ As outlined in Michel Foucault et al., *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977--1978* (Macmillan, 2009).

¹¹ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007); Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (March 2003): 801–31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>. Thus, for example, whether light appears as a wave or particle depends on the way it is measured and with what instrument, but it has reality in both forms.

¹² Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 7.

¹³ Butler, 7, emphases deleted and added.

does not sufficiently recognize the agency of matter.¹⁴ With Donna Haraway,¹⁵ she adopts the notion of ‘apparatuses of bodily production,’ which she conceptualizes as producing not only human bodies but bodies of all kinds.

Zanotti joins this stance. But rather than replacing Foucault with Barad, she argues that Foucault’s and Barad’s understandings of apparatuses are quite similar, offering the Panopticon as an example. As is the case for Barad’s measuring apparatuses, the Panopticon is both productive and part of phenomena, embodying ‘ways of knowing, of exerting social control, of organizing space that in turn reinforce and enable a variety of different social practices through which modern subjectivity has been shaped into what it is.’¹⁶ But Barad gives Zanotti a new vocabulary to conceptualize the productivity of apparatuses because for Barad apparatuses are instruments of measurement and observation. These encompass not only machines but also a network of supporting relations that through practices of measuring bring phenomena into being. Thus, the world appears and moves not through the operations of power, but through the assessments and determinations that apparatuses invite, that is through the ‘intra-actions’ between apparatuses and phenomena. These intra-actions establish the boundaries and properties of phenomena, including materialities and bodies. Apparatuses are thus enmeshed in bodily production.

What does Zanotti gain by adopting Barad’s understanding of apparatuses, and what does she lose? One innovation is the shift of focus from discourses to matter, in a sense bringing matter to life so that bodies, materials, and artifacts enter the field of vision as agents. Although Barad has argued this shift to

¹⁴ Foucault’s work has received similar critique Claudia Aradau, ‘Security That Matters: Critical Infrastructure and Objects of Protection’, *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 5 (October 2010): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010610382687>; Claudia Aradau et al., ‘Discourse/Materiality’, in *Critical Security Methods: New Frameworks for Analysis*, ed. Claudia Aradau et al. (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 57–84; Philippe Bonditti et al., ‘Genealogy’, in *Critical Security Methods: New Frameworks for Analysis*, ed. Claudia Aradau et al. (London: Routledge, 2014), 1–22.

¹⁵ ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 595.

¹⁶ Zanotti, 58.

distinguish her work from that of Butler and Foucault, the difference may be a matter of degree: the materialization of bodies and the vulnerability of bodies are key themes of Butler's scholarship; and artifacts and tools appear in Foucault's networked understanding of apparatuses. But Barad does make these materialities central, focusing on the production of bodies. Interestingly, these play a relatively minor role in Zanotti's discussion, perhaps because of her starting point in IR theory.

Another innovation emerges as perhaps more important, namely the concept of intra-action, which allows Zanotti to re-conceive agency in ways not imagined in theories of performativity of biopolitics. By assigning bodies agency, Barad invites us to think of bodies as implicated in their own materialization.¹⁷ In other words, she brings into view agency and ethics, not in a substantialist way that assumes pre-existing subjects, but in an entangled way, in which agencies become intra-agencies that operate within apparatuses to produce effects and ontological closures in a world that is *a priori* wide open. Barad's idea of ontological entanglements allows Zanotti to think differently about political agency and ethics, an issue that I will pursue further in the second part of this article.

But there is also a loss in subsuming Foucault in Barad: the language of power disappears in agential realism. Seemingly aware of this, Zanotti plays with the idea that power can be translated into intra-action, as when she suggests that Foucault's understanding of the relationship of power and the subject is 'isomorphic to Barad's intra-action',¹⁸ or when she invites us to reimagine power from an intra-agential perspective as a 'reiterative and intra-active enfolding process',¹⁹ or when she redefines power as 'the assemblage of uneven and unequal entanglements embodied in apparatuses that produce ontological

¹⁷ For an application of this idea in feminist IR, see Lauren B. Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence: Theorizing Embodied Subjects in International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁸ Zanotti, 73.

¹⁹ Zanotti, 74.

cuts.’²⁰ But relatively little remains of the richness of Foucaultian treatments of power and of an apparatus as always having a strategic function and always embedded in power relations (to recall Agamben), except perhaps the suggestion that ontological closure always entails inclusions and exclusions. Zanotti is thus right not to let go of Foucault yet.

What can we conclude from this discussion for the gender thing identified by West African gender experts? Zanotti can be interpreted to suggest that we might understand the gender thing as an apparatus in the Foucaultian and/or Baradian sense. As Repo has shown, it networks international conventions, contested discourses on gender, organizations of feminist activists, gender experts and scholars, and one might add, from a new materialist perspective, the multiple tools, images, and artifacts of gender, from pamphlets and log frames to trainings and t-shirts (see Figure 1). In both senses, the apparatus brings gender into being as something that we perform, observe, and accept as part of reality. But Barad and Foucault add different emphases to this conceptualization of gender as an apparatus. Barad invites us to think of the way in which sexed/gendered bodies intra-act with apparatuses that encapsulate knowledge about them to produce sex and gender as lived and practiced phenomena. In the Foucaultian understanding adopted by Repo, the apparatus in addition transports power, for example in the form of normalization and colonial logics in Liberia, and as empowerments in the discussed context of Nigeria.

²⁰ Zanotti, 114.

Figure 1: Indonesian t-shirt – The Gender Dimensions of Social Conflict and Peacebuilding



Source: Author.

Intra-agential Ethos and Feminist Praxis

One of the key contributions of Zanotti's book is her explicit and forceful engagement with questions of ethics in a world of ontological entanglement, inspired by her experience in humanitarian settings. Her discussion ranges widely, combining insights from various authors (including in addition to Barad and Foucault, Peg O'Connor and William Connolly) and defending the 'ethical potential of deconstruction'²¹. She offers a formulation of ethics that rejects substantialist assumptions of rational subjects following abstract rules (as in Kantian ethics), which she argues is no longer possible once subjects are understood as entangled with the apparatuses that bring them into existence.

²¹ Laura Zanotti, *Ontological Entanglements, Agency and Ethics in International Relations: Exploring the Crossroads* (Routledge, 2018), 7.

It is Barad's theorization of agency that provides Zanotti the basis for her non-substantialist treatment of ethics, and in particular Barad's notion of agential or ontological cuts, that is the cuts enacted by apparatuses to produce "objects" of particular knowledge practices within the particular phenomena produced.²² The location of these cuts is not immediately obvious; in an entangled world, we do not know a priori the boundaries of concepts and things, where measuring instruments end and matter starts. Barad illustrates the indeterminacy of these boundaries with Bohr's example of a stick used to navigate a dark room. When held tightly, the stick becomes a tool used to feel one's way around. However, when it is held loosely, it becomes an object, part of the room that one would like to observe. Yet it cannot be both at the same time: 'The stick cannot usefully serve as an instrument of observation if one is intent on observing it'.²³ Making an agential cut amounts to deciding the boundary between the tool and the object of observation, between concepts and things; in Zanotti's words, making an agential cut is achieving ontological closure, establishing what is.

We should not expect rules for ethical conduct from a theory that imagines human agency as profoundly entangled in processes of materialization, where the intentions of any rule-following are easily derailed. Yet Zanotti insists on the need for assuming radical responsibility for the matterings of the world. Because, even though our agency may not be the single cause of how the world moves, it participates in foreclosing other patterns of mattering. It effects inclusions and exclusions of certain understandings and thus of possible realities.

Unlike Foucault, Barad thus gives Zanotti a language to think about agency and ethics. This language connects to feminist methodologies that reject an understanding of ethics as a matter of abstract and disembodied 'ruminations of

²² Zanotti, 92; citing Barad. For a similar argument see Gregory Hollin et al., '(Dis)Entangling Barad: Materialisms and Ethics', *Social Studies of Science* 47, no. 6 (December 2017): 918–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312717728344>; Aradau et al., 'Discourse/Materiality'.

²³ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 154–55.

reasonable individuals.’²⁴ Indeed, Zanotti draws on feminist philosophy (the work of Alessandra Tanesini in particular, but also care ethics) to sketch the outlines of an intra-agential ethos as a matter of everyday entangled practices. This ethos moves beyond feminist standpoint approaches, which typically start from a pre-existing subject. But it recognizes that ethical judgments need to be embedded in contexts and start from situated knowledges.²⁵ Acting ethically in an intra-agential world thus requires ‘careful and prudent reflections on the forms of materialization of matter we may induce’ in situated contexts.²⁶ Because ‘we’, as humans, are ourselves phenomena, materializing together with the broader world, taking responsibility necessarily requires humility and modesty. It requires developing an ethos, a way of life that embraces values of reflexivity and care. More pro-actively, taking responsibility also demands creativity and curiosity, and ‘relentless attention to the transformative possibilities that may open up in the practices within which we intra-act’.²⁷

What does this formulation tell us about the gender thing, about the productivity of the apparatus in West African gender expertise? What does it tell us about feminist agency and about knowing how to proceed ethically? Looking at the vignettes cited in the introduction to this article through the lens of Zanotti’s intra-agential ethos, we should not be surprised by the contradictory outcomes the experts observed. Indeed, their judgments can be read as interpretations of different agential cuts enacted locally within the apparatus of gender. These cuts drew boundaries around the concept of gender, bringing into being gendered/sexed bodies in a particular way and not another (performing stereotypical gender divisions of labor in Liberia for example). But these cuts also indicate what should be seen as controllable and what not: gender perhaps as an apparatus, but not its patriarchal enactments. Moreover, these cuts establish what and who is included in the apparatus and what and who not,

²⁴ Zanotti, 94.

²⁵ Compare Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’. *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–99.

²⁶ Zanotti, *Ontological Entanglements, Agency and Ethics in International Relations*, 67.

²⁷ Zanotti, 143.

where the apparatus ends and the enactment starts. In their interventions the Nigerian experts reveal themselves as part of the apparatus of gender as they suggest to deploy it in order to convince traditional leaders, while also reflexively adjusting it by cautioning against overdoing the gender thing. This is in distinction to Kunz's Foucaultian reading of the Liberian context which foregrounds the biopolitical power transported through the apparatus. Interpreting this through the lens of Zanotti's intra-agential ethos, the Liberian experts appear as not part of the apparatus yet thoroughly entangled in it.

Zanotti's formulation of an intra-agential ethos thus offers valuable tools for prying open feminist debates about the governmentality of feminist change projects and the cooptations such projects inevitably entail. The notion of intra-agential agency in particular highlights the embeddedness of feminist practices in the apparatus of gender, offering a new metaphor for understanding the radical contingency of agency recognized in both constructivist and poststructuralist feminist theorizing. Indeed, I see a research programme for developing further the connections between Zanotti's intra-agential ethos and theorizations of ethics in feminist IR. To begin with, Zanotti remains strangely blind to operations of difference and associated economies of power that may transect apparatuses of bodily production. Her intra-agential approach theorizes agency and subjectivity in a disembodied fashion and treats difference somewhat epiphenomenally, as one among many practices entangled in processes of materialization. As a result, the operations of difference drop out of intra-actional considerations of ethics. But, the capacity to affect transformative possibilities (i.e. intra-agency) may not be available to all in the same way. Thus, we are left to wonder who is the 'we' that Zanotti appeals to when demanding that we take radical responsibility? Do requirements of humility, modesty, and care apply to all in an equal manner?

Second, what ethos can propel practices of solidarity, which feminists have extensively embraced as a source of reflexivity, creativity, and change? Brooke

Ackerly,²⁸ for example, insists not only on taking responsibility, but on doing so in a just way by always inquiring into power inequalities and norms and by developing inclusive political communities. Others suggest that, in our knowledge practices, we should not only be humble, but also draw in others, moving away from an attitude of wanting to explain and instruct to involving them into debates,²⁹ or that we revalue ‘chatting’ as a way to bridge differences and talk about difficult and sometimes painful topics that emerge from difference.³⁰ Intra-agential realism helps us to think of feminist change projects as a matter of pushing transformative possibilities by shifting agential cuts. There is ample feminist thought that can help flesh out such an ethos in a creative way that remains attentive to operations of difference.

Conclusion

I have argued that thinking of gender as a thing is indeed significant for international feminist praxis. I have interpreted such talk to mean that gender can be treated as an apparatus. With Repo, I have shown that such an apparatus exercises biopower; with Zanotti I have imagined it as entangled with bodies in processes that bring about sex and gender as phenomena. But I have been critical of the erasure of languages of power from Barad’s theory and of the failure to attend to difference in Zanotti’s notion of an intra-agential ethos.

Theorizing ontological entanglements, agency and ethics operates at a high level of abstraction. Zanotti tries to make it practical by illustrating the relevance of an intra-agential ethos for humanitarian interventions and development practices. Attempting something similar for feminist praxis might read something like this:

²⁸ *Just Responsibility: A Human Rights Theory of Global Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁹ Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations: ‘Exquisite Corpse’* (London: Routledge, 2013), <https://www.routledge.com/products/9780415449229>.

³⁰ L. H. M. Ling, *The DAO of World Politics: Towards a Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations* (New York: Routledge Chapman & Hall, 2013). For a more extensive discussion see Elisabeth Prügl, ‘Feminist Methodology between Theory and Praxis’. *Review of International Studies* 46, no. 3 (July 2020): 304–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000482>.

What West African experts identify as the gender thing, could be interpreted as a network of discourses, practices and objects, including international law, gender expertise, programming artifacts and more. This network can be understood as an apparatus that brings into being sexed and gendered bodies. From a Foucaultian perspective, this apparatus transports different forms of power, producing normalization and coloniality, as well as empowerment. From a Baradian perspective it entangles gender experts and others in intra-agential processes of mattering. Discussions among feminists, gender experts, and others (such as the discussion at the Abuja workshop) involve questions as to where to make agential cuts, deciding the meaning of gender as a concept, but also where the apparatus ends and sexed/gendered realities start. Thus, by embracing a Western gender division of labor, some of the Liberian experts Kunz interviewed moved the boundary so that this division came to shape the way gender was practiced. Conversely, the Nigerian expert's concern with 'overdoing the gender thing' can be thought of as pushing back against the international apparatus to protect gender as locally materialized.

The phenomenon of sex/gender thus emerges as open and indeterminate. The habitual practice of questioning, critique, and reflexivity among feminist activists, experts, and scholars, including endless debates about the meaning of gender, may be a symptom of this openness and should be recognized as political interventions seeking to rearrange the apparatus. But so is everyday gender performativity—now redefined as continuously producing new cuts of reality. Adjusting the thing, the measuring apparatus, is an ethical task in light of such performativity. Zanotti invites gender experts and feminists to take on this task creatively but with appropriate humility in light of our ontological entanglements.

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