INTRODUCTION

Doing postcolonial gender: an approach to justifying rights, resources, and recognition

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In this collection, we seek to advance contemporary discussions in postcolonial feminism and science and technology studies (STS) by examining how actors encounter binaries and norms that structure the space of gender recognition. The practice of identifying with, and being recognized by, a nation-state, a healthcare system, a market, an NGO, or any other legal, bureaucratic, or techno-scientific institution governing access to rights, resources, and recognition is a state of accomplishment in a Western legal and/or philosophical sense often referred to as “gender justice” such as found in the work of Martha Nussbaum (2009; 2000). Nussbaum’s (2000) capabilities approach adheres strongly to an idea of women’s emancipation and freedom as an intrinsic and universal right. While she accounts for hierarchy and subordination in societies that limit women’s capabilities, and cross-cultural forms of the good, her fixation on bodily separateness and autonomy is problematic for social scientists who do not share the normative liberal vision of a pre-social self. Thus, gender justice in the sense of individuated rights is not a neutral goal, nor is the process of achieving it driven by widely agreed upon criteria for defining “gender” and “justice,” a point which has been emphasized by postcolonial feminists in the Global South in particular. It is rather guided by gender normative frames and forms of gendered action, which enable or foreclose such access. Narratives that challenge any of the existing categorizations are also guided by gender normative frames, sometimes under the obfuscating label, anti-norms, which claim to act against hegemonic frames, only to do so by proposing an opposing frame, in a never-ending cycle. And while social scientists of gender widely recognize that “gender” is a practice of “doing” (West and Zimmerman 1987), and not intrinsically attached to persons, the problem of how actors engage with norms – the question of agency and structure – is still debated as a bidirectional power dynamic between actors and norms, through some version of “resistance,” “subversion,” or “subjectivation.” This linear focus fails to account for ordinary pragmatic competence in situated contexts. Therefore, the texts in this collection address two related problems: the first concerns the ongoing tension between opposing normative frames for “gender justice;” the second concerns the way feminist scholarship theorizes agency with respect to those norms.
We propose that gender justice can be better understood not through bidirectional dichotomies of norm/anti-norm or agency/structure but rather through multivalent practices of engagement, what we call “justifying gender.”

Through ethnographic detail, we describe social situations of justifying gender by focusing on the socio-political and historical circumstances which give rise to normative pluralism on the African continent, and consequently on how people fluidly take up such norms in their everyday lives. Since none of the possible variations in gendered lives can be recognized as normal in and of themselves, nor as “oppressive” or “emancipated” in any constant way, the question is what happens in the space between gender normative practices, when actors feel compelled to index one or more gender norms in the ordinary necessity of seeking rights, resources, and recognition. This kind of reflexivity, and the need to take up one or more norms in situations, is considered an act of justification, following from a pragmatic model for gendered action. Justification is made absolutely necessary in post-colonial situations of plural sex and gender normativities not only because there is newfound space for “judgement,” which Hannah Arendt has theorized as a means for encountering the unknown in a topsy-turvy world (Arendt 1953). But there is also the necessity of “action” (Arendt [1958] 1998) in this context of plurality, where the claim for recognition is critical when access to health care, markets, citizenship, security, or land is governed by such norms. We argue that post-colonial feminism must account for normative pluralism as a reality to be reckoned with in contemporary Africa, if not everywhere, and that judgement is located in the reflexive space between norms.

We propose a view from multiple locations on the African continent to elaborate multivalent discourses, both those rooted in local traditions and those linked to global dynamics through common historical and (post)colonial experiences. Thus, in each of the texts, the respective authors address two arguments: (1) Our first undertaking is to examine contexts and norms, their socio-cultural, political, or historical genealogies – and subsequent refractions in images, texts, technologies, practices, laws, or discourses. We examine the social and political stakes of such identities – their national or global entanglements through institutions, webs of belief, and infrastructures. Our cases include gender norms inscribed in biometric identity projects, legal codes, health servicing, media imagery, land dispossession, religious institutions, and climate change discourses, all of which are influenced by national or transnational projects of modernity. (2) Then, deploying the proposed framework of justifying gender outlined in this introduction, we present how actors weave gender normative identities, and through such new alignments, critical and ironic moments, the seeds of transformation are planted, and the space of gender recognition is shifted on terms designated by the actors themselves, without having to posit anti-norms or new identities in the quest for rights, resources, and recognition. To be clear, we are not focused on actors subverting or eroding norms through minor acts of rebellion, although certainly, this is also happening in some contexts. Rather, we argue that the emancipatory possibility is in the reflexive space between norms, and the critical capacity needed to take up norms, pragmatically repurpose them, or ironically bring elements of one or more together in postcolonial situations of normative pluralism. The various texts orient to justifying gender in different ways, where the possibility of securing rights, recognition, and resources is, as

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1We take this term from “On Justification” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) in the pragmatic sociology of critique.
everywhere, complex. Each author meditates on this potential in her or his case study of lived realities through detailed descriptions gathered from extensive fieldwork in five African contexts, namely South Africa, Ghana, Sudan, Uganda, and Tanzania.

1. Gender norms in post-colonial Africa

Concerning the first argument, our context is Africa, not as an essentialized timeless place, but one where common historical events on the continent have generated specific patterns of gender politics today. As gender studies in Africa have demonstrated, in imperial, colonial, and nation-building projects, as well as recent neoliberal capitalist and development paradigms, gender norms figure within the tropes of both modernity and tradition, and intersect with related patterns such as rural and urban, class and ethnic divisions, and education and livelihoods. As Oyèwùmí (2002) has argued, such projects have exacerbated power relations in male/female configurations in accordance with the “Western” family model and its white middle-class concerns and values. This patriarchal frame and the form of feminism it provokes have followed from that model, such that “gender” and even “feminism” are constructs which, she argues, do not apply to African realities where family patterns emerged differently than in Europe (Amadiume 1987; Oyèwùmí 1997). Similarly, Bakare-Yusuf (2002) asks the question, “What are the implications of introducing a gendered perspective as a starting point for the construction of knowledge about African societies?” (Bakare-Yusuf 2002). Do gendered distinctions have any empirical basis, or do they reflect the pre-existing categories of the researcher? Viewing a question as “gendered” invariably frames the range of answers that can emerge. Bakare-Yusuf says of African “gender” systems: “To commit oneself to the assumption of gender is to remain unquestioningly embedded within a specific western intellectual tradition of critique” (Bakare-Yusuf 2002). Feminist scholars of Africa have engaged in heated debates over how to theorize gender as a concept for Africa, interrogating the kinds of inequality on the continent, the various manifestations of patriarchy and the aspirations of feminism they envision for Africa (see, for example, Arndt 2001; Arnfred and Adomako Ampofo 2009; Imam 1997; Mama 2011; Pereira 2002; Adomako Ampofo et al. 2004).

One such debate concerns whether feminisms in post-colonial contexts can seek recourse to Black Feminism. As it evolved in the United States, Black Feminist concerns such as “race” and “class” emerged in response to the lack of such concerns in white feminist activism. Intersectionality, a lens of analysis coming out of earlier queer Black poetics but later articulated by Kimberlee Crenshaw (1990) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), argues that “gender” is not understandable independent of its racial, class, or other contexts. It attends to the interlocked relations of power across different forms of subordination. African feminists have considered whether such forms of analysis, which take certain structures for granted, can also represent them, or whether an authentically “African” feminism can be forged. African feminism that adopts an intersectional lens has taken on the patriarchal relations entrenched in a host of oppressive and exploitative structures: imperial, colonial, and post-colonial transformations, capitalism, neoliberal economic and

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2This and the following quotes are taken from an essay published online with no page numbers. See http://www.codesria.org/spip.php?article579.
humanitarian interventions, and religious fundamentalisms, just to name a few. As feminist scholar, Ayesha Imam has said about feminism in Africa at the African Feminist Forum³ “It’s always intersectional.”⁴ It is the position of such thinkers that the tools of radical Black Feminism are in fact useful for analyzing power dynamics, but that the specific categories of oppression will have to be understood with respect to African realities. Unlike the authors above – who distance themselves from any concept of gender originating outside of Africa – these thinkers place African gender in post-colonial patterns of exploitation as a reality not to be rejected but to be reflected on conceptually and lobbied against. One of the most dominant patterns (but certainly not the only one) that feminists in Africa have long worked out is that of patriarchy.

In line with the intersectional thinking from this vein of African feminism, in our collection, a common theme that runs through the case studies is that of a heteronormative and patriarchal national identity project against which persons are forced to position themselves, and against which deviations are marked. In many of these cases, men are normatively positioned as the vanguard of modernity, the brokers with the “West,” with education, technology, political, and economic life, while women are positioned as guardians of tradition and authenticity, expected to be chaste and motherly. Furthermore, when actors stray from these normative patterns, a host of reactionary stereotypes may emerge locally, which pejoratively casts the “West” and modernity as contaminating influences, responsible for “deviant” gender identities, and, by metaphorical extension, contaminations of the nation and its vision for a moral, civilized future. Control over sexuality, in particular, is one of the African feminists’ battles, as are religious fundamentalisms which claim ownership over people’s bodies (Gqola 2007; Tamale 2005; Arnfred 2009). Regardless of how sexuality was organized historically, today, patriarchy and its intersections in Africa are engaged in a struggle for defining a form of modernity often predicated on the normative positioning of women as “the past,” and sex and gender minorities as deviants.

Gender relations between men and women pre-colonially, and between “good” and “deviant” gender norms in the colonial era, are further forced to reconcile with neoliberal capitalist formations, development, human rights, and humanitarian activities that seek new normative positionings for actors. To put this another way, it is not our goal to assess the vitality of gender norms that existed before, how they may have eroded or continued today – this is an empirical question for each context. Rather, we seek to account for the presence of plural normative systems today, one of which is clearly that of heteronormative patriarchy. While some African gender activists seek to recover Africanness by proposing alternative labels such as “motherism,” “womanism,” or “stiwanism,” in recognition of African-specific moral configurations for families and homosexualities that “reach into the past” (Rao 2020), others argue for a focus on what they perceive to be larger battles. For example, feminist scholar Amina Mama rejects so-called African alternatives to feminism in an interview with Elaine Salo:

[T]his does not get away from the main problem, namely white domination of global politics and northern-based white women’s relative power to define. […] To put it bluntly, white

³The African Feminist Forum is a network of African feminists who see the tools of Black feminism as useful for analyzing power relationships, while developing their own terms for feminism. http://www.africanfeministforum.com/feminist-charter-preamble/. Accessed on April 2, 2020.
⁴https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNn9zk0XVMg. Accessed on March 31, 2020.
feminism has never been strong enough to be “the enemy” – in the way that say, global capitalism can be viewed as an enemy. The constant tirades against “white feminists” do not have the same strategic relevance as they might have had 20 years ago when we first subjected feminism to anti-racist scrutiny. Since then many Westerners have not only listened to the critiques of African and other so-called third world feminists – they have also re-considered their earlier simplistic paradigms and come up with more complex theories. Postcolonial feminism owes much to African, Asian and Latin American thinkers. Western feminists have agreed with much of what we have told them about different women being oppressed differently, and the importance of class and race and culture in configuring gender relations. Having won that battle why would we want to abandon the struggle, leave the semantic territory to others, and find ourselves a new word? (Salo and Mama 2001, 61)

These semantic negotiations emphasize their intersectional dimension and the need to take on broader global power struggles to define the terms of local struggles over gender normativities. This is compatible with the direction we pursue. And yet, the insights from the feminist and queer literature notwithstanding – and, in recognition of its great diversity of positions – we take a step back from any normative or romanticizing tendencies that still lurk in this vein of activism. We obviously distance ourselves from those studies that see women’s emancipation in pre-colonial or cultural relativist explanations, but also those contemporary arguments that seek to detach African patterns from their post-colonial entanglements today. To put this another way, why should the categories of oppression for Africans be any different from those of other women or sex and gender minority? To say that anything is truly African emphasizes its continent-specific relatedness, while denying the multitudes of other relations that also constitute African experiences, as well as Africa’s constitution of those places’ experiences. For example, while a neoliberal model for emancipation or self-determination has indeed originated in specific Euro-American capitalist sites, its value for ordinary people everywhere can still be contested; its relationship with different places has emerged in regionally or historically defined ways, which make it authentic to no one and nowhere in particular, but everywhere at the same time, including the very existence of feminist and queer inquiry in Africa. It is as African as it is Western. In another example of a trans-regional pattern, homosexuality is illegal in thirty-seven African countries, often framed as a (neo)colonial import. As Rottenburg (2013, 55) has discussed for the punitive anti-LGBTQ law in the mediatized case of Uganda,

both the human rights-abetting bill and the social move to recognize homosexuality in Kampala and Uganda are not just local but closely linked to initiatives in the United States and elsewhere [… the outcome of] contradictory expectations and opportunities of global social networking […].

In tandem with national heterosexual paradigms and with anti-LGBTQ movements come human rights’ discourses of “empowerment” to support such movements. Thus, in turn, appear the state-supported discourses of re-traditionalization, and a turn to so-called authentic African values that we find and elaborate on in our case studies. Therefore, since gender is a classificatory principle, and if the object of analysis is the way gender becomes salient and meaningful to people, normalized, and used to frame other phenomena, we assert that it is an important lens of inquiry for Africa. As we have been arguing, however “gender” may or may not have been for Africa before colonialism, gendered distinctions, and in fact, gender pluralism is alive and well in post-
colonial Africa. Gender is a locally productive tool of classification that is inextricably tied to broader historical and political dynamics.

To provide examples of flourishing and often competing gendered norms from the authors’ case studies, women entrepreneurs in Ghana are stereotyped as incompetent in payment transactions by Ghanaian market leaders, but development discourses seek to empower women through biometric identity schemes. Queer activists and artists in South Africa confront heteronormative visions for the nation by generating homonationalist imagery. In Masaailand, Tanzania, women are subject to tropes of vulnerability in discourses of climate change at the cost of their customary role as spiritual custodians of their environment. Also, women’s health campaigns and services can carry both the bias and ethos of the national or customary norm and that of transnational human rights projects as seen in Tanzania (anti-female genital mutilation) and Sudan (sexual violence servicing). Religious fundamentalisms have largely defined national gender models in Sudan and Uganda, where a strong heteronormative patriarchal model casts sexually mature women and transgender women respectively, as immoral and even criminal. In Sudan, stereotypes about sexuality also carry an ethnic dimension, where the label “Nuba” is pejoratively linked with sexual availability. In each of these settings, actors engage with a plurality of gender norms operating at multiple scales.

Adopting a post-colonial feminist and Science and Technology Studies (STS) lens of inquiry, it is apparent that doing gender in Africa is folded into post-colonial struggles over the contradictions between ethnic, racial, national, sometimes continental, self-determination and individualist, feminist, or queer self-determination. Thus “doing gender” is also “doing post-coloniality” where both are always nested into concerns over modernity’s discontents and the unequal distribution of resources and knowledges. Taking up Sandra Harding’s call for bringing post-colonial and feminist STS concerns together, our position is that, modernization is not identical to Westernization, contrary to Western exceptionalist and triumphalist assumptions. […] It is also independently produced within each and every society. Whether arriving from outside or inside a society – or, more likely, through negotiations between inside and outside – it must be “sutured” into existing economic, political, cultural, psychic, and material worlds. Thus, modernity will always take on distinctive local features in its multiple regional appearances. And it always tends to appropriate and reshape to its own ends the social hierarchies that exist. Feminist and postcolonial projects will always be multiple and distinctively local if they are to serve those escaping local male-supremacist and Western-supremacist histories. (Harding 2009, 415)

Acknowledging this, we hope to steer between normative positions embedded in both purportedly Western universals or African particularisms, and study the existence and reality of normative pluralisms that structure post-colonial lives. Justifying gender means doing postcolonial gender. It is about managing the relationship between locally active gender norms and the rights, resources, and recognition they may afford. In some cases, actors engage with normative identities in order to make life livable, and in some cases, they transform them, stretching the space of what can be recognized.

2. Justifying gender

The question of gendered action and the possible transformation of norms bring us to our second concern, namely a conceptual model for analyzing the relationship between
persons and the social norms they must live with. Thinking about how people do and undo gender necessarily invokes contemporary conceptual discussions concerned with agency and resistance, processes by which new normativities are instituted. As Saba Mahmood (2005, 6–8) argued, feminists in the secular-liberal tradition have almost always identified gender agency with forms of resistance to hegemony, linked with anti-normative stances. This is due to the tendency to hunt for the inner capacity for resistance: “[T]he humanist desire for autonomy and self-expression constitutes the substrate, the slumbering ember that can spark to flame in the form of an act of resistance when conditions permit.” (8). She took issue with the trope of resistance (and subtler forms of resistance through acts of subversion or recoding) finding other forms of agency at work in upholding dominant normative gender identities among female Islamic preachers in Cairo. She argued that these preachers practised agency by inhabiting norms, seeking to perfect themselves within such gendered frames, by drawing on Foucault’s techniques of the body (Foucault 1990) to analyse how power gives shape to agency. As we have already suggested, an overemphasis on agency-as-resistance is indeed problematic since the adoption of anti-norms, which are meant to offer a solution by being more inclusive, are always, ultimately, exclusive as well. Furthermore, the performative interactional process of undoing gender is the same as that of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987). As feminist political philosopher Chantal Mouffe has said, “We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion” (Mouffe 2000, 104). There is no way out of gendered differentiations, however politically insensitive it may be to say so, without doing away with identity politics altogether (Fraser 2000). And yet, identity politics are thriving in this world of “traveling models” (Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg 2014), where rights’ claims, popular uprisings, humanitarian discourses and indigenous, fundamentalist, and LGBTQ movements circulate the planet. While (feminist) political philosophers envisage forms and models for a more egalitarian world, querying the agency it takes for transforming it, we, as ethnographers, attend to how people already do so. And, by understanding this process, we aspire to a glimpse of how a transformative and livable world may come into view.

In line with contemporary thinking in social science, we observe that gender agency can be expressed in a host of ways, from inhabiting gender norms to resisting them in the form of anti-norms, but more importantly, through a range of gendered social actions that fall in-between. Not unlike original formulations of Actor-Network-Theory, we see human beings as social agents that are not located in individual bodies but also in between:

But it [ANT] insists that social agents are never located in bodies and bodies alone, but rather that an actor is a patterned network of heterogeneous relations, or an effect produced by such a network. The argument is that thinking, acting, writing, loving, earning – all the attributes that we normally ascribe to human beings, are generated in networks that pass through and ramify both within and beyond the body. Hence the term, actor-network – an actor is also, always, a network. (Law 1992, 4)

This pragmatic stance on meaning-making foregrounds its relational aspects. Gender is a relation (Strathern 2001), and actors seek rights, resources, and recognition within that relationship or many relationships. In the same way, in Butler’s (2004) performative
approach, gender does not precede the situation in which it is constructed. She depicts an agency that entails doing away with compromises between what one desires and what one needs through acts of recognition. She acknowledges the paradox of both needing norms to be included and “recognized” as human, and the possibility that such norms “undo” forms of personhood which are not categorizable by available “schemes of recognition.” For such persons, compromises have to be made either way, which can be “unlivable.”

Certain humans are recognized as less than human, and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life. Certain humans are not recognized as human at all, and that leads to yet another order of unlivable life. If part of what desire wants is to gain recognition, then gender, insofar as it is animated by desire, will want recognition as well. (Butler 2004, 2–3)

Butler’s vision of undoing, influential to feminist and queer theory, sees the necessity of norms but nonetheless advocates for transcending them for a more livable future. She says that gender is undone through culture, by “being together” in the world. Of course, a host of gender identities have been proposed to “recognize” persons who do not identify with dominant gender normativities, including but not limited to LGBTQ, but such solutions entail new exclusions, norms, and pathologies (Butler 2004, 5), which repeat the original problem of inclusion and recognition.

My agency does not consist in denying this condition of my constitution. If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility. As a result, the “I” that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them. (Butler 2004, 3)

People depend on institutions and a social world that uphold and enable agencies for the exercise of self-determination (Butler 2004, 7). Norms have to exist to support non-normative selfhoods.

The task of all of these movements seems to me to be about distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself. (Butler 2004, 8)

Critique, for Butler, is about finding more inclusive ways to live rather than focusing on difference. We too see critique as the starting point of agency. As ethnographers, we can analytically contribute to the vision of inclusion and a transformative world through ethnographic accounts of what people already do with norms in situations to make life livable. Our stance is less a concern with out-right debate and deliberation, but neither is it a detached description that claims to be disinterested. We are invested in describing and strengthening the process – conceived as action – of both meeting and countering expectations, of revising what is and what can be. We thus take up Arendt’s ([1958] 1998) understanding of action not as a competence based on acts of free will but rather as a necessary part of the human condition. In this understanding, to act, to have the agency to make a difference is less a privilege. It is rather a basic human competence as the rules and norms guiding action are multivalent, contradictory, resulting in fluid webs of belief and institutions that never fully determine action. At the heart of this
basic competence is the ability to judge a polyvalent situation that eludes a clear and stable interpretation, in order to maintain the ability to act. In further developing this stance, we draw from our previous work. In Lamoureaux’s (2017) study of a community of converted Christians in Sudan, she developed a pragmatic model for describing how actors take up one or more normative "registers" in a setting with multiple gendered value spheres. She described situations where women, in particular, were competent at various acts of aligning, switching, adjusting, embedding, or even challenging registers. Rottenburg’s notion of metacodes (2009; 2014) similarly sees the work of code-switching as a competence necessary for cooperation in polyvalent situations.

To return to the notion of justice, we are further inspired by the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) from the pragmatic sociology of critique, who offer a model for managing norms, what they call the ordinary capacity for critique, or “justification,” as the way people detach from and situate themselves with respect to norms. This approach helps to move away from any assumptions of fixed gendered identities towards a focus on the fluidity of gendered categories and the creativity of actors reflexively engaging with such norms in a situation of multiple or competing value systems, which they call “orders of worth” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 5). Central to this model is the way people justify their actions according to the relative values of persons in situations of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 7). Justification means situating or ranking oneself or others in a hierarchy of grandeur, of “worth.” Their use of the term “worth” rather than “value” is important because it captures the social embeddedness of value, not as rational, fixed amounts or ideas, but relative, ordered, and subject to agreement. This requires finding an agreement about the relative worth of persons and objects based on a common principle for that ordering, that is, shared norms. However, in a dispute, one’s ranking is up for question, and this requires appealing to criteria – a “legitimate form of the common good” or “worth” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 19) – that will absolve a person of potential critique.

Justification of worth occurs in reference to shared norms which are accepted and hold across multiple situations (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 140–41). These understandings of superordinate values hold for particular “worlds” with shared ideas of a “common good.” Justification means that an actor must “ascend to generality” – or in Rottenburg’s terms, must invoke the relevant metacode – and thereby reference that common good so as to convince others. It is an ongoing epistemological process since all causes have to be “created, constructed, established and proved” in an ongoing process (Boltanski 2012, 8). In institutions or, more precisely, situations that define the common good, where justice can be established based on relative worth – the worthy are those who manage to convince others what the common good is for the purpose at hand.5 This process necessitates recognition and reciprocity if it is to work. This means that norms of gender and sex are not attached to persons, but rather exist between people and are enacted as shared concepts that any actor can mobilize and thereby shape. They can be better grasped as “grammars” or “orders of worth” that are more or less normatively germane to situations which call for schemes of recognition.

5Institutions may be more stabilized and durable than situations, but they are equally subject to transformation through critique. Institutions are a permanent and ongoing negotiation, “confirmation” and “critique” in situated acts.
Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) help to theorize the way actors evaluate and justify “what is” and “what should be” attributing them a more judicial role, than the classic spectrum of agency-as-resistance to agency-as-submission. Expanding their model of critique into the vocabulary of performative competence, the notion of “register” becomes a useful tool. Several of the texts in this collection use the notion of “register” or “register of justice,” bringing the model of critique described here into the performative and semiotic realm. Registers are not only representative of socio-political “orders” or “spheres” but a productive technology that can be deployed anywhere by anyone and yet point to (or index) that order.

The commonplace understanding of the word “register” is the concept of a discourse style associated with a regulating institution, such as, for example, politician’s speech, lawyer’s speech, working-class dialects, urban slang, bureaucratese, medical expertise, and so on. This understanding is rather static, and it does not tell us about how this process happens – how linguistic form is linked to social value, of say, being a medical authority. However, in pragmatic semiotic theory (Agha 2004), this discourse style is the outcome of indexical practice, which results in the form of language linked with an existing social entity. A register, as it is understood here, is a semiotic instrument for moral evaluation (justification) and can be used to frame and give pragmatic force to whatever issue is of concern by indexing all that is subsumed within an order of worth. A register for the purposes of our approach is the linguistic means by which all that is evoked by that worth is metapragmatically indexed. It is an epistemic tool for the assertion of credibility and worthiness. Registers can be adhered to in situations, not only through assertions, taking up a normative code, such as a style of dressing, walking, or speaking. They can more creatively be aligned, switched, adjusted, invested in, challenged, or embedded within one another, at times in the same gesture. That is, they are meta-commentaries that signal how a person draws on one or another order of worth, or situates one order with respect to a plurality of worths – simply put, how to construe meaning in contexts that add to and reframe meaning. Therefore, justifying gender refers specifically to the performative, indexical capacity to bring together the expected and the unexpected.

In this collection, justifying gender is exercised in different ways albeit through different vocabularies: Van der Wal puts forward the idea of “movement” to show how queer subjects imagine who they are and how they want to be within national citizenship norms in South Africa, thus reconfiguring the boundaries of what can be visualized. Lamoureaux illustrates how women in Sudan “embed” one register of justice within another as a way to voice experiences of sexual violence, when opposing understandings of women’s agency prevent the majority from access to justice. The few women who report on rape draw on norms of age, ethnicity, debility, or class, complicating Islamic legal as well as humanitarian registers in order to qualify for justice. In another context of policed sexuality in Kampala, Uganda, Bryan analyzes how transgender women both take up and flaunt activists’ NGO guidelines about personal security. Bryan finds that transgender women employing such registers “get by” by carefully managing a queer identity through embodied performances of heteronormativity and market savvy in a state of compulsory heterosexuality. In Ghana, Thiel shows how actors at both local and transnational levels reproduce registers of Ghanaian womanhood in terms of “dependence and deviance,” and how women entrepreneurs deploy these norms to seek
inclusion in the market. In Maasailand Tanzania, justifying gender means reflexively critiquing climate change discourses of women’s “vulnerability.” De Wit analyzes how Maasai women rather locate vulnerability in land dispossession, and in Christianity’s prohibition of women’s spiritual role as custodians of nature, by regulating rain. Justifying gender is enacted in these case studies through the deployment of plural, often competing, registers as modes of justification. Doing postcolonial gender reveals that the persistent temptation to link actors with fixed and stable gender identities, or to link institutions with durable gender norms, becomes wholly untenable in the face of ordinary situated judgement and pragmatic action in the ongoing quest for rights, resources, and recognition.

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Siri Lamoureaux has degrees in anthropology and linguistics. Her work draws inspiration from Science and Technology Studies, pragmatic sociology and linguistic anthropology to study micro-processes of situated techno-social communication, an approach brought into studies of digital activism, gender and agency, ethno-religious movements, literacy, and datafication in Sudan and Africa broadly. She is currently a researcher and lecturer in the Sociology Department at the University of Siegen, and a member of the SFB 1187 ‘Media of cooperation’ and the LOST (Law, Organisation, Science and Technology) Research Group at WiSER, Johannesburg, South Africa.

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