DOING NONIDEAL THEORY ABOUT GENDER IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS

A REPLY TO MCLAREN, MEYERS, AND MONQUE

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Abstract: This paper elaborates and renders explicit some of the views about political philosophical methodology that underlie the author’s arguments in Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic. It shows how the author’s stances on autonomy, individualism, intersectionality, human rights, the coloniality of gender, and the oppression of genders besides man and woman grow out of a commitment to scrutinizing our normative views in light of transnational criticism and empirical information from the qualitative social sciences.

Keywords: feminism, political philosophy, global justice, nonideal theory, transnational feminism, postcolonial feminism, decolonial feminism, oppression, philosophy of gender.

In Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic (Khader 2019a), I argue that an anti-imperialist, universalist transnational feminist praxis is possible. The nonideal universalism I advocate (a) conceives the normative core of feminism as opposition to gender-based oppression and (b) envisions the role of normative concepts in transnational feminist praxis as (in a term borrowed from Amartya Sen) a “justice-enhancing” one. Nonideal universalism allows us to untether feminism as a normative concept from many of the ideas that have driven feminist complicity in imperialism. It also allows us to resist the long-standing universalism/relativism debates that force anti-imperialist feminists into a self-defeating position. Taking the normative core of feminism to be opposition to oppression allows me to drive a wedge between feminism and the “Enlightenment liberal” values that postcolonial and decolonial feminists have found problematic, such as controversial forms of autonomy, individualism, and gender eliminativism. Recognizing that transnational

1 See Gettachew 2019 and 2018 for arguments about how anti-imperialist and decolonial projects have often involved both moral universalism and attempts to change the global order.

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feminist theory and praxis are undertaken under unjust conditions clarifies many decolonial criticisms of Western feminism. In my view, decolonial feminists are often drawing attention to Western feminist epistemic habits that get in the way of bringing about gender justice in colonial and postcolonial contexts, such as the tendency to favor cultural explanations of “other” women’s oppression (rather than colonial or geopolitical ones) and the tendency to ignore the costs of Western intervention in “other” women’s lives.2

I am grateful to Margaret McLaren, Diana Tietjens Meyers, and Pedro Monque for their careful attention to my work. I am also appreciative of the ways their own work calls attention to urgent moral and political issues relevant to women in the global South. Academic philosophy has been even slower to take up global and decolonial concerns than it has feminist ones, so these interlocutors are a very special group of philosophers. Because their commentaries raise issues that are of general interest for political philosophers and feminist philosophers (whether or not they have read my book), and because there is occasional overlap among the commentaries, I organize the replies below thematically. And because so many of my replies rely on methodological commitments from nonideal theory, I begin with a discussion of those commitments.

The Role of Empirical Realities in Nonideal Theorizing

One of my theses in Decolonizing Universalism is that much anti-imperialist feminist work can be understood as calling for recognition of the fact that feminist activism and praxis occur under nonideal conditions. What seem to be rejections of feminism are often instead attempts to draw attention to the complexities of engaging in real-world politics, where women are navigating unjust conditions of multiple kinds, face trade-offs, and are unable to make a world without these injustices come about with a single action or the stroke of a wand. So, for example, when Susan Moller Okin famously argues that being “shrouded from head to toe” in a burqa or niqab is not a desirable way to live (1999, 116), she is ignoring what Leila Ahmed and Hannah Papanek actually claim about body veils, namely, that, in some contexts, they make it possible for women to gain new economic and political opportunities while remaining “secluded,” and that this is an improvement over literal seclusion in the home.3

2 I use “other” to refer to women in the global South and women with perceived roots in these countries in the global North. I choose this term to highlight the role of what Chandra Mohanty (1991) famously called the “third world difference” in constituting them as a group; these women may have little in common besides their subjection to colonialism and their association with cultures that Westerners perceive as different or backward.

3 Noting this failure of Okin’s does not require taking a stance about whether body veils would be present in a society that had achieved gender equality.
My nonideal theoretical commitments also include the view that part of the philosophical task of evaluating normative concepts involves considering what the effects of adopting them would be. For example, I argue in the chapter on individualism that the ideal of valuing only chosen relationships makes it difficult to apprehend the transition costs women can incur when they lose unchosen relationships, and that this is, in turn, a reason to jettison what I call “independence individualism.” I make a similar type of point about the form of autonomy I call “Enlightenment freedom,” arguing that we should take seriously the fact that anti-imperialist feminists see language about freedom from tradition as enabling imperialist adventures ranging from the U.S. invasion of Iraq (Mahmood 2005) to the undermining of indigenous self-determination (Blackwell 2012).

I see the concerns raised by McLaren, Meyers, and Monque as opportunities to think more deeply about what it is to do nonideal political philosophy. Many of Meyers’s remarks about autonomy and individualism, for example, are versions of the claim that close empirical relationships between concepts and feminist effects are enough to make them central to feminism. For instance, Meyers argues that, even if autonomy is not conceptually related to feminism, anti-imperialist feminism practically requires respect for autonomy. In Meyers’s view, anti-imperialist feminists have to reject top-down approaches to social change, and the only way to authenticate bottom-up approaches is to demand that they be grounded in women’s own desires. Put differently, bottom-up approaches work through women’s exercise of reflection and agentic skills, so we need to value and cultivate these skills. I think Meyers’s broad point here is right, and I have explicitly argued elsewhere that cultivating the type of autonomy Meyers defends is an important ingredient in women’s empowerment projects (see Khader 2015).

Meyers’s implication that a close empirical relationship between a concept and feminism is enough to make it a feminist value reveals our shared commitment, not just to nonideal theorizing broadly construed, but to the subspecies of it that says that empirical evidence about what values do in the world is an important part of normative inquiry. Letting the empirical in, however, means openness to real-world counterexamples and a wide range of evidence. I criticize autonomy in Decolonizing Universalism partly because of another body of empirical evidence that Meyers does not emphasize, namely, evidence that non-Western women often find autonomy language alienating and claim that versions of it promote cultural destruction. For example, as I mentioned above, a large body of literature on Muslim women argues that the idea that cultures restrict women’s autonomy has made it seem that eroding cultural ties, by literally bombing

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4 See Khader 2020b for a discussion of the relationship between feminist methods and the relevance of the empirical to moral and political philosophy.
Muslim-majority countries or outlawing hair coverings, will make women freer.5

My attempt to take this body of empirical evidence seriously has led me to adopt the following two views about autonomy. First, it has led me to be open to the possibility that autonomy may not be the right value, or the only value, that explains why we should place a high value on something like women’s own reflective agency. Meyers is absolutely right that feminist change generally happens through women reflecting, criticizing, and remixing.6 But I am not sure that we have to call this set of capacities “autonomy.” Other moral languages, and even other values within the Western moral repertoire, may contain extensional equivalents that are worth exploring and adopting.

In fact, I would suggest that the entire idea that authentic reflective remixing is a type of autonomy comes largely from antecedent commitments to a Western moral vocabulary. It is an antecedent embedding in a tradition that sees autonomy as among the most important goods in human life, and has developed an entire political philosophy around it, that makes revising the concept of autonomy seem like the right way to articulate the importance of reflective agency. If Western feminists had not inherited a tradition and practices that gave autonomy pride of place, they might simply have looked askance at the idea of “giving the law to oneself” and invented some other moral concept.

This does not mean that the project of rehabilitating autonomy is not worth undertaking, and readers familiar with my work will know that I have spent much of my career defending autonomy—and a conception of it very similar to Meyers’s own (see Khader 2020; 2011; Meyers 1987; Khader 2012). But it does suggest that the project of describing reflective agency as autonomy may be more parochial than we realize. Some theorists influenced by postcolonial feminisms, such as Sumi Madhok (2014), have suggested dropping autonomy and moving to more direct agency talk. Still others claim that even agency talk is embedded in a cultural imaginary that portrays the “authentic” self as locatable only in opposition to tradition (Mahmood 2005).7 To endorse an ideal called autonomy, even a rehabilitated one, suggests more than just that women’s own priorities and desires matter (see also Khader 2020)—and that more may turn out to be controversial. To claim that the thing that we value when we care

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5 See, e.g., Razakh 2008; Mahmood 2005; Bangstad 2011; Gurel 2009; Maira 2009; Volpp 2011; Scott 2010.

6 I argue in Khader 2018b, however, that the excessive emphasis on agency in women’s empowerment discourses unnecessarily burdens them with the responsibility of ending their oppression.

7 Of course, feminist autonomy theorists can claim that we have rehabilitated autonomy in ways immune to Mahmood’s criticism, but this misses the fact that her criticism is of an “imaginary of autonomy” governed by certain metaphors and associations, not just a definition.
about women’s own priorities is autonomy is not to offer a moral language-neutral description of a phenomenon. It is to offer a culturally and theoretically laden one. Once we recognize this, a burden of justification arises for those of us who would assert the centrality of autonomy to feminism.\(^8\) I believe the demands of nonideal theorizing in the face of the critical body of empirical evidence weigh in favor of opening ourselves to the possibility that other moral languages may have better, equally plausible, or more politically efficacious characterizations of the relation between authentic agency and feminism—either in their own contexts or in general. I accept Meyers’s substantive point that something like reflective agency has a very strong empirical link with feminism, especially bottom-up feminism, but think the empirical burden of transnational nonideal theorizing, in particular the burden created by the accusation of parochiality, asks Western feminists to be open to other ways of naming and discussing the connection between feminism and the relevant type of reflective agency.

In the example of autonomy, the nonideal theoretical commitment to examining what normative concepts do in the world can suggest that we should expand the scope of normative concepts and movements that count as feminist. But an equally interesting result of nonideal theorizing is that empirical evidence can also suggest we should contract it. Monque asks in his piece what my view suggests about the anti-trans activists who call themselves “gender critical” feminists (see Saul 2020). I will discuss what my account of sexism in Decolonizing Universalism implies about the oppression of queer people and people with gender identities besides man and woman at greater length later in this reply. But anti-trans activists who call themselves feminists offer an interesting case where empirical evidence (among other things) gives us reason to question a movement’s claims to feminism.

Putting anti-trans activists’ practice of allying with right-wing movements to the side, much of these activists’ reasoning about why trans women do not deserve the protections feminists fight for derives its power from false narratives about the sources of rape and sexual assault. Its arguments about bathrooms and locker rooms cast these spaces, where trans people are far more likely to be victimized than cis women, as sites whose role is to protect women from men. But, as feminist activists have been at great pains to show for more than fifty years, we know that most of the sexual violence against cis women is perpetrated by those we know in intimate spaces and in the workplace. Separate bathrooms are a product of the “doctrine of spheres,” and the main role the need to protect women in bathrooms historically played in U.S. society was that of helping defeat

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\(^8\) As Margaret Urban Walker puts it, “Morality bears a far greater descriptive and empirical burden . . . than is commonly thought” (2007, 13).

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the Equal Rights Amendment. Arguments that women need to be protected from “male” aggression are part of the ideology psychologists term “benevolent sexism” that has historically functioned primarily to support women’s confinement and seclusion. These arguments contribute to the stereotyping of women as a “low-agency group,” which keeps them out of leadership roles and supports the view that they need cajoling to engage in sexual activity, which, in turn, prevents men from being held morally responsible for sexual assault (Blumell, Huemmer, and Sternadori 2019; Buck and Obzud 2018; Fraser 2015).

I turn now to the second way I have grappled with the critical elements of the body of empirical evidence about autonomy and “other” women. I have criticized the variant of autonomy that I take to cause the problems that decolonial, postcolonial, and transnational feminists identify. As Meyers generously notes in her article, I do not take her conception of autonomy, or many political liberal and feminist rehabilitations of autonomy, to be the one that promotes cultural destruction. Instead, as she notes, I focus on a value I term “Enlightenment freedom,” a form of positive freedom in which traditional dictates constitute an impediment to self-realization. I claim in Decolonizing Universalism that though Enlightenment Freedom is an implausible value, it often seems plausible to Westerners because they see themselves as not possessed of traditions. The core of Meyers’s objection to my criticism of Enlightenment freedom is that no one actually believes in it. Instead, she argues, acts like the French ban on wearing hijabs in public schools stem from an overzealous commitment to laïcité.

In support of her point, Meyers criticizes my reading of Élisabeth Badinter, a French feminist philosopher who continues to be a vocal defender of veiling bans (see Le Monde.fr 2016). Meyers argues that Badinter must believe Europeans have traditions because she praises French teens who dye their hair blue, even as she criticizes schools that permit the hijab for “riveting” Muslim girls “to their roots.” I take Meyers’s point that Badinter does seem to admit that having only natural hair colors is a French tradition. I do not think, however, that we need to conclude from this that Badinter rejects Enlightenment freedom. Time and again, as recently as in response to the burkini ban controversy in 2016, Badinter praises the “right” type of Muslim women for “turning their backs on tradition” (my translation) (Khader 2020; 2014; 2015).

Of course, one conclusion we might draw from this is that Badinter is an equal opportunity antitraditionalist; if that’s so, she is an exponent of (implausible) Enlightenment freedom, but not an imperialist. To establish that she is an imperialist, I need to show that she has a special problem with non-European traditions because they are non-European. One way to do this is to claim, as I do in Decolonizing Universalism, that Badinter denies that French traditions count as traditions. The point Meyers makes about blue hair suggests that Badinter’s denial is not categorical, but that
is probably not enough to undermine my point. All I need is for there to be a significant disproportion in the level to which Western and non-Western traditions count as traditions and a level of moral arbitrariness in determining what does and does not count as a tradition, both of which I think are clearly present in Badinter’s worry about students seeing veils in classrooms but lack of worry about camembert in the cafeteria.

If this response is unsatisfactory, however, we might think of Badinter as being in the thrall of another, still imperialist assumption—namely, that “new, antitraditional” (and because of the Enlightenment teleological narrative, progressive) things can happen through European cultural forms, but not through (historically) non-European ones. What I call the “Enlightenment teleological narrative” (according to which the West is more morally advanced than other societies because of endogenous features) will always code the cultures of “others” as more traditional and will associate Western cultural forms with progress. The public debate around “l’affaire du foulard”—the scarf affair—seemed to exemplify this association of non-Westernness with tradition; the girls in the case were seen as controlled by their Muslim parents, when in fact many of them were defying both their parents’ wishes and the current norms for girls in their social class’s parents’ countries of origin.

Badinter is but one player in a larger set of discourses, and this is one reason I am reluctant to take her at her word that she is just a proponent of laïcité. My nonideal theoretical commitments drive me to look at values as they are operating in the world, not just in the explicit claims of their exponents, but also in the political discourses and effects they animate. As critics of European (and now North American) bans on veils point out, these laws do not equally target all religions. The French have no problem calling their spring break an “Easter vacation.” Nor do they have a problem with the wearing of crosses in school. Further, similar anxiety about Muslim modest dress afflicts European countries without commitments to laïcité—indeed, arguments very similar to Badinter’s are made in European countries with state churches, like Sweden. If we are in doubt that European conceptions of the secular incorporate an uncritical attitude to Christianity, and to Western cultural forms, as scholars like Talal Assad and Joan Scott allege it does, consider this: the European Court of Human Rights actually issued a written opinion that described a classroom crucifix in Italy as secular, claiming that it represented Italian culture, and hence liberty and equality (Scott 2017, 19).

If we broaden the scope away from veiling bans to arguments that veils hold women down because they are “from another time,” we will find a host of even American proponents of arguments like Badinter’s—strange,

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9 The Levy girls at the center of the 2003 case had parents who opposed their daughters’ decisions to wear hijab.
since the United States is not *laïque* in the sense of disallowing displays of religion in public schools or government buildings. Without denying that it is worth examining the details of specific arguments about secularism and Islam, I think we miss something important if we ignore the way secularism has become an Islamophobic dogwhistle in the hands not just of feminists but also of the Richard Dawkinses and Sam Harrises of the world. I hasten to add that my criticism of the way secularism is operating in our political discourses is not an endorsement of theocracy. My point is that nonideal theoretical commitments should make us circumspect about philosophical methods that take at their word those who endorse policies that promote oppression. We can, and should, look at the patterns of political action that their views take advantage of and make available, and recognize them as part of larger patterns when appropriate. This criticism is easy enough to make about people who do not identify as feminists. The harder part is that sometimes the values that are not what they seem to be, and that need to be scrutinized as a result of their real-world effects, are our own.

**Intersectionality and the Definition of Feminism**

The most frequent criticism that *Decolonizing Universalism* encounters concerns my nonintersectional definition of feminism. I say in the book that feminism is opposition to sexist, or gender-based, oppression. Much of what I will have to say about the intersectionality critique will simply be to point out that practicing intersectionality (which I believe is necessary) does not require, and is actually impeded by, defining feminism intersectionally. Monque captures my view well: “Not wanting to define feminism as opposition to all intersecting forms of oppression is not the same as rejecting intersectional feminisms.” My reasons for not defining feminism intersectionally also have to do with my nonideal theoretical commitments. We should want our definition of feminism to be sensitive to the injustices that multiply oppressed women face, and to be helpful in overcoming these injustices.

I am—and have been across all my work—obsessed with the trade-offs that oppression imposes on the oppressed. Some of these are trade-offs between individual well-being and group social status; oppressed people often stand to benefit from complying with the norms that oppress their group (Khader 2020; 2014b; 2014a; 2016; forthcoming). I spent much of my career before writing *Decolonizing Universalism* arguing that it is often the need to do the best one can in a bad world, rather than false consciousness or classic-case adaptive preference (Khader 2013; 2011), that make women comply with oppressive norms. Those who have read the book will recognize that the chapter of *Decolonizing Universalism* on oppressive gender complementarianisms is largely about how women face trade-offs...
between doing what would enhance their own basic well-being and doing what would improve their status as a group, and how this makes them prefer strategies for improving women’s lives that do not challenge their (oppressive) asymmetrical vulnerability to men. Some of the trade-offs I am interested in are also trade-offs in fighting different forms of oppression. Often the world is such that the political strategies that are most likely to succeed, or are most morally urgent to pursue, fight some oppressions but not others.

The presence of this particular type of trade-off has been central to “other” women’s histories, and theorizing such trade-offs out of existence, as claiming that all oppressions track one another in the lives of the multiply oppressed does, does feminist politics no favors. The literature about women and the anti-imperialist nationalist movements of the twentieth century abounds with narratives about trade-offs between women’s liberation and national liberation (Jayawardena 2016; Alexander and Mohanty 1997). Feminists in anti-imperialist struggles often advocated fighting both oppressions, only to find that the uptake of anti-imperialism was greater than the uptake for feminism. For example, because of how narratives about modernity were deployed to justify imperialism, nationalist movements found themselves advocating rights to engage in misogynistic “cultural practices” like sati and women’s seclusion. Feminists had difficulty finding space for successful activism that simultaneously undermined sexism and imperialism (Jayawardena 2016). 10

If we refuse to acknowledge that anti-imperialism can be advanced through sexism, or vice versa, I believe, we are simply in the thrall of a false view about how real-world politics works. I, like many of my readers, travel in social justice circles where it is often said that none of us will be liberated until all of us are. But it simply does not follow from this that, in the short-term horizons that real-world activism usually takes place in, reductions in one type of oppression cannot happen while another is worsened or left intact. As I suggest in Decolonizing Universalism, we lose an important analytical tool for understanding the trade-offs that multiply oppressed women make if we deny that sexism is a distinct axis of oppression. Recognition of trade-offs in fighting different oppressions is very important for feminist praxis in colonial or formerly colonial contexts. Western feminists have often taken women’s participation in sexist practices, or silence on them, to be evidence of rejection of feminism. It is often in fact evidence of a political terrain where there is no option to oppose both sexism and imperialism—and sometimes one where women rightly believe that the anti-imperial struggle is more morally important and has more to offer their well-being. To be clear, it does not follow from

10 See Narayan 1999 for an explanation of why sati is poorly understood as a cultural practice, and why transnational feminists are suspicious of cultural practice talk in general.
the presence of such trade-offs that the trade-offs are not unfortunate, or that we should not try to fight anti-imperialist and gender oppressions, and other oppressions, simultaneously. But we do need to stop pretending that reducing one form of oppression will always reduce another.

Recognizing that there can be trade-offs between reducing one oppression and reducing another certainly does not imply that different forms of oppression do not intersect. Of course, it is difficult to tell which oppression causes silence on how the foster care system has become an extension of the carceral system for Black women in the United States, or which oppression, to use McLaren’s example, causes poor women in India to be harassed by the police. But there is a difference between saying that intersectionality is an important theoretical tool and saying it is the definition of feminism. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw herself clearly did not intend intersectionality to be definitional and has argued against the inflation of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Coaston 2019). Intersectionality has become something of a floating signifier, intended primarily to signal that the authors using the term are not white feminists and that they see that the world is complicated. State of the art work in interdisciplinary women’s and gender studies now suggests that the term is expected to do far too much work, work that we may need other concepts and analytical tools to do.

Of course, what Crenshaw thinks is not the ultimate decider on how we should use the term, and “intersectionality originalism” (Nash 2016) is something we should avoid. So, to make the more direct philosophical point, defining feminism intersectionally means removing the possibility that sexism and other oppressions sometimes produce opposing effects. Defining feminism nonintersectionally is fully compatible with the oppressions intersecting; in fact, it is partly because oppressions intersect that multiply oppressed women are candidates for having to trade away reductions in one oppression for those in another. Rather than defining feminism intersectionally, I think we should just acknowledge that intersectionality is a vital part of any feminist toolkit—especially one that is useful in the global South. Multiply oppressed women will sometimes face situations where multiple oppressions have to be fought in concert and sometimes face situations where there are political possibilities available that would reduce one oppression and not others. (If the idea of reducing one oppression and increasing another seems like a contradiction in terms, it may be helpful to call to mind the difference, all-important under nonideal conditions, between “reduce” and “eliminate.”)

11 I say “partly” because the theory of multiple oppressions is not the same thing as intersectionality. For example, discussion of entwined oppressions means something different from discussion of intersectional ones.
McLaren claims that we should see multiple forms of oppression as “analytically distinct but practically inseparable.” Maintaining an analytical distinction between gender-based oppression and other forms of oppression is exactly what my definition of feminism as opposition to sexist oppression allows us to do. The entire idea of intersectionality in fact assumes that the oppressions in question are analytically distinguishable; if they are not, then there is nothing to do the intersecting. Making intersectionality definitional for feminism seems only to create theoretical downsides, including the denial of what is at stake in the decisions that multiply oppressed women sometimes have to make.

**Individualism**

McLaren and Meyers raise distinct concerns about my criticisms of individualism. My argument about individualism in the book has two components. First, I explain what is morally at stake in many decolonial and postcolonial feminist criticisms of individualism. I argue that a value I term “independence individualism,” because it is an end-state ideal with parochial and implausible content, is responsible for obscuring the transition costs of feminist change. Second, in what I take to be one of my most philosophically controversial claims in the book, I argue that even normative individualism (or what I call personhood individualism)—the idea that the individual human person is the fundament of moral concern—is conceptually unnecessary for feminism. The thrust of my second argument is basically that because oppression is a group-afflicting phenomenon, it does not entail views about why harms to individuals that are unrelated to their social groupings are bad.

McLaren agrees with most of the first point, and her own work on the importance of alternative forms of association, like women’s cooperatives, is very much in its spirit. Much of why I am criticizing independence individualism is to get Western feminists to see that social groupings, including the protective factors they provide and the bargaining power they enable, are often invaluable for feminist change. McLaren raises the question, however, of whether, in criticizing independence individualism, I have made too little of the importance of economic opportunities for women. I do not take this to be an objection. Instead, the fact that McLaren sees me as denying the importance of opportunities is indicative of how difficult it is, in our current discursive context, to talk about poor women meeting their needs without lapsing into neoliberal ideology. My critique of neoliberal ideology may look to some like a denial of the importance of survival. At the same time, however, the universalist and cross-cultural character of my project makes me unwilling to say economic opportunities, at least narrowly (and neoliberally) construed, are necessary for feminist change.
Much of my argument in *Decolonizing Universalism* and also in *Adaptive Preferences and Women’s Empowerment* is that unduly thick (ethnocentric, end-state) Western theorizing gets in the way of seeing the possibility of multiple paths to ending gender-based oppression. Language about “economic opportunities,” unless it is further specified, holds fixed many elements of neoliberalism. I do not see a cross-contextual reason to advocate income-generation opportunities, especially when it seems possible that subsidizing care work could potentially do more to increase women’s status and decrease their work burdens—and when economic opportunity usually means vulnerable informal sector work (Chen and Moussie 2017; Narayan 2005). Similarly, changing men’s behavior and opportunity sets might do more to save women from the exhaustion caused by the feminization of responsibility than would encouraging women to work more. In fact, because oppression is a relational phenomenon, economic opportunities can mean more oppression for women, as in cases where men withdraw from certain areas of economic responsibility once women enter the paid workforce (Khader 2019b; see Chant and Sweetman 2012). More generally, economic opportunity talk, as it currently exists, seems to be part of a discourse that assumes poor women should take responsibility for lifting themselves out of poverty (Madhok and Rai 2012; Khader 2019c).

Perhaps it is my vantage point of having been immersed in mainstream development discourses for many years (rather than academic philosophy about rights whose loftiness may be McLaren’s rightful target), but I do not see the idea that women need opportunities to meet their own material needs as very anti-imperialist at all. If anything, the problem with Western discourses about women in the global South is that they think economic opportunities are feminism, as any call to buy a woman a goat at Christmastime will tell you. The neoliberal global order reduces poor women’s options for survival to very few. Yes, increasing women’s access to economic opportunities that will enable survival is crucial, but what is occluded in many celebratory stories of helping women doing incredible things under bad conditions is the global order itself. What is revolutionary about the Self-Employed Women’s Association, the internationally famous women’s cooperative in India that McLaren discusses in her own work, is not, to my mind, that its members support economic opportunities. It is that they foster political power and collective bargaining power that is often absent for informal sector workers. So, I agree with McLaren that economic opportunities are often deeply important, and that women can do amazing things with them; but there are feminist, anti-imperialist,

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12 Oppression is a relational phenomenon because it entails relations between social groups: one group could become better off, and its oppression could worsen if the dominant group benefited more from the new arrangement than it did from the previous one.

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and nonideal theoretical reasons that an endorsement of them is not part of my book.

Meyers takes issue with my second argument about individualism, the one about personhood individualism. She offers two arguments against my claim that personhood individualism is conceptually unrelated to feminism. The first is that feminists should not approve a society where individuals are unjustly harmed, even if that harm is not gender differentially distributed. I too would condemn such harms, but I simply do not think we should rely on feminism to furnish all of our normative commitments. In other words, my point is not that harm to individuals is never wrong or deeply unjust—only that feminism is not the moral tool that we should rely on to reveal it. Part of my big point in the book, to put it in Rawlsian terminology, is that feminism is not a comprehensive doctrine, so we need to be open to untethering it from the comprehensive doctrine of the crude liberalism I refer to as Enlightenment liberalism. If feminism is not a comprehensive doctrine, it will not explain what is wrong with all wrongs. But this does not bother me; indeed, I think it is likely that a number of different comprehensive doctrines can house feminism and concern for gross injustices that are not gender differentially distributed.

Meyers also argues that because of a strong empirical connection between the idea that women should be able to assert their interests as individuals and feminist change, we should treat personhood individualism as necessary for feminism. I note such a connection in the book. I have already spelled out that my nonideal theoretical approach entails that if something is empirically important, there is, at some point, an argument for taking it into the scope of central normative concern. Here, however, as in the autonomy case, I think Meyers and I are considering different bodies of empirical evidence and giving them different weight. Meyers is right that the idea of “nonindividualistic” societies are utopias is sometimes used as a sexist smokescreen; we know that this has often been the case in discussions of “Asian values,” for instance. But there are others who, rather than arguing that individuals are morally expendable, argue that more relational moral conceptions can furnish reasons not to unjustly harm individuals. For example, some indigenous women, including indigenous feminists, argue that concepts like kin (Lindberg 2004), reciprocity (Mayer 2007), and “caretaking relations” (Tallbear 2018) can explain how each person matters. As in the autonomy case, I am interested here in the possibility that there are extensional equivalents to individual entitlements in other moral languages—and these may have moral and strategic advantages that many liberalisms do not. One reason I argued that opposition to oppression was conceptually distinct from personhood individualism was this: I believe that the idea that any recognizable feminist doctrine must “build up” feminism from individualism has caused Westerners to ignore the possibility that non-Western worldviews, including fundamentally
“relational” ones, can house views that oppose both abuse of individuals and gender-based oppression.\(^{13}\)

**The Status of Human Rights on My Account**

I make a passing claim about human rights in the book that forms the basis for many of McLaren’s comments. My claim is this: since sexism is a gender-differential distribution of advantages, we need a list of indicators of advantage and disadvantage if we are to engage in cross-cultural judgments about whether a given gender group is oppressed. That is, we need a list of goods and powers whose gender differential distribution is morally worrisome. To give an example, if we do not know that access to food is an indicator of advantage, we will not be able to say that a situation where women are disproportionately malnourished involves sexism. The objects of human rights, I argue, can form a nonexhaustive list of indicators. The fact that there is a human right to food gives us reason to suspect that women’s disproportionate lack of access to food is an instance of sexism.

I choose the objects of human rights as indicators because I prefer a list that has been deliberated on over one that is simply intuited by Western feminists—even as I acknowledge that deliberation on human rights, especially among feminists, leaves much to be desired (see Ackerly 2007; Matua 2001). If I thought there existed a list that was a product of a more just cross-cultural deliberation, I would have chosen that one. After all, many Western feminist intuitions about what constitutes a good life have failed to be true about other contexts. Classic examples of this are the intuition that showing one’s hair in public is a requirement for equality or self-respect and the intuition that engaging in agricultural work is degrading.\(^{14}\)

My reference to the human rights regime falls far short, however, of a claim that transnational feminists need to embrace the moral concept of human rights, let alone that they need to embrace the body of advocacy and legal practices now referred to under that umbrella. Absolutely central to my use of human rights is a distinction between human rights and their objects. This distinction is common in the human rights literature, but the use of the term “object” is not always precise or consistent, so I clarify my usage here. When I speak of the object of a human right, I mean the substantive good the right aims to secure. So, for example, the object of the human right to food is food, the object of the human right to security is security, and so on.

\(^{13}\) Some Western feminists also find problems with normative individualism. Virginia Held argues that care is the true comprehensive doctrine and that it can explain the practical need for rights, and Lisa Schwartzman argues that normative individualism can prevent us from seeing relational social patterns.

\(^{14}\) This was a frequent justification of colonial oppression of women in sub-Saharan Africa.
McLaren takes me to hold that human rights express a moral truth, and that the practices invoked in their name are ones transnational feminists should adopt. This is simply not my view. A key reason I distinguish human rights from their objects is because I take human rights language and practice to be controversial (perhaps even more controversial than McLaren considers them to be). Saying that something is a right, and a human right, involves saying much more than that the object to which it refers is good; it means saying, among other things, that entitlements to that good have a status that trumps the status of other social goods (this is, after all, what rights are in liberalism), and that can be claimed against states and pursued against states in international courts. To embrace “human rights advocacy” can mean even more than to endorse the view that human entitlements ought to be understood as rights or be pursued against states. Given the way our political context seems to recognize only violations of the so-called first-generation rights to freedom from unfair persecution, to property, and so on as morally urgent, endorsing human rights can also mean implicitly making a claim that deprivations like lack of medical care and safe working conditions are of only secondary international moral concern. Endorsing human rights practice wholesale might also mean suggesting that the claims of individuals against states are more morally urgent than the claims of individuals or peoples against an unjust global order (see Gettachew 2019). It might also mean thinking that the force of transnational advocacy ought to emphasize “cultural” practices rather than the global order, a position I explicitly criticize in Decolonizing Universalism.

At the risk of oversimplifying, I agree that the issues with human rights advocacy that McLaren raises (and the additional ones I mention above) are significant. They are not problems for my view, because I do not claim human rights advocacy is the right framework for transnational feminism. All I claim is that we need some cross-cultural standard for knowing what kinds of things are goods in human life, and that it’s better to have one that has been deliberated on than one whose only credential is seeming intuitive to Western feminists. McLaren suggests that I should consider making an explicit argument defending a “decolonized notion of rights.” Part of the reason I do not do this is just that it is not part of my project. But another is that I would take this, in the context of my project, to be a conservative move—one that does not take the anti-imperialist critique seriously enough. The project of decolonizing rights involves, as far as I can tell, holding fixed the idea that rights are the correct moral language for expressing entitlements, and that a human rights regime similar to the existing one is the correct way of pursuing anti-imperialist feminist ends. To put it differently, the project of decolonizing human rights—especially as part of the normative framework for transnational feminism—would assume that human rights talk and advocacy are necessary for transnational feminism. To simply equate “decolonizing human rights” with
“decolonizing transnational feminist praxis” is to empty the term “human rights” of specific meaning. A central part of my view in *Decolonizing Universalism* is that Western feminists need to stop assuming that potentially parochial moral concepts are the only possible good moral ones.

Because of this, and because of the remaining genuine controversy about human rights language and practice, I do not assume that the human rights regime itself needs to be held fixed in decolonial feminist approaches. Some decolonial approaches, including Afro-pessimism (see Wynter 2003) and certain strands of the Latin American decolonial turn (see Maldonado-Torres 2017), think the language of the human can only serve the purpose of marking colonized people as nonhuman. Other approaches, including some of the ones McLaren cites, think that human rights practices are too legalistic or that the language of rights is too individualistic. If the latter is true, I could not consistently retain my agnosticism about individualism elsewhere in the book and assume that human rights, not just their objects, should be part of the normative core of feminism. At the same time, it is clear that feminists have used human rights, both strategically and with utter sincerity, to decrease women’s oppression, and this is also evidence worth taking seriously. Feminist human rights practitioners have made critical strides in prosecuting sexual violence in war and bringing violence against LGBTQ+ people to international attention. I genuinely do not know what role human rights, as a specific set of moral languages and a set of legal practices, should play in transnational feminist advocacy, and I suspect there isn’t a context-invariant answer. I do know that I think that the project of decolonizing human rights would be a project that would sidestep a number of controversies raised in anti-imperialist feminisms. Before we decide that decolonizing human rights is the right way forward, we need to ask hard questions about whether human rights can be decolonized at all, and for all purposes in all places.

**The Relationship Between Sexism and Queer and Trans Oppression**

In *Decolonizing Universalism*, my explicit definition of feminism is as opposition to sexist oppression. To operationalize the concept of sexist oppression, I adopt Marilyn Frye’s (1983) classic definition: a sexist practice must (a) afflict people because they are members of a social group and (b) be part of a system of practices that work to (c) disadvantage that group relative to another. This concept of oppression does important work in my arguments that feminism does not imply missionary feminist epistemic habits, such as Enlightenment teleological narrative and adherence to Enlightenment liberalism. Monque, however, raises some important questions about whether Frye’s definition of feminism is too narrow. He makes two central arguments, both motivated by a concern about how to make sense of, and oppose, gender-related harms to members of marginalized
gender and sexuality groups who are not women (I take it that it is clear that my account is hospitable to the inclusion of trans women in the category “woman”).

Before I address these arguments in turn, I want to take advantage of an opportunity that Monque has offered me by raising these concerns. I now regret having used the term “sexist” oppression in the book. Though I use it and “gender-based” interchangeably in the book, a few readers (though not Monque) have overlooked the occasional use of “gender” and assumed that I meant oppression on the basis of “biological sex” (whatever that is). Since the dominant view in feminist theory in my lifetime has been that the term “sexism” is compatible with the idea that women are oppressed as a gender, I did not realize that some would assume the biological reading. I should also explain, however, why I did not choose another term that is gaining favor in philosophy, “patriarchal oppression.” In transnational feminist contexts, there is significant debate about whether all societies are patriarchies. The term “patriarchy” is often used to refer to households where most power resides in the male head and lineage is traced through him (see Kandiyoti 1988). Much of the literature on gender relations in Africa in particular is about how some societies that practice polygamy, polyandry, or matriliny are not patriarchies—and that we misunderstand gender relations, and in particular feminized power within them—by assuming they are. I avoided using “patriarchal” to avoid suggesting that the presence of a particular family structure that is common in the West was a requirement for gender-based oppression.

On to Monque’s more substantive views. In what I will call his “broader” argument, Monque argues that groups besides women are victims of sexist or gender-based oppression. I agree that this is often true, and this is why I occasionally suggest in the book that other gender groupings could be victims of sexism. But this is certainly not all there is to be said about the matter. Monque’s questions point to the fact that thinking about the types of oppression faced by queer and trans people, as well as other marginalized (often by colonialism) gender groupings, such as two-spirit and hijra, raises deep questions about social ontology—ones that, rather than being only of academic interest, affect how we theorize about and strategize against oppression. In service of his call to see these groups as victims of sexism, Monque suggests a set of social ontological commitments that seem slightly different from my own, though mine admittedly are, like those of most philosophers, undertheorized and evolving. Monque criticizes my treatment of cissexism and homophobia as intersections of feminism, saying that he instead sees them as something like subspecies of sexism.

There are two reasons I chose to treat cissexism and homophobia as intersections of feminism rather than as subspecies of it. The first has to do with the aims of the book, particularly its cross-cultural scope and nonideal theoretical aims. It seems likely to me that how the relationship
between women’s oppression and other gender and sexuality oppressions works depends on details of the context. It is, for example, imaginable to me that there are contexts where homophobia is poorly understood as an extension of sexism—where, for instance, same-gender attraction is stigmatized, but not because it disrupts views about gender. At the same time, it is clear to me that homophobia in the United States is driven partly by misogyny.

The second reason I treat homophobia, cissexism, and other forms of harm and oppression of gender minorities as intersections of sexism is that I think that I do see them as analytically distinguishable, at least in some contexts. Though the view that homophobia in the contemporary United States is simply a variant of sexism certainly has a theoretical history, this history centers mostly on the oversimplified strain of radical feminism that treated even racism as a symptom of men’s oppression of women. Theoretical history aside, there are characteristics of homophobia that make it seem to involve more than sexism. The centrality of disgust to homophobia, for example, suggests that it marshals more than anxiety about gender norm violation. Similarly, the perception of trans people in the West as deceivers suggests a dynamic different from sexism. As Talia Bettcher argues, the oppression of trans people often takes the form of “reality enforcement,” a sort of punishment for refusing to reveal (or being perceived as refusing to reveal) genital form through one’s outward appearance (Bettcher 2007; 2015; 2014).

Of course, it may be argued that these are differences in degree or technique of sexism, not in kind. Julia Serano (2016) suggests an argument to this effect by claiming that something she calls “oppositional sexism,” that is, the view that men and women form two poles of a binary, is the real root of what she calls “traditional sexism,” the idea that woman is inferior to man. Serano’s version of the view may turn out to be true about Western contexts, but it seems clear that there is sexism in societies that recognize, without oppressing, genders besides man and woman (like those that are home to Muxes and Fa’afafine, for example). It is of course possible for there to be a view similar to Serano’s that is less parochial, so my point here is not decisive and remains open to revision.

It is also worth noting that conceiving cissexism and homophobia (where they exist) and sexism (where it exists) as different types of oppression makes it possible for us to draw on the other theoretical resources that come from multiple oppression analyses to analyse harms to genders besides man and woman and to victims of sexual orientation oppression. So, for example, conceiving these as intersections allows us to say that the effects of sexism and cissexism can be distinguishable in a given person’s life. It also allows us to say that a person’s susceptibility to gender-based oppression may decrease as they are perceived as more masculine, even as their susceptibility to trans oppression might increase because they are susceptible to violence as they enter more male-coded spaces. Further, it is
worth explicitly stating the implication of analytically distinguishing these other forms of oppression from gender-based oppression while still calling them intersectional; there will absolutely be cases in the real world where it is difficult, or impossible, to figure out whether a harm is caused by sexism or cissexism, or sexism or homophobia, and so on.

The core of Monque’s point may not be about the analytical distinguishability of these forms of oppression at all. It may instead be that, in at least some places, these forms of oppression were historically instituted at the same time as gender-based oppression, through related processes. This point is central to much of the literature on what has come to be called the “coloniality of gender” (see Segato 2011; 2003; Lugones 2010; Oyèwùmí 1997). According to this literature, gender roles, sexist gender roles, or gender roles that are as sexist as they are today (the details vary by theorist and also within individual works) were instituted by colonialism. Much of this literature includes the claim that the stigmatization of same-gender relations, the idea that there are two genders, and the idea that gender is an essential property of bodies arose through colonialism as part of the institution that enabled the oppression of women. It is clear, for example, that the form of sexism that predominates in North America gets traction partly because the idea that there are two types of bodies that suit us for two types of social roles goes unquestioned. It is also clear that many indigenous peoples of the Americas did not make this same assumption (Picq 2020; Segato 2011; Bacigalupo 2004). My nonideal theoretical commitments make me hesitant to claim that the nexus of gender, gender identity, and sexuality is the same across contexts and also make me hesitant to claim that going straight to the historical root of a problem is always where political strategy has to start, but I am in broad agreement with Monque that, in many contexts, cissexism and homophobia prop up sexism—and that the entwining of the three often has a colonial legacy.

Moreover, attention to the coloniality of gender suggests that I ran slightly afoul of my nonideal theoretical commitments on the occasions where I referred to cissexism and homophobia as intersections. To consistently apply my claim about how gender formations vary across contexts, it seems that I should have been more circumspect about asserting that the status of cissexism and homophobia as intersections was a cross-contextual truth. It seems possible that in some contexts they are intersections and in others they are part of the same oppression as sexism, and that we would need much more empirical evidence and theorization to know.

Monque also gives a narrower argument about how my account of gender-based oppression situates queer oppression, trans oppression, and the oppression of gender identities besides man and woman. Monque argues that, because I take social group membership to be a necessary condition for oppression, the conception of oppression I endorse risks defining away the oppression of those who do not belong to recognizable...
social groups, including people whose genders and sexualities are not highly visible to dominant groups in society. It is worth noting for my readers—in a point that I assume Monque agrees with—that the extent to which people who are not men or women experience this kind of hermeneutic marginalization will vary dramatically from society to society. In fact, in some colonized societies, people with gender identities besides man and woman are hermeneutically *advantaged* compared to their counterparts in the West, by the presence and legibility of genders like two-spirit and Fa’Afafine, as well as conceptions of gender as fluid and nonbinary. Even when gender groups besides women are oppressed, the fact that they have a widely recognized social existence can help foster group identity and serve political purposes; the hijira in South Asia are clearly oppressed, but (in contrast with most countries in the North) because of hijra social movements there have been three gender options on the Indian passport application since 2005.¹⁵

To his point about hermeneutic marginalization and oppression, though, my reply is the one that Monque has anticipated for me: distinguishing between being subjected to oppression because of one’s group membership and having group visibility and consciousness. The oppression of trans people and people with gender identities besides man and woman seems, like the oppression of women, to operate by treating individuals poorly on the basis of the perception that they are members of a kind (or of kinds). It seems true that there are often significant gaps between the perceived kind and the actual one. It also seems true that these gaps are often driven by advantaged groups’ lack of interest in the self-representations of oppressed people—and, in some cases, its refusal to allow them safety to develop collective self-representations. But the upshot of this seems to be something that has always been true, that overcoming oppression requires the development of hermeneutic resources by those who are oppressed and their widespread uptake. The cases of queer and trans people, as well as other oppressed genders, suggest that physical safety and the ability to be together in public are important for the enhancement of such resources and their uptake. It also suggests that we need to recognize that the practice of overcoming oppression can be burdensome and dangerous for the oppressed and that theorists need to be sensitive to these burdens and dangers. I see these concerns as particular practical challenges for overcoming these oppressions, rather than challenges for the account of oppression itself. I hasten to add that I think that much would be theoretically lost by removing the notion of social groups from the notion of oppression, because the notion of social group is part of what distinguishes oppression from other types of harm that are less systematic.

¹⁵ The new gender category is eunuch, which many argue retains roots of colonial oppression and ought to be replaced; see Khan 2018.
Monque’s concerns point not just to the need for greater contextual and historical attention by feminists but also to the amount of feminist philosophical work that remains to be done in what might be called the “social ontology” of oppression. What is a social group? What makes something a distinct axis of oppression? Monque’s concerns bring to light something that is easy for feminist philosophers to forget—that attention to the workings of actual societies, especially non-Western societies, can bear upon what seem to just be conceptual judgments. Even the idea that cissexism is a distinct oppression that intersects with sexism turns out to rely on controversial empirical claims. My work in *Decolonizing Universalism* rests on a painstaking level of engagement with literatures in sociology, anthropology, economics, and interdisciplinary women’s and gender studies. At the same time, as my responses to my critics have shown, theorizing that is based on serious empirical engagement opens the theorist to questions that will take more serious empirical engagement to answer. I have been lucky to have critics who treat questions raised by real-world anti-oppressive social movements as philosophical ones. Though philosophers have been slow to acknowledge it, an adequate political philosophy will have to look at the empirical life of normative concepts. Part of that life has to do with the forms of life and political strategies they enable, and criticisms from those subject to those strategies and forms of life. This will have to be the foundation of any global feminist philosophy that is both rigorous and responsible.

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