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## Transnational Feminisms, Nonideal Theory, and “Other” Women’s Power

Serene J. Khader

### Abstract

Postcolonial and transnational feminists’ calls to recognize “other” women’s agency have seemed to some Western feminists to entail moral quietism about women’s oppression. Here, I offer an antirealist framing of the transnational feminist critiques, one rooted in a conception of transnational feminisms as a nonideal theoretical enterprise. The Western feminist problem is not simple ethnocentrism, but rather a failure to ask the right types of normative questions, questions relevant to the *nonideal* context in which transnational feminist praxis occurs. Instead of asking which forms of power are gender-justice-enhancing, Western feminists are fixated on contrasting “other” cultures to an idealized Western culture. A focus on ideal theorizing works together with colonial epistemic practices to divert Western feminist attention from key questions about what will reduce “other” women’s oppression under conditions of gender injustice and ongoing imperialism. Western feminists need to ask whether “other” women’s power is resistant, and answering this question requires a focus on what Amartya Sen would call “justice enhancement” rather than an ideal of the gender-just culture. I show how a focus on resistance, accompanied by a colonialism-visibility hypothesis and a normative vision that allows multiple strategies for transitioning out of injustice, can guide Western feminists toward more appropriate questions about “other” women’s power.

**Keywords:** decolonial feminism, postcolonial feminism, transnational feminism, resistance, multiculturalism, feminist ethics, feminism and globalization, political philosophy, global justice, nonideal theory

Transnational and postcolonial feminists criticize Western feminists for seeing “other” women only as “victims” or “dupes of patriarchy” (Mohanty 1988; Obiora, Hall, and Jardine, 1996; Narayan 2002, Nnaemeka 2003, Mahmood 2005). These same calls to recognize “other” women’s agency have seemed to some Western feminists to entail moral quietism about women’s oppression. If saying that

“other” women lack power is imperialist, the worry goes, it becomes impossible to object to women’s oppression. For example, Susan Moller Okin sees Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s argument that third-world women’s movements have different priorities as creating an “anti-universalizing climate” that reduces claims about oppression to “offensive cultural imperialism” (Okin 2000, 37) and as preventing “the framing of women’s rights as universal human rights” (Okin 2000, 38)<sup>1</sup>. Here, I offer a framing of the transnational feminist critiques that is explicitly antirelativist. The Western feminist problem is not simple ethnocentrism, but rather a failure to ask the right types of normative questions, questions relevant to the *nonideal* context in which transnational feminist praxis occurs. Instead of asking about which forms of power are gender-justice-enhancing, Western feminists are fixated on pointing out the nonideality of non-Western cultures. A focus on ideal theorizing works together with colonial epistemic practices to divert Western feminist attention from key questions about what will reduce “other” women’s oppression under conditions of gender injustice and ongoing imperialism.

In this article, I describe Western feminist difficulties in evaluating “other” women’s power as involving misuses of ideal theory. I contend that articulating the Western feminist mistake as the misuse of ideal theory reveals the nonrelativist character of many transnational feminist calls to recognize “other” women’s power. In the first section, I explain how ideal theoretical habits combine with colonial epistemic practices to generate moral insensitivities in Western feminists. Ideal theory and colonial epistemic habits encourage Western feminists to treat encounters with “other” women primarily as opportunities to rank entire cultures. In the second section, I focus more narrowly on questions about “other” women’s power. I describe three causes of arbitrary Western feminist dismissal of “other” women’s power. I call these “the idealization of Western cultural forms,” “the idealization of the territorial public,” and “the culturalist category error.” Examples of these dismissals appear frequently in transnational feminist writing, but interpreting them as misuses of ideal theory locates the Western mistake, not in normativity itself, but in a failure to ask the right types of normative questions. Third, I suggest that many questions about “other” women’s power relevant to transnational feminist praxis concern what Amartya Sen calls “justice-enhancement.” Western feminists need to ask whether “other” women’s power is resistant, and answering this question requires comparative historical judgments rather than an ideal of the gender-just culture. I show how this focus on resistance

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<sup>1</sup> Mohanty’s specific argument in this piece is that focusing on women’s shared victimization by men and alleged antinationalism occludes the different priorities of third-world feminist movements.

can guide Western feminists toward more appropriate questions without denying the need to criticize gender injustice.

### I. Ideal Theory, Colonial Epistemic Practices, and Culture-Ranking

Western feminists often see their dismissals of “other” women’s power as required by moral universalism. Many such dismissals are, I contend, motivated by confusion about the types of moral judgments transnational feminist praxis necessitates. Western feminists wrongly assume the need for *an ideal* vision of gender justice. Since my overarching claim is that many Western feminist difficulties perceiving “other” women’s power originate in ideal theoretical commitments, I begin by explaining the term “ideal theory.” I use the term in Charles Mills’s sense to refer to normative approaches that develop visions of just social conditions rather than analytical tools for rectifying and responding to existing injustices (Pateman and Mills 2007, 94). I am about to argue that, within a colonial epistemic context—one in which Westerners always “already know” that Western culture is closest to embodying the ideal—ideal theory interferes with Western feminists’ abilities to ask the right questions about “other” women’s power.<sup>2</sup> My point is not that “other” women’s power always serves feminist ends; it is rather that moral insensitivities stemming from ideal theory and colonialism cause Western feminists to dismiss “other” women’s power for morally arbitrary reasons.

The background epistemic context in which many Western feminist judgments occur is characterized by a preoccupation with cultures and ranking cultures relative to one another. Transnational and postcolonial feminist scholars have identified many distinct mechanisms by which analytical frameworks that emphasize culture shield Westerners from genuinely morally grappling with imperialism.<sup>3</sup> Two key analytical approaches that participate in minimizing imperialism are what Lila Abu-Lughod calls “resort to the cultural” (Abu-Lughod 2002), and what Uma Narayan refers to as “cultural essentialism” (Narayan 1998). The resort to the cultural occurs when “other” women’s oppression is only explained in an endogenous, ahistorical fashion. Gender injustice faced by “other” women must be caused by their “culture.” In addition to being descriptively suspect, the resort to the cultural pre-empts consideration of Western responsibility for the

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<sup>2</sup> Mills argues that ideal theory is inherently ideological. I do not take a stance on whether ideal theory is inherently colonial here; I show only that it comes to serve imperialist ends in a colonial epistemic context.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of the ways in which cultural essentialism and cultural explanations produce distorting normative judgments about the lives of “other” women, see Jaggar (2005), Narayan (1997), Nnaemeka (2003), Hale (2005), Volpp (2001), and Abu-Lughod (2002).

oppression of “other” women by blocking questions about the role transnational political and economic processes may have played.<sup>4</sup> Cultural essentialism includes the idea that the cultures of “others” are relatively internally homogeneous, have characters that have not changed over time, and whose character causes harm and subordination of women (Narayan 1998). Cultural essentialism portrays contact with Westerners as the cause of all moral progress.

I want to suggest that cultural essentialism and the resort to the cultural are symptomatic of a deeper theoretical orientation wherein cultures are ahistorical and possessed only by “others,” and wherein the only important questions about “other” women’s lives are “what are ‘other’ cultures like?” and “how are they inferior?” This orientation prevents Western feminists from confronting many important questions that arise in encounters with “other” women—among them, questions about transnational feminist political strategy. We can understand this orientation toward cultures and culture-ranking as promoting two distinct types of moral insensitivity, or what Rebecca Kukla calls “moral blindness.” One type is caused by a lack of attention; it “keeps the gaze averted” (Kukla 2002, 328). The focus on cultures keeps the Western feminist gaze away from data about the origins and effects of specific non-Western practices. As we shall see in the next section, transnational feminist claims about the meaning of specific forms of power are rarely apprehended in their specificity. Instead, they are treated as (false) claims that “other” cultures are ideal, equivalent, or superior to Western culture. Rather than analyzing specific strategies and practices, Western feminists refer discussion back to cultures as wholes.

A second type of moral insensitivity bred by the colonial epistemic “exclude[s] or misconstrue[s] certain kinds of morally relevant information directly at the level of perception” (Kukla 2002, 329). This type of insensitivity infects both Western feminist judgments about entire “other” cultures and the role of specific practices within them. Western feminists “already know” that “other” cultures oppress women more than Western culture and so assign particular weight to data that would confirm this. Oppressive practices become so salient as to stand *metonymically* for “other” cultures in their entirety. Metonymy takes parts to represent wholes; the Western feminist eye is trained to pick out oppressive practices in “other” cultures and take them to support the judgment that other cultures are wholly dangerous to women—or at least more dangerous than Western culture. An American audience’s reception of a paper on Sudanese women offers a

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<sup>4</sup> Abu-Lughod’s example of the resort to the cultural is the Western view that extreme repression of Afghan women can be traced to “Muslim culture.” According to her, this ignores the role that U.S. foreign policy played in bringing the Taliban to power.

case in point. Though the paper, by Sondra Hale, pointed out Sudanese women's superior rates of women's employment and political representation in the 1960s, the audience became fixated on the presence of infibulation to the point that they were unable to consider the rest of Hale's data (Hale 2005). Hale recounts this story, not to endorse infibulation, but rather to point out that the audience was so used to taking infibulation as *the* relevant fact about "Sudanese culture's" treatment of women that they could not evaluate other evidence.

Ideal theoretical habits exacerbate the moral insensitivities caused by preoccupation with cultures and culture-ranking. As Mills argues, ideal theory can serve an ideological function. In his words, "One has to be self-conscious about the concepts that 'spontaneously' occur to one, since many of these concepts will not arise naturally but as the result of social structures and hegemonic ideational patterns" (Mills 2005, 75). Three specific features of ideal theory allow it to magnify colonial moral insensitivities. First, ideal theory may promote what Sen calls "transcendental institutionalism"—the idea that there is a single best form of social organization (Sen 2009). Though imagining ideally just societies does not logically require the view that there is one best form of social organization,<sup>5</sup> Sen argues that the emphasis on ideal theory in political philosophy bolsters the view that there is *one* way just societies can look. The colonial epistemic context in which it is always already known that "other" cultures are inferior makes transcendental institutionalism particularly pernicious; if there is a single best form of social organization, Western culture must come closest to approximating it. Since cultural essentialism dictates that "other" societies do not change, it is only natural that Western societies, as the ones that *evolved*, would be the most morally and politically developed. Further, if colonialism cannot be understood as stemming at all from Western culture, suspect practices attributable to it escape evaluative scrutiny.

Second, ideal theory contributes to culture-focused moral insensitivity by concealing the thickness of normative ideals. Thick descriptive content is ineluctably contained in normative ideals. In other words, normative ideals include culturally specific information about how to identify and respond to instances of them. Normative ideals have this descriptive thickness both because they are developed and understood within specific sociocultural situations and because they need thick descriptive content to be capable of being applied.<sup>6</sup> Getting the level of thickness right is especially challenging for cross-cultural normative evaluation. Given that ideals arise in particular contexts, special problems arise in attempts to make ideals

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<sup>5</sup> Rawls (2001) explicitly eschews transcendental institutionalism by arguing that there are many liberalisms and that justice as fairness is but one.

<sup>6</sup> For a longer discussion of thick ethical concepts, see Williams (2011).

travel from context to context. The prescription to achieve the ideal may include the morally arbitrary injunction to adopt practices of the culture in which the ideal originated, or in which the evaluator is used to employing the ideal. I will offer some richer examples in the next section, but a simplified example can make the point for now: it may seem to me, if I come from a context where most people eat rice, that we should advocate a moral entitlement to rice, rather than a more abstractly formulated entitlement to adequate nutrition. The culturally thick prescription of rice is, for me, sedimented onto my understanding of the normative ideal—but it is in principle distinguishable from the ideal itself. Further, it may be impossible to know in advance of cross-cultural encounters whether there is arbitrary thick content sedimented onto the ideal. As I have argued elsewhere (Khader 2011), this provides a strong reason for those engaged in cross-cultural normative judgment to be hypervigilant about the risk of confusing the unfamiliar with the normatively unacceptable.

This danger of importing arbitrary and culturally specific expectations accompanies all normative judgment. What is particularly problematic about ideal theory, however, is its occlusion of the processes by which normative ideals were arrived at in the first place. Mills and Elizabeth Anderson independently argue that ideal theory advocates for a particular resolution when the ideal and the actual world diverge: alter the world (Mills 2005, 168–169). As Anderson puts it, “We risk assuming that gaps we see between our ideal and reality must be caused by problems in the world,” rather than problems in the theory (Anderson 2010, 4). Though it is unclear that visions of an ideal society *require* us to ignore the sociocultural contexts from which normative ideals arise, they do suggest a sort of settledness of our understanding of what human societies should aspire to. Rather than encouraging Western feminists to grapple with the possibility that the ideals they use to evaluate “others” may contain arbitrary ethnocentric expectations, ideal theory tends to treat normative ideals as ossified. The Western feminist may think that the trappings of Western culture *just are* the markers of opposition to sexism. The ossification of normative ideals may prevent her from asking why the ideality of Western culture and the greater injustice of “other” cultures are always already “known.” If the genesis of normative ideals that associate Western culture with gender justice is not up for discussion, Western feminists may not only make arbitrary ethnocentric judgments; they may not even realize they are doing it.

Third, ideal theorizing promotes Western feminist moral insensitivities by producing a dearth of analytical tools for assessing nonideal conditions. It is particularly easy to turn one’s gaze away from particular strategies and practices when most of the available evaluative concepts apply properly only to entire societies. Many nonideal theoretical questions, including questions about how to reduce oppression, will ultimately be questions about specific strategies and

practices rather than entire cultures. However, ideal theory evaluates complete sets of social arrangements. My point is not that there is no feminist value in envisioning just social arrangements. As we shall see in the last section, however, envisioning such arrangements tells us little about how to move existing social arrangements to more gender-just ones. When most available normative concepts concern the ideality of societies, Western feminists can remain convinced that ranking cultures is just the operating cost of normative judgment.

## II. Ideal Theory and “Other” Women’s Power

Now that I have explained how ideal theorizing can exacerbate colonial moral insensitivities, I turn to the specific topic of “other” women’s power. I will show that three Western feminist difficulties seeing “other” women’s power involve inappropriate uses of ideal theory. My hope is that construing the difficulties in this way will make clear that the Western feminist mistake is not the attachment to normative judgment as such—but rather difficulty identifying the questions, and collecting the data, relevant to transnational feminist praxis. The first two misuses of ideal theory I discuss can be understood as involving the idealization of social relations. Onora O’Neill describes idealization as a phenomenon wherein an abstraction distorts what it attempts to describe (O’Neill 1987, 56). It typically proceeds by attributing positive features to the idealized object that the object does not actually possess. According to Mills, idealizations can prevent us from perceiving the role certain normative views and institutions play in perpetuating injustice (Mills 2005, 168–169).

A first misuse of ideal theory that occludes “other” women’s power is what I call “the idealization of Western cultural forms.” Western feminists often assume that “other” women’s embrace of unfamiliar cultural practices, particularly gender-related ones, tracks the extent to which those women embrace or perpetuate their oppression. Many Western feminists who make this assumption see themselves as doing nothing more than insisting that “other” cultural practices can be oppressive. I want to suggest that Western feminists are making a mistake here, but it is not the mistake of suggesting that “other” practices can be oppressive. It instead involves ascribing a feminist valence to Western cultural forms *because they are Western*. The issue is not judgments about oppression as such, it is attributing anti-oppressiveness to Western cultural forms for a morally arbitrary reason. In practice, this idealization of Western cultural forms can inure Western feminists to recognizing the possibility of feminist potential in non-Western practices. “Other” practices will often lack the contingent cultural features that count, for Western feminists, as markers of gender justice.

Mainstream French discourses about the hijab offer an example of Western cultural forms being taken to be feminist, and uniquely so, *because they are*

*Western*. According to Joan Scott, the French desire to ban Muslim headscarves in public schools stems from white French citizens mistaking their gender relations for the ideal ones. A common source of French outrage about the hijab concerned the supposed tragedy of young women “covering their beautiful faces.”<sup>7</sup> According to Scott, this outrage reveals an underlying preoccupation with “girls’ refusal to engage in . . . the ‘normal’ protocols for interaction with members of the opposite sex” (Scott 2010, 154). Gender justice ostensibly required “sexual liberation,” which in turn required presenting oneself as available for sexual relations (or evaluation as a sexual object) in public. In contrast, one purpose of the hijab is to declare that sexual relations are off-limits in public. As Scott notes, some Muslim feminists argue that not having to be sexual in public is empowering (2010, 171).

We do not have to take a stance about whether the hijab is empowering in France to see this as an instance of Western feminists attributing an arbitrary positive valence to the familiar—and failing to realize that they are doing so. Scott explicitly argues that mainstream French conceptions of gender relations and Muslim ones that require hijab are both patriarchal. The issue is that the French cannot see the sexism of their own gender protocols because women displaying their bodies in public has, because of its Frenchness, come to appear as a requirement of gender justice. Further, the French view presupposes their possession of *the* correct gender protocol, not just *a* correct one. Treating public display of women’s bodies as a necessary marker of gender justice excludes the possibility that acceptable gender protocols could originate in cultures that coded the place of sexuality in human life differently. It is possible to imagine gender egalitarian societies that discourage the sexualization of interactions with strangers, and this is what some Muslim feminists who veil hope for. The perception of women’s sexuality as especially threatening to social order is undoubtedly antifeminist, but not all advocates of veiling place the responsibility for modest dress primarily on women (al-Khatahtbeh et al. 2014).

The problem with idealizing Western cultural forms, however, is not merely that it is morally arbitrary. It also may also encourage ineffective strategies for change. Western cultural forms, even if they are effective at increasing or embodying gender justice in their respective contexts, may not be equally effective in all contexts. The effectiveness of means typically varies from context to context (a car is a better tool for getting around in a society constructed around roads than one constructed around waterways, for example). A danger of idealizing Western cultural forms involves treating their feminist potential as emanating uniquely and

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, the hijab does not cover the face, but this phrase is consistent with the tendency to take the most oppressive practices in a culture to stand metonymically for the entire culture.

only from their intrinsic features, rather than from a combination of their intrinsic features and the contexts in which they are implemented. What are means to the achievement of gender justice in Western contexts can become *fetishized* and confused with gender justice itself.<sup>8</sup>

Feminists who idealize Western cultural forms will have difficulty imagining the possibility that “other” women’s exercises of power might seek universal goods through different, potentially more contextually effective, means. Consider Naila Kabeer’s depiction of rural Bangladesh as characterized by “the continued centrality of family in social life and the near-universality of marriage” (Kabeer 2012, 229). According to Kabeer (1999), some feminists assume that frequency of divorce tracks women’s ability to act in their own interests. Yet the divorce focus ignores the differential benefits of marriage and divorce in different types of societies. In societies where family membership is both valued extremely highly and necessary for accessing other goods, casting out one’s own may have little appeal. It does not follow from this that women are unable to distinguish their interests from those of their families or that they are unable to act in their individual interests. According to Kabeer, many Bangladeshi women use income gained through microcredit as a bargaining chip that allows them to effect what Kabeer calls a type of “divorce within marriage.” Kabeer argues that the ability to limit interaction with one’s husband can be an instrument for the universal good of being able to identify and assert one’s interests. The idealization of divorce prevents Western feminists from seeing ways that women in more communal societies seek the ability to distinguish their interests from those of their families.

So, the idealization of Western cultural forms keeps Western feminists from distinguishing familiar cultural forms from those that reduce gender injustice. This is problematic, not merely because it causes the morally arbitrary valorization of certain cultural forms, but also because it ignores the role contextual factors play in determining the effectiveness of strategies for change. A second Western feminist misuse of ideal theory is also a form of idealization. I call this mistake the “idealization of the territorial public.” Transnational and postcolonial feminists have long argued that the public/private distinction causes Western feminists to misunderstand the meanings of “other” women’s exercises of power. This criticism has been particularly common in discussions of sub-Saharan Africa, about which it is argued that feminized traditional forms of power are available to women. The idealization of the territorial public assumes that the spaces that are sites of social power in the West are vehicles for increasing women’s power in postcolonial contexts. I use the term “territorial public” to emphasize the way the term “public”

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<sup>8</sup> I mean “fetishism” here in the sense of “commodity fetishism,” wherein the value of an object is wrongly assumed to inhere in the object itself.

sometimes refers to a set of spaces (i.e. the public functions as a territorial concept) and other times refers to a set of activities that need not be spatially bounded. The former meanings of public include formal male-dominated institutions—institutions supported by official regulatory mechanisms, like the taxed portion of the market and political decision-making institutions. In contrast, democratic theorists use the term “public sphere” to mean the metaphorical space in which claims about the meaning of the collective political enterprise are made and disputed.<sup>9</sup> To the extent that it idealizes the sorts of spaces and institutions that are common in the West, the idealization of the territorial public includes a variant of the idealization of Western cultural forms.

However, the idealization of the territorial public includes a further idealization—an idealization of history. It does not merely attribute an arbitrarily positive valence to Western institutions; it suggests that the processes by which such institutions arose and continue to arise are either uniformly gender-justice-promoting or irrelevant to assessing whether they will bring about gender justice for “other” women. Note that this second assumption would be strange about any case; to know whether certain changes are making things better or worse, we need to know what pre-existed those changes. But the second assumption takes on a special strangeness when formal institutions in colonial and neocolonial contexts become the topic of discussion. The institutions in question are often artifacts of colonialism—a process that we know often *decreased* women’s power.<sup>10</sup> One of the things imperialism did (and does) was alter existing power relations. The investment of power in formal, male-dominated structures was often a colonial strategy for increasing the power of elites, men, or both. In addition to allowing Westerners to instate what they saw as appropriate gender relations,<sup>11</sup> new institutional forms allowed them to empower local forces amenable to discharging colonial goals. To be clear, the issue is not merely that imperialism generated such institutions. The issue is that colonial institutions often supplant(ed) forms of power for women that pre-exist(ed) them—forms of power that were potentially greater. (Note that favoring

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the usage, as well as the ways in which imprecise uses of it occlude women’s power in the West, see Fraser (1990).

<sup>10</sup> African women’s loss of control over land and the political power that came from farming is one example of a colonial reduction in women’s power. Colonialism meant the advent of private land ownership and the idea that only men could own property, the exclusive selection of men for formal political roles, and the idea that women’s appropriate role was homemaking. See Parpart (1986).

<sup>11</sup> For an argument that colonialism imposed gender itself (or gender as understood in the West) on the colonized, see Lugones (2010).

precolonial forms of power does not imply that they were perfect or ideal; I will discuss this in the section on the culturalist category error below.)

For an example of the variant of the idealization of the territorial public that sees historical processes as irrelevant to assessing “other” women’s power, consider Ifi Amadiume’s discussion of young Wakirike women’s participation in a coming of age ritual.<sup>12</sup> Young women are prepared for marriage by spending weeks with powerful women in their community, “being pampered and loved like princesses, and they equally have to display their decorated bodies to the community in a public ceremony” (Amadiume 2002, 47). Part of the goal is for them to gain weight to meet cultural standards of beauty for marriage. Amadiume discusses two girls—one who wants to stay in the village, and one who is home from university in Lagos. According to Amadiume, the young woman who stays in the village chooses the protection of a “matriarchal umbrella.” She refuses to subject herself to the violence of the “global city”—a form of violence brought about by neoliberalism. The neoimperialist violence is both literal (economic exploitation, sex work, and the lack of protection from kin) and symbolic (racist beauty standards). Complicating matters is the fact that sexism is an element of imperialist violence—part of what imperialist violence does is wrest power from the hands of women. Amadiume asks, “Which of these girls might more easily find support and protection if confronted with any of these new forms of violence against women? The one under the matriarchal umbrella or the one in the city? Is there a feminist imperative that the rule of law must supersede ritual? Is the rule of law more empowering than ritual?” (Amadiume 2002, 48).

It is striking that Amadiume does not answer the last question. It is unusual to even raise the question of what new, Northern-imposed, institutional forms might have taken away. In other cases, however, the idealization of the territorial public does not assume history is *irrelevant*. It instead suggests that history is relevant, but the content of the “history” is always already known; precolonial institutions were worse for women than the territorial public. In other words, the history of contact between Westerners and “others” is rewritten in an idealized fashion. Nkiru Nzegwu’s argument that Western anthropologists mistake the extent of women’s oppression prior to colonialism offers an example of the idealization of history. Nzegwu argues that a variety of distinct political associations and offices existed in Igbo society, and some were reserved for women. Western anthropologists overlook this, because they assume that the only institutions that are sources of power are the ones dominated by men. For instance, Helen Henderson argues that Igbo power is concentrated in age-sets and that women’s

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<sup>12</sup> The ritual portrayed in the film *Amadiume* is criticizing does not involve female genital cutting or forms of force-feeding that are severely detrimental to health.

exclusion from them is a sign of their marginalization. Nzegwu argues that Henderson has decided that age-sets are the source of power *because* they are male-dominated (Nzegwu 2006, 182), and this allows her to suggest that Western forms will offer women social power for the first time. The history of colonial contact has been rewritten so only institutional forms introduced by, and familiar to, Westerners are the ones that can bring about gender justice.

Thus, the idealization of the territorial public may involve either type of moral insensitivity discussed above; it may turn the gaze away from history or give perceptual salience only to historical data that confirm women's need for institutional forms that will liberate them from their especially patriarchal "other" cultures. Casting the Western feminist mistake here as an idealization of history makes clear that the force of the critique does not lie in the romantic view that "other" women's power is always emancipatory. Instead, it is important to gather historical data and work to recognize the role colonial perceptual habits play in filtering them. Both Amadiume and Nzegwu criticize Western feminists for overlooking feminist potential in precolonial cultural forms. But their reason is not that African women are not oppressed; it is that it is impossible to assess the anti-oppressive potential of the territorial public without information about the types of gender relations that preceded it. To know what will improve women's access to power, it is important to know what forms of power existed before. The assumption that colonialism either did not occur or only introduced gender-beneficial institutions precludes this type of knowledge.

The two Western feminist difficulties evaluating "other" women's power I have discussed up to this point are forms of idealization. A third misuses ideal theory in a different way. It uses ideal theoretical standards to evaluate practices and strategies employed under unjust conditions. It constitutes an inappropriate use of ideal theory for two reasons. First, ideal theory evaluates entire networks of social institutions, where strategies for change usually work in a more piecemeal fashion. Second, as I will discuss in more detail in the next section, what matters for the possibility of social change is the ability to effect a certain type of *transition*. Practices that move toward gender justice in an unjust society will likely diverge from those that would exist in a society that was already just. (To give a familiar example of this point, it is noncontradictory to believe that society should be "color-blind" and to believe that affirmative action is necessary in a racist society). There are a variety of reasons we should expect strategies for change under nonideal conditions to differ from the forms of power that would be present in an ideal world. People may resent being asked to abandon their existing oppression-supportive beliefs wholesale. Oppressors may resent losing their power and have to be persuaded to give it up gradually. "Other" women, who are, by definition, multiply oppressed may face trade-offs in which they feel they must leave one

oppression intact to resist another. Intersecting oppressions, widespread oppression-supportive beliefs, and oppressors who refuse to relinquish their advantage would not be parts of a just political landscape, but they are typical of our nonideal one.

I call this third misuse of ideal theory the “culturalist category error.” It occurs when strategies and practices that are endorsed for their value under nonideal conditions are evaluated as though they constitute visions of ideal gender justice. In conversations about “other” women’s power, the culturalist category error often takes the following shape: an unfamiliar practice or strategy, recommended for its potential contribution to long-term gender justice, is responded to with a claim about the gender injustice of the context in which it occurs. Since the context is usually an entire “other” culture, the culturalist category error usually deflects conversation back to the claim that the culture in which it occurs is especially patriarchal. A debate about severe female genital cutting between Leslye Obiora and Monica Jardine offers one example. Obiora argues that Western-influenced attempts to combat it are vanguardist and so will be ineffective. Women in villages cling to circumcision, she argues, largely because they are poor and marginalized by neoliberalism (Obiora, Hall, and Jardine 1996, 74–76). She argues that “moderate” approaches to ending female genital cutting are more likely to garner support from rural women. Obiora also claims that improving maternal health and decreasing poverty are more likely than moral grandstanding to be effective means for ending circumcision.

Jardine first responds to Obiora by accusing her of relativism. In a second response, Jardine asserts that Obiora disagrees with other African women who believe female circumcision should be ended (Obiora, Hall, and Jardine 1996, 80). Jardine continues by attributing to Obiora a “desire to make accommodations for traditional African cultural practices” and a failure to see the need to “break with the cultural practice of female circumcision.” These responses are curious, given that Obiora explicitly describes her concerns as centered on efficacy and calls the motives behind the campaigns she criticizes “noble” (1996, 73). Jardine, however, refuses to engage with questions about strategy at all. It is sufficient to return to the claim that female genital cutting is oppressive and to suggest that Obiora is really motivated by a desire to preserve “traditional African culture.” This instance of the culturalist category error takes advantage of both types of moral insensitivity we have discussed; the Western feminist eye is averted from questions of strategy and toward something that is already known—that “African culture” is gender unjust.

Another instance of the culturalist category error is present in Susan Okin’s influential *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Bonnie Honig’s (1999) response to Okin includes the claim, attributed to Leila Ahmed, that veiling can empower women. Okin replies with the following: “I do not doubt that this is so. But surely to

be unable to go out and practice one's profession without being enshrouded from head to toe is not, on the whole, an empowering situation in which to live, unless it is a temporary transition to greater freedom" (Okin 1999, 124). Note first that this move by Okin shifts the discussion from a practice to an entire cultural situation. Further, it is strange for Okin to think that she wins the argument by pointing out that a situation in which women have to wear burqas is unjust. Honig has already quoted Ahmed as pointing out that the situation is nonideal, "'a sexually integrated' urban world that is 'still an alien, uncomfortable social reality for both women and men'" (Honig 1999, 37). Ahmed and Honig never claimed anything about burqas besides that they had transitional value toward a more gender-just world. Admittedly, Okin mentions an apposite response in the point about transition, but it is not only rhetorically buried in a minor clause; the rest of the essay focuses on reminders about the patriarchy of "other" cultures. Indeed, a very similar point about the nonideality of polygamy follows soon after and occurs in response to the idea that co-wives benefit from solidarity.<sup>13</sup>

Both of Okin's essays in the book vacillate between questions about whether patriarchal cultures are unjust and what should be done about patriarchal practices under unjust conditions. When individual practices come into question, her argumentative strategy is almost always to point out that the cultures in which they occur are patriarchal—but is this really what matters for which practices should be allowed to persist in the short term? The political cases the book addresses are largely about whether Western countries should tolerate sexist practices by internal minorities, but most of Okin's arguments conclude that non-Western cultures are not exemplars of gender justice.<sup>14</sup> This move is bound to distort the meaning of "other" women's exercises of power, because all power exercised under nonideal conditions will be disqualified from resistance, and the colonial epistemic context guarantees that nonideality will attach to "other" cultures more than Western culture.

The culturalist category error criticizes strategies for moving out of nonideal conditions for the simple fact that they take place under nonideal conditions. In other words, it criticizes strategies for change taking place in contexts where change is necessary. Understanding this Western feminist error as the misapplication of ideal theoretical concepts makes clear that the problem does not lie in the

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<sup>13</sup> Honig argues that co-wives form solidarity and this can help them divide labor and bargain with their husbands. Okin replies that wives only need solidarity because of the context's patriarchy (1999, 124).

<sup>14</sup> Okin does explicitly state that Western cultures are patriarchal. See Khader (2016) for a discussion of how her argument depends on a depiction of non-Western cultures as ultrapatriarchal.

employment of normative concepts *as such*. Those engaged in the culturalist category error seem to think of themselves as put upon to remind us of the wrongness of gender injustice. Recognizing that endorsing strategies as part of a transition out of nonideal conditions is not the same thing as endorsing the conditions that enable them can help defuse the Western feminist argumentative strategy. To be clear, seeing the culturalist category error as a problem does not entail claiming that feminists should never point out the nonideality of entire sets of conditions. Rather, neither acknowledging gender injustice nor knowing what gender justice would look like tells us which strategies and practices will bring about gender justice. The judgment that certain practices occur under gender unjust conditions is not the only normative judgment relevant to feminist politics. Nonideal conditions open up much room for reasonable disagreement among those who see the same practices as gender unjust and see gender injustice as wrong.

### III. Resistance Under Nonideal Conditions and Justice-Enhancement

I have argued that many Western feminist difficulties evaluating “other” women’s power can be traced to the operation of ideal theoretical habits in a colonial epistemic context. Because Western feminists often justify their controversial claims about “other” women by characterizing their stance as the only one capable of criticizing gender injustice, I have insisted on distinguishing critiques of misplaced ideal theorizing from critiques of normative judgment *as such*. Western feminists can no longer claim a monopoly on normativity if the accusation against them is that they are confused about the *types* of normative judgments relevant to transnational feminist praxis. So, what kinds of normative judgments does transnational feminist politics actually require? How can getting clearer about what these judgments entail help Western feminists overcome their difficulties evaluating “other” women’s power? It is to answering these questions that I now turn.

To begin, we need in view some facts about the practical contexts in which questions about “other” women’s power arise. These are typically contexts in which Western feminists face choices about which strategies for change to support and which normative ideals to invoke in making such choices. Such contexts are nonideal in two ways. First, they are gender unjust. Transnational feminist praxis occurs within a field of systemic global gender injustice. Judgments about which local strategies for change to support usually occur against a backdrop where local and transnational gender injustice are intertwined.<sup>15</sup> Second, the contexts are nonideal in the sense of being characterized by historical and ongoing imperialism. This fact introduces important practical considerations for “other” women’s attempts to

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the ways in which global and local forces work together to cause retrench the oppression of women in the global South, see Jaggar (2014).

reduce gender injustice in their own contexts. Among the practical considerations introduced by imperialism are incentives for “other” women to dissociate their activism from association with Westerners<sup>16</sup> and the co-presence of other forms of deprivation, such as poverty, with sexist oppression. The fact of imperialism also introduces epistemic impediments to Western feminists evaluating data about “other” women’s lives. I have already mentioned a number of these impediments. All I wish to draw attention to now is that these impediments are endemic to the practical situation in which transnational feminisms occur—that it is misguided to simply imagine them away. Mills argues that ideal theorizing is characterized by an “idealized cognitive sphere” (Mills 2005, 169), wherein agents making normative judgments are perceived as uncontaminated by ideology or other biases introduced by power relations. Historical and ongoing imperialism give us reason to worry that Western feminists are likely to have their judgments about “other” women’s exercises of power infected by ideology.

An appropriate normative approach to “other” women’s power must not imagine away the nonideality of the contexts in which transnational feminist praxis occurs. The real world contains widespread gender injustice. There is no gender-just culture, and there are significant epistemic impediments to Western feminists imagining such a culture in a way that is not morally arbitrary. Under such circumstances, imagining an ideal culture is both dangerous and politically unnecessary. What matters for transnational feminist praxis is whether “other” women’s exercises of power are *resistant*,<sup>17</sup> rather than whether the surrounding cultural contexts are ideal. Homing in on the importance of resistance can sharpen our understanding of what the culturalist category error gets wrong. Focusing on the gender injustice of entire cultures supposes that pointing out the nonideality of contexts is decisive about which exercises of power within those contexts to support. But resistance, by definition, occurs under nonideal conditions. Resistance, after all, has to be *against* something. The observation that the conditions under which “other” women organize are oppressive is, from the perspective of transnational feminist praxis, banal. It amounts only to the observation that resistance is necessary. Perhaps more damningly, claims about the sexism of contexts do nothing to help feminists pick out strategies worthy of support within a given context; all strategies in a given context will be equally sexist or nonsexist. Recognizing that strategies and practices, rather than entire cultures, are the

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<sup>16</sup> See Narayan (1998) for a discussion of how association with Western agendas can delegitimize women’s movements in the global South.

<sup>17</sup> The term “empowering” is also a process term that denotes transitions out of nonideal conditions. I use the term resistance here because empowerment is usually used transitively—to suggest that one agent is awakening power in another.

relevant objects of normative analysis can begin to orient Western feminists toward the right questions.

This is not to say that attempts to recognize the presence of resistance do not require normative ideals. If resistance requires moving closer to gender justice, it is undoubtedly necessary to have some ideal of what gender justice is. However, there are two reasons the requisite ideal need not reduce to the ideal of the gender-just culture, or what Sen would call a “transcendentally institutionalist” vision. First, judgments about whether resistance is present can be made without a single vision of gender justice—or at least without the type of vision that would function as a blueprint. Sen identifies a category of political projects that are “justice-enhancing” and argues that most real-world political projects are of this type. According to Sen, such projects “demand comparative assessments, not simply an immaculate identification of *the* just society” (Sen 2009, 401).<sup>18</sup> I would argue that judgments about the presence of feminist resistance are of this sort. They assess potential changes to states of affairs *over time* and not ahistorical cultures. As Maria Lugones puts it, “Resistance is always in the gerund, resisting” (Lugones 2003, 208). What matters is whether exercises of power are likely to improve gender justice vis-à-vis current conditions, not whether they match up completely to some ideal, culturally specific or otherwise.

Western feminists do need an ideal that restricts the kinds of power relations compatible with gender justice, but this is different from a thick, culturally specific picture of the types of institutions, practices, and conceptions of gender that would obtain in a gender-just world. Even if such an ideal were necessary and available, it is not obvious it would be useful in tracking progress. Looking for approximations of a thick ideal is often not the best way of assessing behavior under nonideal conditions. As Lisa Tessman puts it, “The best goal in the actual world . . . may require very different actions than the best in the ideal world (Tessman 2015, 198). Robert Goodin offers a simple example of this point: whether one wants chocolate sauce or pasta sauce should depend on whether one has pasta or ice cream in front of them (Goodin 1995, 51). Even if one’s ideal is ice cream with chocolate sauce, chocolate sauce on pasta is worse than fettucine marinara. To draw this point back to feminism, even if a specific culture were the ideal (ice cream with chocolate sauce), it would not follow that looking for pieces of that culture would be a useful way of tracking progress. It would risk the feminist equivalent of looking for chocolate sauce, irrespective of whether we had access to ice cream or fettuccine.

The idea that the embrace of Western forms identifies power with feminist effects would be questionable even if we began from the unnecessary and ethnocentric belief that Western culture is *the* feminist blueprint. Recognizing this

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<sup>18</sup> Mills makes the same point. See Pateman and Mills (2007, 121–122).

can help Western feminists see what is wrong with the idealization of Western cultural forms. Even if Western culture were the ideal, it is far from clear that embracing pieces of Western culture in non-Western background contexts would bring “other” contexts closer to the ideal. More importantly, recognizing that feminism does not require a transcendently institutionalist vision forces Western feminists to ask why they treat the presence of Western cultural forms as tracking progress toward gender justice. The idea of a one-to-one correspondence between Western cultural forms and those compatible with gender justice is based on the mistaken assumption that there is a single path from our nonideal world to gender justice.

Second, if resistance is defined partly by its consequences for future gender justice, the baseline relative to which resistance must be judged is a historical. What matters is whether things are getting better relative to some point in time, not just what gender justice would look like. Recognizing this fact can help Western feminists overcome the moral insensitivities associated with the idealization of the territorial public and the culturalist category error. The culturalist category error arises from the mistaken assumption that only judgments about the presence or absence of gender justice are relevant to choices about which strategies to support. The idealization of the territorial public is based on either the view that historical information is irrelevant or on a false historical narrative about colonialism. If judgments about what constitutes resistance require information about what has happened in the past and what is likely to happen in the immediate future, then undertaking them requires careful attention to actual historical circumstances. Of course, given the idealization of history involved in the idealization of the territorial public, it may be necessary for Western feminists not only to look for historical information, but also to actively work to offset the moral insensitivities that filter perceptual data. If the issue is sometimes that historical institutions are always already known to be worse than Western ones, it may be important to attempt to explicitly offset these biases. One way to do this would be to adopt a defeasible *colonialism-visibility hypothesis*. According to this hypothesis, in contexts where women have been, or are, colonially oppressed, colonialism has generated new forms of sexist oppression. When Western feminists encounter “other” women’s exercises of power, they can ask: In what ways does imperialism shape their possibilities? In what ways have gender relations and women’s opportunities been shaped by imperialism?

So, resistance does not require an ideal of gender justice that functions as a blueprint and should be measured with reference to a historical baseline. It is also worth noting that a variety of strategies are capable of counting as resistant in a given context, and that a conception of resistance alone cannot dictate strategy choice. A notion of feminist resistance will need to *exclude* certain forms of power

from counting as resistant, but this is not the same thing as directly dictating strategy choice. Though I will not commit to a definition of feminism here, many existing definitions, such as bell hooks's definition of feminism as opposition to sexist oppression, focus more on ruling out certain types of gender relations than suggesting the ideal ones. Even as they rule out certain courses of action, ideals formulated negatively like this one allow a number of different strategies in a given context to be capable of counting as resistant; there are a number of ways gender injustice could be reduced. As I have argued elsewhere, normative ideals that focus on what is wrong rather than what is right *underdetermine* what strategy should be pursued in a given context (Khader 2011). A number of other considerations can be relevant for choosing which resistant strategies to support. For instance, Western feminists may be morally obligated to choose strategies that are consistent with the reparative moral duties they incur because of the history of colonialism.<sup>19</sup> Considerations of effectiveness may also be important; it may be necessary to rank strategies that are likely to reduce gender injustice in terms of effectiveness. It may also be worth considering which strategies combine opposition to sexist oppression with other important political goals, like poverty reduction or the extension of power to non-elites. This, too, is a reason not to idealize Western cultural forms; reasons not to export Western forms, even when they are desirable in the West, may arise because of pragmatic considerations that are context-specific. The type of notion of resistance I have sketched does not specify how to adjudicate among these concerns. But it does illuminate how these types of concerns, and not just concerns about whether cultures are ideal, are relevant to political judgments about "other" women's exercises of power. Further, it makes clear that they are relevant for nonrelativist reasons.

To see how recognizing nonideality can help Western feminists overcome their inability to ask the right questions about "other" women's power, let us return to the example of Okin's culturalist category error. Seeing the world in which women move about uncovered as the ideal, Okin engages with questions about whether women should be permitted to wear the burqa primarily to assert that burqas are a marker of nonideal conditions. If Okin instead had begun with the question of what would improve women's progress toward gender justice, she would perhaps have been more able to hear her interlocutors' central claim—that burqas had *transitional* value. If she had had an eye toward historical conditions and allowed that "other" cultures change, she may have been able to see that, in contexts where seclusion preceded the burqa, burqas may represent progress

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<sup>19</sup> See Jaggar (2005) for arguments that Western feminists bear particular responsibilities for responding to injustices they have caused and for speaking to international institutions who are likely to prioritize their voices.

toward gender justice. Further, and perhaps more controversially, if she had had less of a focus on markers of the territorial public, her essay may have ended up less focused on burqas—which mark the association of women with the private—and more focused on the gender-related priorities of Muslim feminists.<sup>20</sup> Of course, this reorienting of the relevant normative questions cannot simply undo the insensitivities that color unfamiliar strategies and practices with ultrapatriarchy; many of these occur at the level of perception. But part of what has prevented Western feminists from learning to see differently has been a worry that refusing to treat Western culture as ideal means relinquishing normativity.

Worries about moral quietism have motivated Western feminist dismissals of “other” women’s power. I hope to have clarified here that many transnational feminist calls to recognize “other” women’s agency are not defenses of sexism; they are demands that Western feminists start asking the types of normative questions central to the fundamentally nonideal project of transnational feminist politics. Repeatedly pointing out the nonideality of non-Western cultures, as Western feminists have tended to do, is a red herring. Prescribing the proliferation of Western cultural forms as a solution to gender injustice is a way of refusing to grapple with questions about history and contextual effectiveness. Questions about history and effectiveness are undoubtedly central to any justice-enhancing political project, and Western feminists need to acknowledge this fact. Resistance, power that is likely to reduce the presence of gender injustice, must be measured relative to a historical baseline, and its presence cannot be detected without contextual detail. Framing key transnational feminist challenges as demands to recognize what normative judgments look like in a nonideal world can help combat the Western feminist conflation of ethnocentrism and moral universalism. The path to genuine cross-border feminist engagement lies in recognizing the nonideal character of transnational feminist praxis.

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<sup>20</sup> Though Muslim feminists disagree about veiling and what the priorities of Muslim women in France should be, see Nnaemeka (2003) for an argument that Okin’s focus on veiling causes her to ignore the extent to which Muslim women in France see poverty as a more pressing issue.

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