3 AUTONOMY AND THE SECULAR

DO MUSLIM WOMEN NEED FREEDOM?

Post–September 11 cultural discourses present the fate of Muslim women as tied to the fate of civilization itself. Muslim women are oppressed by a barbaric, medieval religion, and "Islamland" represents a sort of final frontier in humanity's struggle for freedom from the bonds of the past.[1] A body of scholarship on Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2002, 2013; Alexander 2006; Mahmood 2005; Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002; Maira 2009; Puar 2007; Razakh 2008; Volpp 2011) claims that this cultural imagery draws much of its appeal from the values of freedom, autonomy, and the secular. According to it, these values play what I call a "justificatory" role in imperialist projects that range from unjustified war to the marginalization of Muslim populations in the West.[2] As Sherene Razakh (2008) puts it, "The secular/religious divide . . . functions as a color line, marking the difference between the modern, enlightened West, and people of color, notably Muslims" (148). If adherence to religious traditions both marks the absence of modernity and causes women's oppression, feminism appears to authorize the destruction of "other" traditions.

Yet feminists cannot simply refuse to criticize traditional dictates. People often see women's inferiority as part of their religious or cultural inheritance. This produces a version of the anti-imperialism/normativity dilemma described earlier in this book.[3] Since the same value that seems necessary for feminist critique (anti-traditionalism of some kind, often justified with reference to the values of autonomy or the secular) also seems to motivate feminist complicity in imperialism, we face a choice between a feminism that licenses cultural domination and other imperialist harms or rejecting feminism altogether. Adding fuel to the anti-imperialism/normativity dilemma, many anti-imperialist feminists suggest that

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the solution is to abandon normative judgment as such. Some caution that moral judgments are inextricable from imperialist notions of "progressive and backward, superior and inferior, higher and lower" (Mahmood 2005, 198) or suggest that what we need is universals that are "not normative" (Abu-Lughod 2013, 201–229).[4] This chapter develops a way out of the dilemma and suggests that a critique of women's oppression is compatible with a much greater degree of respect for traditional and religious worldviews than is often supposed.

I argue in this chapter that feminism and traditionalism, even the sort of traditionalism that takes some dictates to be beyond question, are not necessarily at odds with one another. The idea that they are incompatible arises from a mistaken sense that the oppressiveness of traditions is a function of their inheritedness, or so I will attempt to show. The mistaken view that externally dictated practices are inherently objectionable stems from the value I call Enlightenment freedom. Although both liberal and anti-imperialist feminist theorists connect feminism to Enlightenment freedom, I claim that the link is conceptually unnecessary. I propose that the conception of feminism as opposition to sexist oppression directs feminism to oppose practices with certain objectionable *effects*—irrespective of their perceived origin. The upshot of my analysis is a view according to which feminism can be grounded in worldviews that value orienting human lives around tradition, and even ones that take certain traditional dictates to be beyond question. I discuss the moral epistemologies of Islamic feminist movements to show that this possibility, rather than being merely theoretical, is pursued by real-world feminist theorists and activists.

I begin by explaining what Enlightenment freedom—the value that makes antitraditionalism seem appealing—is, why it has been seen as an imperialist value, and why it seems to some to be necessary for feminism. Second, I show how the idea that traditions are inherently patriarchal, an idea surprisingly shared by many liberal and postcolonial feminists, motivates the view that feminism requires Enlightenment freedom. Third, I consider an alternative view about the feminist importance of opposition to tradition that takes traditions to be problematic only insofar as they prevent individuals from questioning their social roles. I contend that this alternative reflexive distance view retains vestiges of Enlightenment freedom and is unnecessarily hostile to what I call "metaphysically traditionalist" worldviews that hold certain inherited dictates to be beyond question—that is, the worldviews that have been posed as challenging for feminism in Saba Mahmood's work. Finally, I argue that elements of the nonideal universalism I have developed here allow a feminist perspective that is genuinely normative without being

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thoroughgoingly antitraditionalist. I claim that the view of feminism as opposition to sexist oppression makes the question of whether beliefs and practices are inherited orthogonal to the question of whether feminists should reject them, and I show how the moral epistemologies of some Islamic feminist movements demonstrate the compatibility of genuine feminist commitments with traditionalist worldviews.

Three notes about the scope of my argument are in order before I continue. First, I use the terms "religious" and "traditional" relatively interchangeably. I do so not because the terms are interchangeable in all contexts but because a single shared feature makes them problematic for feminists who enjoin "other" women to come into modernity. This shared feature is the perception of inherited external dictatedness. In other words, for many feminists, the problem with traditional and religious dictates is that they gain their authority from a communally recognized source that is antecedent to and outside any individual agent. Second, I focus on Muslim women, not because my argument applies exclusively to them, but because the scholarship on them is an important site of feminist theoretical conversations about the relationship between the secular, autonomy, and imperialism. My ultimate argument that it is possible to be a traditionalist and a feminist can be logically extended to apply to those who subscribe to other worldviews that place a high value on traditional adherence. Third, by "secular," I refer to moral ideals according to which structuring one's life and the life of one's community around religious dictates is harmful or undesirable. Talal Asad's (2003) distinction between secularism and "the secular" is useful in denoting the attitude toward religion I am interested in distancing from feminism here; for Asad, the secular is way of thinking about what it means to be human that, among other things, situates authority, agency, and responsibility in individual human agents and human law, rather than in the divine will or religious traditions. Proponents of the secular often associate freedom or autonomy with the ability to reject religious traditions. Secularism, in contrast, is a view about the relationship between religious institutions and the state and is outside the scope of my analysis. My interest is in showing that one need not be a secular person, or lead a secular life, to be a feminist—not in defending religious social institutions.

Enlightenment Freedom and Its Dangers

Value for liberation from tradition appears to some liberal feminists as women's only hope and to some transnational feminists as the cause of imperialism. Liberal feminist public intellectual Ayaan Hirsi Ali, in her celebrated

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memoir *Infidel,* describes her literal and metaphorical journey from Africa and the Middle East to Europe. She describes having been a victim of female genital mutilation, having worn the hijab, and having developed sympathies for conservative Islam during a youth spent in Kenya, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia. After moving to the Netherlands, Hirsi Ali read voraciously, became an author and politician, and codirected the film *Submission*—a film whose reception included death threats to her and the murder of her collaborator, Theo Van Gogh. Her life's lesson, in her words, is that "it is possible to free oneself from one's faith, to examine it critically, and to understand the way in which faith itself is at the root of oppression" (Hirsi Ali 2007, 350). Not only is faith itself oppressive but clinging to faith is Muslims' way of miring themselves in prehistory. "I moved from the world of faith to the world of reason . . . We in the West would be wrong to prolong the pain of that transition unnecessarily, by elevating cultures full of bigotry and hatred toward women to the stature of respectable alternative ways of life" (348).

French philosopher and public intellectual Elisabeth Badinter advocates banning headscarves in public schools in strikingly similar terms. In a pamphlet cowritten with Régis Debray, Alain Finkielkraut, Elizabeth de Fontenay, and Catherine Kintzler, she writes:

> To tolerate the Islamic veil is not to accept a free being (in the form of a young girl); it is to open the door to those who decided, once and for all, to try to bend her to their wills. Instead of offering her a space of freedom, you send her the message that there is no difference between the school and her father's house. . . . It is no longer the equality of the sexes, or free decision making—that is the law of France . . . [You want] a school in which each student is always reminded of her parents, riveted to her roots—a school of social predestination. (Badinter et al. 1989; translation mine)

Badinter refers to a number of different justifications in the passage, but the last sentence is particularly noteworthy. "Being riveted to [one's] roots" is presented as incompatible with freedom, so much so that it is equivalent to being bent to another's will. What (liberal) education is supposed to offer is the ability to question veiling (which Badinter casts as oppressive[5] largely *because it is traditional*).[6] The central worry seems to be that traditions—embodied here in the homes of "others"—are hotbeds of patriarchy. The only way to protect "other" women from patriarchy is to reduce the power of their roots over them.

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Hirsi Ali and Badinter both suggest that adherence to a faith or a tradition is incompatible with two other values: feminism and freedom. More precisely, they argue that traditions promote women's subordination by making a certain type of freedom unavailable. For Hirsi Ali, a free person is one who recognizes that "faith itself is the source of oppression"; for Badinter, even being "reminded" of one's tradition by seeing others follow it constitutes a "riveting." Ali and Badinter use the term "freedom" in a loose, nontechnical way. If we map their concerns onto the language of contemporary political philosophy, we can characterize Ali and Badinter as endorsing a particular variant of positive freedom. Positive notions of freedom allow that impediments to freedom can exist within the self (see Hirschmann 2002).[7] For Hirsi Ali and Badinter, an individual agent's desire to follow tradition constitutes an internal barrier to her excavating her true will, and traditional practices are barriers to her executing it.

Yet Hirsi Ali's and Badinter's conception of freedom will strike many as implausible. Dictating appropriate beliefs and behaviors is just what human cultures do. As Diana Meyers (2000) puts it, "The fact is that we are all immersed in a culture at a historical moment" (469). It is thus worth asking why such a suspect concept of freedom is embraced by Hirsi Ali and Badinter. The answer, I believe, is a submerged descriptive assumption that only "others" have traditions. Asad (2003) argues that the secular has its own myths, and perhaps one of them is the Enlightenment teleological narrative I discussed in the first chapter, according to which the West achieved its preeminence because of its preference for reason over tradition, rather than because of its global political and economic domination. Homi Bhabha (1999) ironically calls the idea that Western cultures are not cultures "liberalism's sacred cow." The notion that the West has no traditions lurks behind Badinter's description of what is wrong with veiling in public schools; it is difficult to imagine her suggesting that encountering girls with *uncovered* heads in school, or encountering French cheese in the school cafeteria for that matter, would "rivet" white French teens to their roots. Indeed, Badinter argues elsewhere that teenagers who dye their hair blue are rejecting tradition but hijab wearers are not (quoted in Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002, 352). In Hirsi Ali's stronger iteration of the assumption that only "others" have traditions, tradition is more or less synonymous with "patriarchy." The move is almost metonymic—the part stands for the whole. Non-Western cultures are defined by their "bigotry and hatred towards women."

The value that Hirsi Ali and Badinter are describing is what I call Enlightenment freedom. Enlightenment freedom is a form of positive

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freedom according to which the acceptance of traditional dictates constitutes an impediment to self-realization. This value is conceptually distinct from the belief that only "others" have traditions. However, the value is likely to be unappealing to those who see the inheriting of external dictates as an inescapable part of all human socialization.[8] I have named the value Enlightenment freedom partly to make plain that it is not the only possible conception of freedom, nor one to which all liberals subscribe. I will return to alternative liberal interpretations of freedom in the section "Moderating the Feminist Relationship to Tradition"; here I wish only to point out that Hirsi Ali's and Badinter's understanding of freedom, though widespread in popular culture, is idiosyncratic in contemporary political philosophy—and the appropriate target of contemporary transnational feminist critiques of freedom, secularism, and autonomy seems to be this pop-cultural notion of freedom rather than any contemporary philosophical notion.

A second reason for the term "Enlightenment freedom" is to make explicit that the type of autonomy Badinter and Hirsi Ali value borrows from, even if it is not identical to, the ideas of some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European philosophers who cast tradition as quelling human freedom. Immanuel Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" mobilizes some of the very same background assumptions that seem to motivate Hirsi Ali and Badinter—even if, as I note in the next section, Kant stigmatizes traditional adherence far *less* promiscuously than they do.[9] Kant's essay takes religious authorities who demand unthinking adherence to be enemies of freedom par excellence. Traditional authorities demand obedience and discourage independent thought as a way of maintaining power. To be free, then, is to refuse to obey simply because one has been told to obey; it is to excavate one's own will and reasons instead of acting according to reasons given from outside (Kant 2010). Offering a different justification for a similar idea, John Stuart Mill (2002) argued that traditions stifle the expression of human individuality: "Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing" (64). Third, the term "Enlightenment freedom" highlights the fact that many of its exponents, such as Hirsi Ali, support what I called the Enlightenment teleological narrative in chapter 1—the view that contemporary Western culture represents the epitome of human progress and has managed to do so because of endogenous factors such as commitment to reason.

A look at the types of harms transnational feminists think are caused by the Western focus on freedom suggests that the object of their critique

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is Enlightenment freedom.[10] I have mentioned that transnational feminists suggest that vocabularies of freedom, autonomy, and the secular have allowed concern for women to become a pretext for what they see as imperialist acts—ranging from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Abu-Lughod 2002, 2013; Alexander 2006; Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002; Razakh 2008) to the denial of civil liberties to Muslims living in the West (Maira 2009; Razakh 2008) to the rendering of public institutions inaccessible to Muslims (Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002; Razakh 2008; Scott 2010; Volpp 2011) to the desire to eradicate Muslim women's movements (Mahmood 2005).

Saba Mahmood offers the most extended argument for the view that freedom is an imperialist value that encourages harm to Muslims. In addition to making the same arguments about justificatory imperialism that I attribute to Abu-Lughod in the next paragraph, she suggests that autonomy is a *constitutively* imperialist value[11]—one that is parochial and valuable only to Westerners, and whose spread is part of a regime of cultural domination. She argues that Western feminists will have to want to erase the worldview of the Salafist women's *da'wa* movement in Cairo, because they hold that traditions and "pious practices [are] scaffolding" (Mahmood 2005, 148). The meaning of this idea about scaffolding varies in Mahmood, sometimes meaning just that traditional dictates are worth following, and at other points meaning that such dictates cannot be questioned. Debates within the *da'wa* movement are always over the content of what is dictated, not whether what is dictated is worth doing. For the da'wa women, the ineffability of divine commands means that the significance of religious practices can often only be understood *after* one has made habits of them; attempting to rationally weigh their costs and benefits before engaging in them is not only impious; it is fruitless and prevents the practices from having their intended edifying effects on individuals. For example, Nama, a da'wa participant, describes having felt hypocritical when she started veiling because she did not feel "shyness" in her heart. However, according to her, "you must first wear the veil because it is God's command, and then, with time, your inside learns to feel shy without a veil, and if you take it off, your entire being feels uncomfortable about it" (157).

Lila Abu-Lughod's (2002) concern with the *justificatory* role vocabularies of freedom play in imperialism also seems to have Enlightenment freedom as its target. Those in the thrall of the freedom vocabulary, for her, believed Afghan women in the early 2000s were longing to "throw off" their burqas, waiting for Westerners to liberate them from the shackles of religion. According to Abu-Lughod (2002), the problematic notion of freedom,

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besides promoting imperialism, cannot accept that "humans are social beings, always raised in certain social and historical contexts, and belonging to particular communities that shape their desires and understandings of the world" (787). Freedom, as Abu-Lughod understands it, is incompatible with traditional adherence—and is enhanced by the destruction of the traditions of "others.

Such worries about the justificatory role of Enlightenment freedom in imperialism boil down to the idea that Enlightenment freedom breeds a form of moral insensitivity in Westerners (see especially Mahmood 2005, 198). Mahmood argues that value for Enlightenment freedom breeds this insensitivity in two ways: first, if desire for freedom is naturalized, it may seem that all women are yearning to be free of their traditions—that they are, to use an image from Uma Narayan (2002), "prisoners of patriarchy," chafing at traditions and longing for their elimination—waiting to throw off their burqas, as it were. Second, insensitivity to the harms of cultural destruction may manifest as the view that, whether women *want* freedom from their traditions or not, they would be better off if their traditions were destroyed. Mahmood expresses this concern when she suggests that feminists would want the da'wa women to learn to see their traditions as an impediment to excavating their true wills.

Traditions as Inherently Patriarchal: Why Feminism Seems to Need Enlightenment Freedom

If Enlightenment freedom is a parochial Western value, and if adopting it justifies promiscuous destruction of "other" lifeworlds, an anti-imperialist feminism must find its grounding in another value. But extricating Enlightenment freedom from feminism is easier said than done. A single fact about the world threatens the possibility of a feminism not founded in Enlightenment freedom: people often see women's subjugation as traditionally dictated. Is it possible to take an affirmative or neutral stance toward traditional adherence without becoming an apologist for patriarchy? Transnational feminists have often attempted to answer this question by reminding us that what are called "traditions" are political products—often of colonial marginalization (Abu-Lughod 2002; Jaggar 2005; Narayan 1997; Nzegwu 2006; Song 2008; Phillips 2009; Volpp 2011). For instance, Narayan argues that *sati* (widow immolation) only achieved the status of cultural practice in India through the British colonial fascination with it. But this type of answer does not vitiate the feminist need to criticize traditions. Although it

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is certainly true that imperialism has deepened existing patriarchal practices and created new ones, it is not their only source. Even if it were, it might not matter—because many people *believe* that their traditions demand the subordination of women. It is unclear that there is an authenticity criterion that allows sorting "true" from false traditions. A view or practice can gain the status of a traditional or religious dictate merely from being widely perceived as such—regardless of whether this perception is based on a selective or distorted history.

Enlightenment-liberal feminists are thus responding to a genuine problem when they cling to Enlightenment freedom. As Sindre Bangstad (2011) points out in a critique of Mahmood, feminism has to be a normative doctrine in order to be anything at all; feminism is literally meaningless if it is compatible with *all* dictates and practices (42–43). Ali and Badinter see straightforward rejection of relativism as an advantage of their view; for them, if "imperialism" is a bullet feminists just have to bite, so be it. Some transnational feminists have inadvertently buttressed such Enlightenment-liberal self-satisfaction by expressing skepticism toward the idea of normativity itself. For instance, although Abu-Lughod and Mahmood claim to eschew moral relativism and political passivity, they also claim, somewhat contradictorily, that normative judgment is indistinguishable from imperialism.[12] We thus seem to face a choice: embrace Enlightenment freedom and criticize sexism or embrace sexism and criticize Enlightenment freedom. It is difficult to formulate an anti-imperialist response to this dilemma, but luckily, it is a false dilemma. It arises out of a questionable assumption that many transnational and liberal feminists share: the assumption that traditions are defined by patriarchality.

Perhaps the most famous defense of the view that feminism requires a critique of traditions is Susan Moller Okin's (1999) essay "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" Okin argues that policies designed to preserve cultures can undermine gender justice. Although Okin restricted her initial argument to questions about the toleration of the patriarchal practices of (mostly immigrant) minority cultures within liberal states, her response to her critics defends the general idea that the subjugation of women is wrong, regardless of who practices it. She argues against the idea that "others'" support for patriarchal gender roles justifies the perpetuation of those roles. I believe this normative claim is correct, but her descriptive claims are problematic in ways that are relevant to our current discussion. Okin has a particular view of the source of patriarchal oppression. For her, all cultures have patriarchal pasts—but "other" cultures are closer to those origins.[13]

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The idea that the *origins* of Western culture are patriarchal and that "other" cultures remain so suggests a particular understanding of the relationship between tradition and patriarchy, one that makes Enlightenment freedom seem like an appealing value for feminists. Consistent with the Enlightenment teleological narrative, patriarchy belongs to a past shared by Western and non-Western cultures; it is just a past in which "other" cultures remain more stuck and out of which Western cultures have progressed. Okin (1999) is quite explicit on this point: "Most cultures are patriarchal, then, and many (though not all) of the cultural minorities that claim group rights are more patriarchal than the surrounding culture" (17). "While virtually all of the world's cultures have distinctly patriarchal pasts—some, mostly but by no means exclusively, Western liberal cultures—have departed further than others" (16).

The logical coherence of Okin's view that Western cultures are more removed from traditions than others rests on the idea that *what makes the past the past* is its patriarchality. If her understanding of the past were merely temporal, the idea of Western culture as further removed from the past would be unintelligible—all cultures in 1999 would be similarly situated with regard to pastness. Traditions typically gain their authority from their extension into the past, so what makes something a tradition for Okin seems to be, at least partly, its association with patriarchy. Okin (1999) argues that a central *purpose* of traditions is to control women (13) and cites no examples of traditional practices that are not sexist. She consistently describes existing sexist practices in the West as vestigial and attempts to mitigate them as openings into the future—rather than, say, developments of existing nonpatriarchal elements within cultures.

This nexus of associations between the past, patriarchality, and tradition does not occur at the level of explicit argument in Okin and is not logically necessary for her defense of moral universalism. Yet the idea that traditions are almost by definition patriarchal helps us make sense of Okin's more justificatorily imperialist statements. In a sentence that seems to embody exactly the insensitivity to traditional destruction Abu-Lughod and Mahmood worry about, Okin (1999) remarks that women may not have an interest in the preservation of patriarchal cultures and that sometimes women "*might* be better off if the cultures they were born into were . . . to become extinct . . . ." (22). In the same sentence, she argues that cultural reform is preferable to extinction, but as I discussed in the last chapter, the glibness of the remark has struck many transnational feminist commentators. Okin's framing of the question of whether cultures ought to be preserved as a core feminist question suggests that she understands tradition to be a key source of patriarchy.

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One might expect transnational feminist scholarship on Muslim women to reject this characterization of tradition, but Mahmood inadvertently accepts it. As a result, instead of disputing the idea that traditions are patriarchal, she ends up being skeptical about whether patriarchy is really bad. As we have already seen, Mahmood's ethnography emphasizes the fact that Egyptian revivalist women see submission to traditional, conventional, and/or divine dictates as the path to self-actualization. Beginning from the assumption that respect for the da'wa movement is a good thing, Mahmood argues that Western feminists cannot respect the da'wa women *because they are feminists.*[14]

But this conclusion is somewhat bizarre. To see why, we need a clearer picture of the traditional dictates to which the da'wa movement prescribes unquestioning deference. Among these traditional dictates are that women's capacity to arouse men is so strong as to justify a prohibition on mixed-gender worship (Mahmood 2005, 65), that women should refrain from divorcing even immoral husbands (69), that women should either not interact with unknown men at all or severely limit their interaction with them (107), that women should submit to their husbands' authority (177), and that unmarried women should not protest scorn they receive from others (172–173). Also among these dictates are the ideas that women's education is necessary and worth pursuing (101), that there is a higher moral court of appeal than the commands of one's husband (180), and that weeping, covering one's head, and prostrating oneself during prayer help one become closer to God (147). According to Mahmood, the reason feminists have difficulty respecting women who submit to these dictates is that they are indebted to "an imaginary of freedom." Interestingly, Mahmood uses the terms "feminism" and "liberalism" (and occasionally, the words "secularism" and "individualism") nearly interchangeably. This is imprecise but coherent because she sees feminism as requiring the view that women need *liberation from* oppressive traditions and norms.[15] What she calls "liberalism" and feminism are so conceptually intertwined that Mahmood suggests that feminists who question value for the sort of freedom she is criticizing must become skeptical of feminism itself.[16]

But Mahmood's conclusion comes too quickly. Note that there is a key difference between the two sets of dictates I have just described—the former subordinates women, whereas the latter does not. Once we recognize this, a logical puzzle emerges. How, if Mahmood mentions features of the da'wa movement that are not sexist, does she arrive at the claim that feminism is altogether incompatible with tradition, rather than the claim

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that some traditions are compatible with feminism? The answer, I believe, is by making the same move that Okin makes—by tacitly building patriarchality into her definition of tradition. This comes out most clearly in Mahmood's indictment of the work of Janice Boddy (1989), whom Mahmood sets up as the paradigm of objectionable Western feminist scholarship. Mahmood (2005) writes about Boddy, "When women's actions seem to reinscribe what appear to be 'instruments of their own oppression,' social analysts can point to moments of disruption of, and articulation of points of opposition to, male authority . . . Agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles, individual or collective" (8).

Yet Boddy's explicit argument does not criticize custom or tradition as sweepingly as Mahmood suggests. Boddy describes the healing and spiritual practices of the centuries-old, women-dominated *zar* cult in Sudan. Boddy's explicit claim is that the cult is an arena in which women can assert their value against the background of a sexist dominant ideology. Does this really amount to the view that feminism means value for the rejection of "custom" and "tradition"? Only if opposition to sexism and asserting women's value in spite of it requires flouting, or stepping outside of, tradition. But Boddy seems to show the exact opposite—that some traditions are feminist vehicles, even if they are restricted to certain spaces. After all, the practices of the zar cult are *themselves traditions.* In another example, Mahmood argues that feminists will have difficulty understanding the behavior of a woman named Abir, who tries to get her husband to allow her to develop her personal relationship with God by exhorting him to become a better Muslim. Mahmood (2005) argues that feminists will puzzle over the fact that Abir's exhortation relies on the "perfection" of a religious tradition and occurs within "Islamic norms" (79). Mahmood fails to make clear whether the puzzle originates in the tradition subjugating Abir or its being a tradition at all.

Mahmood concludes from her inquiry that we should perhaps give up on feminism if we want to oppose imperialism. Okin concludes from hers that if we must be called "imperialists," so be it. But for the purposes of our discussion of Enlightenment freedom, what they agree about is more important than what they disagree about. They both attribute a patriarchal valence to tradition. Because of this, they see Enlightenment freedom—or perception of tradition as an impediment, especially when its dictates are internalized—as necessary for feminism.

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Moderating the Feminist Relationship to Tradition: Reflexive Distance

If the confluence between feminism and imperialism comes from the idea that feminists should object to views and practices *because they are traditional,* an anti-imperialist feminism will need to conceive the normative commitments of feminism differently. Liberal rehabilitations of communitarianism may seem useful for this re-articulation of the normative commitments of feminism, since they explicitly seek to define freedom in ways that acknowledge that inherited beliefs and practices can add meaning and value to human lives.[17] However, the existence of patriarchal inherited practices has made the tension between communitarianism and feminism more difficult to resolve than that between communitarianism and liberalism.[18]

Reflexive Distance from Traditional Commitments

Liberals who accept communitarianism's social ontology, including many feminist autonomy theorists (see Friedman 2006; Meyers 2000; Christman 2018), have argued that there is inherent value, not in rejecting traditions, but in being able to *ask whether one wants to* reject them. Like Hirsi Ali and Badinter, these contemporary liberals are inspired by Kant's argument that tradition can interfere with the living of a life guided by one's own reasons. Unlike Hirsi Ali and Badinter, these contemporary liberals claim that only certain types of subjective relationships to tradition are incompatible with freedom.[19] Will Kymlicka, who advances one example of such a contemporary liberal view, argues that, although traditions can be important to individuals' flourishing and development of self-respect, individual freedom requires that agents have the ability to reflectively evaluate their relationship to traditions. As he puts it, "People can stand back and assess moral values and traditional ways of life and should be given, not only the liberal right to do so, but also the social conditions which enhance this capacity" (Kymlicka 1995, 92). Kymlicka (1991) sets high standards for what constitutes the attainment of this capacity: "no end or goal should be exempt from possible re-examination" (52).

Kymlicka's view seems at first blush to make room for feminist criticism of traditions without accepting Enlightenment freedom's implausible assumptions about human socialization. In the eyes of Enlightenment freedom's defenders, traditions prevent agents from developing their own views merely by offering guidance that originates outside agents themselves.

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For Kymlicka, in contrast, traditions have to do more than just be traditions to discourage autonomy. They must discourage or prevent individuals from being able to reflectively evaluate traditional dictates.

Yet even if Kymlicka's view renders some traditional adherence objectionable, it is unclear that these instances of objectionable traditional adherence are the ones *feminists* should find objectionable. Kymlicka's view suggests that traditional adherence is unfree in any case in which the agent cannot, or refuses to, raise the question of whether she wants to identify with a particular tradition. It thus renders unfree, for instance, a person in a society that values filial duty who is incapable of asking whether she could identify as anything but the child of her parents and the case of a person who cannot countenance the question of whether her religiously forged dietary preferences are appropriate.[20] We may (or may not) find such views about vegetarianism and filial duty objectionable, but it is not obvious that the reasons behind such objections would be *feminist*.

Reflexive Distance from Social Roles

If the value of reflexive distance is going to sort feminist and nonfeminist traditional adherence—not just autonomous and nonautonomous adherence—we need to say more about the *types* of traditions from which people need reflective distance. Seyla Benhabib, another rehabilitator of communitarianism, suggests a potential feminist addendum to Kymlicka's view. Although Benhabib agrees that we need the capacity for reflective distance from all traditional dictates, she also identifies a more specific problem for feminists: communitarians need to "distinguish their emphasis on constitutive communities from an endorsement of social conformism, authoritarianism, and, from the standpoint of women, patriarchalism." She thus suggests that it is particularly important to develop a capacity to criticize social *roles*, or to be capable of asking whether I am separable from what F. H. Bradley refers to as "my station and its duties" (Benhabib 1992, 74). The type of view Benhabib advocates in this passage resonates heavily with Okin's (1999) more moderate comments in "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" Women need to be able to question "our place within our culture," especially "to the extent that our culture is patriarchal" (22).

Can this reflexive role distance view move us beyond the dilemma that pits feminism against anti-imperialist critiques of autonomy and the secular? Recall that the anti-imperialist feminists whose concerns I am trying to accommodate hold that feminists promote imperialism through their

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inability to apprehend the harms of traditional destruction. Benhabib's view very clearly rejects the idea that the destruction of traditions always benefits women. Instead, what needs to be eradicated are specific traditional forms and dictates—those that prevent people from asking whether they want to identify with traditions and, more specifically, whether they want to accept their traditionally defined roles. Ali and Badinter are committed to a much stronger view—one that takes women to benefit from the eradication of even those traditions that allow the questioning of social roles. Even a chosen "faith" belongs to Ali's "world of faith," and merely being "reminded" that some members of one's religion want women to cover their hair is, for Badinter, an objectionable "riveting to one's roots." Benhabib's view offers a principled reason to reject such views: being exposed to, or being expected to follow, traditions is not itself harmful.

Reflexive Distance as Unaccommodating of Metaphysically Traditionalist Views

However, Benhabib's reflexive role distance would still be found insufficiently accommodating by some transnational feminist critics of autonomy and the secular. Up to this point, I have focused on the fact that Abu-Lughod and Mahmood defend worldviews that find meaning in practices that are inherited and externally dictated. But on a closer look at some of the putatively Islamic practices they want to defend, we notice that many of them have a feature beyond being seen as externally dictated. The practices appear to their adherents as worth doing *because* they are externally dictated. In many of these cases, questioning a given inherited external dictate would prevent the dictate from having its intended effect on the agent. To distinguish them from worldviews that merely *value* traditional adherence, let us call worldviews to which one cannot adhere unless one treats certain dictates as *beyond question* "metaphysically traditionalist."

To be clear, metaphysically traditionalist views do not hold that it is desirable to lead an unreflective life (the da'wa women are highly reflective), but rather that some views that are externally dictated should not be questioned—and that one should orient one's life around them. For an example of metaphysical traditionalism, we can examine the belief of Mahmood's da'wa women that one can only understand the meaning of certain dictates by engaging in them first. One becomes modest *through* veiling. Asking whether one wants to veil, or whether female modesty is the right end, is inconsistent with veiling for the right reason. Veiling for the right reason means beginning

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from trust in the divine will and desire to surrender to it, so evaluating the practice without identifying with it is impossible. Religious worldviews are not the only metaphysically traditionalist worldviews, but they are particularly good candidates because divine will is readily understood as something one is not in a position to question. Religion is seen by many to require faith precisely because reflection cannot provide reasons for adherence or nonadherence.

Benhabib's reflexive role distance suggests that metaphysically traditionalist worldviews are antifeminist, or at least ones that are metaphysically traditionalist about certain social roles. Consider Mahmood's example of a woman who is socially ostracized because she is unmarried. A woman named Nadia counsels this woman that the virtue of *sabr*, or bearing hardship correctly, means that she should not try to persuade others that her marital status is irrelevant to her social value. For Nadia, the reason one must accept suffering rather than question unjust social conventions is that "divine causality . . . cannot be deciphered by human intelligence" (Mahmood 2005, 172–173). In other words, in cases of disidentification with what are seen as religiously dictated roles, one is supposed to try harder to identify with social roles. Whereas Benhabib would argue that it is important for the woman to be able to decide whether she identifies with a doctrine that attributes lesser status to unmarried women, the da'wa women's worldview says that this is a type of hubris that gets in the way of leading a pious life.

I believe Mahmood is wrong that feminists should respect this particular metaphysically traditionalist view. The idea that unmarried women should believe that they are damaged goods or do not deserve social benefits, unaccompanied by the idea that men should be exposed to similar penalties, is simply incompatible with feminism. But Mahmood may still be pointing out something important—that *some* metaphysically traditionalist acceptance of social roles may be respectworthy. Let us consider another example of a view that is metaphysically traditionalist about a social role—a view that Benhabib's reflexive role distance would have to prescribe rejecting or modifying. Islamic feminists have devoted significant energy to discussing the type of love between husbands and wives dictated by the Qu'ran. For instance, Asma Barlas (2002, 162) argues that part of the Islamically dictated role of a husband involves repudiating sexual violence. It is not difficult to imagine such a conception of husbandhood being plugged into a metaphysically traditionalist view similar to that of the da'wa women. A man may believe that it is not up to him to ask whether he wants to believe sexual violence is wrong, or whether he wants to believe the verses of the Qu'ran that stipulate it

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are true. Such a man lacks Benhabib's reflexive role distance, but it is not clear that his views are antifeminist.

If I am correct that such a man's views are potentially feminist, two important points about whether reflexive distance offers a helpful anti-imperialist recasting of feminist normative commitments come to light. First, the reflexive role distance view does not pick out the feature of traditionalist views and practices that determines whether they are objectionable *to feminists.* On the reflexive-role-distance view, the content of roles is irrelevant; what matters is a person's ability to raise the question of whether the roles are worth fulfilling. This should be unsurprising; reflexive distance is a conception of autonomy, not a conception of what makes something an appropriate or feminist political goal. Autonomy, at least according to procedural conceptions, is a feature of agents' relationships to views, rather than their content. Relational conceptions of autonomy, though they conceive autonomy differently, cannot on their own explain what makes views and practices feminist, either. They hold that a person's ability to make choices that are genuinely her own depends on certain features of her social context; making feminist views the same as those that promote relational autonomy closes off the possibility that contexts within which women exercise agency can be oppressive.[21] Once we have recognized that the question of whether an agent identifies with a role is distinct from the question of whether that role promotes feminist ends, we can see that reflexive role distance shares an important feature with Enlightenment freedom. Both, when taken to explain what feminists' normative commitments are, identify the *external dictatedness* of practices or views as the feminist problem. The difference between them is the stringency of the requirements for objectionable external dictatedness; for the reflexive distance theorist, certain subjective attitudes toward practices can make them no longer externally dictated.

Second, the possibility of the externally dictated and inherited feminist view in the husband example suggests that the *perceived source* of a view or practice is not what determines its compatibility with feminism. Assuming that patriarchality is a defining feature of traditions, á la Okin and Mahmood, prevents us from apprehending this fact. I now turn to showing how the nonideal universalism I have developed does not locate feminist moral concern in the inheritedness of practices, but rather in their *effects.* My view allows feminist respect for some metaphysically traditionalist worldviews and thus does a better job than reflexive role distance at responding to anti-imperialist concerns. It refuses to suggest that secular or antitraditionalist worldviews are the only ones hospitable to feminism.

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From Inherited Sources to Oppressive Effects: Making Conceptual Space for Traditionalist Feminisms

Up to this point, I have relied on our intuitions to determine which practices are objectionable to feminists. However, to see why feminists should worry more about the effects of dictates and practices than about their sources, we need an explicit definition of feminism. As I argued in my defense of nonideal universalism in chapter 1, the early work of bell hooks offers what I hope is a noncontroversial one: feminism is opposition to sexist oppression.[22] According to Marilyn Frye's (1983) now-classic essay, oppression is a social system that subordinates one social group to another. An oppressive practice must have three features: it must target its objects on the basis of social-group membership; it must be part of a system or network of forces that work together to produce similar effects; and one of those effects must be the subordination of the targeted group. So, for example, the expectation that Western women wear high heels is oppressive because it applies only to women; it is one of many expectations that tie women's access to social benefits to their sexual availability to men, and the overall function of this system is to subject women to sexual violence, reduce their ability to participate as equals in public life, and so on.

My analysis of the high-heels example presupposes that freedom from violence and participation in public life are goods to which people deserve access as a matter of justice. As I argued in chapter 1, nonideal universalists believe that the indicators of advantage differ from context to context, so to find out whether sexist oppression is happening in a given case, we need context-specific information about which goods are important.[23] What I am about to say about the relationship between feminism and tradition, however, holds true irrespective of what the goods in human life are, so long as strong Enlightenment freedom is not taken to be one of them (and given Mahmood and Abu-Lughod's suggestions that the value is parochial, and my claim that it is implausible, an argument that Enlightenment freedom should be seen as a universal good in human life is not forthcoming). If it is possible to imagine gender-just social conditions under which human beings are not encouraged to abandon tradition or to stand back and criticize every single inherited belief (or both), Enlightenment freedom is not necessary for feminism.[24]

Conceiving of feminism as opposition to sexist oppression clearly separates the question of whether views and practices are feminist from where they are perceived to come from, and this is where its anti-imperialist feminist potential lies. We know that inherited dictates and practices can have oppressive

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effects. However, we can also identify oppressive expectations whose force does not stem from historical or religious inheritance. Consider the expectation that North American women shape their genitalia to simulate those in pornography—an expectation that is both oppressive and new. More importantly for responding to imperialism allegations, we can identify views that are nonoppressive or anti-oppressive and yet perceived as externally dictated. Contemporary Muslim feminisms, for whom navigating tradition is often a central concern, suggest that this possibility is not merely theoretical.

According to the nonideal universalist perspective I developed in the first chapter, transnational feminists should reject justice monism, the idea that there is, or that they need a single model of, the gender-just society. Instead, in addition to recognizing that the indicators of advantage and disadvantage vary from context to context, nonideal universalists recognize that the conception of sexist oppression as wrong underdetermines what should happen to reduce oppression in any particular case. Thus, nonideal universalism suggests that looking more closely at "other" women's political strategies can reveal *genuinely feminist* possibilities that would otherwise be difficult for Western feminists to imagine. Many Muslim women organize in contexts in which there is, at the very least, strategic value to framing arguments against patriarchal oppression in religious terms. The incentives to frame feminist arguments in "Islamic" terms are varied and context dependent but are often put in place by some combination of the following: (a) historical or current Western cultural and/or political domination, (b) the widespread belief that acting in accordance with religious dictates is morally obligatory, (c) the presence of religious dictates within existing legal frameworks, and (d) the association of secular feminisms with the upper classes. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that all women advocating feminisms in Islamic terms do so for purely instrumental reasons; many of them would offer first-personal reasons that have to do with deeply held religious convictions (Moghadam 2002).

Barlas's feminist rereading of the role of husbands in the previous section is one example of an Islamic feminist interpretation of tradition—though not an example of Islamic feminist adherence to a metaphysically traditionalist worldview. To illustrate the compatibility of feminism with metaphysically traditionalist worldviews, we can look at contemporary Islamic feminisms. Although there is no agreed-upon use of the term "Islamic feminist," I use it here in Margot Badran's (2009) sense to mean a feminism "that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qu'ran" (242). It is important to note that not all Muslim feminists are Islamic feminists; many are overtly secular or ground their opposition to patriarchy in a variety of sources. Additionally,

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some Muslim feminists adopt Islamic feminist argumentative strategies without committing themselves to the idea that the Qu'ran is the only or primary source of moral truth. For instance, the Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité (2005) combines doctrinal arguments against sexist practices, such as child marriage and the expectation of obedience from wives, with human rights and sociological arguments.

Islamic feminists who see the Qu'ran as the ultimate moral truth that cannot be questioned by humans affirm a traditionalist worldview, one that affirms the value of living according to traditional dictates. They take as a point of departure that living consistently with Islam is worth doing. Yet they interpret gender equality as Islamically dictated. Movements with such understandings of Islam have participated in reducing women's oppression. For example, Islamic feminist agitation in Iran advocated for such reforms such respecting unmarried women's rights to study abroad and married women's rights to claim wages for housework in divorce proceedings (Moghadam 2002). Movements that ground opposition to sexism in religious dictates also organize in countries with more secular histories than Iran. Some Egyptian feminists use religious argumentation to argue that women should be able to serve as *muftis.* Turkish Islamist feminists claim that Islamist politicians have failed in their own purported goals by failing to improve women's status (Badran 2001). Some Indonesian feminists oppose polygamy and support increases in the marriage age on theological grounds (Robinson 2006). According to many Islamic feminists, those who believe the Qu'ran accepts sexist oppression are misinterpreting the Qu'ran. Enlightenment-liberal feminists might argue that the fact that such "misinterpretations" are in circulation at all is evidence that tradition is oppressive. But this misses the point of the Islamic feminist moral epistemology. Islamic feminists are not inventing new traditions; they see themselves as returning to the true meaning of their inheritance. Further, some Islamic feminists see the authority to reinterpret the Qu'ran as issuing from *within* Muslim traditions (Moghadam 2002, 1144). The right to *ijtehad,* or independent reasoning about religious texts, was historically well-established in Islamic jurisprudence.

I do not focus on Islamic feminism to suggest that it is the only legitimate feminist approach for Muslim women. Nonideal universalism, with its emphasis on context specificity and the (nonidentical) roles imperial legacies play in shaping contemporary contexts, must acknowledge that Muslim women face different contextual challenges, have different priorities, and hold different metaphysical commitments.[25] Islamic feminisms are just especially relevant to the question of whether one can value traditional adherence

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and be a feminist; they demonstrate the possibility of worldviews that are simultaneously feminist and grounded in submission to certain inherited external dictates.[26]

But if my oppressive effects view is going to be more helpful than reflexive role distance in respecting traditionalist worldviews, we need to know whether it is possible to oppose sexist oppression from within worldviews that are *metaphysically* traditionalist—that hold that some traditional dictates to be beyond question. Mahmood's da'wa women are clearly not feminists, but is it possible to reject sexist oppression from a worldview like theirs, one that values unquestioning submission to certain inherited dictates? Many existing Islamic feminists do not accept the *metaphysical* version of traditionalism. For instance, Mohsen Sa'idzadeh states, in an interview with Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1999), that he opposes "unquestioning obedience" and that "humans have the capacity to understand the reasons for God's commands" (256).

However, some Islamic feminists insist that it is in principle unacceptable for believers to question the truth of the Qu'ran or other divine dictates. For instance, Amina Wadud (2006) writes in her early work, "As believers in the faith and tradition of Islam, we cannot rewrite the Qu'ran . . . As an historical record of the word of Allah revealed to Mohammed, those words are unchangeable" (204).[27] Wadud defines the word "believer" so that the identity of believer precedes questioning and restricts the types of questions one is allowed to ask. Whereas Sa'idzadeh suggests it would be possible to come to a reason to accept divine dictates without antecedent faith, Wadud suggests no such thing. Yet the metaphysical traditionalism of Wadud's view grounds rather than undermines her opposition to sexist oppression. Those who believe that Islam is fundamentally patriarchal, in her view, not only misinterpret the Qu'ran; they are guilty of instrumentalizing divine dictates for human power struggles. Wadud (2006) argues that the metaphysical traditionalism of her feminism is actually a moral advantage; human reason is fallible and excessive reliance on it will actually get in the way of feminist causes. "I chose the literary tradition of Qu'ranic exegesis . . . to sustain my faith by equipping me with the tools to determine how the master's house has been constructed, without limiting the sacred potential to human tools" (81).

Wadud's underlying stance toward tradition is strikingly similar to that of Mahmood's da'wa women. This is especially clear when we return to Mahmood's (2005, 174–177) story of Abir. Abir is married to a "Westernized" man who drinks and expects her to entertain male houseguests. To prevent her religiosity from impeding his lifestyle, he tells her that she is flouting her Islamic wifely duties by focusing more on the women's mosque movement

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than on him. Her response is to exhort him to be a better Muslim, often praying loudly in front of him for the fate of his soul. The parallels between Wadud's relationship to tradition and Abir's are triple. First, both assume that certain Islamic dictates are beyond question and worth following; they exhort others to change based on the idea that they share this assumption. Second, Abir and Wadud both see religious dictates as offering a normative standard that allows human practices to be judged, rather than vice versa. Third, they suggest that the views and practices they find objectionable are objectionable because those who engage in them have failed to successfully submit to the divine will.

The parallel between Wadud and Abir makes clear that acceptance of sexism does not directly track attitudes toward tradition. What makes Wadud a feminist and Abir not, I contend, is the type of social relations each takes to be divinely dictated. In other words, feminism (or sexism, as the case may be) pertains to the *content of their tradition* (as they understand it) rather than to their attitudes toward it or understanding of the source of its normative authority. Feminism is a stance about the normatively acceptable effects of social practices rather than their perceived origins, and once this becomes clear, traditionalist feminisms are no longer a contradiction in terms.

Conclusion: Feminism without Enlightenment Freedom

Feminism does have genuine normative requirements, but contra those who would ground feminism in Enlightenment freedom, hostility to tradition *because it is tradition* is not among them. Feminism does not require the view that traditions are patriarchal (as Okin and Mahmood inadvertently suggest), the belief that people must reject all inherited external dictates (as Hirsi Ali and Badinter suggest), or even the belief that they must *question* all of them or the roles those dictates assign (as Kymlicka and Benhabib do). Feminism does require reshaping a subset of traditional dictates and practices—but because of their sexist effects, not their perceived source. Feminism is thus compatible with worldviews that place a high value on acting on inherited external dictates, including some that are metaphysically traditionalist.

Enlightenment liberal feminists must acknowledge that their reasons for wanting to *spread* Enlightenment freedom do not originate in feminism alone.[28] Their support for Enlightenment freedom seems instead to originate in adherence to an ethnocentric justice monist view, according to which the cultural forms they associate with the contemporary West are imagined as the only ones that can support gender justice. But as Collectif 95 Maghreb

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Egalité (1993) argues, "universality does not in any way signify Western monopoly" on the concept of gender justice (10). Feminist concerns militate against sexist oppression, but not in favor of exporting any specific understanding of where human beings should find meaning. Given concerns about the effectiveness of making change in neo-/postcolonial contexts and the history of cultural domination, Western feminists need to recognize that being attentive to the harms of traditional destruction is not the same thing as abandoning feminism. Feminism, though it requires a stance about sexist oppression, does not require a stance about the appropriate human orientation to tradition. Feminism can be thought of as what Rawls (1996) would have called a "freestanding" doctrine—capable of being defended from within a variety of different understandings of the ultimate ends of human life. As Badran (2009) puts a similar point, feminism can be a "plant that grows only in its own soil" (243).

As I discussed in the first chapter, Abu-Lughod (2002, 788) encapsulates her objection to "saving" Muslim women by noting that it involves, not just saving them *from* something, but saving them *to* something. For her, the attitude of saving demands rescuing someone from one (inferior, traditional, religious) lifeworld and transporting them to a (superior, modern, secular) one. One of my broad points in this book is that feminist normative judgment does not require the view Abu-Lughod associates with saving—the view that there is a single correct feminist endpoint (typified by the trappings of Western "modernity") at which all societies must arrive. In a world characterized by imperialist domination, the demand that "others" abandon their entire worldviews and adopt those of Westerners cannot be presumed innocent. Sweeping judgments about the sexist valences of the traditions of "others" end up aligning feminism with cultural domination, economic exploitation, and imperialism. Feminists need to criticize sexist oppression without trading in a discourse about destroying and replacing lifeworlds or bringing "others" out of the bonds of tradition into the light. We need a feminism that, as Allison Weir (2013) puts it, addresses "the reality that we are all embedded in and attached to specific cultural identities, within which we value different ways of flourishing; and they must confront the possibility that feminism itself may be wedded to particular cultural identities" (2). Mahmood (2005) rightly ends her book with a wish for a feminist "vision of coexistence that does not require making the lifeworlds of others extinct or provisional" (199). Untethering feminism from Enlightenment freedom makes it possible to oppose sexist oppression without surrendering that hope.

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