



## Research Article

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# Epistemology, Political Perils and the Ethnocentrism Problem in Feminism

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0208>

received November 15, 2021; accepted April 20, 2022

**Abstract:** Nobody claims to be a proponent of *white feminism*, but according to the critique presented in this article, many in fact are. I argue that feminism that does not take multiple axes of oppression into account is bad in three ways: (1) it strategically undermines solidarity between women; (2) it risks inconsistency by advocating justice and equality for some women but not all; and (3) it impedes the ultimate function of feminism function by employing epistemological “master’s tools” that stand in antithesis to feminist emancipatory work. In investigating ethnocentrism in feminism, I develop the idea of *latent ethnocentrism*, which occupies the space between meaning that is generated from reference to the self and overt racism. I identify an epistemological prong in the ethnocentrism charge against feminism, where I draw on bell hooks’ interlocking axes-model of oppression to answer why the ethnocentrism problem is important for feminism and what its underlying epistemological causes are. I draw on Uma Narayan’s destabilization of cultural dualisms to argue that they do not serve emancipatory agendas. There is a mutually constitutive relation between language that informs our understanding, on the one hand, and the political agendas that produce this language to sustain the male and the western norm as center, on the other hand. I call this circular and reciprocally reinforcing mechanism the *episteme-politic*. I conclude that the ethnocentrism problem is not merely an issue of (1) strategy or (2) feminist consistency but of (3) shooting oneself in the foot by uncritically accepting patriarchal concepts for feminist politics.

**Keywords:** feminism, epistemology, master’s tools, bell hooks, Uma Narayan, ethnocentrism, axes of oppression

## 1 Introduction: Is feminism intrinsically ethnocentric?

In posing the key questions of this article – is there ethnocentrism in feminism, what is it, and, if so, what can philosophy do about it? – I must insist on some general understanding of feminism or at least invite the reader to consider a form of “mainstream” feminism against which the charges of ethnocentrism are brought. In none of the standard stories of feminism does multiculturalism or a critique of eurocentrism come entirely to the fore, a pattern already seen externally when feminism is typically noted in the back of the book in political philosophy or political science.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this relegation indicates a perpetual tension

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<sup>1</sup> For examples on introductory books on feminism relegating cultural or racial difference, or issues related to western supremacy or multiculturalism to the final pages, see Holst, *Hva er feminisme*; Walters, *Feminism*; and Gemzöe, *Feminism*. This relegation occurs despite all acknowledging criticism against a more traditional feminist narrative and state that feminism is not simply about sexual equality. The prevalence of this structure indicates that issues related to race and culture are seen as niche, not unlike how feminism is relegated to the margins in political philosophy. For examples where feminism (and

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in feminism between analyzing sexism distinctly and analyzing sexism as part of a larger framework of oppression.

First, in the following section, I give a brief overview of some general black and post-colonial feminist concerns about ethnocentrism in feminism. In Section 2, I present feminist poststructuralism as a methodological approach to analyze ethnocentrism in feminism as it appears in the works of bell hooks and Uma Narayan. I also give a brief description as to what kind of ethnocentrism feminism is accused of and argue that *latent ethnocentrism* is not a *necessary* component of feminism. In Section 3, I present the ethnocentrism charge against feminism, which I argue can be separated into two prongs – the one epistemological and the other political. In this article, I focus on the epistemological prong to investigate what the ethnocentrism problem in feminism is. In Section 4, I argue that a major issue for overcoming ethnocentrism in feminism is a mutually constitutive relationship between the epistemological and the political that I call the *episteme-politic*. Finally, I conclude that the ethnocentric problem in feminism needs to be taken seriously, as it endangers the success of the feminist project.

### 1.1 Challenges to feminism from black and post-colonial feminist philosophy

Many feminists and feminist philosophers have long acknowledged that there is or has been an ethnocentric issue in feminism and have been trying to remedy this issue. Many intersectional feminists promote a more inclusive feminism that is more sensitive to sexism as one of many axes of oppression that women face. For instance, Maggie Humm, author of *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (2005), notes in her definition of feminism that a “fundamental goal of feminist theory is to understand women’s oppression in terms of race, gender, class and sexual preference and how to change it.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, still today feminist projects, when attempting to be attentive to differences between women, are charged with ethnocentrism by failing to (properly) acknowledge the forms of oppression that different women experience.<sup>3</sup> Both black feminism and post-colonial feminism are partially founded on a protest against mainstream feminism that fails to adequately address the multifaceted oppression faced by nonwestern women and women of color.<sup>4</sup> Uma Narayan discusses these sorts of reactions from nonwestern feminists in “The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist” (2004). Nonwestern feminists are weary of help from western women and respond negatively to feminism conceived as savior, even though they oppose western women’s dismissal or minimization of their specific struggles.<sup>5</sup> The issue of ethnocentrism

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multiculturalism, separately) is added toward the end of the book in introductory works to political philosophy, see: Miller, *Political Philosophy*; Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (1996 & 2015). Academically, this example illustrates a similar indifference to cultural or racial diversity within feminism, as feminism itself meets externally in the field of political philosophy or political theory.

<sup>2</sup> Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, xii.

<sup>3</sup> In 2013, feminists from Harvard Law School and Women’s Center were mocked and criticized by the Indian activist, feminist and blogger Nivedita Menon after announcing their intent to help Indian feminists with rape violence in India (Menon, “Harvard to the Rescue!”). One might be inclined to ask why Menon was so quick to reject help from such well-connected, privileged women who have – I presume – excellent knowledge of feminist theory. It may be that the Harvard feminists had not properly recognized the work put in place by Indian women, or that Menon perceived a certain self-congratulatory attitude from the elite western women that was in bad taste, or thought that they had somehow miscalculated the value of the help they were offering in an Indian context.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the categories “women of color” and “nonwestern women” are not mutually exclusive and indeed overly general. They are only used in this article to address the way axes of oppression separate people into categories that they are consequently forced to subsume as identities in society. My use of this nomenclature should in no way suggest that white/western/Caucasian women are exempt from singularities, or that the experience of oppression by women of color or nonwestern women are all similar. It should also be noted that there are white people in nonwestern countries that may suffer from western imperialism, and that there are people of color in western countries that benefit from western imperialism. There are also those who traverse these categories.

<sup>5</sup> Narayan, “The Project of Feminist Epistemology,” 219.

has not been successfully resolved. In reading hooks and Narayan, there is a demand for mainstream feminism to adequately include nonwestern women and women of color, as well as an aversion to the kinds of inclusion that tend to occur.

Shared gender is not sufficient to overcome issues of ethnocentrism in feminism. Meyda Yeğenoğlu argues that there is a connection between western philosophical, colonial, and patriarchal discourses, in that they share certain premises, which means that seriously tackling patriarchy will necessarily involve seriously tackling colonial discourse.<sup>6</sup> She argues that an analysis that treats patriarchy and colonialism as separate issues has inherited the masculinist framework of western philosophy.<sup>7</sup> If there is a root philosophical ethnocentrism in feminism, then that problem may be more difficult to eliminate from feminism and feminist philosophy than many may have thought.

## 1.2 What is at stake for feminism?

One objection to ethnocentric charges is that feminism is a project against sexism in particular and should not be expected to grapple with race or culture as forms of oppression. Granted, it is an unfair and unrealistic standard to set for feminists to work against *all* forms of structural injustice, as if feminists were somehow held to higher moral standards than other political ideologies.<sup>8</sup> In this article, I will argue that a separation of the axes of oppression and isolation of gender or sex as the sole concern for feminism does not help the feminist cause, but rather (1) makes feminism a project for those women who *only* suffer from the gender axis of oppression and remain indifferent to the oppressions faced by women with intersectional identities, (2) makes feminism inconsistent with its goal of emancipating all women from oppression, and (3) serves to uphold what hooks calls *imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy*, and in so doing, feminism shoots itself in the foot by accepting certain epistemological categories of oppression analysis. The third point is the focus of this article and is elaborated in Sections 3 and 4. In “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles” (2003), Mohanty points out that those who are subjected to multiple axes of oppression manifest the most inclusive kind of feminism. She argues that poor nonwestern women who “bear the brunt of globalization” can see the necessity of addressing multiple axes of oppression simultaneously. For they are

the hardest hit by the degradation of environmental conditions, wars, famines, privatization of services and deregulation of governments, the dismantling of welfare states, the restructuring of paid and unpaid work, increasing surveillance and incarceration in prisons, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

It follows that a movement that aims to target only one axis of oppression is best suited for those people who experience that axis alone, and it is for the same reason that class and anti-race movements have been criticized for not taking gender into account. That which is at stake for feminism, if practiced in an ethnocentric way and if shaped by ethnocentric foundational premises, is, firstly, solidarity (a strategy issue) and, secondly, logical consistency (a consistency issue). But most importantly for this analysis, what is at stake is feminism’s emancipatory capability (a self-destructive issue), meaning whether or not feminism risks reproducing oppression in the attempt to thwart it. Shooting oneself in the foot is the threat of the master’s tools. This possible pitfall is alluded to when Mohanty states that feminists need to “examine

<sup>6</sup> Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 119.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>8</sup> Niineste articulates the exceptionally high moral standards of feminist theory: “[feminist theory] has routinely been expected to provide ‘usable’ answers to very grave practical problems, including social and global problems relating to poverty, racism, homophobia, development aid, etc. ... It is only in comparison with other disciplines that we realise that this dilemma of usefulness of theory presents itself here much more starkly than in other fields of theoretical reflection” (Niineste, “A Sisterhood of Letters,” 10).

<sup>9</sup> Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited,” 514.

the *political* implications of our *analytic* strategies and principles.”<sup>10</sup> An ethnocentric feminism risks inadvertently reproducing oppression *within* that it aims to dismantle in patriarchy (*without*).

## 2 Methodological approach to analyzing feminist ethnocentrism

When Audre Lorde wrote “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” Lorde (2003 [1983]),<sup>11</sup> she was criticizing the lip-service that white feminists pay to anti-racism without seeing racism as a feminist concern. Lorde’s words are a critique of white, western feminism, which she finds reproduce the same systems of patriarchy as they claim to oppose. Read from poststructuralist perspective, Lorde’s statement can be understood as taking issue with a feminism that does not oppose the oppressive center but wishes to be included within it. The feminist poststructuralist Chris Weedon argues that “the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male,” whereas many of women’s social and political gains have been about including women “in the rights and privileges which men have instituted to serve their own interests,”<sup>12</sup> for example, racism. With this strategy, structure that excludes is not being challenged, but expanded to include more people. But everyone cannot be included in a structure that is founded on exclusion. I will briefly present the methodology behind my investigation in three steps: first, by considering what a poststructuralist perspective adds to my investigation of ethnocentrism in feminism; and, second, by analyzing what is meant by ethnocentrism.

### 2.1 A poststructuralist perspective on feminism’s ethnocentrism problem

Feminist poststructuralism (hereafter FPS)<sup>13</sup> seeks to “deconstruct patriarchal power relations” and finds that meaning is not fixed but discursive. When there is a claim to neutrality and objectivity, there is also an exercising of power.<sup>14</sup> FPS historicizes concepts that are “otherwise treated as natural” such as man/woman or black/white.<sup>15</sup> This means that language, instead of being a representation of something, is conditional for understanding everything and anything, including institutions, social and production relations, and identity. According to the poststructuralist Jacques Derrida, we think in terms of exclusions, where meaning is achieved by establishing what it is not. When we say something by excluding what we do not say, that very exclusion is implied in, and thereby included in, what we are saying.<sup>16</sup> Derrida’s notion of *différance* describes the mechanism by which meaning is produced by difference from other terms, or signs, and deferral, which is difference from past and future meanings of the sign.<sup>17</sup> Meaning is made by contrast, and by the fact that it is impossible to assert anything positively – all by itself – without distinguishing it from other things. In addition to analyzing patriarchy and racism, FPS also allows feminists to look at what power-mechanisms take place within feminism.

<sup>10</sup> Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 64.

<sup>11</sup> Lorde, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” 25–28.

<sup>12</sup> Weedon, *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Books on FPS tend to follow the same trend as introductory books on feminism, where issues tied to race and culture are often treated as afterthoughts, such as Weedon, *Feminism and Poststructuralism*; Elam, *Feminist and Deconstruction*; and Papadelos, *From Revolution to Deconstruction*.

<sup>14</sup> Weedon, *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory*, 171.

<sup>15</sup> Scott, “Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference,” 34.

<sup>16</sup> “Apophatism” is the technical term to describe definition by negation and is often used when trying to explain or define something ineffable, such as in negative theology. Examples in philosophy are Anaximander’s *apeiron*, Plato’s *Parmenides*, and Plotinus’ *the One*.

<sup>17</sup> Weedon, *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory*, 25.

Some feminist philosophers find that FPS is a problematic methodology.<sup>18</sup> For example, Lena Petrović credits deconstruction as a tool to see ways in which repressive ideologies control its subjects, but does not find that deconstruction can lead to any emancipation, because that would require the establishment of a new kind of repressive structure.<sup>19</sup> Patricia Hill-Collins argues that theories that perceive race as a “social construction” are too abstracted from reality in ways that are not useful for African Americans, who face issues such as voting rights and infant mortality.<sup>20</sup> However, I think that feminist poststructuralist challenges to conventional concepts that reveal implicit biases can contribute to a productive analysis of ethnocentrism in feminism. Poststructuralism is useful for this discussion in part because of its use in exposing ethnocentric assumptions in work which claims to be universal and neutral.<sup>21</sup> Derrida’s objection to the circular project of using tools from that which one refutes is strikingly similar to the position of Audre Lorde:

Derrida would have none of this. In his opinion, to exploit the relative efficacy of these terms in order to destroy the old machinery to which they belong and of which they are themselves pieces is by definition a self-defeating project.<sup>22</sup>

Analyzing the question of ethnocentrism in feminism through an FPS lens proves fruitful and not antithetical to hooks or Narayan. Of contemporary black feminism scholars in the United States, hooks was one of very few who advocated for the usefulness of postmodern thought for black liberation.<sup>23</sup> Narayan, however, is influenced by feminist standpoint epistemology, which is derived from Marxist thought.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, I find that her writings play into an FPS framework, especially because of her focus on the harms of universalization, essentialism, oppression, and paternalism. They both connect feminist ethnocentrism to an epistemological framework that comes from the western philosophical canon and argue that the ethnocentric praxis reveals itself in the political manifestation of feminism. Despite differences, their positions share certain important features, which I believe support the validity of their work.

## 2.2 What kind of ethnocentrism is feminism accused of?

The philosopher María Lugones describes ethnocentrism as believing in the superiority of one’s own culture.<sup>25</sup> But ethnocentrism can also occur when evaluating other cultures by using our own culture as the reference point. I find that this distinction between normative, or otherwise overt, ethnocentrism, such as fascism, and simply descriptive ethnocentrism is too restrictive for the charge of ethnocentrism against feminism. Racist feminism is possible and does occur. It is possible to hold racist and feminist sentiments at

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism;” Alcoff, “Why Coherence?;” Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology;” Longino, “Subjects, Power and Knowledge;” and Fraser, “False Antithesis” for criticisms of FPS. Note that some of these criticize postmodernism, a term often conflated with poststructuralism.

<sup>19</sup> Petrović, “Remembering and Dismembering,” 91.

<sup>20</sup> Hill-Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida was concerned with ethnocentrism in philosophy and European self-critique. In “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” (1978 [1967]), Derrida critiques Claude Lévi-Strauss’ attempt in *The Savage Mind* (1966) to find something universal for all human beings. Lévi-Strauss maintained that all humans classify and order the world around them (*The Savage Mind*, 15). As Lévi-Strauss denounces ethnocentrism by acknowledging the values of other cultures, he simultaneously “accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism” because he uses key signifiers of the “modern science” of his own culture to do so (Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences,” 283).

<sup>22</sup> Petrović, “Remembering and Dismembering,” 92.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, hooks, “Essentialism and Experience;” hooks, “Postmodern Blackness.” Weedon also notes that hooks speaks favorably of FPS (*Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory*, 177).

<sup>24</sup> Feminist post-colonialists generally have a much closer relation to the French philosophical and literary tradition than Anglo-American intellectuals. Several well-known feminist post-colonialists such as Gayatri Spivak, Meyda Yeğenoğlu, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Jasbir Puar are influenced by poststructuralism.

<sup>25</sup> Lugones, “Hablando Cara a Cara/Speaking Face to Face,” 48.

the same time, and feminism may even seem less threatening for patriarchal society if it is paired with racism.<sup>26</sup> But “indifference” can also be a form of ethnocentrism.<sup>27</sup> The implicit assumption of the superiority of the Self may even be unbeknownst to the Self or unintended.

In *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), Trinh T. Mihn-ha explains that the self is a necessary precondition for meaning, and that all meaning is entangled in self and Othering. Meaning is created ethnocentrically because it takes as its center and point of reference this Self. As Mihn-ha writes, “The search for meaning will always arrive at a meaning through I.”<sup>28</sup> This necessary form of epistemological ethnocentrism, where the “I” is a precondition for meaning, was articulated in Nietzsche’s essay “Truth And Falsity In An Extra-Moral Sense” (1993 [1873]), where he argued that all language is a metaphor and all words are androcentric generalizations.<sup>29</sup> I call this *necessary ethnocentrism*, in contrast to overt ethnocentrism such as racism, colonialism, imperialism, and fascism. In its most primordial form, ethnocentrism merely gives the insight that all meaning takes some form of self as reference point and is a commonality for all forms of ethnocentrism in varying extents or whether western or nonwestern. Some basic form of ethnocentrism is necessary for knowledge and construction of meaning. As such, *necessary ethnocentrism* is not really up for normative debate, regardless of its western or nonwestern status. But the ethnocentrism problem in feminism is more normatively problematic than *necessary ethnocentrism* and not reducible to feminist racism or feminist fascism.

I maintain, therefore, that there exists a form of ethnocentrism that goes beyond *necessary ethnocentrism* and is subtler than xenophobia or overt ethnocentrism, and which I call *latent ethnocentrism*. *Latent ethnocentrism* is a middle ground between the two and includes indifference toward others – whether it is a known and intended indifference or an ignorant and unintended indifference – and notions of superiority of the group-Self. It is a *status quo*-ethnocentrism that covertly permeates knowledge production under the guise of normalcy. It is latent, but it is amendable. One does not necessarily consciously choose to act or speak in structurally ethnocentric ways, but it is not a necessary condition. Because it is not necessary, it is also subject to normative evaluation and political powers that reduce or augment it. Efforts are needed to change this *latent ethnocentrism*, which may explain why this form of ethnocentrism is so widespread. The harmful issues that accompany *latent ethnocentrism* are treatable by tempering *latent ethnocentrism*.

However, latent ethnocentrism can also be hard to identify and to avoid for unintentional perpetrators in feminism. I find it useful to think about *latent ethnocentrism* much like structures of consumerism and global capitalism. Certainly, individual decision-making may impact the growth or recession of consumerism and global capitalism, but to reduce solution-making strategies to individual choice is to misunderstand the construction of the problem entirely, namely that the powers of the free market are valued above basic human rights.

*Latent ethnocentrism* is distinct from what I have called *necessary ethnocentrism* that is constitutive for knowledge production, unavoidable, and descriptive and *overt ethnocentrism*, such as fascism. Latent ethnocentrism goes beyond what is necessary for the simple constitution of meaning, by for instance inappropriately implying a white Self in diverse contexts and thus exposing an indifference toward those who do not participate in the referential use of that Self or who do not share the issues at hand, nor support their political prioritization for feminism. *Latent ethnocentrism* also uses a Self as reference point for

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<sup>26</sup> In *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*, (hooks, 1997) argued that superstar Madonna (Madonna Louise Ciccone) was a feminist not despite her racist remarks and attitudes, but that her feminism was permissible over time in the patriarchal mainstream *because* of her racism. To maintain her superstar status in a society with oppressive structures that she had challenged by her feminist stance, hooks explained, Madonna supported other axes of oppression to limit her danger to the *status quo*.

<sup>27</sup> Lugones, “Hablando Cara a Cara/Speaking Face to Face,” 48.

<sup>28</sup> Mihn-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 70.

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, “Truth And Falsity In An Extra-Moral Sense.” Nietzsche has been identified as the first philosopher to attempt to do justice to difference and criticized eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking, which held that things could be objectively named (Hermesen, “Now Foolish Then Wise,” 169).

meaning-making, but does so at the expense of others or by disregarding their experiences. Linda Alcoff provides a good example:

White support for antiracism is often similarly flawed: riven with supremacist pretensions and an extension at times of the colonizer's privilege to decide the true, the just, and the culturally valuable.<sup>30</sup>

Alcoff describes the well-meaning westerner who fails to recognize that understanding racism by employing white/western situated knowledge might not be suitable. Alcoff's white supporter of antiracism illuminates an important feature of ethnocentrism; one which is not best examined through a dichotomous framework of whether something is or is not ethnocentric. *Latent ethnocentrism* in feminism becomes apparent in the perpetual, structural prioritization of the oppression of those who suffer from singular axes of oppression, such as sex, and the perpetual, structural disregard of the differing oppressions of those who suffer from multiple axes of oppression.

In this article, the specific form of *latent ethnocentrism* that feminism is charged with is eurocentrism.<sup>31</sup> Western ethnocentrism – or *eurocentrism* – is of a different global significance than that of other cultures' ethnocentrism due to colonial history, global capitalism, and the flow of feminist theory from the West to the "peripheries," which disregards theory produced in nonwestern cultures.<sup>32</sup> Eurocentrism has had and continues to have large amounts of influence on nonwestern societies, while the opposite does not occur to the same extent.<sup>33</sup> *Eurocentrism* specifically describes latent western ethnocentrism that inappropriately takes the norms of the West as Self, such as whiteness. Eurocentrism is the particular form of feminism's western (more specifically western European or Anglo-American) ethnocentrism. This *latent ethnocentrism* is the ethnocentrism that I take as the basis for this analysis, and the basis for the accusations against feminism from black and post-colonial feminism. *Latent ethnocentrism* in feminism is ethnocentrism that goes beyond what is necessary for reference points of meaning and harmful to feminist solidarity in struggle against oppression.

### 3 The epistemological prong of the ethnocentrism charge

In this section, I argue that there is something about our epistemological framework that supports ethnocentric expression in feminism. First, I contend that latent ethnocentrism is not necessary to feminism, nor is it an occasional or accidental issue in feminism but an epistemological issue. Second, I examine how epistemology affects the political. By looking at hooks' interlocking axes-model through a poststructuralist lens, I argue that western metaphysics forms the basis of an epistemology that has resounding effects in feminist politics. I will present a reading of hooks' argument where ethnocentric feminism is not simply self-contradictory if one is concerned with justice, but it is also counterproductive because the structures of domination that produce sexism are supported by the conceptual separation of sexism and racism. I maintain that this epistemological framework affects feminist politics in a counterproductive way. The

<sup>30</sup> Alcoff, "What Should White People Do?," 262–3.

<sup>31</sup> I often use the term ethnocentrism instead of eurocentrism to highlight that it is not simply eurocentrism that is problematic, although eurocentrism is the ethnocentric case I discuss in this article. There are certainly questions to be asked about whether certain types of feminism can be ethnocentric in ways that are nonwestern, that is, not specifically eurocentric.

<sup>32</sup> See Roberts and Connell, "Feminist Theory and the Global South," for an account of how knowledge production in academia flows from the West, and that theory produced in nonwestern societies is not read by westerners, while the opposite is often required. See Pettersen, "Less Travelled Texts," for an account of a similar structure within academia concerning gender, and the academic preference for texts written by men and in the center over texts written by women and in the periphery.

<sup>33</sup> Engaging in European self-critique does not mean that the imperialist ethnocentric behavior of others is not problematic, such as Chinese economic imperialism. The difference between eurocentrism and other kinds of ethnocentrism, such as national resistance movements in post-colonial countries, are also of importance. One can distinguish between an offensive ethnocentrism, which is perpetuated by dominant groups in order to serve their interests, and defensive ethnocentrism, which is a form of resistance and self-preservation as a response to, for instance, imperialism.

heritage of western metaphysics has produced concepts that define the way we think, and which extends to feminist thinking as well. bell hooks and Uma Narayan have both argued that there is eurocentrism in mainstream feminism. According to my analysis, they argue that there is a structural *latent ethnocentrism* in feminism. I will demonstrate why ethnocentric feminism cannot dismantle the master's house. It might, as Lorde states, have effects in the short term, but not the long haul.

Sometimes, it is difficult to make the distinction between the political and the epistemological, since the political requires an epistemic position and the epistemic in turn requires a political position. However, I divide the charge of ethnocentrism into two prongs: *epistemological* and *political*. It is important to investigate not only whether feminism's political work is ethnocentric, but also whether the epistemological framework behind it is ethnocentric and may be a cause of its political ethnocentrism. hooks articulates this relation between the epistemological and the political when she writes,

The foundation of future feminist struggle must be solidly based on recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression. Without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have long-range impact.<sup>34</sup>

The first sentence expresses a need for a specific construction of political struggle, namely that it must found itself on the erasure of causes of oppression, which is not an exclusive focus on sexism. The second sentence addresses the philosophical structures behind such a political construction and a need to challenge these as epistemological *causes* of feminist ethnocentrism.

### 3.1 Feminism is not inherently ethnocentric

It is important to establish that feminism is not intrinsically ethnocentric, that *latent ethnocentrism* is not foundational to feminism, and that there is something that can be done to eradicate latent ethnocentrism from feminism. When it comes to non-ethnocentric feminism, hooks believes that anyone can take a political stance against “sexist, racist, heterosexist, and classist oppression” and choose to focus on any particular issue in that struggle. For her, feminism is not “simply a struggle to end male chauvinism” or to ensure equal rights with men. Instead, it is a “commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels.”<sup>35</sup> She argues that the ways in which women analyze their personal woes in the private sphere is what makes or unmakes a feminist. Understanding the issues that women face systematically and not in terms of personal grievances makes an analysis a feminist one and may incite solidarity to work toward the dismantling of unjust social orders.

In her book *Dislocating Cultures* (1997), Narayan uses the idea of feminism as methodology to argue that feminism is not inherently western. Based on various women's movements around the world, Narayan finds that “*political connections* to other women and their experiences” are necessary for feminism, along with political analyses of their problems and attempts at finding political solutions to those problems.<sup>36</sup> She holds that post-colonial feminism is not a western infiltrator or colonial heritage, but a mode of thinking that is not owned by or derived from any culture. This mode of thinking is feminist but not culture-specific in that (A) it brings the discourse out of the private sphere and into “*general concern and public debate*,” (B) it does this in “*terms of analysis*” and “*explanatory accounts*” that differ from non-feminist analysis, which often uses apolitical terms of analysis, and (C) it concerns women's situations within specific contexts [Narayan's italics].<sup>37</sup> In contrast to those who explain the suffering of women in terms of being unfortunate and being victims of immoral others, Narayan claims that feminists, such as herself, look toward the

<sup>34</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory, From Margin to Center*, 33.

<sup>35</sup> hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, 194–195.

<sup>36</sup> Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



“systemic and systematic nature of the problems.”<sup>38</sup> There isn’t anything essentially or intrinsically western about that, she argues. Epistemologically, this feminism-as-method takes experience as a source of knowledge. Narayan and hooks both maintain that feminism is not intrinsically or fundamentally ethnocentric or eurocentric. The problem is that feminism often plays out in eurocentric ways. If latent ethnocentrism is not necessary, then *why* does feminism seem to have an ethnocentric problem? hooks and Narayan often invoke western philosophy as the source of this problem.

### 3.2 Feminism’s metaphysical heritage: Difference and devaluation

Feminism’s epistemological framework is influenced by western philosophical metaphysics, which makes it difficult for feminists to perceive ethnocentric structures in feminism. Metaphysical presumptions in western epistemology affect how we think of oppression, and they can have consequences for how feminism operates in ethnocentric ways. We think of oppression as restrictive social structures that inhibit people’s freedom unjustly. We separate forms of oppression conceptually into different “axes” of oppression, such as sexism, racism, imperialism, capitalism and class struggle, as well as ageism, discrimination against disability, sexuality, and so forth. hooks claims that the separation of these axes of oppression such as racism and sexism stems from western metaphysical dualism. Herein lies the epistemological ethnocentrism that constructs a norm, post-structurally understood, which is upheld by peripheral deviants. hooks maintains that there is in western culture an “ideology of domination” that is informed by western philosophy and the derived belief that “the superior should control the inferior.”<sup>39</sup> She writes:

The sexism, racism, and classism that exist in the West may resemble systems of domination globally, but they are forms of oppression that have been primarily informed by Western philosophy. ... Within our society, all forms of oppression are supported by traditional Western thinking.<sup>40</sup>

These philosophical foundations of binaries and hierarchies make it possible to separate axes of oppression. Sexism and racism are dualistic ways of asserting people as Other from the norm of our world, which is the white male. The separation of these axes of oppression are made possible by binaries with allegiance to the norm, which obscure the interlocked nature of the axes and which culminate in an ethnocentric structure for the benefit of the western patriarch. In *Writing Beyond Race, Living Theory and Practice* (2013), hooks writes:

Meaningful resistance to dominator culture demands of all of us a willingness to accurately identify the various systems that work together to promote injustice, exploitation, and oppression. To name interlocking systems of domination is one way to disrupt our wrongminded reliance on dualistic thinking. Highlighted, these interlocking systems tend to indict us all in some way, making it impossible for any of us to claim that we are absolutely and always victims, calling attention to the reality of our accountability, however relative.<sup>41</sup>

By seeing the axes as interlocking instead of each separately related to the norm, hooks can make the claim that racism is as much of a feminist issue as sexism. Her objection to the axes-model of oppression is motivated by the consequences of separating axes of oppression from one another. In “Gendered Reason: Sex Metaphor and Conceptions of Reason” (1991), the feminist philosopher Phyllis Rooney investigates reason by a genealogy of metaphors that explain reason in gendered fashion, and that works to exclude

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Dualisms are prevalent in many cultures and often serve patriarchal systems in eastern civilizations as well. For instance, the Ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius’ five cardinal relationships are based on a hierarchical dualism where the stronger part rules over the weaker part.

<sup>40</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory, From Margin to Center*, 36.

<sup>41</sup> hooks, *Writing Beyond Race, Living Theory and Practice*, 37.

groups of people.<sup>42</sup> I find that her argument about the double-edged sword of metaphors supports hooks' claim that the axes-metaphor obscures the interlocking feature of different forms of oppression. According to Rooney, metaphors may seem like they provide clarity, but instead, they give an even more distorted picture of reality by homogenizing differences.<sup>43</sup> Metaphors will enhance, select, and suppress some aspects and organize features to fit into the metaphor-image. And so much so that a metaphor may turn into a "*self-certifying myth*" because it has an effect on how we understand the world.<sup>44</sup> If we believe the myth that the axes of oppression can be separated from one another, we will come to form our world around that belief and also our resistance.

There is much evidence to support hooks' claims about oppression being supported by canonical western philosophy,<sup>45</sup> which starts early on with a devaluation of difference. Instead of the cloak of neutrality that western philosophy often dons, many feminist philosophers argue that western philosophy values perceived "masculine" qualities over perceived "feminine" ones. The gendering of qualities is made particularly explicit in the Pythagorean table of opposites. Pythagoras preceded Socrates and influenced Plato and Aristotle, and thereby also a large part of western philosophy. His table of opposites has demonstrated the devaluation of sexual difference in western philosophy:<sup>46</sup>

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Limited [Bounded]	Unlimited [Unbounded]
Odd	Even
One [Determinate Form]	Many [Indeterminate Form]
Right	Left
Male	Female
Resting	Moving
Straight	Curved
Light [Clear]	Darkness [Vague]
Good	Bad
Square	Oblong

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The qualities in the column on the left seem to confirm to a standard of the norm, whereas the qualities in the column on the right differ from it. These two columns are, besides being gendered, also explicitly linked to normative values. Difference is not merely descriptive, but always contrasted with something that is thereby established as the norm. In line with this interpretation, the feminist philosopher and ethicist Sabina Lovibond argues that this organization also means that the differing is marked via a hierarchical relation to sameness and to the male, whereas qualities such as difference and the feminine occupy a lower

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<sup>42</sup> Rooney, "Gendered Reason," 77. Rooney analyzes several historical metaphors that explain or invoke reason – often in a gendered contrast to emotion – from prominent and influential philosophers such as Plato, Pythagoras, Aristotle, Augustine, Descartes, Hume, Rousseau, Locke, Kant, and Hegel. She questions whether our understanding of reason is separate from these metaphors that defend the very validity of reason, highlighting its impartiality, neutrality, abstraction, and universality, and that is derived from a gendered dichotomy. In this way, the construction of the notion of "reason" is based on an implied and assumed "natural" and unquestioned gender hierarchy that serves as an affirmation of the value, strength, and importance of reason itself. This understanding of metaphors illustrates a serious problem for the impartiality of reason.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 87. Rooney employs a chess-metaphor to demonstrate this distortion, which she credits to Max Black. In order to describe a battle between people by using the metaphor of a game of chess, several important aspects of war such as death and despair are suppressed in favor of other aspects such as strategy. It also gives the impression that there are two opposing teams with opposing interests, who internally share the same interest. In a war between people, this may be far from reality.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 87–8.

<sup>45</sup> Much like my generalization of feminism, I rely on a generalization of western philosophy for the sake of analysis. I do not do this to purposefully discount the many various strands of western philosophy that do not correspond to its general representation. By using this generalization to make claims on the pervasiveness of dualisms, I follow in the poststructuralist tradition.

<sup>46</sup> The table is discussed in Lovibond, "An Ancient Theory of Gender," but originally retrieved from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 986a22. I have added alternative translations in brackets for nuance.

hierarchical position.<sup>47</sup> Although feminism has long been critical of this devaluation of difference, hooks is not convinced that feminism has managed to overcome its philosophical heritage. I argue that her interlocking axes-model of oppression demonstrates how this philosophical heritage produces *latent ethnocentrism* in feminism.

hooks' claims about the "ideology of domination" center on her view that each axis of oppression is a devalued difference from the norm, much like in Pythagoras' table of opposites. In other words, these differences are not simply innocent complementary contrasts, but are instead value-based and hierarchical. My interpretation of hooks' argument finds that the metaphysical presumptions of the division of axes affect how we think of oppression in ways that do not support feminist purposes. In general, feminism is concerned with sexism as a form of oppression. hooks argues that this understanding of feminism as sexist oppression is ethnocentric, because it first and foremost pertains to the experiences of white women, who are able to isolate gender as a singular axis of oppression. It is "ethnocentric white values," hooks writes, that have constructed within feminism a "priority of sexism over racism," one which does not reflect the reality of lived experience for women suffering from racist as well as sexist oppressions.<sup>48</sup> For this to be accurate, I will add that this would be correct for middle- and upper-class white women, who are also able to ignore class as a form of oppression, since they are positioned at the privileging end of class oppression. For women of color and often for nonwestern women it is not necessarily useful to separate sexism from racism or imperialism because their lived experiences of oppression cannot neatly be separated from one another into different axes. A feminism, therefore, that serves the interests of women of color would not be concerned with sexism as a *primary* form of oppression, but rather as one of several interlocked axes of oppression, which does not occupy a position of constant primacy over the other in all circumstances.

The language that separates racism from sexism is misleading if the axes of oppression are intertwined. Despite her objections, hooks does define feminism as "a movement to end sexist oppression," simply put.<sup>49</sup> Read charitably, this is not a contradiction from the view that centering sexism above other axes in feminism is ethnocentric. From hooks' texts, I have found that a feminism that only focuses on sexism as an axis of analysis is a feminism that undermines its own efforts as feminism. The prioritization of sexism is made possible by the conceptual separation of the axes of oppression under the "ideology of domination." One of hooks' main and recurring arguments in the many texts she has written on sexism and racism over the period of several decades is that conceptually dividing oppression into axes leads feminists to think that they can be treated separately. In *Writing Beyond Race, Living Theory and Practice*, for example, hooks wrote that "[...] challenging patriarchy will not bring an end to dominator culture as long as the other interlocking systems remain in place."<sup>50</sup> The unquestioning acceptance of different axes of oppression actually inhibits an understanding of the overall interlocking oppressive structure and makes it all the more difficult to dismantle it.

Because the system in its entirety is based on upholding the norm, and due to the Othering of those who differ from the norm, any feminist struggle for the eradication of sexism will be limited as long as that basic structure is maintained. The basic structure of Othering will remain, and so will the basic structure of the norm, because it is established by the periphery. In order to capture this structure in her language, hooks develops the term *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* to describe more precisely the "ideology of domination" that encompasses multiple axes of oppression, in an attempt to provide "a way to think about the interlocking systems that work together to uphold and maintain cultures of domination."<sup>51</sup> *Imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* benefits from the division of axes of oppression and seeks to maintain obscurity by allowing aspects of the system to be challenged separately, both

<sup>47</sup> Lovibond, "An Ancient Theory of Gender," 97.

<sup>48</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory, From Margin to Center*, 53.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>50</sup> hooks, *Writing Beyond Race, Living Theory and Practice*, 36.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

conceptually and temporally.<sup>52</sup> Different struggles are even pitted against one another, hooks argues, such as the race for suffrage between black and women's liberation in the nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup>

Emancipation strategies that conceptually separate the axes of oppression will support the *status quo* of white supremacy. These interlocking systems – imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy – depend on and sustain one another:

Since dominator culture relies on interlocking systems (imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy) to sustain itself, it seeks to cover up the connections between these systems. Or it allows for only one aspect of the system to be challenged at a time: for example, allowing anti-racist critiques while silencing anti-capitalist or anti-sexist voices.<sup>54</sup>

I find it is helpful to think of the ideology of domination as a many-legged stool. Imagine a stool with an ability to regrow new legs, in which each leg represents an axis of oppression and the seat of the stool represents the established norm. If this stool had three legs, attacking just one leg – say, sexism – will be enough to topple the stool for good. Since the stool has many legs, in this case as many legs as there are axes of oppression, the stool will have many other legs to stand on while the one is under siege. This type of “divide and conquer” strategy serves to strengthen the *status quo* of the ideology of domination. In this vein, hooks writes that feminism needs to be “based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression.” It is the causes, and not so much the effects of oppression, that hooks wants feminism to tackle, which echoes Lorde's paradigm of the master's tools: “Without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have long-range impact.”<sup>55</sup>

Related to this problem is the way in which the idea of feminist liberation takes inspiration from the status of the norm. According to hooks, it is a mistake to think that sexism can be eradicated by a “movement that aims to make women the social equals of men,” because men are not equal either.<sup>56</sup> Black men, for instance, are not equal to white men in the United States, and nor are working-class men equal to upper-class men. On the one hand, there is no “liberation” for black women to become the equals of black men because black men are also oppressed. On the other hand, hooks argues that, if feminism is about making women equal to men, and especially white men, feminists have made a goal for themselves that involves the domination of others, because the status of men in the *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* relies on domination. Insofar as feminist projects base their ideas of emancipation and freedom on the norm, who appears to embody freedom, then domination and oppression of others will necessarily be part and parcel of that kind of freedom. hooks' project is very much an attempt at saving feminism from this ethnocentric pitfall of the master's tools in which liberation is equated with a status that requires the domination of others. If women's liberation is measured by measuring a woman's ability to fare in the world like an upper-class white male, then, in hooks' view, feminism will not be an anti-oppressive politic. Emancipation without domination requires the production of a new societal structure without relying on the master's tools.

The inheritance of metaphysics as an epistemological tool in feminism has perhaps made it difficult for feminists to perceive the ethnocentric structures that they perpetuate. The epistemological framework affects the political. Because the epistemological framework is tied up in metaphysical dualisms, language – which operates as a generator of metaphor and reflects these dualisms – shapes our conception of reality in a way that can produce misguided directions for the political. The feminist and physicist Evelyn Fox Keller argued that language, images, and metaphors “can become hardened into a kind of reality.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, the meanings of these ideas contribute to shape our understanding, instead of simply

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>53</sup> hooks, *Ain't I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, 126.

<sup>54</sup> hooks, *Writing Beyond Race, Living Theory and Practice*, 34.

<sup>55</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory, From Margin to Center*, 33.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>57</sup> Keller, “Gender and Science,” 78.

articulating our understanding. hooks' interlocking axes-model is an example of the effects that language-as-metaphor can have on feminist politics, for instance when feminism tackles sexism as a sole axis. hooks' arguments have demonstrated that, when feminism works with a concept of sexism as an axis of oppression that is separable from other interlocking axes, feminist politics ends up serving the agenda of the "ideology of domination." hooks strives to correct this issue by urging her readers to see the interlocking feature of the axes and to challenge that way of understanding oppression. In the next section, I will argue that the political in turn influences the epistemological, and that this has consequences for feminism insofar as feminism is an attempt at emancipation.

## 4 The political effects on feminist epistemology

Narayan's work may be read as an intersocietal critique on a global scale, whereas hooks' work is an intra-societal critique, albeit with an outward global awareness. These two different perspectives are in one sense strikingly similar. Both hooks and Narayan are concerned that our language, which informs our epistemology, serves the agendas of those who are already powerful. I have argued that epistemology influences politics, and that western metaphysical dualism allows feminists to think in terms of isolated axes of oppression. These ways of thinking in turn have consequences for the ways in which political struggle is made. In this section, I argue that the political has an effect on epistemology in return. Specifically, I will examine how political agendas affect our epistemological tools, such as the hierarchy of dualisms. I draw on Narayan and her destabilization of what I call the West/rest-dichotomy to support my argument that dualisms serve norm-upholding political agendas, and that challenging the devaluation of one side of the dualism will nevertheless help to maintain the dualism. I contend that our language and the political agendas that produce ethnocentrism in feminism exist in a mutually constitutive relation to one another that makes alternative politics and epistemology difficult to establish, a function which I call the *episteme-politic*. Even resistance projects like feminism are not immune from the effects that this doubly affective structure has for the relation between the political and the epistemological, the *episteme-politic*.

### 4.1 Destabilizing the West-and-the-rest dichotomy

Narayan exposes the incoherence of Othering binaries by pointing out inconsistencies in the West's portrayal of itself in these dualisms, and in the West's selective understanding of its Others that ignores similarities between western and nonwestern cultures. In *Dislocating Cultures* (1997), Narayan warns against understanding terms such as "westernization" and "cultural preservation" as what she calls "innocuous descriptive terms."<sup>58</sup> These are not neutral or innocent terms with no power or harmful effects. The notion of "westernization" originates from a binary understanding of cultures constructed during colonial times, which pits the view of the colonizer against the view of the colonized, usually in terms of the colonizers' supposed historical progress and the ahistorical and static culture of the colonized.<sup>59</sup> In this manner, the use of "westernization" perpetuates old and problematic colonial notions of "progress," "civilization," and "culture." This language served to justify colonialization. To destabilize this dichotomy, Narayan demonstrates that what is western and what is nonwestern is difficult to establish, because things originate in one place and become appropriated within another culture. Therefore, the language that insists on the West/rest-dichotomy informs the way we think by benefitting the hidden political agendas of those in power.

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<sup>58</sup> Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*, ix.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

In her article “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism” (1998), Narayan points out that values such as “equality” and “human rights” are often hailed as western, which leads people to what Narayan argues are false conclusions about eurocentrism.<sup>60</sup> Why are notions such as equality and human rights particularly western, Narayan asks, when the historical reality is that “[w]estern doctrines of equality and rights” coexisted for a long time alongside the western perpetuation of slavery, colonialism, patriarchy, and internal discrimination against minorities.<sup>61</sup> Western civilization has a consistent history of *not* championing these rights for anyone other than the middle/upper-class white male in its own societies. According to Yeğenoğlu, these dichotomies serve to identify the West with the universal, and they perpetuate an essentialist view of the East and West as “constitutively contrary and profoundly different.”<sup>62</sup> The “profound *similarities*” between the West and the rest, such as “hierarchical social systems, huge economic disparities between members, and the mistreatment and inequality of women,” were systematically disregarded in the making of the western/nonwestern dualism [Narayan’s italics].<sup>63</sup> Genealogies of concepts, objects, ideas, and practices often expose the ambiguity that dualisms cover up: “Entities of non-European origin that have been assimilated into “western culture” over time include items as disparate as gunpowder, compasses, Christianity, and coffee.” Certainly, the origin of something does not determine its cultural significance or “limit its *scope of relevance*” [Narayan’s italics].<sup>64</sup> If notions such as equality and rights did in fact originate in what is now Europe, and nowhere else – which would be very difficult to prove – the West can hardly lay unique claim to these concepts and ideas. Whether by appropriation or by discovery of their own, other cultures will also have relations to these ideas. The insistence on difference between western and nonwestern cultures, Narayan argues, is the result of an unquestioning acceptance of the very dualisms that rely on cultural homogeneity and have been used to justify western colonialism.<sup>65</sup>

To demonstrate the homogenization of culture that takes place in the Othering of the nonwestern, Narayan invokes a metaphor of culture and history as pictures. The still-frames obscure the movement and historicity within culture and history, together with the fact that they, the pictures, are mere representations, rather than the “natural givens” that they suggest. Narayan’s use of this picture-metaphor is useful because a picture is a still-frame without movement, which makes it hard for the onlooker to see what is represented as “the historical inventions and constructions that they are.” The pictures do not present the “economic and political agendas” that stand behind the wish to “return to past traditions.”<sup>66</sup> Narayan’s point is that feminists will create better theory if they are able to see beyond an ethnocentric lens. I think that this reaction against ethnocentrism is not a claim of objective truth, but rather a call to become more aware of one’s own situatedness *in relation to others* and the normative implications of these relations. Nor is it cultural relativism, because it does not involve a valueless or merely descriptive observation of other cultures. It rather includes an awareness of other modes of discourses and a drive to figure out what agendas are served by those modes of discourses.

## 4.2 Dualisms represent political agendas

In this section, I will argue that politics and power dynamics influence the epistemological, or, in other words, they influence the way we understand our world. In this sense, epistemology cannot be removed

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<sup>60</sup> Narayan’s criticism is directed at Adamantia Pollis and Peter Schwab, who argued in 1979 that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an imposition of western values on nonwestern cultures. Narayan argues that their argument is based on cultural essentialism.

<sup>61</sup> Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History,” 97.

<sup>62</sup> Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 104.

<sup>63</sup> Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History,” 90.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>66</sup> Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*, 21.

from these dynamics of power. Even resistance to the “ideology of domination” is impacted by the way epistemology is affected. In the previous section, I discussed Narayan’s arguments to show that dichotomous differences are presented in such a way that implies that they are “pre-given and prediscursively ‘real’”<sup>67</sup> and merely describe natural givens instead of constructs. The particular danger of discursively reiterating essentialist differences such as the western and nonwestern is that it shapes people’s self-understanding. Narayan holds that discourses about these differences “often operate to conceal their role in the production and reproduction of such ‘differences,’” whereas the discourse is part of their construction and perpetuation. In this sense, these discourses are not merely descriptive.<sup>68</sup> Instead, these conceptual differences are conflated with reality. The hierarchical metaphysical substructure of these terms perpetuates the sense of western superiority, which in turn justified colonialism and functioned as a rationale for imperialism. The political, understood as the “ideology of dominance,” has had an immeasurably significant impact on our epistemological tools.

The political impact on epistemological tools concerns the way that political agendas uphold essentialist dichotomies that work in their favor. According to hooks and Narayan, this impact is harmful. Firstly, as hooks and Narayan have illustrated, western dualisms make essentialist claims about gender, racial, and cultural identities. These essentialisms establish a norm, from which the Others differ. The norm is the upper/middle-class white western male. The norm, which is presented as both neutral *and* superior at once, establishes an ethnocentric epistemological standard, with which all other identities are compared, and that leads to structural ethnocentrism based on how alike to the norm one’s identity qualifies. The second reason for hooks and Narayan’s claim that western dualisms are harmful is because several western dualisms serve patriarchal and western imperialist political agendas both in the West and globally. Perhaps not all westerners are imperialist in mind, but most of western civilization benefits from this imperialism. The heritage of western philosophy has ethnocentric consequences for feminism because it accepts and uses imperialist categories, which categorizes and prioritizes the anti-oppression focus of feminism.

Even resistance is inundated with politically affected epistemological foundations. Feminism, even in its patriarchy-resisting liberatory ways, cannot get away from these ethnocentric thought-mechanisms. In an article called “Colonialism and Its Others: Considerations on Rights and Care Discourses” (1995), Narayan explains that these ethnocentric foundations may limit feminism:

The alternative moral visions of the agency of women or of the colonized that developed in such political contestations, though they challenge the moral picture of the world held by the powerful, are not themselves immune to creating or reinforcing other relationships of power.<sup>69</sup>

What Narayan is saying here is that the context in which liberation projects emerge – feminist or nationalist – often lead to the perpetuation of power-structures that can be oppressive. This is correct even in the politics of resistance for feminism. This also means that even attempts to alter devaluations by working to increase the valuation of the lesser part of dualisms are not enough to dismantle the structures that serve these agendas. For instance, all Othered identities such as woman, black, and nonwestern are defined by their relation to the members of the dominant group. Many groups of people are, and were in colonial times, “normatively defined in terms of their relationships as inferiors and subordinates vis-à-vis members of dominant groups.”<sup>70</sup> Even the positive acclamation of one’s designed identity is an acceptance of the identity that fortifies the norm. The circular model of this reciprocal fortifying-relation between the epistemological and the political *status quo* can explain why it is so difficult to resist without using the master’s tools. This mutually affective relationship makes sure that metaphysical dualisms create an epistemological

<sup>67</sup> Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History,” 88.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 88–9.

<sup>69</sup> Narayan, “Colonialism and Its Others,” 137.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

foundation that is used for oppression *and* liberation, but a liberation that rests on the very same epistemological foundations as oppression.

In addition to the effect that epistemology has on politics, political agendas that serve the interests of the *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* have an effect on the epistemological as well. I imagine this mutually reinforcing mechanism in a circular fashion, which makes it even harder to break out of. I picture it like a circular track that has been trodden down for so long that it is hard to climb out of it, especially because all the edges are curved and smooth, and there are no corners at which one can climb out of the track.

### 4.3 Latent ethnocentrism and the *episteme-politic*

Western *latent ethnocentrism* (eurocentrism) is implicated in epistemological tools used in feminism. By delineating how the epistemological affects the political, I have argued that the tools we have, such as our language, which presents things in dualistic terms, affect the way we understand the world and choose to act. Metaphors and language make it hard to talk about things and occurrences that are not represented by the language that disregards those aspects of life.<sup>71</sup> hooks wants us to look beyond the framework of oppression we get from our language of sexism and racism. She rejects the axes-metaphor of oppression where axes are separable from one another, because the separation of sexism from racism serves only a limited group of women and fortifies the “ideology of domination” that sustains itself by a divide-and-conquer strategy. This insight into how the epistemological affects the political is not in itself new and innovative in feminist epistemology. But the political also affects the epistemological in turn. The epistemological tools available to us are imbued with political agendas that have epistemological effects. I have employed Narayan’s discussion on seemingly innocent terms to demonstrate how our epistemological framework is structured to fortify the *status quo* of global power balances that favor the male and the western. Anytime that these apparently homogenous terms are invoked, the political agenda of western male superiority is invoked and supported. From Sections 3 and 4, I claim that our language and the political agendas of the hegemonic norm exist in a mutually constitutive relation that I called the *episteme-politic*.

I have hoped to demonstrate that ethnocentrism is a central issue for feminism. Take the metaphor of the many-legged stool that I presented alongside hooks’ interlocking axes-model. Without dismantling the source of sexism, I do not think that feminism can get rid of sexism without also concerning itself with other interlocking stool-leg-axes such as racism and imperialism. Latent ethnocentrism is difficult to overcome, because of the reciprocally affective system of the *episteme-politic*.

## 5 Conclusion

To investigate ethnocentrism in feminism in this article, I developed the idea of a structural form of *latent ethnocentrism* which occupies the space between forms of situated knowledge geared toward the Self, on the one hand, and overt racism and fascism, on the other. From my reading of hooks and Narayan, I distinguished between an epistemological prong and a political prong in the ethnocentrism charge against feminism. In the epistemological prong, I drew on hooks’ interlocking axes-model of oppression to look for answers to why the ethnocentrism problem is important for feminism and what its underlying epistemological causes are. I then drew on Narayan’s destabilization of cultural dualisms to look for answers as to where these dualisms come from and what agendas they might serve. I found a relation between language

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<sup>71</sup> Rooney, “Gendered Reason,” 94.



that informs our understanding and the political agendas that produce this language to sustain the male and the western norm as center. I called this circular and reciprocally reinforcing mechanism the *episteme-politic*.

For the political prong, which I have not analyzed at length, there have been attempted solutions for the ethnocentrism problem in feminism: identity politics, intersectionality, and transnational feminism. Despite being implicated in the master's tools, all three are non-ideal strategies in non-ideal worlds. All three attempts are implicated in the master's tools and therefore do not hold up to a strict interpretation of Lorde's paradigm, namely that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Certainly, ethnocentrism is still a problem for feminism. That which hooks calls the "ideology of domination" depends on a hierarchal structure that privileges what it positions as norm, meaning the West, the white, and the male. Feminism is itself not immune to this ideology of domination, which is evident by how identity politics and intersectionality operate in ways that reinforce the hegemonic norm from which Others deviate, even in the process of claiming rights and recognition. It seems to me that a central part of non-ethnocentrism and feminist resistance to *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* is to look at ways that do not appropriate essentialist homogenizations of identity that were rhetorically used to justify oppression, even for resistance purposes. The issue is that feminism needs categorical identities such as race, gender, and nationality for resistance work, but it also aims to denounce them because the very structure of those categorical identities is what makes this kind of identity-oppression possible in the first place. Using the master's tools is good for resisting, but it may fall short of successful total reform. The denouncing of the structure of categorical identities acknowledges that the danger of using the master's tools is building with the one hand and tearing down with the other, a feminism that contradicts itself and ends up supporting the very oppressive structures it claims to resist. From philosophy, we gain the insight that we are always already implicated in that which we critique, even ethnocentrism. It remains to investigate whether it is possible to achieve non-ethnocentrism in feminism by discarding the master's tools that ground the *episteme-politic* in which feminism is implicated.

The purpose of the metaphor of the master's tools has been to illustrate the difference between resistance, which can be done by using the master's tools, and *successful* resistance, that is, the dismantling of oppressive structures which, according to Lorde's paradigm, cannot be done from the inside. Furthermore, if that means, as Lorde says, that we cannot create lasting change by using the master's tools, but only beat the master temporarily at his game, then we simply cannot stop working at beating the master temporarily, but must continually keep the master at bay, by constantly destabilizing the master's house. Consequently, the ethnocentrism problem in feminism must constantly be brought to the fore, and solutions, which will be non-ideal but urgent, must constantly be reproduced and re-invoked.

In conclusion, I would like to invoke the myth of Sisyphus, who according to Greek legend was punished by the gods to spend eternity trying to push a large boulder to the top of a mountain. This myth has been linked to the laborious and the futile. But what if the objective of Sisyphus was not to secure the boulder on top of the mountain, but simply to keep it off the mountain base? On this view, Sisyphus is more often successful than failed. Granted, the implication of this view is that Sisyphus can never stop working if he is to keep up this success. Feminism is not a self-defeating project, as one might assume if one believes in a post-feminist world, because it will always have to be vigilant of its heritage, its future, and its always already being implicated in the *episteme-politic*. Because something has been reconceptualized or deconstructed, it does not follow that it remains that way. This is the case also for establishing non-ethnocentrism within feminism. Non-ethnocentrism in feminism is not something that can be fixed at some point. It is rather something that needs to be constantly reproduced. It is perhaps for this reason that hooks suggests love as praxis as a solution in which we can "know ourselves beyond race, beyond the tenets of white supremacist logic."<sup>72</sup>

In this discussion, I have hoped to show that the ethnocentric pitfall for feminism is not merely one of philosophical inconsistency but of shooting oneself in the foot if feminism is not simultaneously non-

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<sup>72</sup> hooks, *Writing Beyond Race, Living Theory and Practice*, 198.

ethnocentric, but rather actively anti-racist. Anything else would be to participate in upholding the norm-center (the *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy*) and to aim at an image of freedom that is contingent upon the oppression of Othered identities. This upholding of the norm-center tends to perpetuate an internal feminist version of patriarchy, one which is based on exclusionary practices not along a gender axis, but racial and imperialist axes. When feminism uncritically accepts conceptual frameworks for oppression from patriarchal language, those terms carry with them political implications that shape the way feminist resistance is formed, with self-destructive implications. For feminism, ethnocentrism is an issue not simply of strategic solidarity, nor simply an issue of internal consistency, but of working cohesively instead of building with one hand and tearing down with the other.

**Acknowledgments:** This work was supported by the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas at the University of Oslo (2017–2018 research grant), the Forum for Theory of Science at the University of Oslo (2017–2018 research grant), and the Nordic Summer University (2020 symposium grant). For illuminating discussions, I am grateful to Kari Jegerstedt, the Philosophical Friday Seminar at the University of Oslo, the members of the Nordic Summer University Feminist Philosophy Circle, and Laura Hellsten's encouragements. For her insightful feedback on previous versions, I thank Tove Pettersen, and two anonymous reviewers. Thanks to Jonathan Griffiths for proofreading.

**Conflict of interest:** The authors state no conflict of interest.

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