

**Female Circumcision and the Self-Other distinction**

*An effective vehicle for the re-inscription of the Western narrative across the world*

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## **Abstract**

Through an analysis on the Western-based discourse on ‘African’-assumed Female Circumcision (“FC” hereinafter), this thesis suggests that the controversiality of this issue allows for an uncriticized re-inscription of culture, which falls along the lines of a colonial imperialism. Several sub-narratives of this re-inscription are critically examined and debunked. Simultaneously, stereotypical narratives of the Other in the case of FC are disqualified. Through the disclosure of colonial roots operating in relation to FC, this thesis hopes to do its part in clearing up analytical confusions operative in (some) current scientific work on this topic, which are not addressed because the knowledge they propose is seen as ‘self-evident.’ Data was acquired through advice from several teachers and careful analysis of footnotes in books and articles on FC. Data was analyzed in a qualitative manner, through thematic analysis.

**Keywords:** neocolonialism, colonialism, female circumcision, female genital mutilation, female genital cutting, feminism, activism, cultural imperialism, transnational feminism

## **Introduction**

This is a thesis on a practice with incredible diversity in its sociocultural meanings, geographical contexts and perceptions, in a Western discourse usually addressed with either “female circumcision” (“FC,” hereinafter), “female genital mutilation” (“FGM,” hereinafter), or “female genital cutting” (“FGC,” hereinafter) and in local African contexts, among many other names, as “bolokoli, khifad, tahara, tahoor, qodiin, irua, bondo, kuruna, negekorsigin, and kene-kene” (Abusharaf, 2006b, p. 1). Constituted as dangerous and ‘unspeakable’ in the Western realm, FC inhabits a locus of dialogue, engagement, enagement and negotiation. In contrast with its highly diverse nature, FC in this context is heavily simplified.

Inspired by Frantz Fanon’s (1952/2008) reading of the colonial dynamic thriving off an aggressive separation of the Self vs. the Other, this thesis proposes that the West, in regards to this practice, vividly solidifies its Self by defining its Other. In the various moments of discussion, those involved with FC are (un)consciously presented as ‘Other,’ and ‘barbaric,’ and thereby separated from everything that makes the Self, which are those traits, elements, behaviors and thoughts associated with the Civilized. As the process of defining the Self is not transparent and known, self-reflexivity lacks and a new ‘truth’ is re-inscribed over alternative knowledge-systems. Thereby, alternative worldviews are neutralized and Western truth prevails. This happens according to an imperial dynamic we are all very familiar with in terms of the material world, but less so in the ideological.

In order to provide a productive analysis, this thesis will align its reality along the binarism of the Self-Other distinction, as well as make use of generalizing concepts like ‘(non)Western,’ ‘Third World,’ and ‘African.’ Thereby, I reify boundaries, and I am aware of this. However, these should not be taken as a belief in the truth of a reality along binary lines, but merely as analytical tools to better clarify my claims.

In its essence, this project will ask in relation to FC: “who constructs what knowledge for whom and from whose or what standpoint?” (Ajayi-Soyinka, 2005, p. 50). By analyzing the production of knowledge surrounding the ‘taboo’ topic of FC, we can see how there are (still) very critical power imbalances in who gets to create knowledge, define cultural intelligibility and, ultimately, invent ‘truth.’

In the case of FC, colonialism has a strong ally with high credibility—Western-based feminism—of which some ideological constructs in relation to FC have been criticized by scholars (Nnaemeka, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Nzegwu, 2003; Okome, 2003; Oyěwùmí, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d; Taiwo, 2003). This thesis gains scientific relevance because it exposes a dynamic at the root of some analyses that should not be called ‘scientific’ nor ‘feminist’ (Obiora, 2003). Thereby this thesis might allow us to think further of better ways to deal with transcultural knowledge production.

After elaborating on FC’s research context, this thesis will start illustrating how the Self-Other distinction is already embedded in the name with which FC is addressed, before showing, with two examples, how the projection of ‘barbarity’ justifies the Othering of peoples involved in FC. Following this, the thesis will explain in more detail the Self-Other distinction in relation to FC, and debunk the dehumanized narrative assigned to the Other, as well as criticize the narrative that is actually re-inscribed over it, as part of the Self.

## **1. Research Context, Literature & Methods**

This thesis builds its analysis on Fanon’s (1952/2008) Self-Other distinction. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon famously explained the essentiality of this distinction in the colonial project. As he indicated, the violence in this dynamic lies in that the Other is created not by those who inhabit it, but by the hegemonic Euro/American subject. Therefore, the Other is

forced into a category, defined, limited, and constructed by the words of the hegemonic Self. Once ‘Other,’ one enters into subjectivity. More specifically, in relation to ‘the African,’ the black subject under colonialism enters into ‘objecthood,’ says Fanon. As Fuss (1994) writes: “Through the violence of racial interpellation—““Dirty nigger!” Or simply, “Look, a Negro!””—Fanon finds himself becoming neither an ‘I’ nor a ‘not-I’ but simply ‘an object in the midst of other objects’” (p. 21).

Consequently, by inhabiting (and essentially owning) the category of Self, the hegemonic European subject has managed to escape categorization, in the sense that for him (because the hegemonic subject is a man), it is still possible to be himself *without scrutiny*—to be neutral, to render himself transparent: where the black man “must be black *in relation to* [emphasis added] the white man,” “the sign ‘white’ exempts itself from a dialectical logic of negativity” (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 90; Fuss, 1994, p. 22).

Fanon (1952/2008) shows how the Self-Other distinction relegates those defined as Other to an inferior position in which it is the Self who they will want to approach, but it is this exact position that they will never be able to inhabit. This is the process of mimicking which comes with cultural domination, and, as Fuss (1994) shows, works by “policing the boundaries of cultural intelligibility, legislating and regulating which identities attain full cultural signification and which do not” (as cited in Akudinobi, 2005, p. 151). Thus, it operates on a denial or admission of humanity, which fuels people to ‘fit’ the lines in order to acquire humanity.

This control of who gets to be seen as human requires a process of cultural re-imagining, in which the ‘traditional,’ or ‘minority’ culture is being disposed of and replaced with a Western narrative, and we can see this happening in relation to FC. Here, I relate to what Akudinobi (2005) calls *imperial myths*, identifying the process of dominating narratives

replacing minority narratives in colonial culture-formation.

Akudinobi (2005) builds his idea of the imperial myth on two scholars' thoughts. First, he cites Barthes (1972), who understands the myth as "speech *stolen and restored*" (as cited in Akudinobi, 2005, p. 154). Therefore, we can think of the *imperial* myth of any topic X as its Western version, replacing alternative, 'Othered' narratives. By default, then, the imperial myth "necessarily invites *erasure and reinscription* [emphasis added] of hierarchies" (Akudinobi, 2005, p. 154). And it is here that Akudinobi introduces the second scholar he builds his concept of the imperial myth on, citing Alcoff (1994) and her claim that Speaking for Others "is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another's situation, or as one who can champion just cause and thus achieve glory and praise" (as cited in Akudinobi, 2005, p. 154). We can see the above occurring in relation to FC, as scholars passionately engage in a dispute on the meanings of it, in order to acquire mastery, which in this case is 'won' by the hegemonic, imperial West.

Next to Fanon's (1952/2008) ideas on colonial domination and Akudinobi's (2005) conceptualization of the imperial myth, this thesis equally employs Edward Said's (1993/1994) study on culture and imperialism. The latter argued that culture works to create a narrative of identity, which is subject to continuous refinement, to that which is 'best' in our thinking, arts, morals, and every other terrain involved with the human perception of reality. As he noted, "you read Dante or Shakespeare in order to keep up with the best that was thought and known, and also to see yourself, your people, society, and tradition in their best lights" (Said, 1993, p. xv). The mention of 'your people' is essential here. Culture, Said says, relates you to your people, and thereby works as a way of telling 'us' and 'them' apart (which in turn relates to the Self-Other distinction Fanon identified). Culture, thus, demarcates the

boundaries of identity.

Although Said (1993/1994) himself defines culture as an undefinable, fluid, boundary-less, ever-changing creation of humanity, the tendency for an essentialist approach to culture legitimizes the denial of humanity to specific Others. An example of this is when Fanon (1952/2008) expressed that, although from Martinique, he saw himself as a French citizen, “happily lost, submerged by the white flood composed of men like Sartre and Aragon,” and that he therefore only asked for one thing, “that the imbeciles and the exploiters let him live like a human being” (pp. 178-179). The idea of a ‘French’ culture in the essentialist understanding, then, makes it possible to exclude, and it is this process of culturally formed exclusion that is visible in the discourse on FC.

Finally, following Gayatri C. Spivak (1988/1994), this thesis is also informed with the idea that *epistemic violence* is something that can be done to peoples (usually those not connected to forms of power) who are subjected to discourses inflected with recurring (harmful) ideological notions about them. As Spivak wrote in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*, epistemic violence occurs when the colonial subject, typically—but not necessarily—related to those located in the so-called ‘Third World,’ is constituted as ‘Other’, but abstained from speaking whilst its culture and bodies of knowledge are replaced by those produced by the European hegemonic subject. The subject not in power, then, Spivak calls the *subaltern*, and this thesis takes those represented as involved with FC as in such a state. I now switch from authors’ concepts influencing this thesis, to a more direct overview of FC’s situation in the scholarly discourse.

FC first appeared on the ‘radar’ of mainstream scholarly consciousness after a transition from being described as (just) a cultural practice in ethnographies of some African

social groups,<sup>1</sup> to being branded as ‘alarming’ and subsequently generalized over the whole of the African population (Wade, 2011/2012). This was initiated after feminism shifted its attention from just the Western world to its outsides too, resulting in a discourse of ‘sisterhood’ bound by patriarchy (Wade, 2011/2012). Mary Daly (1978/1990), for example, in her influential *Gyn/Ecology*, provides an overview of five “barbarous rituals” around the world, of which FC is one (p. 111). These rituals are all outcomes of what she calls the *Sado-Ritual Syndrome*, a global mindset of patriarchal oppression originated in the necessity for all males to “murder/dismember” the female divinity, the Goddess in all of femininity (Daly, 1978/1990, pp. 110-111). As Daly writes, “patriarchal society evolves around myths of Processions” (p. 37). FCs, in this light, are “unspeakable” and “ritualized atrocities” (Daly, 1978/1990, pp. 154-155). Anticipating critical responses to her claim, Daly notes that

[t]hose who claim to see racism and/or imperialism in my indictment of these atrocities can do so only by blinding themselves to the fact that the oppression of women knows no ethnic, national, or religious bounds. There are variations on the theme of oppression, *but the phenomenon is planetary* [emphasis added] (p. 111).

As Daly (1978/1990) mentions a couple sentences later, in fact this thesis, by attempting to provide a counternarrative to the hegemonic story on FC and critically approaching activism against it, “embrace[s] and perpetuate[s] the same Higher Order as the ritual performers/destroyers they are studying” (p. 112). No matter the extent to which I am helping patriarchy with this thesis, what I would like to note in Daly’s account on FC and the other barbarous rites, is the idea that ‘the West’ has the lead in attacking them, which relates back to the assumed superiority which I will address in more detail later in this thesis. In the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kenyatta, J. (1938). *Facing Mount Kenya*.



overt condemnation of FC, Daly was not alone at all. Several scholars provided similar enraged accounts of the practice, of which Fran Hosken, who coined the term “female genital mutilation,” in particular has often been cited as a very influential source of anti-FC discourse (El Dareer, 1982; El Saadawi, 1977/2007; Hosken, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981; Lightfoot-Klein, 1989; Walker, 1992/2011; Walker & Parmar, 1993/1996). It is important for me to point out here that my criticism is not directed at the fact that these writers are critical about FC, but rather that their narratives contain over-generalizations and stereotypical elements proving harmful to the Subaltern involved.

In the time-span in which above mentioned feminists started criticizing FC, a stream of African-American as well as non-American feminists produced seminal essays and books to illuminate the way in which not all women were included by their contemporary feminism, but rather only the bourgeois white woman (hooks, 1981/2015, Lorde, 1984/2007; Mohanty, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981/1983; Said, 1978/2003; Spivak, 1985/1994). In 1989, Kimberlé W. Crenshaw issued her influential account on *intersectionality*, which was essential in highlighting how some groups can be ‘doubly’ effected by the combination of several axioms of oppression, with as example African-American women by racism and sexism, which worked as way to show how seemingly ‘empowering’ rhetorics against oppression can have excluding effects for others whose identities are not highlighted (or misrepresented) in these narratives of oppression.

Roughly simultaneous to above projects, the following occurred: a further expansion on the knowledge of power-relations between Western-based women and ‘Third World women,’ an initiation of self-representation by African scholars, an increase in counternarratives to FCs stereotypical representation, and an exposure of a particular colonial dynamic of ‘traveling’ scholars—going about and imposing knowledge in an imperial way—

in the stereotypical narratives of FC (Abusharaf 1999, 2001; Amadiume 1987/2015, Gunning, 1992; Kirby, 1987; Lugones, 1987; Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991; Morsy, 1991; Obiora, 1997; Thiam, 1983, 1986; Wing, 1997).

We have now arrived in the new millennium, and this has meant a relative rise of African self-representation, both in relation to FC as well as in regards to gender/sex and sexuality (Abusharaf, 2006a; Bosire, 2013; Nnaemeka 2005b; Oyěwùmí, 2003a, 2005, 2011). Likewise, Western-based scholars have provided more nuanced accounts on FC (Hernlund & Shell-Duncan, 2000, 2007). By aspiration, this project hopes to situate itself within the paradigm of the transnational feminism as expressed in these collections, in which the scholars are engaged in a thoughtful reflection on the problematics and challenges of a transcultural approach to feminism and related scholarly disciplines.

In an attempt to ‘add’ something, this thesis will try to draw a bridge between an exposure of the colonial dynamics in relation to FC *and* an accompanying critical focus on contemporary Western culture—with an emphasis on the practice of female genital cosmetic surgery—as I found the synthesis of these sometimes lacking in above mentioned and other writings (Abusharaf, 2006a, Braun, 2009; Davis, 2002; Kennedy, 2009; Nnaemeka, 2005b; Oyěwùmí, 2003a; Pedwell, 2007).

In terms of its methodology, this thesis employs a Foucauldian discourse analysis, which “seeks to understand how historically and socially instituted sources of power construct the wider social world through language” (Given, 2008, p. 217). As such, this form of analysis focuses critically on the language employed by those ‘in power,’ like “doctors, parents, the media, and governments” (Given, 2008, p. 217). Specifically in relation to FC, the discourse that I analyze will therefore tell me more about the different power relations between cultures and related elite-classes who help shape and build it.

Important authors, articles, books and collections were received through advice from several teachers; searching the libraries of University of Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit, University Utrecht and Leiden University on “female circumcision,” “female genital mutilation,” “female genital cutting,” “female genital cosmetic surgery,” “labiaplasty” and other relating keywords; and careful analysis of footnotes in work on FC. Data was analyzed in a qualitative manner, by means of a thematic analysis, as described by Braun & Clarke (2006), which is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). This type of analysis proved helpful for providing a productive analysis of the texts I read. Having provided the scholarly context in which FC is placed, as well as the concepts that this thesis is informed with, I will now move on to a general introduction of FC, after which I unpack my analysis of FC in relation to the Self-Other distinction.

## **2. FC & the Self-Other Distinction**

Although often conceptualized in widely generalizing terms, FC is a practice which cannot be defined into a singular definition, constitution, meaning, location or context, and whose meaning(s) depends on specific contexts (Abusharaf, 2006b, 2006c; Kratz, 1994/2010; Obiora, 1997, 2003). It occurs and occurred in various places around the world, including the Euro/American context, and only—unlike what is usually assumed—in a minority of areas on the African continent, meaning that most do not condone the practice (Abusharaf, 1999; El Guindi, 2006; Oyěwùmí, 2003d).

FC entails a ritualized procedure on the genitals. There are several ‘types,’ starting at the ‘mildest’ version in which “the clitoris is barely nicked or pricked to shed a few drops of blood,” coming down to a “strictly symbolic connotation” (Obiora, 1997, p. 262). Going one step further, the “clitoral prepuce, hood, or outer skin” is removed (Obiora, 1997, p. 262).

This type leaves “minimal health risks,” and is comparable to male circumcision (Obiora, 1997, p. 262). Relatively more extreme are “excision” or “clitoridectomy” which entail the removal of the “clitoral glans and some of the nympha or labia minora” (Obiora, 1997, p. 262). The most severe form of FC, and generally rarest in occurrence, is infibulation, where the clitoris, labia minora and the labia majora are removed, before “stitching the remaining raw edges together in a manner that ensures that only a tiny opening will be left after the surgery heals” (Obiora, 1997, p. 262).

Several meanings are attributed to FC, but they are dependent on their context. In areas of Kenya where FC is practiced, for example, it “marks the transition of a young girl into sexual maturity,” whereby it is meant to “prevent promiscuity, preserve virginity, and promote cleanliness” (Mohamud et al., 2006, p. 77). Next to this, it is “widely believed to improve fertility, thereby making a woman more attractive for marriage” (Mohamud et al., 2006, p. 77). Similar meanings are attributed to FC by practitioners in areas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal, namely “preserving cultural identity; defining females’ gender identity; maintaining personal hygiene (the clitoris is seen as a source of germs and possible infection during childbirth); reducing sexual desire, thereby controlling female sexuality; and complying with religious teachings” (Diop & Askew, 2006, p. 126). These two examples are just a few of the many different connotations and meanings attributed to FC per context. As I cannot provide further details, I disclose Mohamud’s and Diop & Askew’s accounts, but I urge the reader to view these as *exemplary* in their nature and not generalizable across other groups.

In Western-based cultural debates, scholarly work and media, FC has a high salience, perceived as ‘at odds with the West’ (Obiora, 1997, 2003). There are several reasons for this. A first is the Western *somacentricity* which places control of female sexuality at the center

of industrialized societies, and in turn pushes the resistance of this control to a high priority for Western-based feminists (Obiora, 1997). A second reason is the fact that FC as historical practice *in the West* was actually conceptualized as ‘punishment’ and way to control female sexuality, which influences Western scholar’s reading of FC across cultures to be constituted accordingly, which in turn causes it to rise high on the activist agenda of Western-based feminism (El Guindi, 2006; Obiora, 1997). A third reason is the West’s focus on the avoidance of physical pain, and the escape of any harm or alteration to the body, which, again, relates to the West’s somatocentricity (Oyěwùmí, 2003d).

Although a topic of high salience, FC is generally presented with a low complexity. The story is simplified, reduced and ‘undressed.’ There are several noticeable simplifications. A first is the fact that we mostly hear about African women in the context of FC (Lionnet, 2005; Njambi, 2009). This negates the human identities behind these practices, and merges the African woman with her genitals (Lionnet, 2005; Njambi, 2009). Furthermore, the African women involved with FC are almost categorically represented as *victims of society*: the idea that FC can occur without the person involved to be a victim is not rendered (Njambi, 2009). Discussing the history of the genital practice *irua ria atumia na anake* of the Gĩkũyũ in Kenya and showing how it was at one point instrumental in creating an anti-colonial sociocultural ‘space’ in which it became a locus of rebellious identity, Wairimũ N. Njambi (2009) tells us that there are in fact ways in which FC can be “a form of empowerment and resistance” (p. 180). Usually, however, the idea of non-victimhood is disclaimed by activists against FC, which leads Njambi to conclude of their discourse as the “mutilation monologue” (p. 177).

Generalizing labels like FGM, FGC, or FC work to obfuscate the various diverse meanings, rituals and names given to it in a wide area of the globe, and reduce the narrative

to one practice, with one narrative of meaning and one area where it occurs (Njambi, 2009). WHO, by aligning to a definite definition of FC, is an example of an influential actor who helps promote this erasure of localized differences. Njambi (2009) argues that “the term FGM [female genital *mutilation*], like the colonising travelling metaphor, is interested in managing female genital practices in Africa by eliminating their differences and complexities” (p. 172). The [activist] goal, for which this simplification on the side of the colonizer occurs, is the child-like logic that once African women “see beyond the cultural blinders imposed by their traditions,” “they surely will oppose such barbarity” (Njambi, 2011, p. 180). In such representations, then, what is lacking is a dedication to “taking complexity seriously,” and this is the general gist we can take from the Western perception on FC (Njambi, 2011, p. 194).

Having provided an introduction to FC, I now turn to the details of the Self-Other Distinction in relation to FC. We start with the actual name that is given to the practice, because it is here already that we see the Self-Other distinction. As Obioma Nnaemeka (2005a) writes, the practice has been given many different names, but always *by the West*, “from gruesome sexual castration and female genital mutilation to the ‘kinder and gentler’ female genital surgeries, and now female genital cutting” (p. 34). As she indicates, most texts on this topic use “female genital cutting,” thereby *by definition* evoking relatively visceral imageries and ejecting possible contextual reasons (given the medical and abstract undertone of “cutting”). Nnaemeka’s (2005b) own book, written almost entirely by African scholars, attempts to reclaim the power to define and undo this trend. In this effort, it employs “circumcision”; a word seemingly more able to contemplate on reasons given to it in a social context.

A third, ‘popular’ way to address the practice is “female genital mutilation,” which,

debatably, carries the most violence in itself, and does not leave much room for interpretation. Analyzing the societal contexts, *human* incentives (i.e. ‘reasons’) for the cooperation in such a practice will not be easy to justify if it’s called (1) female, (2) genital, and (3) mutilation. As such, it gives a lot of power to those campaigning against it. As Njambi (2009) argues, the increasing usage of FGM over FC was an “important victory for the abolitionists in that it prevented dissenters from defending such practices. Who would try to defend mutilation, especially when defined in the language of torture and oppression?” (Njambi, 2009, p. 173).

For this thesis I deem it most appropriate to use “circumcision,” in an attempt to restore the agency of naming to a self-determined definition by the female, African scholars in Nnaemeka’s (2005b) book, and in order to be able to highlight its contextual elements. In her discussion of naming FC, Amal Abdel Hadi (2006) supports this choice, arguing that the introduction of ‘mutilation’ constrains the possibilities for disclosing meaningful ‘reasons’ behind it. Providing further support to my choice, it has been indicated that FC is the preferred name by “indigenous African coalitions” (Obiora, 1997, p. 263).

In the process of naming FC, thus, a displacement in power occurs whereby the power to name is transported from those involved to the hegemonic subject of knowledge-production. But how is this justified? As I will explain throughout the rest of this chapter, the displacement of power, in which a Self and Other is defined, relies heavily on the projection of Barbarity, and thus justified Otherness on those involved in FC.

Several scholars have noted the projection of barbarity onto those involved with FC (Kirby, 1987, 2005; Moruzzi, 2005; Njambi, 2009). What often ‘helps’ in this context is the emphasis on ‘non-medical’ instruments used to execute FC in Western-based discourse on the topic, in which the absence of anesthesia provides the ultimate horror (Njambi, 2009). ‘Non-

medical,' however, misrepresents reality as many of the circumcisers—although not schooled in Western medical science—have years of knowledge and experience to rely on. As I have noted, the Barbaric can only be defined from a viewpoint which assumes itself to be the opposite of that: the Civilized. Tomlinson (1991) is of help in relating to the barbaric, by introducing the idea of the teratology:

A 'teratology' is the tale of the marvelous or the monstrous. Foucault reminds us that anything can be said: mundane, rational, marvelous or monstrous. [...] We should remember that the 'monstrous' is only a way of describing what lies beyond our intellectual boundaries, in the same way as the medieval cartographers imagined monsters to inhabit the lands beyond the known world (as cited in Nnaemeka, 2005c, p. 11).

Whatever its specific, contextual configuration thus may be, the barbaric lies on the borders of a cultural imagination. FC, arguably, sits on this border and in order to keep it there, a sort of cultural warfare has to be engaged in: it has to continuously be defined as barbaric. As Tomlinson says, it has to be kept "at bay" (as cited in Nnaemeka, 2005c, p. 11). Nnaemeka (2005c) further explains: "this taming and pruning—what Foucault calls 'procedures of rarefaction'—pushes back a whole teratology of knowledge beyond its margins" (p. 11).

Simultaneous to the pushing back of that defined as the barbaric, is the continuous authentication and justification of the viewpoint of whatever constitutes the Civilized. Thus, by defining what is Other, the Self is solidified. Nnaemeka (2005c) puts it as follows: "[a]t the heart of cultural imperialism is limited knowledge's tendency to demonize what lies beyond its zone of comprehension. Constructing itself as a site of moral superiority [and



succeeding], the West is [or, becomes] incapable of interrogating its claims” (Nnaemeka, 2005c, p. 12). Consequently, through the conceptualization of the Civilized (Self) vs. the Barbaric (Other), Barbaric (Other) belief-systems are encountered and neutralized by the imposition of our versions of those belief-systems, *through* the presentation of our belief-systems as ‘natural,’ ‘logical,’ ‘self-evident’: in short, as truth.

I will provide two examples in which the projection of barbarity is visible. I start with *In the Name of Your Daughter* (2018). In this documentary, the Dutch filmmaker Giselle Portenier follows a group of local anti-FC activists in Tanzania. As she is not directly speaking for others, and giving voice to local activists instead of Western ones, this documentary is already more culturally sensitive than most on FC. But this does not negate my argument.

Throughout the film, a specific humanity is unconsciously envisioned, and thus a specific ‘unhumanity’ as well, which relates to the projection of barbarity.<sup>2</sup> We can discern this more clearly towards the end of the documentary: after the screen fades to a calming sunrise, mindful and hopeful music enters. Then, two white titles inform us, respectively, of the amount of girls that died this ‘cutting-season’ (because in this specific configuration it happened in seasons) because of FC, and the amount of girls “saved” (“behoed”) from a “mutilating” (“verminkende”) circumcision through the activism shown in the documentary.

As is suggested to the viewer throughout the film, which becomes especially visible towards the discussed end, hope is present, and it is this hope that reveals which kind of humanity is envisioned. The sense that ‘it will get better’ gives away the documentarian’s notion that how it is now, *is not enough*, which relates to a narrative of progress, a path towards Being Civilized, and thereby the projection of barbarity. And here we can see how

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<sup>2</sup> It is a conscious decision of mine not to use “inhuman,” as I believe this word is too colored with a meaning of itself. I use “unhumanity” in order to emphasize its binary opposition to envisioned “humanity.”

“an *inspirational, visionary realm*” is linked to the presented ‘lack’ of the Tanzanian people (Akudinobi, 2005, p. 146). As is clear, however, Being Civilized can only be achieved by submitting to Western notions of the self and on how to live your life.

Towards the credits, this notion is further consolidated with the introduction of a new song, claiming that ‘Freedom is Coming’ (seemingly sung by Tanzanian women, we are not sure of this, but a loose ‘African’ style seems enough for the song to be used in this context). It is clear which kind of freedom is coming. Combine this with the film’s tagline, #EndFGM, and one starts to see that the essence of this film is political, that it has an agenda, and therefore could be called an ‘activist’ film. However, the presentation of this representation as ‘truth’ is what concerns me, as it cannot be defined as such.

To conclude, this documentary does not illustrate an obvious imagery of barbarity, but that is also not why I included it as example. For obvious imageries of absolute horror you only have to look at the majority of Western-based documentaries on FC. I chose this example because of the fact that, even with its seeming cultural sensitivity and less obvious judgment, it is still firmly based in certain connotations of what constitutes the Human, and the Civilized. The titles at the end, indicating the severe mutilation that one is ‘subjected to’ (assuming non-agency of involved peoples) reveal the documentarian’s notions of what constitutes the ‘right’ life, and thus what constitutes barbarity. I will now turn to a more literal projection of barbarity.

*Eve’s Apple* (Armario, 2017) is a Spanish documentary about the actions of a collection of agencies against FC. I focus on the film’s intro-scene. In it, we see a combination of credits, introductory music and backgrounds of landscapes and rooms covered in a sepia-colored hue. On top of this, however, and this is where the analysis starts to make sense, is first of all a collection of fearful, pain-enduring ‘African’ faces and

secondly a randomized but continuously present pattern of subtle splatters of blood laid over them. Together they illustrate the imagined, incredible hurt if one were to be ‘subjected’ to FC.

Taken together, the two examples illustrated in this section give a preliminary understanding of how the Self-Other distinction is justified in discourse on FC: through a projection of barbarity. In both examples, we can see how specific notions of what constitutes the human life, are revealed against the backdrop of FC, as something perceived as definitely *not* what constitutes the human life. In the next chapter, I will show that the assumed barbarity, non-agency, and, in short, absolute terror of FC invites activism executed along the lines of a sister/saviorhood approach, and how a politics of the body emerges in the discourse arising from this sister/saviorhood.

### **3. Sisters and Saviors: Re-Inscription and the Politics of the Body**

As it turns out, sister/saviorhood is legitimized by a perception of barbarity, and this usually comes with a stereotypical narrative of ‘Third World Women.’ As Mohanty (1988) writes, they are usually seen as “sexually constrained...ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, religious, domesticated, family oriented, victimized, etc.,” and in “contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the ‘freedom’ to make their own decisions” (as cited in Akudinobi, 2005, p. 146). Thus, a non-agentic subject is portrayed, in all parts of life. And it is this fictional projection of a diminished agency, relating to or even resulting from the projection of barbarity, that forms the ground for the sister/savior complex, in which Euro/Americans believe it is up to them to ‘fix’ the injustice of FC.

This perceived necessity to intervene, however, might not be discontinuous to earlier

perceived 'duty' to colonize. Relating to the contemporary realm of criticism on FC, Isabelle R. Gunning (1992) notes the 'arrogant perception' of many Western observers when assuming non-agency and feeling the necessity to 'intervene.' She criticizes this, because both reveal a feeling of superiority. If we look back in time, we can find similar rationalizations. Relating to the times of colonial politics in a British context, Said (1993/1994) argues that "the idea of having an empire" seemed so burnt into the collective unconscious of the British, that it might have been perceived as a sort of duty, even when confronted with the dangers the colonizers were facing (Said, 1993/1994, p. 11). This 'duty' was often related to 'bringing Western civilization across the globe,' which reveals the assumed superiority. I believe there is more similarity than we may be ready to admit between the arrogance discussed by Gunning and Said's perceived duty. The narrative of 'the end of colonialism,' therefore, might be a false and misleading one, in which a guise or mask is laid upon contemporary practices and ideas that can then not be recognized anymore as essentially similar and not discontinuous to what has happened during 'colonial times.'

Contemporary sister/saviorhood has been thoroughly criticized in feminism. Looking at feminism in general, Chima Korieh (2005) notes that feminist theory from the 1980s onwards increasingly started criticizing the assumption of 'universal sisterhood' "based on the commonality of sex and 'common oppression' that pervaded feminist thinking in the 1960s and 1970s" (p. 117). In this spirit, hooks (1997), an essential thinker in the critique of sisterhood, posits that the idea of a "common oppression is a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality" (as cited in Korieh, 2005, pp. 117-118). Similarly, Saba Mahmood (2004/2005) notes in relation to contemporary Western responses to Islamic practices in which the former tries to impose its ideas of sexuality and culture on the latter, that

[i]f there is one lesson we have learned from the machinations of colonial feminism and the politics of ‘global sisterhood,’ it is that any social and political transformation is always a function of local, contingent, and emplaced struggles whose blueprint cannot be worked out or predicted in advance (p. 36).

If this approach, either “from above or outside,” is still applied, “it is typically a violent imposition whose results are likely to be far worse than anything it seeks to displace” (Mahmood, 2004/2005, p. 36). Finally, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (2003d) expresses similar sentiments, faded with the reality that “many Western women continue” to uphold “a ‘We’ve come a long way, baby’ posture to underscore what they consider their superior achievement in liberating themselves from the shackles of patriarchy,” whereas it is really their “benefits they enjoy as a racial group and [...] the dominance of their countries in the global capitalist system” that is the root of their privileged situation (Oyěwùmí, 2003d, p. 170). Building on this, she writes that

homogenizing concepts like ‘Third World women’ and ‘women of color’ and even ‘Black women’ are used to erase cultural specificities, but also [...] to mask regional and class privileges undergirding the global system. [...] It needs to be understood that representation cannot be on the bases of pigmentation or a common collection of body parts, *but on the commonality of interests* [emphasis added], recognizing that interests are dynamic and situational (Oyěwùmí, 2003d, p. 170).

Having provided a preliminary overview of critical conceptualizations of sister/saviorhood, I would like to disclose an example of a sister/saviorhood gone wrong. Relating

to *Warrior Marks* (1993), a widely celebrated film by Prathiba Parmar and Alice Walker in which they interview several women from Senegal and Gambia involved with FC, Akudinobi (2005) shows how Walker gains credibility by constructing herself as ‘an insider,’ “framed within the axes of *ancestry, sororal solidarity* [emphasis added], and a supramaternal figure” (Akudinobi, 2005, p. 146). Similarly, Parmar claims: “I did not go in as an outsider but as a *[person] of color, lesbian, woman* [emphasis added], looking at female mutilation as violence against women” (Akudinobi, 2005, p. 146). Through the employment of ‘global sisterhood,’ and an assumed similarity in patriarchal oppression and racial status, Walker’s and Parmar’s words thus gain credibility and authority, but simultaneously allow for uncriticized, or even, unnoticed, displacements of power and epistemic oppression, seeing how several scholars have criticized Walker and Parmar for employing a judgmental, ethnocentrist and even racist approach (Abusharaf, 1999, 2006a; Nnaemeka, 2005b; Oyěwùmí, 2003a).

The sister/saviorhood in relation to FC makes possible the installment of a Western narrative of the Self, that overruns the encountered alternative narrative, effectively creating ‘the truth,’ but which can only be described as “purportedly universal, but particularly Western” (Njambi, 2009, p. 167). One important ‘area’ that inhibits a re-inscribed narrative is related to a specific politics of the body. An axis around which this narrative ‘turns’ is agency and the way it is envisioned. In relation to FC, the West assigns to its own subjects a hyper-agency, while assigning non-agency to the Other, whereby its own notions of womanhood and beauty are respected as something that one could desire, and the Other’s notions of the same things are disqualified.

These notions of (non-)agency, however, are, although presented as such, not self-evident. The non-agency typically attributed to those involved in FC—where the narrative

goes that it is ‘always the men doing it’—, for example, is incorrect. In relation to Arab FCs, for instance, Fadwa El Guindi (2006) writes:

Female circumcision belongs to the women’s world, and ordinarily men know little about it or how it is performed—a fact that is widely confirmed in ethnographic studies. [...] Overall, the sexualizing ritual of female circumcision is neither initiated by nor intended to appeal to men; it is the women’s concern (p. 35).

Obiora (1997), in the same vein as El Guindi (2006), also argues that it is actually the women leading the practice, not the men. This fact, that we have women actively pursuing certain practices, poses a problem to the uncritical branding of non-agency of women in relation to FC. Replacing the burden of oppression to just the men is productive for activists, because it allows for the keeping intact of the women’s ‘dignities,’ but proclaiming their actively sought-after actions as non-agent and thus ‘brainwashed’ considerably decreases their womanhood, to quite literally Third World Women. In reality, the degree of consent by those involved in FC varies widely (Wade, 2011/2012).

Other scholars have supported El Guindi’s (2006) and Obiora’s (1997) claims by proposing that women involved in FC *do* have agency, and that there are instances in which the women in communities have abandoned the practice without intervention from outside (Abusharaf, 2001; Hadi, 2006). Similarly, Tom Obara Bosire (2013), in his book on the Bondo Secret Society in Sierra Leone—a women-only, relatively privileged community with FC as initiation ritual—argued that this instance cannot be simplified to ‘just’ patriarchal oppression, but also as constitutive of empowering identity-formation. By their constitution as non-agent in discourse, these women are thus significantly misrepresented. It might be productive to end with a quote from Obiora (1997), in order to illuminate the way that the

women involved in FC, although ostensibly ‘suffering,’ should still not be represented as non-agent, as their “active sense” of reality will provide them with agent ways of dealing with it:

Women might endure exploitation within the confines of their traditional community and shun commitments that would provoke opprobrium, but not when they have an active sense of their existential dilemmas and alternative possibilities (as cited in Hadi, 2006, p. 104).

Just like the non-agency attributed to those involved in FC, the hyper-agency usually attributed to Western-based women, on the other hand, might also be a myth. In the pursuit of criticizing approaches to sister/saviorhood, Mahmood (2004/2005), again, is of help here. She notices that many others, while doing so, forget about one critical aspect of agency: while productive, they “fail to problematize [...] *the universality of the desire* [emphasis added]—central for liberal and progressive thought, and presupposed by the concept of resistance it authorizes—to *be free from relations of domination* [emphasis added]” (Mahmood, 2004/2005, p. 10).

As Mahmood (2004/2005) indicates, this assumption of the urge for freedom “is normative to feminism, as it is to liberalism (p. 10). Thus, she draws a parallel between feminism and liberalism. But, Mahmood argues, this normative ‘desire to freedom’ finds its source in the latter. As she sees it, “liberalism’s unique contribution is to link the notion of self-realization with individual autonomy, wherein the process of realizing oneself is equated with the ability to realize the desire of one’s *true will*’ [emphasis added]” (Mahmood, 2004/2005, p. 11). Therefore, we could argue that feminism’s core notion of liberation of oppression as pathway to realizing oneself, suspiciously fits some of liberalism’s core



notions.

Similar to Mahmood (2004/2005), Virginia Braun (2009) also dedicates the source of the belief in the hyper-agentic Western self to neoliberalism, which “emphasized the rational agentic subject—an almost hyper-responsible self—who makes individualised choices, removed from any contextual constraints, structural or otherwise, free from the influence of cultural norms and expectations” (p. 236). The emphasis on choice, she continues, “is widespread within the neo-liberal, consumer-oriented West, and is ‘deeply embedded within a consumer discourse.’ Choice, *empowerment* [emphasis added] and consumption—of things like cosmetic surgery—are intrinsically linked” (Braun, 2009, p. 236).

Key to Braun’s (2009) comments here is the introduction of the word ‘empowerment.’ As she sees it, the strong emphasis on the idea of being able to choose is, within a consumer context, used as a way to legitimize the consumer’s actions (for him- or herself). This, Braun says, relates to the ‘post-feminist’ era, in which “consumption, actions or representation otherwise cast as conforming to patriarchal, heterosexist gender relations are reframed as positive and empowered individual choices” (p. 236). Thus, practices, behaviors or thoughts that fit neatly within current, contemporary normalized belief-systems (which she indicates as ‘patriarchal, heterosexist gender relations’) are sometimes reframed through rhetoric as ‘powerful’ choices in order to become attractive for consumers.

But Braun (2009) goes further and contemplates whether choice can also form ‘us,’ whereby ‘choice’ has a “constitutive function, as productive of subjectivity, in the sense that we become ‘choosing subjects’, in which our ‘right’ to choose is both entitlement *and obligation* [emphasis added] (Braun, 2009, p. 236). In other words, could it be that the ability of choosing, the act of having a choice, can in itself also work as a disciplining force?<sup>3</sup> Braun

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<sup>3</sup> For further reading, see Preciado, P. (2008). *Testo Junkie*.

questions this in relation to cosmetic surgery, contemplating the existence of the “social imperative of ‘what can be done should be done,’ meaning ““ugliness” [has become] our choice and our responsibility”” (Braun, 2009, p. 236).

Braun (2009) proposes that having the option to do or buy something, also makes it your choice *if you do not do this*. Then, considering the fact that your perceived ‘lacks’ are ‘treatable’ or ‘fixable’ through ‘consumption’ of a surgical operation, it could become quite tempting to do so, because why wouldn’t you, if you feel lacking and there is a possibility to change? Especially if more people decide to change these lacks by means of a surgery, this operation may become more normalized, and the extent of autonomous power in the act of choosing or declining this operation decreases.

Relating this to what might seem an absurd example, but what I think has the essence needed to convey the message, would you consider not brushing your teeth, or not wearing deodorant to work? Most people would not, because that, nowadays, seems ‘common sense,’ but try to remember that there was a time in which these things were not necessary for participation in society. The ability to *choose* to not brush your teeth or not use deodorant has weakened significantly with both of them becoming increasingly normalized.

The above works as an efficient way to criticize the stereotypical portrayal of Western practices as ‘agent,’ and ‘well-informed’ ‘decisions,’ presented as opposed to those involved in FC. A very productive example of a specific Western practice that can further help in illustrating this, is Western-based female genital cosmetic surgery (“FGCS,” hereinafter). Quite some scholars have compared this practice to FC (Ahmadu, 2007; Davis, 2002; Johnsdotter & Essén, 2010; Ogunyemi, 2003).

Simone W. Davis (2002), for example, points to the different way that FGCS is ‘treated’ in the West in comparison to FC, and she furthers the idea that both should be

analyzed through the same lens. The way she sees it, these two cultural practices are measured with “different yardsticks,” which causes for analytical confusion (Davis, 2002, p. 21). More dramatically, if one indeed does analyze both practices through the same viewpoint, Davis argues they might be more analogue than we might want to admit.

As comparable ‘motivations,’ Davis (2002) states “beautification, transcendence of shame, [and] a desire to conform” (as cited in Pedwell, 2007, p. 51). Meyers (2000), in her analysis of “worldwide FGC practices,” thinks along similar lines when she analyzes both “‘corrective’ surgery for ‘ambiguous genitalia’ in Western cultures as well as the various initiation rites observed in some African and Asian cultures” (as cited in Pedwell, 2007, p. 49). In addition to observing the commonality of socio-cultural oppression, Meyers argues that both are driven by “potent culturally specific feminine bodily norms” that are intolerant towards “unnatural” or “ambiguous” genitalia (as cited in Pedwell, 2007, p. 50).

Several scholars support Davis’ (2002) and Meyers’ (2000) findings when they articulate comparable meanings attributed to FC, including beautification, enhancing femaleness, a ritual of sexualization, and a rite of passage into ‘womanhood’ (El Guindi, 2006; Johansen, 2007). What this tells us is that both practices might be fueled by similar urges to conform to certain beauty standards, no matter their exact configuration. The extent to which a ‘choice’ is thus possible, cannot be painted in black-and-white configurations.

Related to cosmetic surgery, another way to break down the myth of hyper-agency typically attributed to the Western subject, is the way that Western-based medical institutes further corroborate the subject’s ‘power’ by visibly being in interplay with their clients’ desires, invoking ‘problems’ in relation to their insecurities. As Aileen Kennedy (2009) states, what gives legitimation to the medical narrative is its role as ‘therapeutic,’ ‘helping,’ and ‘relieving’: clients come to the doctor with problems, and the doctors are there to solve

these. In regards to the looks of the body, however, and more specifically, in relation to “Western-style cosmetic surgery (genital and general),” it seems that there exists almost a sort of ‘ideal’ self that has to be reached: “shaping the body, literally, through surgery, is depicted as a legitimate therapeutic project” (Kennedy, 2009, p. 211). Here, Kennedy moves in the direction of Mahmood (2004/2005) with her implication that the ‘true self’ is to be approached. The ‘solutions’ offered by doctors are, by means of this discourse rooted in the necessity of shaping the body, “couched in terms of therapeutic psychological benefit” (Kennedy, 2009, p. 211). But the real core of the justification to the narrative of ‘therapeutic benefit’ is the seeming value of reaching the ‘ideal self.’ Next to Kennedy, Davis (2002) analyzes along the same lines when she shows how medical institutions, in their language in relation to cosmetic surgery, create a “deficiency” where there was once “indifference” (Davis, 2002, p. 10). Society’s changing norms towards the desired vagina (‘a clean slit’) are employed by medical practitioners in order to sketch ‘the problem,’ which they then offer to solve.

Both Kennedy’s (2009) and Davis’ (2002) accounts, hereby, further break down static notions of agency, as we can see how doctors play a role in shaping the desire of their clients: the language that doctors employ falls within the lines of solving problems, but what a ‘problem’ is, remains of course free to be defined by society. This causes the contradiction between the non-criminalization of FGCS (considered as ‘the solution’ to a ‘problem’ for some, justified within the medical apparatus) and FC (considered as forceful oppression and non-choice). Another area that Davis mentions where this split in thinking occurs in relation to the ‘corrective’ (and therefore, justified) character of cosmetic surgery is a surgical ‘intervention’ in which “the erotic tissue of ‘intersexed’ or ambiguously gendered babies and children is routinely, in fact just about ubiquitously, modified through surgery without the

minor's consent, in what the medical profession calls a 'psychosocial emergency'" (p. 17). Often, however, this surgery leaves behind a diminished ability to be sexually stimulated, which can highlight the question marks we should put at the conceptualization of this practice as 'intervention' or 'psychosocial emergency,' as both imply a necessity that would not require critical reflection (Davis, 2002).

In order to provide a final 'nail to the coffin' of Western-based hyper-agency, I want to problematize its relation to the conceptualization of individuality, and the culture of Individualism in the West. This conceptualization is, once an Other is admitted into Humanity, often transported and assigned to the Other, as if the same, Western-based Individuality occurs. In relation to FC, for example, an individualistic way of looking at choice is employed to propose solutions. However, as Françoise Lionnet (2005) states, personhood (or individuality) might be envisioned differently across cultures. Throughout the African continent, for example, she argues that the definition of 'person' is often different than in the West: one more recurring conceptualization of identity professes that a person is not born a person but only *becomes* human through his/her interaction and position within a community.

Lionnet (2005) continues, referring to Nguema's (1990) thoughts on this topic: "the African notion of 'person' is a more interactive and dynamic one compared to the Western one, which [Nguema] sees as 'abstract, mechanistic, static, materialistic,' and intolerant of genuine solidarity since an absolute view of individual rights will necessarily enter in conflict with a genuine form of familial or cultural solidarity" (Lionnet, 2005, p. 105). As such, Lionnet suggests that the static, Western notion of individuality and relating individual rights will inevitably clash with real cultural solidarity (meaning, solidarity for other cultures and the different morals of that culture). In this context, and to end this sub-argument, some

scholars have argued that the current conceptualization of human rights is, by being based on Western, individualistic notions of the self, partially incompatible with alternative moral systems on the planet, which is an observation also of value in relation to FC, as much of its activism bases itself on this discourse (Branch, 2011; Lie, 2015; Lionnet, 2005).

I now conclude the culmination of above sections. Bundled by a joint focus on ‘agency’ in its broadest form, I have tried to problematize the so-called self-evidence and superiority of Western notions of agency, and the way that a specific politics of the body is envisioned, while also attempting to debase simplified narratives assigned to the peoples involved with FC. As it turns out, Western-situated agency might be less agentic and authoritative than is proposed. In that regard, they might have to be regarded closer to the notions of agency projected onto the Other in relation to FC, and as always part of a bigger, sociocultural whole which influences everyone’s choices and thinking. Similarly, in regards to the notion of non-sense and non-agency attributed to the Other in FC, this also misrepresents reality, as there are, respectively, comparable pressures to conform to beauty ideals and womanhood, and subjects are not experiencing ‘non-agency’ in the way usually ascribed to them. I will now turn to analyze the second part of a re-inscribed reality that I retraced in the discourse on FC, which relates to the omnipotence of Western measurements and the implications of their global employment.

#### **4. Beyond the Facts: Systems and Statistics**

As I discerned in discourse on FC, the re-inscription of culture comes in two ways. The first, a specific envisioning of the politics of the body, I discussed in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I will expand on the second one, which I take to be of a less corporeal and more systematic nature: the universal employment of Western-based measurements. I propose the

medical discourse, as illustrated by Vicki Kirby (2005), and ‘gender/sex,’<sup>4</sup> as shown by Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997/2018), as two examples of strata along which measurements are taken, that are employed universally across the globe.

The effects of this are more influential than one might think: the epistemological privilege of the medical discourse provides a universal power that allows the disclaiming of any Other’s ‘medical’ discourse, while at the same time inevitably imposing connotations of a specific sexuality (with whose meanings the medical discourse is invested). Secondly, the universal employment of measurements along the lines of the existence of a gender/sex-system, in which the West’s notions on gender/sex are assumed to exist everywhere, makes sure the erasure of contingent Other notions on gender/sex (or even the non-existence of this binary system), which in turn causes for a re-inscription in meaning in relation to notions on ‘womanhood’ (with whose meaning the discourse on gender/sex is invested).

Vicki Kirby (1987, 2005) first proposed that the “medical discourse provides the common thread that weaves through this entire cluster of texts [on FC], providing its classifications and, implicitly, the ‘real’ meanings which authorize the argument (2005, p. 83). As such, the narrative of the Western Self in relation to the Body is safeguarded, because it is already assumed as truth by everyone, even the social sciences. Kirby writes:

Consequently books about genital excision written by African women carry a sense of national authenticity within the role of their author function. For example, Raqiya Abdalla, a Somali woman, and Asma El Dareer, who is Sudanese, each writes about genital excision and infibulation in their respective countries. And yet, their medicalized arguments, research methods, and bibliographical material make the results *almost interchangeable* [emphasis added] (2005, p. 83).

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<sup>4</sup> I use the combination of gender and sex to point to the vague area loosely encompassed by and associated with both terms in contemporary, Western conceptualizations of them.

As an example of the displacement coming along with the alignment in a universal truth in the medical discourse, I offer Akudinobi's (2005) interpretation of, again, *Warrior Marks* (Walker & Parmar, 1993). As he notes, throughout the film, Walker seeks interviews with the circumcisers, but discredits their claims of knowledge, pushing them into the realm of 'witch doctoring,' even though the knowledge of the circumcisers could be conceived of as 'professional,' and probably based on lots of experience. But, "the circumciser is located outside reason, intelligibility, and understanding; her assertion of subjectivity misnamed and rerouted" (Akudinobi, 2005, p. 150). By the circumciser's non-adherence to the Western medical realm, their knowledge is discounted and nullified.

Kirby (2005) considers the implications of the universal reliance on the Western medical discourse. She asks us to what extent ethnocentric assumptions might slip in through the usage of the medical gaze as the building block from which analyses start, especially considering the strong emphasis and importance 'we' attribute to sexuality when it comes to defining ourselves. This very naturalization, or this translation of a cultural expression of our sexuality into 'the truth' might not so easily be translated onto other cultures; it might rather sit in the way of understanding a *different* conception of sexuality.

Yet the universal usage and appliance of the Western medical instruments for measuring health, body functions, etc., comes in a package with Western assumptions of what sexuality should encompass. As example, Kirby (2005) provides us with a small study in Abdalla in Somalia, in which "[t]wenty-five of the sixty circumcised married women maintained that they enjoyed intercourse with their husbands—an unexpected response from women who cannot, at least according to Western medical discourse, enjoy sex at all" (Kirby, 2005, p. 87). How would we explain this? Only through the acknowledgement that our



sexuality is in fact a cultural construct that has inflected all Western bodies of knowledge, comparable to many feminist's statement that knowledge bodies are gendered, "positioning women differently from men within the frame of Western values" (Kirby, 2005, p. 87). However, many contemporary feminists would find this statement controversial, as they cannot grasp the idea of women enjoying sex without a clitoris. This illustrates the power of the medical discourse, as taken for truth. Korieh (2005) touches a similar vein, when he writes:

In contemporary Western societies, every woman 'knows' that the uncircumcised clitoris plays an important part in her enjoyment of sexuality. The removal of the clitoris has, therefore, become one of the most patriarchal and sexist acts imaginable. The point, according to Hetherington, is not to agree or disagree with such a view, but to point out that, in poststructuralist terms, this 'knowledge' about the clitoris may have no power in many African societies where women 'know' that the proper expression of sexuality involves the removal of the clitoris (p. 119).

Thereby, Korieh (2005) points, just like Kirby (1987, 2005), to the social construction of knowledge, including that of sexuality. However unimaginable it may seem, it cannot be true that the Western envisioning of the sexual is the only way of envisioning the sexual. Even if 'we' are disgusted by the expression of a sexuality that includes FC, it should be remembered that peoples involved in FC are caught in a network that assigns social meaning to desires relating to that specific sexuality, which includes FC. Therefore, deeming them 'barbaric,' 'non-agent' and 'oppressed' removes the humanity of the possible reasons behind practicing FC, as part of a (possibly intimate) relation with sexuality. Several scholars support Kirby's (1987, 2005) claims. Chikwenye Ogunyemi (2003), for example, writes that

it is not possible to generalize sexuality across cultures without erasing specificities. Similarly, other scholars challenge the myth of not being able to enjoy sex after loss of the clitoris through FC (Ahmadu, 2007; Dopico, 2007; Johansen, 2007; Njambi, 2009).

Leaving this observation aside, what is important for my analysis is the reliance of all kinds of scholars on Western-based normalities of measurements. The medical discourse and the global reliance on measurements relating to it shows how a global truth is created. In a way, then, Kirby (2005) says, we could qualify the Western medical discourse as a colonial power in itself, 'subjecting' whole populations, by means of its usage in statistics, reports, discussions, media and all other forms of knowledge-production. As Kirby terms it, "mapping bodies" is a process through which the medical discourse creates its subjects, and their subjectivity in the process, and by means of employing it in studies, anthropology and sociology enables a process of colonization (p. 88). It is exactly this mapping and indexing of reality that Kirby deems as part of expanding the Western grip on Other bodies. Kirby provides us with an example of a historical event of mapping, with the British creation of the category of 'the tribe,' that subsequently came to define the reality of the Tanganyikans, even though they were wrongly identified as such. As she notes, citing Iliffe (1979), the "Tanganyikans created tribes to function within the colonial framework..." (Kirby, 2005, p. 89). Thus, the act of mapping and indexing produced a category, that subsequently came to constitute reality for the subjects involved.

Kirby's (2005) ultimate argument is that "the social sciences, including anthropology, begin from a biological base that is *already* a cultural product. "Therefore the most potent of cultural investments is located in the Western belief that scientific and medical knowledges are in fact acultural" (Kirby, 2005, p. 91). Note the word 'potent,' as the power of the myth of the factuality of the medical is unimaginable. It evades interrogation and therefore can spread

like a tumor, without anyone worrying about colonialism. Seeing how, as she showed, the medical world is just as much a “social enterprise” as any of the other academic practices, Kirby concludes with the idea that speaking for others, in relation to FC, should be critically and carefully approached, especially considering its relation to the sexual, which, as she shows, we cannot assume to be exactly the same as it is defined in the West (Kirby, 2005, p. 91). In short, the above section shows that the medical apparatus holds a privileged epistemological status, one supported by the wide-applied usage *even* by the social sciences like anthropology and sociology (who have recently worked quite hard to show that gender is a social construct).<sup>5</sup> However, this section also shows that this epistemologically privileged status is misleading in its very nature, because of the ultimate social structure of the biological body. But by the successful presentation of the medical gaze as truth, critical attitudes are generally scarce and hence the narrative of the medical gaze is applied widely across the globe.

A second stratum which is accompanied with globally applied measurements lies in the concept of gender/sex. Although the assumption of global sisterhood is indeed criticized by scholars (as I also noted earlier), the assumption of the existence of the category, class, or defining element of ‘women’ is often still implicit and a given in scholarly analyses on FC, and rarely scrutinized,<sup>6</sup> and it is by this process that a narrative of gender/sex is re-inscribed. But there is a problem with this assumption of universality of gender/sex, scholars show (Amadiume, 1987/2015; Lugones, 2007; Oyěwùmí, 1997/2018). Oyěwùmí (1997/2018) is instrumental in this argument. As she shows in *The Invention of Women*, the idea of the female gender/sex as it has been expressed in the West throughout history (as part of a binarism with specific sociocultural codes) did in fact not exist in Yorùbá culture and

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<sup>5</sup> See Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>6</sup> Except for those associated, generally, with queer theory.

language before the arrival of the British (Oyěwùmí, 1997/2018).

Like Kirby, Oyěwùmí (1997/2018) after concluding this, starts questioning the base of biological determinism that lies at the bottom of all the sciences, including the sociological and anthropological ones. She criticizes the automatic, assumed employment of the categorization of people in society in biological terms. Even now, with contemporary theory aiming to reduce the power of the biological, this bio-determinism is still very much alive, she says. As most analyses on FC are done within the Western assumption of gender/sex, this bio-determinism also applies to FC, and it distorts reality. Looking for the origins of the focus on the visual body in Western societies, Oyěwùmí finds the primacy of viewing as cause:

The reason that the body has so much presence in the West is that the world is primarily perceived by sight. The differentiation of human bodies in terms of sex, skin color, and cranium size is a testament to the powers attributed to 'seeing' (p. 2).

Grosz (1994) further explains: "Our [Western] body forms are considered expressions of an interior, not inscriptions on a flat surface. By constructing a soul or psyche for itself [...] the body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered" (as cited in Oyěwùmí, 1997/2018, p. 2). Thus, the visual aspect of the body becomes a text to be read, encoded and decoded, deciphered, analyzed, or any other form of meaning-making practice. It becomes a message in itself, to be considered separate from what is inside, or even better, to be considered expressive of that which is inside, and in its visual essence containing the essence of the inside. Concludingly, "the body is given a logic of its own. It is believed that just by looking at it one can tell a person's beliefs and social position or lack thereof" (Oyěwùmí, 1997/2018, p. 1).

The power of the visuality of the body, then, gives meaning to “a *gaze*, a gaze of difference, a gaze of differentiation—the most historically content being the gendered gaze” (Oyěwùmí, 1997/2018, p. 2). As such, the primacy of viewing and the weight given to all conclusions rendered through this sense, invite for a mode of looking, watching, viewing. A gaze is applied as primary mode of interpreting reality, and in relation to bodies it explains the origins of the Western-based sexist gaze, differentiating between the male and the female and extrapolating in the process all kinds of ‘internal’ traits to the outsides.

And this is where Oyěwùmí (1997/2018) arrives at her original starting (and startling) point for her analysis, and the focus of her book: “the epistemological shift occasioned by the imposition of Western gender categories on Yorùbá discourse” (Oyěwùmí, 1997/2018, p. ix). As she argues, the automatic primacy of viewing and the relating gaze caused for an infusion of meaning since the arrival of Westerners in Yorùbá area. But, as Oyěwùmí notes, “prior to the infusion of Western notions into Yorùbá culture, the body was not the basis of social roles, inclusions, or exclusions; it was not the foundation of social thought and identity” (Oyěwùmí, 1997/2018, p. x). It did have a hierarchical ranking, but that “depended first and foremost on seniority, which was usually defined by relative age” (Oyěwùmí, 1997/2018, p. xiii). Now, the former reality of a ‘gender/sexless’ society has been enmeshed with Western notions of gender/sex. Still, in analyses, anthropologists and sociologists often assume the existence of gender/sex in its Western configuration, whereas in the case of Yorùbá culture it would override a current reality which is much more complicated, as a result of the mix of two different ways of thinking.

As such, Oyěwùmí’s (1997/2018) analysis functions as a way to criticize the unquestioned employment of Western-infused tools of categorization, that are almost always used, *even* by anthropological and sociological scholars. The biological roots of determining

gender/sex by means of physicality, given weight by the primacy of seeing (in all its possible forms), are still at the (implicit) core of academic disciplines, and the mere assumption of the similar existence of gender/sex as envisioned in the West across cultures is a result of that. The problematization that Oyěwùmí (1997/2018) provides us with in this section acquires meaning in relation to the Western-formed discourse on FC, as most of the analysis performed has—if executed by scholars who grew up in a ‘Western society’ (I use quotes because Western influence is everywhere)—been formed by underlying assumptions on what it means to be a ‘woman.’ By this dynamic, again, a re-inscription of meaning is occurring, which neatly falls along the lines of a colonial relationship. Spivak’s (1988/1994) ‘subaltern,’ as S/he who is not situated within networks of power, again, cannot speak.

## **Conclusion**

As I have shown in this thesis, hopefully, the workings of international scholarship and knowledge production can prove to be harmful in its misrepresentations, especially in relation to the Subaltern ‘non-Western.’ In relation to FC, this has great consequences. Its constitution as barbaric allows for a re-inscription of truth, in which a strong Othering occurs. These re-inscriptions—(1) Western politics of the body, (2) Western medical discourse and (3) Western notions on gender/sex—, however, although presented as self-evident, superior and universal, do not hold up if analyzed critically.

If we want to move forward, cross-cultural analyses and communications should occur in a dialogue, never a monologue, during which attention should be paid to the power dynamics between the two parties speaking. Scholarly producers as well as activists engaged in campaigning against FC should be as aware as possible of the cultural inhibitions that they inevitably translate to their narratives. In combination with the idea that agency should not be

envisioned as something not in possession of the African women involved with FC, and that in some instances communities of African women have abandoned FC ‘by themselves,’ Western-based activists should think twice about the politics (and necessity) related to their intervention.

Ultimately, the real problem is not the specific representation on FC, but rather the unequal power relations between the West and Africa. In order to overcome these, we only have real, open dialogue, to our availability, in order to *understand* before judging, and in order to “taking complexity seriously” (Njambi, 2011, p. 194). Because ultimately, as Obiora (2003) observes, simply “no substitute exists for the involvement of the women who provide the impetus for the practice” (p. 212).

The limitations of this thesis are that its analysis was built on texts related to each other in a discursive network of expressions on FC. As such, the analysis built on them is limited in its subjectivity, reach and context, and lacking in generalizability, or applicability to specific fields, areas or contexts. Therefore, future research might be very productive when applied to a specific field of discourse, with a more specific approach (i.e. selecting all news articles of a set of newspapers on FC throughout a specific time period in a specific country). This might result in more specific, contextual approaches to FC, that are still very much missing in current scholarly production.

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