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Samantha O'Neil Grayman April 13, 2015

Recontextualizing the Debate Surrounding Female Genital Operations: Deconstructing binaries, searching for inclusivity, and reevaluating the role of the anthropologist

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Abstract

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By Samantha O'Neil Grayman

The topic of female genital operations finds itself at the center of one of the most polarized and controversial debates of anthropology today. Popular Western discourses, which are directly related to a thorough and fairly recent history of Western imperialism and colonialism, have tended to oversimplify and essentialize a rather messy reality into reductionist terms. The current discourse thus reflects a reality in which female genital operations are discussed within the boundaries of monolithic categories and constructed binaries, all of which have limited the space for a diverse array of voices to emerge as valid. This paper explores the history of female genital operations as a topic of interest to the Western lens as well as the ways in which contemporary Western discourse continues to create limited space for dynamic individuals, predominantly women of color from the global south, to engage with a topic that directly affects them. This paper also explores the treatment of female genital operations through the anthropological perspective, revealing the ways in which anthropology has also contributed to the shaping of contemporary discourse surrounding the topic. Through key informant interviews and two case studies, this research unveils the complex, multifarious voices of women who have had different experiences with the processes of female genital operations. This work seeks to reveal the ways in which these women negotiate the rather limited space of the wider discourse, challenging binaries and monolithic categories through their existence as dynamic individuals with varying experiences. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates the limitations of contemporary discourse, arguing for a radical reconstruction of the conversation altogether.

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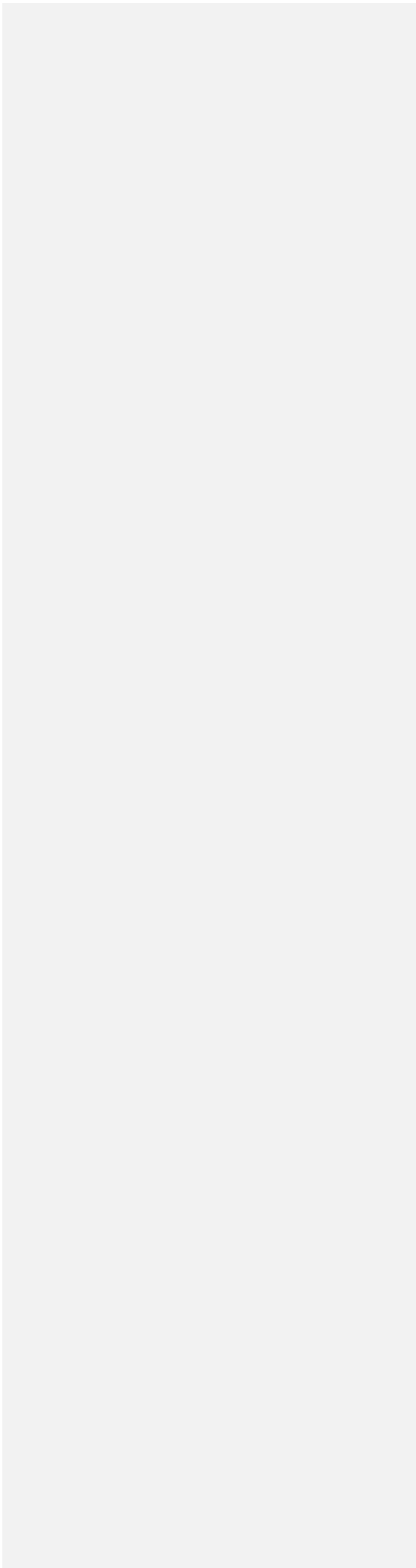

Preface

Popular Western discourses surrounding female genital operations[1] have tended to oversimplify and essentialize a rather messy reality into reductionist terms. From its conception as a topic of interest within Western audiences that began during the late colonial period, the practice of performing female genital operations has emerged as yet another example of an African "otherness" for the West to define itself as superior.[2] An overarching narrative of Western cultural superiority has thus played a key role in defining the terms through which female genital operations are discussed on the global stage; for example, Western—Non-Western, Western—African, and Modern—Primitive. For decades, mainstream discourses concerning female genital operations functioned through these restrictive binaries, overlooking the more complex realities in which culture and individuals exist.

In response to and fervent disagreement with much of the Euro-American-oriented literature available concerning female genital operations, several key anthropological studies emerged that provided alternate frameworks for understanding the complexity of the practices. Three relevant critical works have inspired the scope of my research: "Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," a book edited by Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (1991); "Searching for Voices: Feminism, Anthropology, and the Global Debate over Female Genital Mutilation," an article by Christine Walley (1997); and *Female Circumcision*

[1] Female genital operations is a term first coined by Christine Walley in her work, *Searching for Voices* that encompasses all processes of altering the female genitalia for non-medical purposes
[2] Obiama Nnaemeka, *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge*, 167

and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses, a compilation of many anthropological perspectives, edited by Obioma Nnaemeka (2005). Each contribution emerged as a crucial challenge to the notions of Western supremacy within the broader discourse surrounding female genital operations, a phenomenon that is mainly a concern for women of color from the global south. Main themes covered in each work concern the historical dominance of Western narratives within the wider dialogue concerning female genital operations, the power dynamics involved in the valuing of certain voices over others, and the search for inclusivity within the broader context.

These three publications have contributed to my study's theoretical framework, as I attempt to deconstruct overarching themes and binaries that further blur the complex reality through which female genital operations actually exist. I seek to unpack what it means for the individual to be caught in between such arbitrary constructs, ultimately revealing the impracticality of defining the practices within such limiting terms. I also attempt to build my project on the findings of Mohanty, Walley, Nnaemeka, and other scholars who challenge the anthropological discipline to recognize the ways in which it has also been complicit in constructing newer binaries and other monolithic categories. Though the studies I use raise critical points concerning the struggle of non-Western voices to be heard within a Western-dominated discourse, such conclusions raise questions as to what it means to be "Western" and what it means to be "non-Western" or in this particular case, what it means to be "African." If the overarching arguments of most of these anthropological studies reveal that contemporary discourse still values Euro-American-oriented viewpoints over non-Western viewpoints, a binary inevitably emerges between "Western" voices and "Non-Western" voices that assumes a

monolithic understanding of both categories. Walley briefly touches on this problem by recognizing that there truly is no general consensus among African woman, but rather there are a variety of opinions among them concerning the issue of female genital operations. Chima Korieh, in the book *Female Circimcision and the Politics of Knowledge,* openly acknowledges this issue in this quote, "In the circumcision discourse in particular, Western feminism, like anthropology, constructs stereotypical images of cultural "others" with little attempt to truly understand women in other societies."[3]

Despite her work being the most dated of all three works, Mohanty most thoroughly problematizes the construct of the Third World Woman in the 1990s. Though almost all of contemporary literature now refrains from using problematic terminology such as "third world" or "third world women," Mohanty's arguments remain some of the most comprehensive and applicable to my research today. Mohanty's main issue with the terminologies of "third world woman" and "third world women" is in their existence and usage as monolithic constructs under the Western lens. Citing Western feminist literature, she unpacks how these terms historically emerged from a limited, problematic, and misguided understanding of feminism and women's liberation, based on a "white, Western / non-Western hierarchy." She states, "Just as 'Western women' or 'white women' cannot be defined as coherent interest groups, 'third world women' also do not constitute any automatic unitary group…ideological differences in understandings of the social mediate any assumption of a 'natural' bond between

[3] Nnaemeka, *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses*, 115

women."[4] She goes on to say, "defining third world women in terms of their 'problems' or their 'achievements in relation to an imagined free white liberal democracy effectively removes them (and the 'liberal democracy') from history, freezing them in time and space."

Despite her criticism of these terms, however, Mohanty ultimately continues to use them. Her deconstruction of the expressions involves her own redefinition of what it means to be a "third world woman," a group she openly identifies with in the following quote: "What seems to constitute 'women of color' or 'third world women' as a viable oppositional alliance is a *common context of struggle* rather than color or racial identifications. Similarly, it is third world women's oppositional *political* relation to sexist, racist, and imperialist structures that constitutes our potential commonality." In her own definition she asserts that women who often form a part of the constituency of "third world women" as defined by Western feminist literature can in fact not be defined only by the color of their skin nor by their statuses as passive victims, but rather through their active resistance and resilience within structures of systemic oppression.

At various points throughout my research, I attempt to confront my own position by challenging myself to come to terms with the implications of my participation in the wider discourse. Walley touches on this, arguing that within all engagements, we are constantly at odds negotiating our positions as both outsiders and insiders. Similar to how Mohanty openly identifies as a "Third World Woman" in her chapter *Under Western Eyes*, I identify as a woman of color who also navigates systems of sexism, racism, and imperialism in the same ways as the

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[4] Mohanty, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,* 6-7

women whom I study. Like her, I thus do not remove myself from the broader discourse of women's liberation—rather I posit myself as a woman of color within the movement and seek to relate to the individual struggles of the women with whom I engage in the attempt to shed light on the details of the overlaps and disconnects between women of color within wider systems of Western imperialist hierarchies. My engagement with the topic of female genital operations stems out of a feeling of frustration with powerful Western narratives that assume supremacy vis-à-vis non-Western, non-white peoples, a narrative I often have to confront throughout my own experiences. My identity as a woman with Caribbean and Irish heritage, and a deep, personal contempt for the effects of colonial and post-colonial oppression, cannot be separated from my own passionate involvement in this topic. This deep-seated passion is most likely the driving force behind my interest in the issue. Throughout my work, I challenge myself to unpack this aspect of my involvement. Acknowledging the role of my racial and gendered identity, as well as my relation to Mohanty's concept of the "common struggle," in the context of my engagements throughout this research experience is key. It is undeniable that my layered identities contributed enormously to the ways in which I navigated and entered into vulnerable, insightful spaces with the women I encountered.

I eventually seek to propose through my ethnographic experience, possible ways for the anthropologist to engage, who in the face of glaring dichotomies is often forced to either pick one side or the other. For the anthropologist and others, to condone the act of forcefully mutilating a young woman's body against her own volition clearly can be interpreted as cruel and inhumane. But so can telling a woman that she is nothing more than a mutilated, disfigured frame—a passive, lifeless victim of her backwards culture. I personally believe that it

is cruel to label a woman's experience for her and it is inhumane to disregard a woman's own account of her experience. It is neither feminist nor humanist, but rather it is systematically sexist, racist, and imperialist. This does not alleviate the suffering of the woman. It magnifies it. The question that remains is thus how to properly imagine a reality in which the anthropologist can acknowledge all of the above, and in turn support women of varying identities in their individual struggles for liberation.

Method and Chapter Layout

The original method for my research entailed administering at least 15-20 interviews as well as several focus groups with women within the refugee community over the span of a couple of months. Two women who were heavily involved in the movement against female genital operations in Georgia, Ayana and Aisha, had agreed to help me do this. For a variety of reasons I touch on throughout my thesis, this did not happen. My own ethnographic work thus relies heavily on material gathered from case studies and key informant interviews. There are two major case studies that have significantly contributed to the formation of my main arguments. The first is an ABC interview I happened to witness in the car on the way to a conference in D.C. with one of my key informants, where I was able to gather data supporting my literature research regarding mainstream U.S. media representations of female genital operations. The second is the civil society conference I attended in D.C. where two of my key informants spoke. At the conference I was able to gather data on popular U.S. political discourse surrounding female genital operations. The third source of data is the information gathered from my key informant interviews with two women whom I introduce more

thoroughly later, Aisha and Hassanatou. In these interviews I obtained their own personal views on contemporary discourse surrounding female genital operations.

I want to emphasize the value of the information I have at hand despite the lack of quantitative data and a larger sample that I would have if my original approach had been possible. Performing a high-risk research project as an honors student on a highly controversial topic, while taking a full course load both semesters, proved to be extremely difficult. In addition, the project was further challenged because after agreeing to assist me in my study my key collaborator in the refugee community decided not to work with me nor facilitate interviews with me in the community. I suspect the controversial nature of the topic and concern about how the findings of the study would be interpreted were reasons for this non-cooperation. While a wider variety of voices would have, in some ways, strengthened my arguments, there is much to be said about the abundance of detailed qualitative data I obtained from engaging closely with only a few women. In defending and proceeding on with my study, I thus seek to challenge the notion within academia that values studies with an abundance of quantifiable data over those without.

Before delving into my own ethnographic work, I begin with a brief overview of the history of the popular discourses surrounding female genital operations. Discussion of female genital operations arose first out of colonial, and thus early anthropological, representations of the "other," reemerged later as a central topic within Western feminist liberation literature, and resurfaced within contemporary Anthropology as a key topic of cultural anthropological interest. Overall, understanding the history of how particular historical narratives functioned in

relation to the topic at hand is vital for grasping the complexities of a subject that finds itself at the heart of a global controversy. I open Chapter One with a few anecdotal vignettes, which form a part of the ethnographic story I attempt to tell. In chapter Two, I introduce my key informants, providing space for them to represent themselves through their own words in my interviews. In chapter Three, I present my two case studies: the ABC interview and the civil society conference. Throughout my ethnography, I use pseudonyms for everyone involved.

Introduction

General Background

Female genital operations form an integral part of several contemporary global debates. A focal point for various women's rights activist organizations, the practice has particularly grabbed the attention of feminists in the US and Europe, as well as feminists in Africa and the Middle East. Within the global discourse of human rights, the practice is categorized as gender-based violence. Due to the historically abundant wave of immigration from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia to Western countries, the practice has also entered discourses regarding immigration.[5] The practice of female genital operations is correspondingly a topic of great interest to cultural and biological anthropologists. Anthropologists often use the topic as an example to demonstrate and teach about the inherent tension between cultural relativism and human rights.[6]

Despite female genital operations being most widely apparent in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia,[7] American or European "experts" often hold the most powerful voices in this global debate. This is probably the most recent criticism of the movement against female genital operations in Anthropology—this form of Western engagement in the topic dangerously elicits an overwhelming sentiment of Western cultural superiority within a global movement centered on a very foreign, localized practice. Such a dominant, paternalist Western narrative often results in silencing local voices that might have differing or even similar views on

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[5] Ylva Hernlund and Bettina Shell-Duncan, *Transcultural Bodies*, 52

[6] Miroslava Prazak and Jennifer Coffman, "Anthropological Perspectives on Female Genital Cutting: Embodying Tradition, Violence, and Social Resilience," *Africa Today,* v

an issue that directly affects them. Anthropology as a discourse finds itself in a unique position as a discipline that itself strikingly struggles with similar imperialist and colonial historical entanglements.

Politics of Naming

Female genital operations are associated with a variety of names. Labeling the practice forms a part of the controversy itself.[8] "Cutting," "female cutting," "female genital cutting," "female circumcision," "clitoridectdomy," "infibulation," and "female genital mutilation" are all prevalent terms within contemporary global discourse that have different connotations and functions for specific ideological purposes.[9] "Cutting" is usually considered the least political, while "female genital mutilation," implies a position of opposition. The term "circumcision," in turn, invokes a position of tolerance and is often considered the most political.[10] I choose to employ Walley's term, female genital operations, which not only seems to be the least biased, but also implies a diversity and multiplicity of practices, referring to them grammatically as plural. Any other terms will appear only in specific references.

Female Genital Operations in Early Anthropology

Perhaps most crucial to my research are the historical ways in which anthropology has dealt with female genital operations. The earliest anthropological texts deal with the practices

[8] Prazak and Coffman, "Anthropological Perspectives on Female Genital Cutting," vi
[9] Ellen Gruenbaum, *The Female Circumcision Controversy*: An Anthropological Perspective, 4
[10] Mary Nyangweso Wangila, *Female Circumcision: The Interplay of Religion, Culture, and Gender in Kenya*, 46-47

in a rather non-problematized way.[11] Anthropologists often included the topic within larger categories such as "childhood," "adolescence," or "initiation." [12] There is rare, if any, ethnographic material that deals with female genital operations as an isolated topic. The practices themselves are often referred to as "initiation" or "circumcision."[13] References to female genital operations often occur following in-depth ethnographic accounts of male initiation rites. The primacy of male initiation in ethnographic accounts is epitomized not only by sequence (male initiation always referenced first), but also by depth of analysis. Anthropological accounts of initiation often thoroughly detail male rites of passage then proceed to reference female genital operations as "equivalents."[14] Some early ethnographies ignore female genital operations altogether.

The lack of specific attention to female genital operations is certainly a result of extreme male dominance within the early phase of anthropology, which endured unchallenged until the creation of the "anthropology of women" in the early 1970s.[15] The absence of female anthropologists up until this period largely accounts for the shortage of ethnographic substance regarding female cultural engagements in general. This is epitomized by examples like Evans-Pritchard's study on *The Nuer*[16], in which he illustrates an entirely male-dominated view of exclusively male engagements amongst Nuer although his work claims an all-encompassing

[11] Texts supporting this argument include: Hambly, Wilfrid D., *The Ovibundu of Angola*. Chicago: 1934; Raum, O.F., *Chaga Childhood*: 1940; Dundas, Charles, *Kilimanjaro and its People.* Frank Cass and Company Limited: 1924; Evans-Pritchard, E.E, *The Nuer.* Oxford: 1940; Baxter, P.T.W and Butt, Audrey, *The Azande, and related peoples*. London: 1953
[12] Ibid
[13] Ibid
[14] Ibid
[15] Moore, *Feminism and Anthropology*, 1
[16] Evans-Pritchard, E.E, *The Nuer*

ethnographic account of an entire culture's livelihood, political structure, and people. Despite the apparent and well-studied sexism of early anthropology, what could be other nuanced explanations that could account for early anthropology's indifference, and in many cases complete disregard, for female genital operations? Perhaps a more productive question is: what are the motivating factors that contributed to the ideological and situational shifts in anthropology's concern for female genital operations? In an attempt to grapple with these questions, the following sections explore the construction and development of the current dominant global discourses surrounding female genital operations, particularly those that face harsher forms of criticism from contemporary anthropology.

Female Genital Operations and Colonialism

The origin of Western opposition to and disapproval of the practice of female genital operations was first documented during the colonial era. [17] From missionaries to parliamentarians and state representatives, medical practitioners and educators, there was a general condemnation of the seemingly barbaric practice by Western colonial settlers.[18] At the forefront of this first colonial movement against female genital operations were European women. As early as the 1920s, Western cosmopolitan women led campaigns, speaking out "on behalf" of their "colonized sisters," whom they pitied as voiceless and oppressed.[19] This is perhaps, the first occasion in which Westerners, particularly women, felt the necessity to speak

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[17] Ylva Hernlund and Bettina Shell-Duncan, *Transcultural Bodies*, 52
[18] Ibid
[19] Ibid

out against a practice they viewed to be harmful towards women of other backgrounds but with whom they had no real connection except a shared gender.

These women activists also felt the need to defend the rights of women under colonial rule, because they perceived gender inequality and sexist oppression as an intrinsic result of particularly subordinate, backwards, non-Western cultures.[20] Ironically, while acknowledging and protesting gender-based oppression of women under colonial rule, Western women activists completely ignored any facets of their own potential gender-based oppression as women living under a system of patriarchy in the West. Furthermore, these women activists overlooked their own complicity in the oppression of the women they were seeking to "save," ignoring how the Western colonial regimes of which they formed a part intentionally and purposefully restructured African gender roles to mirror their own.[21]

These Western women settlers felt the indispensable need to stand up for the gender rights of women living under colonial rule. They justified this humanitarianism by the same means through which Western men and women justified imperialism: through racist and Western supremacist ideology. Due to their assumed and inherently backward cultures, African (or Middle Eastern, or South Asian) women were automatically oppressed, and thus to be pitied and to be saved, while Western women were free, progressive, and to be admired. Western women represented the "civilized," and thus "free" women just as Western society represented the "civilized" and "free" society. Western women sought to restructure non-Western women's gender roles and practices to mirror their own just as Western colonial

[20] Ibid
[21] Ibid

settlers sought to reshape non-Western societies to mirror their own.[22] The first movement against female genital operations, despite its humanitarian intent, thus perpetuated and condoned the same racist justification through which Western patriarchal powers dominated African communities and peoples and systematically oppressed African women in the first place. [23]

Female Genital Operations and Western Feminist Literature

The 1970s, under the emergence of second-wave feminism in the U.S and Europe, was era in which female genital operations arose once again to particular Western attention. This sudden emergence of a global consciousness surrounding the topic of female genital operations can be attributed not only to the surfacing of second-wave feminism, as well as newfound Western feminist interest in body politics and sexuality[24], but also to a newfound international attention to women. 1975-1985 was declared by the United Nations as the Decade for Women. [25] Throughout this period of particular international attention towards women, Western and non-Western feminists alike engaged in a myriad of global discourses, female genital operations being a central concern. This motivated the production of many books and articles concerning the practices, especially by Western feminists. Shocked, confused, and disgusted that the ostensibly barbaric and backwards practices of female genital operations were still widely accepted within many regions in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia,

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[22] Ibid
[23] Walley, "Searching for "Voices" *Cultural Anthropology,* 423
[24] Ibid
[25] James and Robertson, *Genital Cutting and Transnational Sisterhood,* 33

prominent feminists like Gloria Steinem, Mary Daly, Fran Hosken, and Hanny Lightfoot-Klein called for an international, collaborative movement to end them.[26]

The same binaries constructed under the colonial perspective emerged once again through the Western feminist lens at the rise of second-wave feminism. Chima Korieh argues this still rings true today, "Colonial discourse and the current feminist discourse on female circumcision assume the same binary trajectory of a civilized, emancipated, and autonomous Western woman, on the one hand, and the oppressed and backward non-Western woman bound by tradition, superstition, and male suppression on the other. Such binaries are possible only with the Western subject as the primary reference point."[27] African women were some of the first individuals to point this out—even those who might have agreed with Western feminists on many other occasions. Nawal el-Saadawi was a key example of this. As a woman who had undergone a process of female genital operations and suffered as a result, she has thoroughly opposed the practices and has been an active participant in movements to end them. However, Saadawi is also a fierce and outspoken opponent to imperialist and colonial power structures. In her work, *Imperialism and Sex,* Saadawi challenged those voices of Western feminists who discussed female genital operations and women's liberation within the binaries that upheld Western morality to be superior and posited African ethics as subordinate, ignoring how systems like Western imperialism also contributed to the suffering of African and Middle Eastern women. She states, "I oppose all attempts to deal with female circumcision or

[26] James and Robertson, *Genital Cutting and Transnational Sisterhood,* 61
[27] Nnaemeka, *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge*, 116

any other sexual problem in isolation, severing it from its links with historical, economic, and political factors, at the national and international levels."[28]

James and Roberston in the book, *Genital Cutting and Transnational Sisterhood,* reveal other examples of African activists' outrage towards this Western feminist perspective.[29] Possibly the most referenced historical example of non-Western outrage regarding Western feminism's overpowering neocolonial, imperialist discourse surrounding female genital operations was during the international conference in Copenhagen, which fell straight in the middle of the UN Decade For Women in 1980, a large number of non-Western, predominantly African, feminists and activists outwardly refuted the Western feminist discourse that dominated the conference's debate surrounding female genital operations. This eventually culminated in many prominent non-Western feminists walking out of the conference altogether. In *Feminism, Anthropology, and the Politics of Excision in Mali*, Gosselin states, "The way that outraged Western women championed the issue at Copenhagen revealed 'latent racism,' 'intellectual neocolonialism,' and anti-Arab and Anti-Islamic fervour."[30] The discourse was so powerful and overwhelming that even non-Western feminists, whom openly sought to abolish the practice of female genital operations, found themselves defending the practice in an attempt to defend their own cultures and selves.[31] This negotiation of agency within popular discourses of feminism and human rights would emerge as a common theme within my

[28] Nnaemeka, *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge*, 22
[29] James and Robertson, *Genital Cutting and Transnational Sisterhood*, 62
[30] Claude Gosselin, "Feminism, Anthropology and the Politics of Excision in Mali Global and Local Debates in a Postcolonial World," *Anthropologica,* 44
[31] Walley, "Searching for "Voices" *Cultural Anthropology*, 419

ethnographic research, revealing that dynamic women of varying feminist views can challenge the notion of Western feminism itself as a category.

Female Genital Operations and Contemporary Anthropology

Finally, I want to return to anthropology's treatment of female genital operations, briefly contextualizing the development of a more critical anthropological lens concerning the experiences of non-Western women and the inclusion of their voices amidst a polarized debate. While anthropology in older texts dealt with female genital operations in a less problematized fashion, a shift in the anthropological perspective coincided with the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1970s. Why did Anthropology suddenly reorient its gaze to concern the ways in which discourse encompassed the topic? What were the contributing factors to the emergence of an Anthropological consciousness in which discussing female genital operations was problematized? Based on analyses of Euro-American-oriented literature on the topic, two historical turning points seem to be at the core of this apparent shift. The first is the dramatic shift within anthropology that called for the inclusion of women as anthropological experts within the field along with more comprehensive incorporation of women's cultural engagements in ethnographic research. The second turning point was the development of a dominant, exclusive, Western feminist narrative surrounding a topic that didn't really concern Western women in practice. This led to the involvement of women like Nawal el Saadawi and Chandra Mohanty, amongst many others, who identified as "Third World Women," or non-

Western women, or African women, etc. seeking to share their voice within a Western-dominated discourse.

Mohanty's work particularly emerged as one of the most critical of Western feminist perceptions of women of color from the global south. Her main arguments were concerned, like Korieh's and Saadawi's, with the imperialist and racist power dynamics that remained at play within Western feminist discourse. She argues, "by contrasting the representation of third world women with what I referred to as Western feminism's self-presentation in the same context, we see how Western feminists alone become the true 'subjects' of this counter history. Third world women on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of their 'object' status."[32] Mohanty's work not only criticized Western feminism for being too exclusive to women of predominantly white, upper-middle class, Western backgrounds, but further condemned its participation in perpetuating narratives that upheld the status of white Western women as superior historical agents and women of color of the global south as passive, inferior, and ahistorical objects. At the same time, anthropology faced a turning point in which it confronted its colonial, imperialist patriarchal past. Its newfound critical lens could therefore no longer ignore the historical intricacies and entanglements of discourse surrounding female genital operations and the global power dynamics that shaped it.

Contemporary anthropologists, however, still find themselves today within a polarized predicament, stuck between the new binaries they create through their own efforts to deconstruct earlier binaries. On the one hand, while some anthropologists still remove

[32] Mohanty, Russo and Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*

themselves from the global debate in the name of cultural relativism, they often receive harsh criticism from feminist or human rights activists for remaining neutral in such a controversial debate. On the other hand, while some anthropologists assume a firmer stance, they too often receive harsh criticism, usually from other anthropologists, for abandoning the principal of cultural relativism. Within Walley's work, she raises an even more critical point for the engaged anthropologist, arguing, "if we resort to cultural relativist arguments in the attempt to divert the racism embedded in much of the international outcry over female genital operations, do we end up undermining those African women who are themselves working to change these practices? Are we participating in leaving them exposed to charges that they are denigrating their own 'traditions' and being culturally 'inauthentic?'" Reflecting on this problem, I seek to challenge the ways in which anthropological approaches to cultural relativism can result in the construction of a static concept of culture, despite a common understanding within anthropology that culture is in constant flux. While cultural relativist approaches create space for more marginalized, "authentic" voices to emerge within a Euro-American-oriented narrative, in what ways does this approach consequently limit space for other "authentic" voices in their own political and social engagements and cultural transformations?

Chapter One: Entering the Field

Like most anthropological research, my current topic is not what I originally intended it to be. It all began in the Clarkston community outside of Atlanta where I was an English tutor and had established fairly strong connections with teachers, community members, and people who worked with resettlement agencies. Clarkston has a large number of refugee families from several different countries, including many African countries. Bobby King, a former chair of Refugee Family Services, was one of my most important contacts. I interned for Bobby in the summer of 2013 at the International Rescue Committee, where he now teaches advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) to adults, who were mostly from Somalia, the DRC, and Iraq. I had volunteered under his guidance for the two years prior, engaging again with adults in an advanced ESL tutoring program once a week. This past summer, Bobby connected me with two women whom he believed would be a good connection for me within the community, given my interests in women's activism and social justice work.

Both Aisha and Ayana were heavily involved in initiatives that focused on empowering young migrant women. From the moment we met, Ayana, a woman in her early 30s, demonstrated a deep interest in including me in some of her projects. She invited me to discuss this further by meeting her for coffee at a small café in Decatur, convenient for both of us given my studies at Emory and her residence in the city of Decatur. Our first meeting revolved around us getting to know each other. I learned that she came to the United States as a refugee from Kenya, ethnically Oromo and originally from Somalia. Having gone to middle and high school in the United States after living in a refugee camp in Kenya, she struggled a lot

with her own identity as a young migrant woman in Seattle. As she grew older, she developed a passion and drive to do as much as she could to create opportunities and spaces for young migrant women—ones she wishes she had available to her during her own difficult and confusing time of transition.

The more time I spent with Ayana, the more she confided in me about her personal life. One day she told me that she and her family were no longer on speaking terms. Growing up in what she perceived to be a very ruthless, restrictive, traditionally Islamic household, she resented not having much space to express herself in ways that strayed from her parents' interpretations of a religious message they cherished above everything. Ayana, on multiple accounts, also expressed a certain degree of chagrin towards her parents for what they did to her. At the age of nine years old, her mother and father forced her to undergo a procedure of female genital operations against her own will. This was devastating. As a young Muslim migrant woman, Ayana already struggled with fitting into her new community in Seattle. But having gone through a procedure that shattered the trust she had for her family, as well as her own self-image and cultural identity, made this even more difficult. She recalled battling with depression for years throughout middle school and high school, drifting further and further from those closest to her when she really needed them most. This all culminated into a breaking point when her parents arranged a marriage for her as a teenager. She recounted living miserably with her husband in a marriage she did not want during a period of her life when she would have preferred to focus on her own self-growth. She ended up giving birth to her first son in this relationship, and though the details of the rest of the story were very murky, it seemed she definitely left her husband and possibly officially divorced him, but I am not

entirely sure. More intense than the resentment she expressed for her family, however, was the disappointment she perceived her parents felt towards her. Ayana mentioned that her parents were so disappointed in her life choices that she could not face them without either pretending to be someone she was not or completely dishonoring them by being who she was. Regardless, her parents definitely did not approve of what they knew about her and would not approve of the aspects of her life that were yet unknown to them. At the time she lived with her fiancé, John, a Jewish-American man in Decatur. Her son also remained out of contact with her parents—she feared they would not accept him given his sexual orientation and his religious views, which strayed on the side of atheism.

Though Ayana seemed very open with me from the beginning of our companionship, this bond really deepened when she asked me to help her with a start-up initiative for young Congolese women and girls living in Clarkston, a project that was to be the original focus of this thesis. Throughout the summer of 2014, Ayana and I worked very hard on the development of a youth program. I had been awarded a grant from the Emory Center for Ethics, which allowed for the purchase of notebooks, pens, and arts and crafts equipment. Throughout the months of July and August, I met Ayana at least twice a week, including our weekly meetings with the youth group. The other times we met were on an individual basis, where we would focus on developing the program curriculum for the school year, as we planned to extend the summer program to an after-school one. It was at these meetings where she would talk to me about her other personal engagements. Ayana was always very busy. Working as a caseworker at one of the refugee resettlement agencies in the Atlanta area took up most of her time. She was also involved with many grassroots activist groups in the refugee community, including the one

we attempted to launch. On top of all that, she had recently been confronted with a lot of media attention, inquiring about her experience with female genital operations. She would constantly have interviews with news outlets, such as the Guardian, Cosmopolitan Magazine, and the New York Times. Her schedule was always packed and she would regularly mention how overwhelmed she was, certain that she needed to reconsider her priorities so that she could rearrange her calendar to be more conducive to her own overall health.

It became extremely difficult to maintain the development of our mentorship program when Ayana started to miss more and more of our meetings, ignore my texts, and cancel appointments. Running the program without Ayana was impossible. I did not have the resources and skills to maintain it alone. To my disappointment, the entire program had to be shut down. Since then, it got even harder for me to keep in contact with Ayana. We had an agreement that she would help me gather data regarding community perceptions about female genital operations in Clarkston. She gradually stopped responding to my texts and emails and ultimately never communicated with me again. Some of my colleagues and friends within the community also began to reach out to me and ask if I had heard from her. She cut herself off from a lot of her engagements, including her job at the resettlement agency, which she quit after getting word that she was pregnant with her second child.

Though my engagement with Ayana was brief and ended abruptly, her story became a crucial piece to my current research. This is primarily because working with Ayana is precisely when the subject of my research drastically shifted. Moreover, it was my engagements with Ayana that challenged me to reorient my perception of the contemporary discourse

surrounding female genital operations—this is more than a simple "controversy," a topic worthy of academic analysis and conceptual deconstruction. I began to realize how the complexities, colors, and implications of the broader conversation all touch human beings in very tangible, personal and individual ways. The discourse surrounding female genital operations is an individual one just as much as it is a global one. This cannot be emphasized enough.

Ayana represents a woman who does not fit into the monolithic structure of what it means to be an African woman, as defined by popular discourse. Her experiences reflect a more dynamic reality. Ayana's religiously restrictive upbringing might have fit the limiting stereotype of the oppressed African woman if she hadn't been an agent in her own experiences, as are ultimately all individuals. Ayana rebelled a lot as a child, challenging the traditional Islamic views and practices of her parents as she struggled to fit into new spaces after their move to the U.S. Her resistance continued as she grew older, reflected in her own choice to choose what she perceived to be a more free lifestyle over staying in close contact with her immediate family. Ayana's resilience in her search to empower herself as a woman is not representative of the African woman portrayed in popular discourse through the media as well as through mainstream Western feminism. Ayana is not a passive object of a uniquely African patriarchal dominance, but rather she is an active participant in the shaping of her own experiences amidst a variety of structural systems.

The systems Ayana challenged were not limited to those perpetuated by her family's Islamic and Oromo traditions. Ayana was a woman who stood fiercely in opposition to the

practices of female genital operations, but she also pushed the boundaries of what it meant to be on this side of the debate. Though in more subtle ways, much like Nawal el Saadawi, Ayana challenged the extent to which Western feminism defined the contemporary discourse surrounding female genital operations. I can recall once being in her living room when she was working on an interview for Cosmopolitan Magazine that she had been avoiding for quite some time. She muttered how difficult it was at times to retell her story over and over again. Some of the questions were very personal, and I couldn't help but agree with her and let her know that her feelings were valid. We discussed how she didn't have to answer every question if she didn't want to, and that if she perceived any question to be too invasive, she was right to trust her instincts.

This was one of the few times where Ayana affirmed herself and her own experiences in front of me amidst a discourse that was highly polarized and emotionally triggering. We ended up discussing the complexities of these interviews and Ayana brought up an interesting perspective. On the one hand, she was extremely grateful to have the opportunity to share her story to a wider Western feminist audience, but on the other there were implications for her involvement in such realms of discourse. Her friend and colleague Aisha, for example, had just received numerous death threats from members of the migrant community who disagreed with the campaign to end female genital operations after being featured in a Change.org petition that reached over 200,000 signatures. Furthermore, there was the underlying issue of Ayana's family, who she didn't necessarily want to disappoint any further by appearing as the poster-child in mainstream Western media for a movement against her own indigenous cultural practices. On top of this all, Ayana didn't necessarily like the ways in which she felt she was

being portrayed—she was not a powerless woman. She might have had some negative experiences in her life but they did not define her.

This conversation with Ayana exposed a reality where she and other women were constantly negotiating their own agency, personal convictions, and safety in the confined space of a global controversy. Nawal el Saadawi once stated, "imperialist scholars could write about us Africans as barbaric, uncivilized, morally, mentally, and sexually debased people while ignoring their barbaric, uncivilized aggression against our men and women."[33] Decades later this statement still holds value in the debate surrounding female genital operations. The reporter for Cosmopolitan magazine was, as were other journalists, so eager to write a spread on the "oppressed" African woman. In the process of sensationalized journalism, the reporter risked fragmenting communities, destroying families, and putting people at risk of harm. She also participated in the perpetuation of colonial age representations of Africans as culturally inferior, primitive others, an oppressive narrative that cannot be separated from its role in having perpetually justified all systemic violence perpetrated against African peoples at the hands of imperialist power structures. Yet none of this seemed to be of concern to her, which begs the questions: what are the ultimate incentives for these articles? With whom are they primarily concerned?

Reflections on this pivotal conversation with Ayana, however, have also prompted me to wonder about the ways in which she might have felt pressured to put up a certain façade around me. Although I believe my position as a fellow woman of color facilitated the depth of

[33] Nnaemeka, *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge*, 24

most of our discussions, I am sure my status as a student at Emory University played a significant role in how Ayana engaged with me. This is one of those examples of where I navigated spaces as both an outsider and insider. Though I could relate to Ayana on many accounts, as an Emory student I still represented an elite, privileged institution. In what ways did my status as a student and outside researcher shape Ayana's perceptions of me? How did she think she would benefit from participating in a research project affiliated with a wealthy, elite institution? And ultimately, how did her involvement in my research project contribute to her decision to cut off contact with me? Was my study another added pressure to her everyday commitments?

Chapter Two: Finding Voices, Challenging Binaries

I would now like to introduce the two women I had the privilege of working with throughout the rest of my ethnographic research, Aisha and Hassanatou. Aisha is a woman from the Gambia who moved to the United States as an adolescent. Identifying as a "survivor of female genital mutilation," she leads her own campaign against female genital operations, which is centered in the migrant community in Southwest Atlanta. She has also recently worked on bringing the organization to Clarkston, GA. Hassanatou is an American born woman of Sierra Leonean heritage. At the age of 21, she chose to return to her mother country to participate in a Sierra Leonean rite of passage, one that runs "parallel and complimentary with" male rites of passage within her ethnic group, the Kono. She is a well-published medical anthropologist and runs her own organization that holds a pro-choice stance in regards to the practices of female genital operations. I had the opportunity to ask each woman a series of questions concerning their views on female genital operations as well as the movement to end them. I presented the questions and answers in a table that extends throughout the next few pages. I decided to keep the answers in their original form, with a few exceptions where I have rephrased and reduced lengthy statements within brackets. As Mohanty argues, "It is time to move beyond the Marx who found it possible to say: They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented." Throughout the next several pages, Aisha and Hassanatou represent themselves in their responses to a series of questions from me.

Question 1: What is your connection to [female genital operations] and/or the current dialog surrounding the practices?

Aisha: *My connection to the practice of FGM is something personal. I went through the practice when I was young and I have experienced first hand what the horrors are and because of that I took a stand to raise awareness about the practice and help bring an end to it.*

Hassanatou: *I was born in the US of Sierra Leonean parentage. Most women in Sierra Leone practice female circumcision as parallel and complementary with male circumcision. I underwent circumcision in Sierra Leone as an adult (21 years old) as part of a traditional rite of passage among my ethnic group, the Kono. I also became an anthropologist so I could better understand the cultural and symbolic meanings of this practice from the point of view of women who support the tradition. I am engaged in this dialogue from both a personal and professional standpoint - for me, both are inextricably linked.*

Question 2: What are your opinions on the mainstream movement against [female genital operations] and the ideologies surrounding it?

Aisha: *I think FGM is still not an issue that is discussed like other issues affecting girls and women. I believe because this is an issue that affects the African girl child it is not seen as a priority for most western governments including the US government.*

Hassanatou: *I am concerned about the legal definition of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), which is used to redefine female circumcision. The term does not refer to an age of consent and instead assumes all females whatever their age cannot consent to this practice. This infantilizes African immigrant women (they are the bulk of women affected) in the face of the law and denies us autonomy over our own bodies. Also, the*

term "mutilation" does not describe the positive genital self-image of most circumcised women and is a considered a great insult in our cultures. The anti-FGM movement effectively silences the voices of the vast majority of circumcised women who support the practice.

Question 3: Do you think mainstream Western feminism is a driving force behind the current movement against [female genital operations]?

Aisha: *I don't think the western feminism movement is a driving force against FGM. I think it is more of an Africa led movement. I believe people are finally taking notice because African girls have stood up and said this is not a tradition we want to see continue.*

Hassanatou: *Absolutely. But of course there are women within the cultures who oppose the practice.*

Question 4: How do you feel about mainstream Western feminism?

Aisha: *I think mainstream western feminism is like every other feminism out there. We are all fighting for the same thing. Equality our natural rights.*

Hassanatou: *I consider myself a third wave feminist. On the whole, I identify with most of mainstream western feminism.*

Question 5: (For Aisha only)

What are your opinions on the views of activists who oppose the movement against [female genital operations]? Do you support migrant women who do not identify as survivors of “FGM,” but are rather proud of their having gone through the practice as a rite of passage?

Aisha: *My opinion on [these activists] is that this is a practice that has shown to have adverse effects on the lives of girls. Some have died from this practice while others have been maimed. I don't see any justification for us to preach for such practice. I don't condone violence against women. If women choose not to identify as survivors that's their choice but I will never condone any form of violence against women and girls.*

Question 6: (For Hassanatou only)

What are your opinions on the views of activists who oppose [female genital operations]? Do you support women who identify as survivors of female circumcision, a practice they label as traumatic and violent?

Hassanatou: *I absolutely support these women although I disagree that the answer is to join anti-FGM campaigns. I believe the latter do more harm to our communities and take away the basic rights of immigrant women from these communities while failing to achieve any real success in their main goal - a global ban.*

Question 7: What are your thoughts on the laws in the United States regarding [female genital operations]? How do you think they affect migrant communities, and more particularly, migrant women?

Aisha: *My thoughts on the laws against FGM in the US is that they are there but are not being implemented. They are laws on paper and most migrant communities are not aware of what the laws are. I don't think these laws affect migrant communities or women in any particular way. If anything I think they stand as a protection tool for migrant women and girls.*

Hassanatou: *In theory the federal FGM legislation does not appear to discriminate against women from groups that practice female circumcision because the law is meant*

to apply generally to all girls under the age of 18. There are issues regarding the fairness of this law given parental autonomy and privacy that protects practices like male circumcision or even the right, of say a 16 year old girl, to have cosmetic surgery, including on her vagina. My main concern is that the term FGM is used disparagingly to apply to perfectly healthy circumcised African women.

Question 8: In what ways do you think these laws are effective and in what ways do you think they are not?

Aisha: *I think these laws can be effective if they are used the right way, by educating communities and making them aware. I think these laws will continue to be ineffective if the government does not start implementing and educating immigrant communities about them.*

Hassanatou: See above.

Question 9: What are your visions for inclusive solutions regarding the practices of [female genital operations] in migrant communities? Could contrasting voices ever coexist in such a way where policies and solutions are formed to create political space and legislative support for migrant women of different convictions?

Aisha: *I think my vision is to see amplified measures targeted at ending FGM in one generation. I don't see [contrasting voices] ever coexisting to bring about change or laws. Our messages are too different.*

Hassanatou: *Great question. These are the questions we are exploring through the movement I've founded, [name omitted] - based on the idea that I was free to choose this cultural practice at the age of 21. We can compromise on the types of non-medical bodily practices that require consent (without regard to age, sex, gender, religion,*

country of origin and so on). I think we also need to be careful that we are not using the term FGM to refer to circumcised women who are healthy, sexually confident and enjoy their rich cultural traditions!

Aisha and Hassanatou coexist as a highly informative example of the intricate complexities of the current debate surrounding female genital operations. On a superficial level, if you were to put both women in the same room, based on their physical attributes (type of attire and religious dress), most people with preconceived notions of Western modernity would assume that Aisha was a proponent of female genital operations and Hassanatou was a dissident. This is also true for their personal histories and professional occupations. Hassanatou was born in the United States, Western-educated her entire life, culminating in the acquisition of a PhD from the London School of Economics. Aisha was born in the Gambia, her level of education is unknown, although I am pretty sure that she has not attended graduate school. Aisha presents herself as a traditional Muslim woman with a family, while Hassanatou seems to focus more on her career and if she has a family or a religious life, is very private about them. The mere existence of these dynamic women shatters the binaries historically constructed by Western narratives concerning modernity as well as those perpetuated by some anthropologists in their attempts to problematize the contrasting positions over the controversy.

Aisha and Hassanatou's answers to question two reveal a complex reality in which both women navigate the contemporary dialog surrounding female genital operations in ways that both contrast and overlap. For instance, Hassanatou is very emphatic about the ways in which

popular discourse has shaped a rather unrealistic and problematic understanding of female genital operations. In her opinion, use of restrictive language such as "female genital mutilation" has contributed to the silencing of voices like hers and many other women who do not fit into a category of having been mutilated. For Aisha, however, lack of legislative action remains a prominent issue—not enough has been done to ensure the safety and health of African women at risk of undergoing a procedure of female genital operations. According to her, this is undoubtedly a result of a notion of Western superiority that regards African women as unimportant. This example of contrasting yet overlapping perspectives is highly reflective of the ways in which women of color from the global south, even those from completely different ideological backgrounds, navigate wider discourses that perpetuate tropes of Western cultural superiority and African inferiority in general.

Their opinions on mainstream Western feminism are also highly informative of a complex reality that challenges the notion of Western feminism as a category itself. Mohanty, as do many scholars of black feminist theory, Africana studies, and anthropology have criticized Western feminism for being exclusive to an elite group of predominantly white, upper-middle class, straight white women. According to Mohanty, "Feminist movements have been challenged on the grounds of cultural imperialism, and of shortsightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism, and homophobia. All of these factors, as well as the falsely homogenous representation of the movement by the media, have led to a very real suspicion of 'feminism'

as a productive ground for struggle."[34] Though Mohanty's work is dated to the 1990s, many of the claims she makes reflect the views of black feminist theory that influenced her work on "third world women," much of which still exists within contemporary black feminist discourse today. Despite the abundance of literature that has criticized Western feminism as a category for being too exclusive, however, neither of these women (each from very different vantage points) openly criticized mainstream Western feminism in that regard. Rather, both, in a way, embraced it. When I asked Hassanatou how she felt about mainstream Western feminism, she stated that she identified as a third-wave feminist, agreeing with most of the movement as a whole. Though Aisha didn't directly state that she identified as a Western feminist, she did imply that she was feminist, through her claim that all feminists around the world were fighting for the same ultimate goal, including herself within that group of women fighting for liberation.

The women's contrasting answers to question three reflect further complexities. Though Hassanatou agrees that the current movement against female genital operations has been highly influenced by Western feminism, Aisha does not. Rather, Aisha views this argument to devalue what she perceives to be authentically "African" efforts to change the cultural mindsets that advocate female genital operations. Her response comes off as a critique of an assumed Western superiority within the wider debate—African women have been at the heart of this discourse not only in support of the practices but also in opposition. Aisha emphasizes her role, as have with many other African women, as a social agent for change within the culture of her home community.

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[34] Mohanty, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,* 7

Along with her personal experience with female genital operations, just like Aisha and Ayana, Hassanatou has also spent quite some time engaging with the debates surrounding the practices on a wide scale. She is both an anthropologist as well as an activist and runs her own organization that advocates for more inclusive solutions regarding laws against female genital operations. In our conversations, she made her issues with the contemporary discourse and legislation very clear. One of her major issues is the general use of the term FGM. In her opinion, the term is exclusive to particular women's experiences and thus an inaccurate term to reflect all the practices and experiences that involve female genital operations as a whole. While FGM might be an applicable term for Aisha and Ayana, Hassanatou argues that it does not apply to her nor to other women who have undergone the procedure. Drawing from my own personal engagement with the topic, I can't help but agree with Hassanatou on this point—the term FGM is used too frequently. An overwhelming majority of media accounts use the term inaccurately, as do many activist campaigns. But Hassanatou reveals that the inappropriate usage of the term goes further than this, and it reaches so far as US legislation. Technically speaking, the current legal definition within the United States for the practices concerning female genital operations is FGM. And this poses both a moral offense and questionable legal boundaries for Hassanatou and other women who share similar experiences with female genital operations. Completely overlooking the possibility for any age of consent, the law assumes that all women, regardless of their age, are incapable of consenting to the practice.

Their contrasting views on creating inclusive spaces are also interesting. While Hassanatou believes that it is possible to create a space in which all women are able to express

their views based off their own experiences with the practices, Aisha does not. This raises issues for the anthropologist and other activists in terms of advocating for inclusivity within the debate. If some women believe this is impossible and hindering to the progress of their own activism, who is the anthropologist to say it is not? I personally want to advocate for a more inclusive space for all voices within this debate, but I confront issues myself when it comes to this point. I do not want to side with Hassanatou and consequently prevent Aisha from fulfilling her own goals in terms of activism and social justice. However I do not want to align myself with the objective of isolating women with views like Hassanatou and further enclose a space that is already restricted to begin with. I do believe, however, that it should be within the role of the anthropologist to grapple with such questions: how do we create a more inclusive space for women of contrasting and overlapping opinions? What would inclusive laws concerning female genital operations be?

Chapter Three: Contextualizing Contemporary Discourse

I will now proceed to reveal through my case studies the ways in which popular discourse provides a limited space for women like Aisha and Hassanatou through media representation and political discourse. When Ayana broke off contact with me, Aisha became my point person within the immigrant community. I hadn't worked as closely with her yet given the fact that I spent most of my time working with Ayana on our mentorship program, getting to know her the most. I had run into Aisha a few times at different events, once at her own awareness event for the organization she ran. We corresponded mostly via email, but had been planning on setting up a time to meet and discuss my project. After several months of exchanging emails, I got a call from Aisha. She had invited me to come to a civil society conference with her in D.C. so that I could learn more about the contemporary politics surrounding female genital operations in the United States. This opportunity in fact provided me with the two case studies I use in my research: the ABC interview and the civil society conference.

Case Study 1: Aisha's interview with ABC News

I met Aisha at the Atlanta airport on an early Thursday morning. We ended up being on the same flight and my seat was coincidentally behind hers. When I got to the gate, she and her husband were already in line to board. She waved me over, frantically balancing luggage, a car seat, a stroller, and three young kids. She immediately handed me a suitcase while her husband, dressed in quite an extravagant suit, modestly smiled and nodded, and we hurriedly made our way through the pre-boarding lane. Getting to our seats was a bit of a hassle, mostly

due her little daughter Khadija who, insisting on carrying her own luggage, whined loudly until her father surrendered over the pink Barbie suitcase so she could roll it down the aisle herself. When we finally made it to our seats, I helped Aisha and her husband get themselves situated. I grabbed their bags to put them in the overhead bins, noticing their extravagant assortment of matching Louis Vuitton and Michael Kors carry-ons.

We touched down in D.C. at Dulles airport around 11 AM. Aisha had let me know beforehand that we would have a car waiting for us. Before heading to the conference, though, she had to make some quick arrangements for her connecting flight to the Gambia, which was later that day, in the early evening. Her husband and kids were going to stay at the airport while she attended the conference and made her speech. After all of that was settled, we parted ways with her family and made a quick stop in the bathroom. She made a call to someone and let them know that we had arrived and were on our way out of the airport. While powdering her face, she turned to me and told me that she forgot to mention how there would be a camera crew in the car on our way to the conference. The expression on my face clearly showed my shock and surprise, because before I knew it, Aisha was apologizing profusely for not telling me beforehand. She explained that ABC News had been trying to interview her before she went to the Gambia, and this was the last chance they had. In return, they had offered her a driver for the entire day, to ensure she get to the conference on time despite the interview and to drive her back to the airport promptly so she would make her flight. I reassured her that I was fine with the camera crew, realizing then that this would be another great opportunity for me to gather some data for my research.

I then felt compelled to put makeup on myself though I usually didn't wear much at all. As Aisha and I looked at ourselves in the mirror, put on lipstick, and fixed our hair, I couldn't help but feel a close connection with this woman who until that morning was almost a complete stranger to me. It felt like for a moment, we were one and the same—like little girls playing dress up or getting ready for a show. Though this seems like a bit of an exaggeration, it was clear that both of us seemed aware of the type of performance that lied ahead. Though I knew I probably wouldn't be caught in the video at all, I still felt that sense of anxiety and excitement that foreshadowed being around a camera, especially one from a prominent news corporation. I wondered if Aisha felt the same way. I looked at her as she fixed her headscarf, which was tied up around her head like a bun. She was wearing a long black skirt with a blazer made of bright red cloth. I had remembered seeing one just like it in a collection made by some of the women who participate in a Clarkston sewing club—these were articles of clothing that mixed "traditionally" Gambian and Congolese patterns with "traditionally" American fashion. I wondered if Aisha wore this especially for her speech and what it possibly meant to her. Perhaps she sought to represent a Gambian-American identity, one that fused Western concepts of "modernity" with tropes of Gambian exoticness—a type of African otherness that holds value within mainstream Western discourse. Finally, she grabbed her purse from the bathroom counter and took one final look at herself in the mirror. We then made our way through the airport as Aisha spoke on the phone with what seemed to be the ABC news reporter.

As we approached the exit doors of Dulles, two white women spotted us, smiling and waving with enthusiasm. One of them reached out to hug Aisha, while motioning for the

younger woman to grab her bags. Aisha introduced me to the two, letting them know that I would be taking notes and shadowing her throughout the conference. The older woman introduced herself as an ABC News producer and journalist. She had brought her intern along with her that day to assist with the interview. We followed the women out of the airport, cameras rolling, and headed towards a large black SUV. We kept stopping so that the producer could get more footage of Aisha walking out of the airport. The driver took all of our bags and the news producer asked me to sit in the very back of the truck, to ensure that I was not caught in any of the footage. The back of the truck ended up being a spacious front row seat to several very intriguing exchanges.

The main reporter sat in the middle section of the car next to Aisha and began to set up the video camera and microphones while the intern sat in the front seat with a camera shooting stills. They were both very focused on aesthetics. The producer worked as much as she could to get the right lighting for Aisha's face, even ordering me, somewhat aggressively, to pass her my notebook so she could use the white paper to balance the lighting on their camera. Then, of course, there were some glitches with the audio equipment. She ended up having an extra set of microphones that worked well, using that opportunity to remind her intern to always bring backup supplies to "important interviews." This notion of Aisha as an "important" figure would reemerge at the civil society conference—she was evidently the poster child for the U.S. movement to eradicate female genital operations. Featured in articles concerning the topic of female genital operations from almost every major news outlet in the U.S., her voice was one that was highly valued within Western discourse surrounding this issue. This was in

stark contrast to Hassanatou's voice, which was not at all present in any of these popular news articles.

As the reporter was finishing up her preparation, she began the interview. Most of the first questions involved Aisha's general feelings upon arriving to DC, sensationalizing the idea of visiting the capital of the United States and encouraging her to express her gratitude for being in such a significant place. This was not the only example of the journalist attempting to portray an image of America as a wondrous, magical place—an exceptional country that represented freedom and liberty. Actually, the reporter used many opportunities within the interview to assert American exceptionalism. The journalist made a point to stop at both the Washington Monument and Capitol Hill for footage. We spent most of our time on Capitol Hill where the journalist asked most of her questions. Aisha also participated in the perpetuation of American exceptionalism, constantly emphasizing the liberties present in America that reflected a country that should support her endeavors. Of course it was clear that Aisha did this for a reason—to challenge Americans to reevaluate their values as citizens of the United States and thus stand up against what Aisha claimed was gender-based violence. Regardless of her motives, however, Aisha also promoted American exceptionalism in the process. At one point Aisha even stated, "This is America. This country is based on that right—the freedom of your body not to be a sexual object."

At one point the journalist proceeded to inquire more invasively about her personal affairs. She particularly wanted to know why Aisha was going back to the Gambia that evening. The journalist seemed to have this sensationalized idea that the visit had to do with Aisha

confronting her father and midwife about their decision to put her through the process as a child. Aisha has never confided in me as to who exactly forced her to undergo the procedure, though this is a point she might have touched on in one of her many interviews. Regardless, the trope of African patriarchal dominance, however, is deeply embedded in this woman's formulation of the question and begs the question as to why this was so important to ask in the first place? Walley argues, "One common trope in much of the Euro-American-oriented literature opposing female genital operations has been the tendency to characterize African women as thoroughly oppressed victims of patriarchy, ignorance, or both, not as social actors in their own right." In what ways did this journalist tap into this narrative of African patriarchal dominance? Furthermore, when Aisha answered the question by revealing the real reasons for why she was returning to the Gambia, the journalist seemed uninterested. Aisha was on her way to visit her family as she regularly did, and this time specifically to launch a grassroots campaign for young Gambian girls centered on ending female genital operations in her home community. This was a point the journalist could have easily expanded on—Aisha's work extended from communities within Southwest Atlanta and Clarkston all the way to the Gambia. Why was this not worthy of the media's attention?

The journalist's fascination with representing Gambian culture as a backwards, misogynistic representation of Africa paired with her disinterest in Aisha's own social activism within her home community is highly representative of what Walley expresses in the aforementioned quote. These are also the same questions that Mohanty and Chima Korieh explore in their own work on Western representation surrounding women of color from the global south. What is it about the majority of Western journalism that still prefers to represent

African women as passive objects of male dominance rather than social agents and pioneers within their own communities? What is still so captivating to the Western eye about this idea of a powerless African woman, confined by the parameters of a uniquely African patriarchal culture?

The interviewer later began asking Aisha to talk more about the practice of "FGM" and its cultural significance. The conversation took an interesting turn at this point—the two of them began to talk about Aisha's home community in uniquely foreign terms, representing her community's culture as an extreme "other." Aisha was not exempt from this. The reporter first asked, "So, what is *their* belief in the culture that makes *them* continue to perform the practice?" In response, Aisha also used the pronoun "their" and "they" when referring to the cultures and communities of her home country. I couldn't help but find this odd. Aisha would often refer to her home community as *hers*, but would at other times refer to the culture of the community as *theirs*. What was this distinction between "us" and "them?" From what was she attempting to distance herself, and with what purpose? What were the power dynamics at play during this interview that perhaps pressured her to identify as an "us," along with the journalist and other Westerners, perhaps me, rather than a "they," like her family members, and her home community members? Perhaps given her negative experiences Aisha, like Ayana, no longer identified with parts of her cultural heritage, leading her to assertively distinguish herself from a past to which she no longer wanted to relate. But overall, this is an example equally reflective of the pervasiveness of binaries such as Western—Non-Western that assert Western cultural superiority over African primitiveness. In this particular moment, Aisha was

clearly making the decision, whether subconsciously or consciously, to distance herself from the constructed backwardness of her home community.

Throughout this interaction, I challenged myself to be critical and acknowledge the ways in which Aisha asserted her agency as an individual. Though throughout the entire interview, Aisha negotiated her agency in several ways, there were two main aspects of the interview that I believe reflected her power in distinct ways. First was the car service ABC News provided Aisha in return for her engagement in the interview. The car service was not a simple favor returned in exchange for Aisha's participation in the interview. It was also an interaction that reflected Aisha's importance as an interviewee. ABC News provided her a driver for the entire day, so that she could make her flight on time after attending the conference, despite the fact that ABC was really only to engage with Aisha for two hours at most. This meant that for the remainder of the day, the driver would wait on Aisha outside the conference and take her to the airport when she decided to leave. I figured that this was not the first time she was offered a similar service in return for her interviews. Aisha probably constantly found ways to support herself amidst the hectic schedule of running her own Non-Profit organization, doing interviews, and traveling through these types of exchanges. I wondered how much of her willingness to participate in these interviews involved these types of benefits. The second reflection of Aisha's agency that I want to discuss is the ABC journalist's request that Aisha ask the White House to allow the camera crew into the conference. The civil society conference was restricted to all media outlets and was strictly a space for community members and government representatives to meet and discuss the issue of female genital operations in the U.S. The journalist, however, had the idea that if Aisha, as the main speaker, were to ask

someone from the White House to let ABC News film her speech, they would allow their entrance. Ultimately, Aisha's status as the poster child for the Western-backed campaign against female genital operations might have restricted her in certain ways but it also created space for her to assert her agency as the main, authentic voice that claimed the podium on the global stage. It was Aisha's voice that people wanted to hear, and with that came a considerable degree of power that she could claim when appropriate for her and her goals.

Case Study 2: The White House Civil Society Conference

When we arrived at the conference, I followed Aisha into the Hubert H. Humphrey's building, the headquarters for Human Health and Services. A woman who seemed to know Aisha, who was running the program, immediately welcomed us. She led us up to the security desk where they checked our bags and IDs and gave us a visitor's pass. Security was very high and they weren't allowing people entry until a few minutes before the event were due to begin. Since we got there a bit early, we sat down in the lobby. As people gradually arrived, they started introducing themselves to one another. Most attendees were professionals working for NGOs and Non-Profit organizations that dealt with female genital operations or gender issues in one way or another. Many people recognized Aisha when they saw her, reaffirming her status as the poster child for the campaign against female genital operations in the United States. I met a few women, two of whom were on the boards of NGOs around the Atlanta area. One of them worked for an organization called Women Watch Afrika in Clarkston. She, Aisha, and the other woman began deeply engaging in a conversation about the issues regarding female genital operations in the refugee community. According to the one woman, there wasn't

enough data to determine that female genital operations were a pervasive issue amongst refugees. Aisha disagreed and raised the issue of reporting, reminding her how common it was for people to misreport and blatantly lie about their experiences with female genital operations due to the stigma surrounding the practices. This was an interesting moment for me. I was witnessing two women, both with migrant backgrounds, working for the same cause, who completely disagreed on a core component of their work. For one woman, it was more important to her to work on the issue of female genital operations abroad, since she didn't view it to be a local issue within the refugee community. For the other, both were equally as important, but she saw the problem of "vacation cutting," a term referring to the practices of parents sending their children abroad to undergo a process of female genital operations, to be more pressing of an issue locally as she witnessed a rise in cases concerning migrants and refugees paired with a lack of proper legislative action by the United States government. This is yet another example of the variety of dynamic migrant African voices that exist within the wider discussion at hand.

At one point during the conversation, a white woman who seemed to be in her late forties entered the lobby. The attention suddenly shifted her way. She was dressed in an extravagant suit and held a briefcase. She approached Aisha with open arms, hugged her tightly and thanked her for coming. People began taking photos on their phones of the two of them greeting each other. Some women even began to ask permission to take photos with them until the security guards stepped in and announced that taking photos was forbidden on the premises. At that point, the event was finally about to begin and we all lined up to pass the second security checkpoint and make our way to the elevators. In line, while Aisha was

preoccupied, still talking with the one white woman, who I later learned was on the board of Human Rights Watch (HRW), I met a young woman from an NGO based in New York. She was there on behalf of her organization to learn a bit more about female genital operations in America, as the organization she worked for focalized on the issue of female genital operations abroad. She also studied anthropology as an undergraduate in college, and went on to pursue a master's in international development at NYU. She offered me her card so we could keep in touch. By the end of the conference, I would have several cards of professionals all involved in the campaign to end female genital operations. It became very evident how much of this grassroots organizing revolved around networking.

Before we entered the conference room, I caught up with Ayana and the woman from HRW, who I will refer to as Rebecca. We had reserved seats and were all seated in the front row, facing the podium and in clear sight of the U.S. state department representatives. I took a look at the panel and noticed the identities of those involved. There were three women of color, two men of color, one who easily passed as white, and six white women. None of the participants seemed to be migrants of any sorts, and none of them appeared to be from any country in Africa. My observations are solely based on what I saw, including their nameplates, which I acknowledge is not sufficiently accurate. I do think, however, my perception and feel of the room provides valuable insight to highlighting the spaces in which political discourse surrounding female genital operations occurs. Why was it that the majority of U.S. representatives who dealt with an issue affecting majority women of color were white women? How is this emblematic of the historical treatment of this topic? Furthermore, there was not one woman of color on the panel who came from a community in which female genital

operations was highly prevalent, and the leading panelist from the side of the U.S. State Department was an American man. Though the dynamics of the panel can mostly be attributed to a wider issue of inclusivity within U.S. politics, they most certainly cannot be overlooked. The power dynamics at play during this conference were at best overwhelmingly Western and at worst neo-imperialist. This would become even more evident as the conference ensued and everyone but one speaker vehemently spoke against female genital operations altogether.

During the conference, I was to be Aisha's note taker, and I also had the task of videotaping her speech. For the purpose of this conference, Aisha introduced me to everyone as an Anthropology student who was shadowing her to learn more about the issue of female genital operations. Though that was precisely what I was doing, I couldn't help but feel as though I insincerely appeared as more of an intern or assistant to her. I was probably the youngest person at the entire conference, which seemed to hold at least 100 participants. I couldn't help but feel like an extreme outsider within this space dominated by older professionals and government officials. I often felt undervalued as a participant in the wider discourse by people like Aisha and Rebecca who assumed I knew nothing about the topic at hand simply because I remained silent. Rebecca would continue to condescendingly ask me if I was taking enough notes, she also kept ensuring that I caught everything that Aisha said during her speech on video. I felt like she saw me as a naïve college student who had no experience dealing with the issue or even basic tasks. I couldn't help but feel frustrated as she continued to look over at me and order me around, as if she were taking over while Aisha was off giving her speech or talking with other members of the conference. But this is yet again one of those moments where my statuses as outsider and insider were in constant flux. Since I was

practically tied to Aisha's hip throughout most of the conference, I felt as though I appeared as an insider to others. Being the perceived assistant to the spokesperson of the U.S. campaign to end female genital operations, I caught a lot of glances from people within the audience as well as members of the state department, as if I were amongst the experts in the room. This was all despite the fact that I didn't engage in any discussions and merely stayed in my seat and took notes. This insider status granted me enough leverage and confidence to approach a few participants after the conference ended.

The conference began with an introduction by a member of the state department. She briefly discussed the parameters of the conference, which was to be a civil discussion between community members, professionals, and state department representatives. Aisha was to give the opening speech, and then they would open the podium to anyone who wanted to share their thoughts on specific subtopics during the "listening session." There would be no response from state department officials during this segment of the conference; it was reserved solely for audience participation. The conference moderator presented the goals of this conference to concern "understanding and collaboration that is inclusive" of all voices and the establishment of "safe spaces" within communities. She emphasized that this was an opportunity for the U.S. state department to deepen their knowledge and understanding of female genital operations as they applies to the immigrant populations across America. She then introduced Aisha and left the podium to her for her opening speech.

Aisha had not prepared anything for the speech. I remember her telling the ABC journalist how she never prepared for speeches, because she always spoke directly from her

heart. When she approached the podium, however, she looked extremely nervous. Rebecca walked up with her and stood by her side. When she stood and faced the audience, looking out at all of us, she struggled to find words. This might have been the first time Aisha spoke to such a large group of people. It might have also been, in her eyes, one of the most important speeches she had ever given. This was her chance to speak directly to official representatives within the United States government. As she stuttered and stumbled over her words, Rebecca stepped in and asked Aisha if she wanted her to start off the speech with some words of her own. Aisha nodded and backed away as Rebecca approached the microphone and began to speak eloquently about Aisha as an inspirational figure for the fight to end female genital operations. She spoke of Aisha in extremely flattering terms, presenting an idolized image of a strong resilient woman who fought relentlessly for herself and the rights of other women like her. Aisha stood in the backdrop as this woman painted a sensationalized, heroic image of her as if to save her from a potentially overwhelming and embarrassing experience. After she finished, she turned back to Aisha and, whispering, asked her if she was ready. Aisha nodded and approached the podium once again, and began to speak. I cannot emphasize how problematic this exchanged seemed to me. Though it was unmistakable how little preparation Aisha had put into her speech, Rebecca's stepping in came off as completely disempowering. She interrupted Aisha and maternally guided her along like a child. Even the way she looked at her while she spoke elicited an undertone of condescension. Furthermore, I wondered what power dynamics were at play in such an exchange. Why did Rebecca step in? Was it because she personally cared about Aisha and didn't want to passively sit back and watch as she humiliated herself in front of a crowd that anticipated for so long an inspirational, authentic

hero? Or did Rebecca's reputation also depend on this speech? Though it wasn't completely clear, it seemed like Rebecca was supporting Aisha on behalf of HRW. This conference was thus not only a critical moment for Aisha, but also for Rebecca and her organization. Aisha, as a figurehead of an HRW-backed campaign held the role of promoting a particular image. This conference provided the opportunity for Aisha to emerge as the woman she appeared as in the newspapers. It also presented the possibility for her to ruin her image entirely. This was a lot of pressure—a facet of her involvement in the discourse with which I'm sure she was constantly at odds.

Aisha opened her speech the second time by discussing her childhood, how she was forced to undergo "female genital mutilation" as a young adolescent, and how important it was to her that the practice be completely obliterated. She stressed the necessity of categorizing the practice under gender-based violence. In her opinion, this would resolve any lingering debates on cultural relativism and cultural sensitivity. For her, there was no room for such. Aisha's experience with female genital operations traumatized her in ways that still haunted her. At a young age, she got married and had to undergo the process of de-infibulation, which was equally as painful and traumatizing to her. She believed that if people within her community had been educated about the negative effects of female genital operations, she would have avoided experiencing that dark chapter of her life. It was thus her goal to do all she could to ensure that this would not be the case for another young girl like her. She finished by speaking briefly of her organization, highlighting the prevalent need for funding in associations like hers. She hoped that through this conference, the U.S. would reorient its focus to one that more pervasively upheld legal and social structures that would benefit young migrant women.

The crowd applauded for Aisha as she left the podium to come sit back down next to me. She only had a few more minutes before she had to leave to catch her flight. I helped her gather her belongings and reassured her that I would stay the remainder of the time to take notes for everything she missed. As she left, almost everyone turned and watched her leave, still captivated by her presence and what she represented for the movement. The conference continued with the listening session, where people lined up for their chance to speak for a few minutes on their experiences working to end female genital operations. The premise was to discuss what worked and what room remained for improvement. The first woman to speak was Maya, the woman I had met earlier from Women Watch Afrika. She began by praising the White House for their recent attention to the issue of female genital operations; she argued that the surfacing of vital conversations was a sign of progress within the movement. Maya, like many at the conference, emphasized that female genital operations need to be addressed as issues of reproductive justice and through a human rights framework. In her opinion, the prevalence of such a practice poses a threat of irreparable damage to too many women around the world. According to Maya, despite any progress, there was much room for improvement. One of the most pressing issues regarded women's reluctance to discuss the issue in the first place, given the spaces in which the discussion often arose. She argued that often the spaces were too white, and this posed a grave issue for women in voicing their experiences and opinions surrounding female genital operations. She stated that she was not interested in hearing from women who've never experienced the process—emphasizing how difficult it was to discuss the practices with "people who don't look like [her]." The goal was to eradicate female genital operations, but the way was not through outsider engagement—it would be

through community activism and education. According to Maya, a prerequisite for this was the creation of safe, inclusive spaces for migrant women.

Next, a Muslim woman approached the front of the room from the Institution of Domestic Violence in African American Communities. She offered insight to the conversation by providing basic tips on community engagement. She worked within a growing migrant community and provided many resources not only to African Americans but more recently to refugees. One of the main issues she confronted was the lack of coordination between newly arriving communities and the pre-established American ones. For her, assimilation and community strengthening would be key to creating more inclusive spaces in which women would feel more comfortable coming forward and engaging in dialog surrounding female genital operations. Some ideas she had to facilitate this involved discussing female genital operations and U.S. laws at refugee orientations. Making information accessible and comprehensible to new refugees was key to her vision. Another idea of hers involved providing information concerning female genital operations and other related practices in community hubs such as hair salons, mosques, and supermarkets. Ultimately, her objective was also to end female genital operations through the vehicle of cultural and social reorientation.

The next several women all shared varying degrees of similarly colored viewpoints. The theme continued of categorizing female genital operations under the bracket of gender-based violence as well as addressing it through the human rights lens. There was an overwhelming tendency to succumb to Western notions of human rights, one woman even stating that "women's rights are human rights and human rights are universal." No one was really

concerned at all with the idea that some women might view it as their basic right to preserve and perform a cultural practice that defined their social roles and individual identities. A few women who represented clinics spoke about the process of de-infibulation and physical therapy for women who undergo more extreme cases of female genital operations. There was no distinction made, however, between different types of female genital operations throughout the conference. Most terminology revolved around the use of phrases such as "female genital mutilation," "FGM," and "female genital cutting." There was a tendency to lump all practices, which vary tremendously, into one category.

Halfway through the civil society conference, which began to seem somewhat repetitive and redundant, a dark-skinned woman with straight, shoulder-length black hair walked up to the podium in a fitted grey pantsuit and heels. She introduced herself as Hassanatou, an Anthropologist who received her doctorate degree at the London School of Economics. Of Sierra Leonean heritage, she went through a cultural rite of passage she intentionally labeled "female circumcision." Hassanatou spoke articulately to the audience about her own personal refusal to refer to the practice as female genital cutting or female genital mutilation. She didn't feel mutilated. And by exposing herself as a woman who did not have a harmful experience with the practice, she embodied her own argument that using the terminology of "FGM/C" entailed speaking on the behalf of all women implied there was a universal experience with the practices as a whole, which was utterly inaccurate. But almost as if this weren't enough to convince the audience, Hassanatou followed up by reading a written statement of one of her colleagues, a fellow Anthropologist, who could not attend the conference. The statement emphasized the vital role of cultural relativism for outsiders

engaging in the debate, while proposing a few pieces of advice (mostly on how to practically apply cultural relativism) to community participants. When Hassanatou finished reading the statement, she began to talk about her own suggestions for reshaping the current discourse surrounding female genital operations in the U.S. Her speech, however, was cut short when the moderator reminded her of the time limit and told her that she could get back in line and wait for a second turn if the schedule permitted. Hassanatou's presence shook me. She was the only speaker thus far who had used terms such as "female circumcision" and who didn't oppose the practices of female genital operations. I began to think of how people achieved access to these types of spaces. Who was invited? How much effort was put into seeking alternative voices? If the goal was to learn how to create inclusive spaces, why were there not a variety of opinions voicing different views on the practices of female genital operations?

The next speaker was a white woman from the Refugee Women's Health Clinic of Arizona. She discussed the research findings from one of their studies within the refugee population, revealing a few pieces of "progress" within the community. Men were no longer demanding circumcised wives, but rather there was an actual increase in demand for uncircumcised wives. She emphasized the importance of religious leader engagement in the spread of awareness within migrant populations. And finally, she discussed some areas for growth within the community efforts, one being the fact that less than 13% of healthcare providers within the refugee community felt comfortable performing the de-infibulation process. For the next ten or so presentations, the conversation one again resumed to be strictly concerned with the progress and setbacks of community efforts to eradicate female genital operations within US communities, in particular as well as globally, in general.

Despite the space being clearly consumed by people who sought to eradicate female genital operations for the entirety of the conference, Hassanatou ultimately returned to the podium. She began to speak of her own experience with female genital operations; emphasizing the self-pride she has held since the day she chose, as an adult, to undergo one of the processes herself. A noticeable sense of shock fall over the audience, including myself, when she looked into our eyes and avowed, "I do not feel like a mutilated body." I assume most were shocked that she did not admit any feelings of pain or disgust with the process that many had just beforehand (and for centuries) painted as barbaric, backwards, and violent. I was shocked at the mere confidence she exhibited by asserting herself and affirming her own experiences within a space that was exclusive only to those that aligned with the goal of eradicating the apparently violent practices altogether. Regardless, Hassanatou spoke with confidence; she did not demonstrate any hesitation in her words nor in the sharing of her story. She spoke directly and fluidly about her own experience as a "circumcised" woman navigating the discourse concerning the controversial practice that she, as do many women, personally associates with the shaping of her identity and her own self-empowerment. Ultimately, Hassanatou emphasized the unfair and impractical lack of space and acknowledgment for her women like her within the mainstream discourse concerning female genital operations. Furthermore, according to Hassanatou, the U.S. law hypocritically forbade female genital operations for cultural reasons amongst migrants, defining them as child abuse and gender based violence, while U.S. legislation still allowed American women the freedom to choose to undergo female genital operations, such as clitoral reduction and labiaplasty surgeries for aesthetic reasons.

Hassanatou's presence didn't seem welcomed or appreciated by the majority of the audience. The entire room felt very tense while she spoke. Most state representatives didn't take notes on anything she said, nor did many of them look as captivated by her opinions as they did for others. Most seemed uninterested. It was as if they were going through the motions, quietly waiting for her to finish, so they could move on to hearing more valuable, worthwhile, and applicable opinions. At one point, I began to hear individual discussions arise, a mark of disrespect that had not occurred at any other point of the conference at all. When Hassanatou mentioned she had made her own conscious decision to undergo the Sierra Leonean rite of passage, one state department representative even rolled her eyes. Her speech finished with the weakest audience applause of all the speakers, and was followed up by closing remarks from the mediator and a quick transition to a Q&A session between the State Department representatives and audience members. Though I risk oversimplification by making the following statement, I must say that Hassanatou did not fit in nor did she seem welcomed. There was a rigid disconnect between Hassanatou's opinions and the opinions and goals of the majority of activists and State Department representatives at the conference. And it wouldn't be until after the conference that I would see any instance of audience engagement with Hassanatou, when a small selection of women from the audience approached her to thank her for her insight and contributions in private. I would then see that Hassanatou's opinions were welcome and appreciated within the wider conversation, even if this only took place behind the scenes.

There is a lot to be said about the emergence of Hassanatou's voice within this space. Her opinions most certainly materialized as a much-needed reminder to the panel and

conference participants that women who defended the practices of female genital operations still existed. Furthermore, she represented a Western-educated, professional, American-born woman who resisted contemporary movements to end a cultural practice in which she found value. Why was this significant? Walley makes a convincing point that rings true and reflects a space for discourse in which women like Hassanatou are not considered to have valid views or experiences, "[in Euro-American-oriented literature] Sub-Saharan and North African women are alternately seen as not being allowed to express their voices, or as having defective or confused understandings if they speak in favor of genital operations." Walley then proceeds to quote Daly who once said, "the apparently 'active' role of the women, themselves mutilated, is in fact a passive instrumental role…mentally castrated, these women participate in the destruction of their own kind."[35] Mutilation and Africanness within these wider narratives have been synonymous to backwardness while Western ideals and norms have meant modernity. Hassanatou's American background and European education, however, challenged this dominant image of the mutilated, "mentally castrated" African woman. She further challenged these binaries through her existence as a woman who identified partly as American and partly as Sierra Leoneon. Her participation within the wider discourse deconstructed arbitrary distinctions between those who supported female genital operations and those who condemned them. Her character emerged as an appropriate foil to Aisha—the two women representing, despite colonial and postcolonial depictions that have constructed a homogenous image of the African woman, just precisely how dynamic and multifarious African women happen to be.

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[35] Walley, *Searching for Voices,* 419

After the conference ended, people continued discussion through individual interactions. After some hesitation, I finally decided to go up to Hassanatou and ask for her contact information. I had to wait for a few minutes while two women wearing hijab spoke to her, expressing their gratitude for her speech. One muttered of how uncomfortable she felt during the conference—not feeling safe enough to express her disagreement with the current U.S. government's stance on female genital operations as well as with the label of FGM. When I had my chance to speak with Hassanatou, I told her about my research and asked if she would be willing to contribute in any way to my project. She immediately agreed and gave me her contact information. I thanked her for this opportunity and let her know that I would send her an email with more details of my work. She expressed appreciation for my research, thanking me for trying to see both sides of the discussion.

Conclusion

The story I have attempted to tell through my case studies and interviews is one that reflects the current space in which the dialog concerning female genital operations occurs. It is evident that despite the critical contributions of scholars such as Mohanty, Walley, Nnaemeka, amongst several others, Western ethnocentrism and assumptions of Western cultural superiority, which date back to colonialism, still shape contemporary discourse surrounding the practices today. This is disturbing, and reflects an urgent predicament in which this contemporary dialog must be radically restructured.

While a wider pool of informants might have provided more grounds on which I could affirm my most principal arguments, the detailed, rich accounts I was able to achieve throughout my research shed to light the benefits of performing such a focused study. Engaging closely with each woman, I was able to create more space within my work to value the complex voices of women whom this wider discourse directly affects. This is extremely important. If the goal, as communicated by Mohanty, Walley, Nnaemaka, and other scholars, has been to "search for voices," to allow those voices to "represent themselves," and to create a more inclusive arena for such a complex debate, the process must include exactly this—the voices of women implicated within this discourse must be individually valued and affirmed. My ability to have personally engaged with three women who happen to be at the core of the contemporary debate in the U.S. is a result of many factors. At the top of this list, however, is my own dedication of time, despite having a very short period in which to work. I spent a lot of time getting acquainted with Ayana and Aisha, which ultimately led to my being invited to

attend the conference where I would meet Hassanatou and obtain much of my ethnographic data. Of course, as I have acknowledged throughout, my own position and the layers of my identity played tremendous roles in the depth of my engagements with these women. As an Emory student researcher, I of course brought with me impressions of an elite, wealthy institution, which probably influenced the women's decisions to engage with me to begin with. My identity as a woman of color, however, played a key role in allowing me to enter spaces to which anthropologists of other identities might not have been granted access. The qualitative data I attained through my interactions and case studies is more than sufficient to challenge contemporary popular discourse in its shaping of female genital operations as a topic of interest.

Overall, through my results I have come to several conclusions. First, female genital operations encompass a variety of procedures with a diversity of effects on individuals and simply cannot be reduced to an imagined restrictive category of a single procedure labeled as "female genital mutilation," "female genital circumcision," or "female genital cutting." As Aisha, Ayana, and Hassanatou all demonstrate, the procedures of female genital operations can have vastly differing effects on the experiences of individuals and can produce a multiplicity of meanings for each and every one of them. "Female genital mutilation" as a term does not accurately acknowledge the existence of women like Hassanatou, who hold pride in being "circumcised", within the wider discourse surrounding this topic. Likewise, "female circumcision" does not rightfully represent Aisha's violent experience with a process she was forced to undergo, as a child against her own volition. It is thus necessary that popular Western discourse, within media and politics, as well as anthropological discourse shift towards using

more inclusive language, for example "female genital operations," representing a more complex reality in which these multifarious processes exist.

Furthermore, this limited framework through which popular Western discourse has defined and continues to define female genital operations today propagates an image of a monolithic African migrant or refugee woman that can be traced to Western and colonial perceptions. This monolithic construct is detrimental to the overall dialog because it limits the imagination of the woman implicated to one type of passive, static individual—who, in fact, doesn't exist. This is harmful not only for women like Hassanatou, but for all women who are directly affected by the broader debate. Ayana and Aisha also challenge this unrealistic image as they too exist as dynamic women with a variety of opinions and experiences worth understanding. This construct is also harmful for the development of laws and policy surrounding female genital operations within migrant populations and other issues that affect migrants in general. The current laws surrounding female genital operations do not concern themselves with individuals of dynamic backgrounds and understandings of the practices, but rather with two types of African women: the backwards, uneducated African or Middle Eastern woman who has yet to be "saved" by Western ideology and the African or Middle Eastern woman who has been empowered by discourses of Western feminism and Human rights. Once again, my experiences with only a few women completely demolish these monolithic categories, as they provide pictures of women colored with a variety of overlapping and contrasting identities, all of which surpass the static essence of these constructed binaries. This thus reveals in the impracticality of defining issues as such.

My results have also revealed much about the Western-dominated power dynamics that remain at play within spaces in which female genital operations are discussed. Throughout my case studies, people of Western, white backgrounds still held most positions of power and expertise. This was evident in the ABC interview, where the journalist was a white American woman, as well as in the civil society conference, where the majority of the people who formed the panel were of Western, white backgrounds. This particular aspect of the contemporary discourse is reminiscent of a rich history in which Western "experts" have dominated mainstream dialogues surrounding female genital operations.

And finally, throughout my work I've faced the roles that anthropology has played in the shaping of the discourse surrounding female genital operations. The history of anthropological involvement within the dialog reveals a story of dynamic entanglements, ranging from anthropology's colonial past to its emergence as a field that provided a much-needed critical lens to the topic. Furthermore, anthropology has obviously implicated itself within the construction of impractical and problematic binaries—Mohanty's use of "third world women" and "third world woman" as terms, despite her valuable deconstruction of their usage, proves the point of how difficult it becomes to avoid categorization altogether. I too struggle with this in my own analysis—which terms do I use? How to I avoid constructing monolithic binaries in my attempt to reveal such problems as power dynamics amongst and within groups of varying identities? Is it possible to discuss structural systems of oppression without defining and thus categorizing particular groups to begin with? Evidently individuals in their dynamic essences will surpass the limits of these arbitrary groups and sets. These are obviously questions that remain unanswered within anthropology until this day, but I certainly conclude they are critical

questions that must remain at the center of all dialog concerning female genital operations and issues alike.

Ultimately, I propose this work in the hopes that it will further contribute to existing literature that has sought to challenge and problematize the tendencies of popular discourse to generalize, oversimplify, and reduce the complexities of the topic to be digestible and valuable for a Western audience. I also present this work as a challenge for contemporary anthropologists to defy the ways in which we might conservatively imagine our involvement in this dialogue. In the globalized world of today, it becomes tougher and tougher to distance ourselves from our connections and entanglements within these wider discourses. Anthropologists, as critical thinkers, have a lot to offer to the conversation surrounding female genital operations. I thus challenge us to engage ourselves in a constant process of deconstructing binaries, searching for voices, and reevaluating our roles as anthropologists within this wider dialog, with the ultimate goal of supporting all women in their individual struggles for liberation everywhere.

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