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# A single narrative : obscuring difference in the Guardian campaign against female genital cutting

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A Single Narrative: Obscuring Difference in the *Guardian* Campaign against Female  
Genital Cutting

by

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*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Alyssa Mary Finlay Donahue has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Rhetoric Studies.

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## **Abstract**

Female genital cutting (FGC) has become an incontestable atrocity in Western public discourse. Many argue that popular Western advocacy against the practice tends to denigrate FGC cultures and to reduce genitally cut women to voiceless victims. In 2014, British newspaper the *Guardian* joined the fight against FGC with the launch of its “End Female Genital Mutilation Global Media Campaign.” Drawing on postcolonial criticism and political scientist Sanjay Seth’s theory of liberalism’s intolerance of difference, this thesis argues that the *Guardian* campaign authorizes only one condemning narrative of FGC that obscures all others. Through this single narrative model, the campaign usurps the agency of the same women it seeks to liberate.

## Chapter One. The *Guardian* Campaign in Context

### I. The *Guardian* Campaign: An Introduction

Western media seems to have reached a consensus: female genital cutting (FGC) is always wrong. FGC has roots in many traditions and takes on many forms, ranging from complete removal of the clitoris to a mere symbolic pricking. In an analysis of six high-circulation US newspapers between 1992 and 1996, Lisa Wade found that although articles usually included the opinions of both proponents and opponents of FGC, reporters tended to frame those in support of FGC as non-authoritative speakers from other (non-Western) cultures. Wade observes that “the inclusion of these sources does not necessarily translate into influence, as is often presumed.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, Wade notes that “insofar as there is a sphere of consensus around FGCs,<sup>a</sup> those speakers that contest that consensus do not influence the discourse in their favor...they draw condemnation upon themselves.”<sup>2</sup> Wade’s observations of FGC in US newspapers hold true now in the United Kingdom. In February 2014, British newspaper the *Guardian* launched its “Stop Female Genital Mutilation Global Media Campaign.”

The campaign is a multifaceted compilation of text journalism, documentary video, song, and poetry. For example, it includes a rap video by Bristol schoolgirls about their fight against “female genital mutilation” (FGM—this is the acronym the *Guardian* uses), a video titled “I Will Never Be Cut,” in which a Kenyan girl refuses to receive surgery, and an article encouraging President Obama to take action against the practice during his July 2015 trip to Kenya. In addition to these pieces produced for *Guardian* readers, the campaign also works to promote activism with increased local reportage of

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a Wade’s pluralization points towards the many variations of FGC practices.

“FGM” in countries where the practice occurs.<sup>3</sup> The *Guardian* aims to end “FGM” within a generation,<sup>4</sup> and in an email one of its leaders said she and her co-workers intend to continue the campaign until that goal is realized.<sup>5</sup>

The campaign positions two young black women in head coverings as its figureheads. The launch centered on Fahma Mohamed, a secondary school student from a Somali family, who organized a petition on change.org in February 2014, advocating “FGM” education in British schools. That spring, Jaha Dukureh, a Gambian immigrant to the United States, joined Fahma with another petition on change.org, calling on the Obama administration to conduct a national survey on the prevalence of “FGM” in the United States. Both Fahma and Jaha articulate FGC as a violent practice that must end.

In this thesis, I argue that the *Guardian* authorizes only one condemning narrative of FGC that obscures all others. My argument draws on postcolonial criticism and political scientist Sanjay Seth’s theory of liberalism’s intolerance of difference. Before I begin, a note on terminology: throughout the campaign the *Guardian* refers to female genital cutting as “female genital mutilation” or “FGM.” “Mutilation,” meaning “the act or process of disabling or maiming a person by wounding a limb or organ,”<sup>6</sup> implies the imposition of violence, resulting in the target person’s injury. In the context of FGC, it suggests that genitally cut women are victims and that the modification of their genitals renders them disabled. The word “mutilation” therefore is not a benign explanation, but rather a forceful indictment of FGC. Other authors sometimes refer to FGC as “female circumcision.” As penile circumcision usually abbreviates to “circumcision,” the addition of the adjective “female” suggests that FGC is merely the female version of male circumcision. Although different forms of penile circumcision exist, the practice tends to

be more uniform across cultures than FGC. I believe that the multiple forms of FGC, some of which are extremely invasive, render this implicit comparison to male circumcision inappropriate. In an effort to sidestep the implications of the terms “female genital mutilation” and “female circumcision,” I refer to the practice as “female genital cutting” or “FGC.” When context calls for the use of “FGM,” I use quotation marks as a reminder of the implications the acronym carries. I acknowledge, however, that my language does not extricate me from bias, for as Janice Boddy notes, “All terminologies are political.”<sup>7</sup>

## II. Female Genital Cutting in Western Discourse

The *Guardian* campaign situates itself among longstanding international advocacy against FGC. According to Janice Boddy, the issue first captured Western attention in the 1920s.<sup>8</sup> The practice of FGC gained renewed prominence during the United Nations Decade for Women from 1975 to 1985.<sup>9</sup> In 1978, Fran Hosken published *The Hosken Report*, which affirms that Western women “are able to teach those who cling to distorted beliefs and damaging practices some better ways to cope with themselves, their lives, reproduction and sexuality.”<sup>10</sup> Still cited today, Claire Robertson calls the report “the single most influential document responsible for raising Western consciousness of FGC.”<sup>11</sup> In the early 1990s, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Alice Walker and British filmmaker Pratibha Parmar brought FGC to the forefront of public discussion in the United States with the release of their FGC-censuring documentary *Warrior Marks* and a book by the same name.<sup>12</sup> Around this time, as immigrant communities transported traditional customs to their new homes in the West, prominent

legal cases in both Europe and North America also spotlighted FGC in public discussion.<sup>13</sup>

Many scholars have found the tone of global advocacy deeply troubling. In the introduction to their book *Genital Cutting and Transnational Sisterhood*, Stanlie James and Claire Robertson claim that the Western feminist project against FGC tends to produce reductive images of Africa and African people:

First, they reduce Africa's fifty-four countries and hundreds of cultures to one uncivilized, "traditional" place outside of history to be compared with the "modern" "West." Second, they reduce Africans, and African women in particular, to the status of their genitals, to being malicious torturers or hapless victims. Finally, uniform depictions reduce all cutting of female genitals to the most severe practice—infibulation.<sup>14</sup>

Others echo James's and Robertson's assertion of the reductive effects of Western FGC discourse. Corinne Kratz argues that the discussion typically relies on a broad division between "Western" and "traditional" cultures.<sup>15</sup> Christine Walley agrees, offering a table listing common reductive binaries: "modernity/tradition, science/superstition, civilized/barbarous..."<sup>16</sup> Charles Piot draws attention to stereotypical presentation of Africa in a 1996 *New York Times* series about a legal case in which Togolese immigrant Fauziya Kasinga sought asylum in the United States to escape FGC in her home country. Piot argues that the series evokes "images of the immutable nature of patriarchal tradition in a timeless Africa."<sup>17</sup> Sara Johnsdotter leverages similar critiques against a Swedish documentary called *The Forgotten Girls*, claiming that it "strengthened the impression of evil Africans, obsessed with cultural ideas, hiding their faces."<sup>18</sup> Kratz insists that journalists and advocacy groups should strive to understand Africa's varied and complex cultures instead of relying on "fragmented ethnographica whose vague contours are easily filled in with stereotypes."<sup>19</sup>

In Western discussions of FGC, the trope of African women oppressed by patriarchy often forefronts these stereotypical representations of Africa. Walley argues that much of Euro-American literature opposing FGC has the tendency to “characterize African women as thoroughly oppressed victims of patriarchy and ignorance, not as social actors in their own right.”<sup>20</sup> She suggests that this attitude limits African women’s agency by assuming that others must speak for them. Lacking a voice, African women are reduced to their bodies. Boddy points out that “although African women’s voices and experiences may be muted in FGM texts, their bodies and body parts are omnipresent.”<sup>21</sup> Johnsdotter goes so far as to call the Western obsession with African women’s genitals “everyday voyeurism.”<sup>22</sup> Boddy<sup>23</sup> and Robertson<sup>24</sup> contend that this myopic attention to FGC overshadows more pressing feminist issues, like severe poverty, in international debate.

Discussions of FGC often focus on what Ylva Hernlund and Bettina Shell-Duncan call “the contested clitoris.”<sup>25</sup> Boddy argues that Western women consider the clitoris to be the organ “metonymic of female personhood.”<sup>26</sup> She wonders, “What do we invest in the clitoris that contemplating its loss augurs such serious personal diminishment?”<sup>27</sup> This investment in the clitoris may be rooted in Western medical discourse’s assertion that the clitoris is essential to female orgasm.<sup>28</sup> Much “FGM” literature insists that by removing or diminishing the clitoris through FGC, women are rendered incapable of sexual pleasure. Mansura Dopico protests this claim, arguing, “Orgasm in women is a sensation localized in different regions.”<sup>29</sup> Sierra Leonean writer Fuumbai Ahmadu, whose genitals have been cut,<sup>30b</sup> uses personal testimony to challenge

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b Ahmadu does not specify what kind of FGC she experienced.

the claim that FGC impedes sexual pleasure. She remembers intimate girlhood talks in which her genitally cut friends and cousins recounted their pleasure-filled sexual escapades. She asks ironically, “Were they somehow, within our small groups, in girly private conversation, pretending to enjoy sex and orgasms when in fact they were suffering in silence?”<sup>31</sup> From a medical anthropology perspective, Carla Obermyer argues that systematic investigations into the sexual experiences of men and women from societies that practice FGC are too few to draw conclusions about the effects of FGC on sexual health. She questions, “Could there be fundamental differences among cultures regarding notions of the link between genital organs and sexual enjoyment?”<sup>32</sup>

The final reduction that James and Robertson point out is the conflation of all types of FGC “to the most severe practice—infibulation.”<sup>33</sup> Boddy echoes their concern, observing, “Some popular accounts elide ... differences, letting infibulation stand for female genital cutting, *tout court*.”<sup>34</sup> This simplification gives the impression that all genitally cut women undergo infibulation. In contrast to the majority of “FGM” literature, Obermyer distinguishes between four types of FGC:

“Infibulation,” which refers to the complete excision of the clitoris and labia minora and the paring and stitching of the labia majora; “intermedia circumcision,” which includes a lesser degree of excision of the labia with milder or no infibulation; “clitoridectomy,” which is the removal of the clitoris; and *sunna*, which refers to the removal of the prepuce of the clitoris.<sup>35</sup>

These more specific definitions complicate the reductions that many “FGM” opponents use to discuss the practice. However, some might argue that even these classifications continue to obscure the numerous differences in FGC practices between communities.

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c Google, s.v. “tout court.” “With no addition or qualification; simply.”

Implicit in “FGM” literature’s reductive portrayals is a harsh condemnation of the practice. Johnsdotter affirms Wade’s findings that the tone of conversations about FGC is one of complete consensus. “Certain things should *not* be said, it seems, as the speaker runs the risk of being suspected of inability to grasp the horrible reality of the traditions involving female circumcision.”<sup>36</sup> Richard Shweder remarks similarly that the question “What about FGM?” is a “rhetorical query intended to end all debate” so as to prove the failure of cultural relativism.<sup>37</sup> For him, the question blocks consideration of the possibility that there may be “a real and astonishing cultural divide around the world in moral, emotional, and aesthetic reactions to female genital surgeries.”<sup>38</sup>

These reductive and uniformly negative portrayals in “FGM” literature can impact the lives of African women living in exile in Europe and America. Ahmadu<sup>39</sup> and Boddy<sup>40</sup> express concern for the effects of “FGM” media on circumcised African girls and women of the African diaspora. Ahmadu suggests that these immigrants internalize Western judgments about their bodies and define themselves in terms of their perceived shortcomings.<sup>41</sup> Boddy similarly argues, “When infibulation is performed on an immigrant child living in the West, the psychological impact can be dire. If she does not belong to a close community of compatriots, she will surely lack a sympathetic environment.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, while studying West African Mandinga immigrants’ attitudes towards FGC in Lisbon, Portugal, Michelle Johnson found that media representations of “FGM” strongly impact how the Mandinga “conceptualize and speak about the practice of female circumcision.”<sup>43</sup> Boddy claims that the issue of FGC often takes center stage in Western women’s conceptions of their African immigrant neighbors. She found the issue

was so dominant to the experiences of Sudanese women in early 1990s Canada that it “overdetermined” their lives there.<sup>44</sup>

Embedded in this “FGM” environment, it can be difficult for African women immigrants to openly share diverse opinions about FGC. Juliet Rogers critiques the language of the Australian Family Law Council, which describes women with genital modifications as “mutilated women.”<sup>45</sup> Rogers argues that this terminology implies that Western women are “whole” and can serve as a yardstick against which the “mutilated woman” can be measured.<sup>46</sup> For Rogers, the presentation of women with FGC as damaged seriously undermines the agency of African women immigrants in Australia.<sup>47</sup> Ahmadu also calls attention to the restrictions that “FGM” rhetoric places on African women. In conclusion to her piece “Ain’t I a Woman Too?”, she mourns, “In our consummate fear and virtual paralysis in challenging Western feminist interpretations of who we are and how we supposedly feel, as circumcised African women, we truly have assured our psychological mutilation.”<sup>48</sup> I argue that the *Guardian*’s single narrative undermines the agency of women like Ahmadu who carry alternative perspectives of FGC. In the next section, after a brief overview of FGC in rhetorical studies, I present two theoretical frameworks that inform my analysis.

## **Chapter Two. Lenses of Analysis: Rhetorical Perspectives, Postcolonial Criticism and Difference Management in Liberal Democracies**

### **I. Female Genital Cutting in Communication Studies**

Little scholarship on FGC exists in communication studies. A brief overview follows.<sup>d</sup> As mentioned previously, Lisa Wade argues that 1990s US newspaper coverage represented FGC as always wrong by framing oppositional viewpoints as unauthorized.<sup>49</sup> Wade also analyzes how late 1990s and early 2000s US newspaper framing of FGC as a non-Western, sexist ritual impacted those newspapers' portrayal of gendered oppression in Western culture.<sup>50</sup> She found that some speakers posed FGC as evidence of non-Western cultures' degeneracy and used the practice to trivialize oppressions facing US women. Other speakers deployed FGC as proof of the universality of gendered oppression in order to leverage transnational feminist arguments.<sup>51</sup>

Meghan Sobel also analyzes FGC in newspapers. In a study of coverage from 1998 to 2013 in English newspapers from the United States, Ghana, Gambia and Kenya, Sobel found that 97.2% of all articles discussed FGC as a problem.<sup>52</sup> Sobel concedes that her analysis may not represent the opinions of all people in each country of study, pointing out that “the study only analyzed English-language newspapers which provide insights into the news being covered in each country, but are often targeted at the educated elite in the local country or foreigner.”<sup>53</sup> She suggests that future research could address this limitation.

Beyond newspaper analysis, Natasha Gordon argues that short stories provide a platform for African and Middle Eastern women to express their opinions about FGC.

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<sup>d</sup> I used search terms “female genital cutting” and “female genital mutilation” in communication studies database Communication and Mass Media Complete. I exclude unpublished conference papers, non-academic works, and a few misplaced articles.

Gordon asserts that the short story has the “ability to reach its audience immediately” and “thus allows these writers agency.”<sup>54</sup> Also within literary analysis, Gulab Singh examines Alice Walker’s representation of FGC in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.<sup>55</sup> Singh argues that Walker portrays FGC as a form of patriarchal control over women and concludes that Walker’s novel is a plea for individual resistance against oppressive societal forces.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, Radhika Gajjala, Yahui Zhang and Phyllis Dako-Gyeke examine discourses of female emancipation on the internet with a specific focus on websites about FGC. Gajjala et al. argue that the presentation of FGC in online spaces “indicate[s] a Western domination of international discourses.”<sup>57</sup> They draw attention to underprivileged women’s limited or nonexistent internet access to point out that most disadvantaged women cannot voice their opinions online. When these women do have the opportunity to “talk back” online, their communication may be unintelligible due to their different cultural relationship to cyber material “so that the overall effect is not participatory, but rather a lopsided hierarchy that still privileges those that designed [the website].”<sup>58</sup> The authors conclude that websites with a goal of international female emancipation often stifle the agency of the same women they purport to liberate.

My analysis of the *Guardian* is an extension of Gajjala et al.’s research into the effects of international feminist advocacy on the women it seeks to liberate. I argue that the *Guardian* campaign’s single narrative silences many of the voices it claims to empower. In building this argument, I rely on two theoretical frameworks: postcolonial criticism and political scientist Sanjay Seth’s theory of liberalism’s intolerance of difference.

## II. Postcolonial Criticism and the Question of Subaltern Female Agency

In her 1996 essay “Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical Canon: An ‘Other’ View,” Raka Shome stresses the importance of postcolonial criticism in rhetorical studies. Shome asserts that Western cultures exert a neocolonial power on non-Western cultures through “discursive imperialism,” which constructs non-Western subjects<sup>e</sup> as racially inferior “others.”<sup>59</sup> She argues, “It is only when we embrace postcolonialism as a significant critical perspective that rhetorical studies will be able to adequately engage in the present historical and social conditions.”<sup>60</sup> Since the publication of Shome’s essay, many scholars have heeded her call for postcolonial interventions in the rhetorical canon.<sup>f</sup>

Fundamental to postcolonial criticism is Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, published in 1978. “I have begun,” states Said, “with the assumption that that Orient is not an inert fact of nature.”<sup>61</sup> Rather, Said argues that the Orient is “almost a European invention,”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>e</sup> Ronald W. Greene, who cites Shome, defines a rhetorical subject as one who both “speaks and is spoken to,” in Ronald W. Greene, “Rhetorical Materialism: Rhetorical Subject and General Intellect,” in *Rhetoric, Materiality and Politics*, ed. Barbara A. Biesecker and John L. Lucaites (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2009), 44.

<sup>f</sup> See, for example, Radha S. Hegde, “A View from Elsewhere: Locating Difference and the Politics of Representation from a Transnational Feminist Perspective,” *Communication Theory* 8, no. 3 (1998): 271-297. Hegde engages a postcolonial perspective in order to situate feminist communication theory in a global context. See also, Radhika Parameswaran, “Local Culture in Global Media: Excavating Colonial and Material Discourses in National Geographic,” *Communication Theory* 12, no. 3 (2002): 287-315. Parameswaran deploys postcolonial theory to reveal the “othering modalities of Euroamerican colonial discourses” in National Geographic’s August 1999 “millennium” issue. See also, Mohan Dutta and Mahuya Pal, “Dialog Theory in Marginalized Settings: A Subaltern Studies Approach,” *Communication Theory* 20, no. 4 (2010): 363-386. A description of their work is forthcoming. Finally, see, Sara L. McKinnon, “Diana and Beyond: White Femininity, National Identity, and Contemporary Media Culture,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 1 (2015): 302-305. McKinnon’s contemporary review praises the significance to Rhetorical Studies of Shome’s new book *Diana and Beyond*, which engages postcolonial criticism.

discursively constructed by and for the West. Said acknowledges, “customs have a brute reality,” but claims, “about this fact this study of Orientalism has very little to contribute.”<sup>63</sup> Through the construction of the Orient as a dialectical “Other” to the West, the West comes to understand itself as the Orient’s “contrasting image, idea, personality and experience.”<sup>64</sup> This relationship creates a stark differential between the powerful West and the silent Orient.

Said argues that discursive imperialism is not confined to texts with political significance. Rather, Orientalism is “a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts.”<sup>65</sup> Said thus implicates all texts, even the most apparently apolitical, in the production of Orientalism. He resolutely offers no recourse from complicity: “To say this [that all Western texts employ Orientalism] may seem quite different from saying that all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact—and yet *that is what I am saying* in this study of Orientalism.”<sup>66</sup> For Said, Orientalism weaves throughout all discourse.

Said claims that this ubiquitous Orientalism masquerades as benevolent. He writes, “The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*,<sup>g</sup> for the poor Orient.”<sup>67</sup> Said suggests that Western representations of the Orient carry an internal implication of their own humanitarian necessity.

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g *Google*, s.v. “faute de mieux.” “For want of a better alternative.”

Said holds that Orientalist authority does not lay hidden deep within a text, but appears at a text's surface. He claims, "Orientalism is premised upon exteriority. That is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West."<sup>68</sup> Said underscores the importance of recognizing that the stylistic, external portraits that authors use to render the Orient transparent to the West are merely representations and carry no fidelity to any "real" Orient. These surface-level representations develop into static stereotypes. Said draws attention to the impression of fixity that authors confer upon the Orient: "The tense they employ is the timeless eternal; they convey an impression of repetition and strength . . . For all these functions it is frequently enough to use the simple copula is."<sup>69</sup> These ironclad representations form a network among themselves such that the invocation of one Oriental stereotype is the tacit invocation of a host of others. Said argues that Orientalism is the "distillation of essential ideas about the Orient—it's sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness—into a separate and unchallenged coherence; thus for a writer to use the word *Oriental* was a reference for the reader sufficient to identify a specific body of information about the Orient."<sup>70</sup> In its prescribed fixity, the Orient appears entirely knowable to the West. In the *Guardian* campaign, stereotypical representations imply the complete knowability of FGC cultures and peoples.

In his essay "The Other Question," Homi Bhabha extends Said's analysis of the colonial stereotype. Bhabha generalizes Said's distinction between the Occident and the Orient to a dichotomy between colonizer and colonized. He argues that the colonizers feel a need to continually reinforce the stereotypes that they have constructed for the

colonized. He describes the stereotype as a “major discursive strategy . . . a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated . . . as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual licence of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse be proved.”<sup>71</sup> This repetition ironically challenges the fixity that the stereotype claims to confirm. As an assertion that falsifies itself in its own repeated utterance, Bhabha declares that the stereotype is “as anxious as it is assertive.”<sup>72</sup>

Bhabha theorizes the motivation behind the colonial stereotype. He argues, “The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.”<sup>73</sup> The stereotype constructs the colonized as deviant, which produces an exigency for colonial control. “Racist stereotypical discourse . . . inscribes a form of governmentality,” claims Bhabha. He explains, “What is visible is the *necessity* of such rule which is justified by those moralistic and normative ideologies of amelioration recognized as the Civilising Mission or the White Man’s Burden.”<sup>74</sup> Just as Said argues that the Western discursive representation of the Orient masquerades as the benevolent fulfillment of what the Orient cannot do for itself, Bhabha maintains that tangible forms of colonial control often pose as benevolent liberation from degeneracy. The *Guardian*’s philanthropic “FGM” advocacy in non-Western countries illustrates Bhabha’s theory.

In her landmark essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”<sup>h</sup>, published in 1988, Gayatri Spivak claims that Bhabha’s “White Man’s Burden” often manifests as projects of transnational feminism. She argues that “imperialism’s (or globalization’s) image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as *object* of protection from her own kind.”<sup>75</sup> Western nations accrue moral authority by administrating the lives of non-Western women in the name of protection. While Spivak charges colonialism with the usurpation of agency from both marginalized women *and* men, she argues that colonialism leaves “the subaltern as female . . . even more deeply in shadow.”<sup>76</sup> By denying their female objects of protection the permission to articulate their own desires, some Western feminist projects counteract their own objective of recovering female agency.

Spivak draws attention to the narratives that imbue the West with power and silence the subaltern. She labels these discursive practices “epistemic violence,” offering a definition from Michel Foucault, who writes, “The *episteme* is the ‘apparatus’ which makes possible the separation not of the true from the false, but of what may not be characterized as scientific.”<sup>77</sup> Like Bhabha’s stereotype, epistemic violence, or “knowledge violence”<sup>i</sup> seeks to define as truth information that cannot really be proven because it is not based in fact. Epistemic violence effaces certain narratives to concretize hegemony as reality. For those operating within hegemonic systems, people whom Spivak labels “the general nonspecialist, nonacademic population across the class

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<sup>h</sup> Mohan Dutta and Mahuya Pal define subaltern as “the margin of the margins, the very bottom of society that remains hidden from discursive articulation of that society,” in Mohan Dutta and Mahuya Pal, *Dialog Theory in Marginalized Settings: A Subaltern Studies Approach*, *Communication Theory* 20, no. 4 (2010): 383, 2n.

<sup>i</sup> *OED*, s.v. “episteme.” “Scientific knowledge, a system of understanding.”

spectrum, for whom the episteme operates its silent programming function,”<sup>78</sup> subaltern narratives remain inaccessible. Epistemic violence obscures the subaltern voice from the conscience of the general population.

Spivak’s critique does not exonerate scholars from complicity in epistemic violence. She claims, “The ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual’s stock in trade.”<sup>79</sup> For Spivak, many scholarly projects that attempt to “give voice” to the subaltern only further mitigate their agency by presenting them as a homogenous group. Drawing on Marxist theory, she asserts, “There is no such thing as a ‘class instinct’” of the subaltern. As such, “the formation of a class is *artificial* and economic.”<sup>80</sup> Spivak maintains there is no subaltern consciousness; subaltern individuals have different perspectives and different desires. She demands that one must “insist that the colonized subaltern *subject* [her italics] is irretrievably heterogeneous.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, the intellectual who attempts to impart *the* subaltern perspective obscures all the subaltern perspectives that he or she does not share.

Spivak demonstrates the subaltern’s silence through an example of an Indian female suicide, called *sati*. In Hindu society, *sati* usually signifies a newly widowed woman’s devotion to her late husband. Unmarried Bhubaneswari Bhaduri’s 1926 suicide, in her father’s apartment in North Calcutta, was a different story. The suicide was a puzzle because, as Bhubaneswari was menstruating at the time, her *sati* was obviously not a case of illicit pregnancy. Years later, a letter Bhubaneswari had written to her elder sister was discovered. The letter explained that Bhubaneswari had been involved in the Indian revolutionary movement and had been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to realize her task, she had taken her own life. By waiting for the onset of

menstruation, Spivak suggests that Bhubaneswari “perhaps rewrote the social text of *sati*-suicide in an interventionist way.”<sup>82</sup> She explains, “[Bhubaneswari] generalized the sanctioned motive for female suicide by taking immense trouble to displace (not merely deny), in the physiological inscription of her body, its imprisonment within legitimate passion by a single male.”<sup>83</sup> But when Spivak asked Bhubaneswari’s nieces about the suicide, they insisted that it was a case of illicit love, indicating a refusal to acknowledge Bhubaneswari’s bodily communication that so starkly differentiated her suicide from traditional *sati*. This failure of Bhubaneswari’s communication elicits Spivak’s lament: “The subaltern cannot speak!”<sup>84</sup>

In an interview twenty-three years after the publication of “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak clarifies the negative reply to her titular question. “[Bhubaneswari] could not speak because she did speak but was not heard,” she said. “It was about: when the subaltern speaks, there is not enough infrastructure for people to recognise it as resistant speech.”<sup>85</sup> These remarks seem to revise Spivak’s original sentence, “The subaltern cannot speak” to “The subaltern cannot be heard,” for the force of dominant narratives evaporates their speech.

Not all scholars agree with Spivak that subaltern agency is so hopelessly irretrievable. With a repetitive emphasis on “sincere”<sup>j</sup> listening, Mohan Dutta and Mahuya Pal claim, “the researcher/scholar/practitioner” can serve as “an entry point to transformative politics by sincerely seeking to engage in dialog with subaltern voices such that these voices might be heard amidst the colonizing structures of neoliberalism.”<sup>86</sup> This dialogue with the subaltern “is constituted as a mediation that

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<sup>j</sup> Dutta and Pal use the word “sincere” or “sincerely” twelve times throughout their twenty-one page essay to characterize ideal dialogue with the subaltern.

brings subaltern narratives into mainstream structures/sites of knowledge.”<sup>87</sup> For Dutta and Pal, well-meaning people have the capacity to translate subaltern narratives into the hegemonic idiom.

Dutta and Pal do not, however, present the recovery of subaltern agency as a simple project. They draw attention to the codes of conduct that authorize speech in international communication, offering the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) as an example:

Although the UNPFII positions itself as a space for dialog with indigenous communities across the globe . . . the participation of indigenous communities in the forum is intrinsically dependent upon the ability of the communities to master the tools and resources necessary for participation at the UNPFII.<sup>88</sup>

Dutta and Pal claim that the UNPFII threatens “to minimize the resistive politics of the indigenous movements against neoliberalism while simultaneously creating the appearance of participation.”<sup>89</sup> Because involvement in UNPFII discussions must be in the language of international debate, indigenous peoples who do not speak in the international idiom are denied access to debate and concepts that cannot be translated to the international idiom remain unspoken. In the next section I explore Dutta and Pal’s observation further with attention to Sanjay Seth, who has theorized limitations to debate in liberal systems. I argue that these same limitations regulate the *Guardian* campaign, determining who can participate and what they can say.

### III. Speaking Difference in Liberal Democracies: Plurality versus Difference

In his essay “Liberalism and the Politics of (Multi)culture: or, Plurality is Not Difference,” political scientist Sanjay Seth asserts that liberalism fails to support true cultural difference. He explains, “Liberalism and culture are not normally words which one juxtaposes, for it is thought to be a hallmark of liberalism precisely that it is

impervious to culture, just as it is blind to colour, sex and creed.”<sup>90</sup> Seth challenges these assumptions by claiming that the “Reason” on which liberalism is founded is “in fact a particular conception or vision of the world (male, or Western, or heterosexual) . . . made to stand in as a universal.”<sup>91</sup> For Seth, liberalism *is* a culture.

Seth’s analysis focuses specifically on procedural liberalism, which he defines as “concerned with finding rules which might regulate and adjudicate conflict between different conceptions of the good, rather than in elaborating and championing a specific set of values as being constitutive of the good.”<sup>92</sup> In order to avoid privileging one set of values over another, procedural liberalism conceives of the political as “an arena itself devoid of any content, bar the minimum necessary to allow it to function.”<sup>93</sup> While purporting inclusivity, this contentless notion of politics delimits the participation of many value sets. For example, Seth points out, “there are traditions where separations between politics and law and faith and religion appear as unthinkable, a falsification of both.”<sup>94</sup> Therefore, he argues that diversity is valued “only by presupposing that the differences are within a certain range.”<sup>95</sup> Seth argues that liberalism supports, and even celebrates, “*plurality* (where things are so many variations on a theme . . . ),”<sup>96</sup> but he resolutely concludes, “plurality is not difference.”<sup>97</sup> Seth exposes as false liberalism’s claim that it supports cultural difference.

Seth suggests that multicultural difference is even more restricted beyond the political sphere. These tighter and more informal restrictions apply to the *Guardian* campaign. Seth claims, “Underlying most ‘official’ multiculturalisms is still the view that those who find themselves in a country other than their own must, after all, accept its values and institutions, and simply be grateful that they are not required to wholly forsake

their own.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, even Western societies that celebrate multiculturalism tolerate “only those cultural practices . . . which do not conflict with or challenge the dominant ethos.”<sup>99</sup>

True acceptance of multicultural difference remains merely an idealized myth.

I argue the *Guardian* campaign’s single narrative supports plurality, but not true cultural difference. This intolerance takes root in the colonial narratives critiqued by Said, Bhabha and Spivak. In the next chapter, I integrate these theoretical frameworks with an analysis of a representative video from the *Guardian* campaign.

### Chapter Three. Masking Difference

My method of analysis is rooted in Edward Said's recommendations for postcolonial criticism: "The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devise, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representations, nor its fidelity to some great original."<sup>100</sup> The *Guardian* puts forth a particular representation of the cultures and people who practice FGC. In congruence with Said's orientation to postcolonial analysis, I am not concerned with whether or not these representations are "true"; I seek instead to discover what impressions they create.

I argue that the *Guardian* campaign authorizes only one condemning narrative of FGC that obscures all others. The campaign represents cultures that practice FGC as violent, patriarchal, and inhospitable to female flourishing. While the campaign purports to champion multicultural difference by featuring black figureheads with head coverings, its exclusion of varied viewpoints of FGC reveals limited tolerance for non-Western culture. Through the portrayal of genitally cut women as victims and the omission of counter-narratives, the *Guardian* usurps the agency of the same subaltern women it seeks to liberate.

#### I. "End FGM *Guardian* Global Media Campaign"

The campaign breaks down into four sections.<sup>k</sup> The first section is titled, "End FGM Global Media Campaign." A video called "Highlights of the Guardian's Global

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<sup>k</sup> Material from the campaign is gathered under the domain "theguardian.com/end-fgm." A team of campaign coordinators manages this page (*Guardian*, "Contact the End FGM Guardian Global Media Campaign," February 4, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/help/2015/feb/04/contact-the-end-fgm-guardian-global-media-campaign>). I made these observations on October 21, 2015. The *Guardian* may make future changes to its campaign page.

Media Campaign to Help End FGM” dominates this initial section. The next section is titled “The Campaign So Far,” and features the titles to fifteen videos. With one exception, these videos are under six minutes.<sup>1</sup> Text articles about FGC comprise the next two sections, “FGM in the News” and “Latest Comment.” These titles include “UK to Introduce Measures to Stop Girls Being Taken Abroad for FGM” and “What Can You Do to Help End Female Genital Mutilation in the US?” The page ends with an “Information” section including contact details for the campaign coordinators and an article titled “What is Female Genital Mutilation and Where Does it Happen?”

I focus my analysis on the “Highlights of the Guardian’s Global Media Campaign to Help End FGM” video from the first section.<sup>m101</sup> This video is the most prominent in the campaign: it is the first video users see and it features the largest title screen. Additionally, the video compiles material from other campaign videos to represent the campaign as a whole. The six minutes and twenty-six second “Highlights” involves a multi-modal montage of film, stills, animation, text, and audio. The one minute and four second introduction features nineteen distinct images, video clips and text screens, augmented by voiceovers, sound, and music. After the introduction, the video follows the campaign’s presence over twelve months in four different countries: the United Kingdom, the United States, Kenya and Gambia. Footage from each country comprises its own segment. The UK segment highlights Somali teenager Fahma Mohamed’s campaign for “FGM” education in British schools. Similarly, the US segment features

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<sup>1</sup> Often before users can view a campaign video they must to watch a ten second advertisement for Charles Schwab “Intelligent Portfolios,” which use technology to guide investment decisions.

<sup>m</sup> Hereafter referred to as “Highlights” and cited in text.

Gambian immigrant Jaha Dukureh's effort to raise awareness of FGC in the United States. In Kenya, girls protest FGC in the streets and participate in an educational poster competition sponsored by the *Guardian*. The video concludes with Jaha's trip home to Gambia to start a local campaign against FGC.

## II. Reductive Representations

In the introduction to *Genital Cutting and Transnational Sisterhood*, Stanlie James and Claire Robertson summarize what many have found so deeply unsettling about international discussions of FGC. They claim that popular Western "FGM" discourse tends to rely on three reductive descriptions of Africa and African women: the reduction of all of Africa to one "traditional" place in opposition to the "modern" West, the reduction of African people to either "hapless victims" or "malicious torturers," and the reduction of all FGC practices to the most severe version—infibulation.<sup>102</sup> I argue that the *Guardian* campaign mimics these same reductions.

The "Highlights" video suggests that FGC is the same everywhere. The introduction includes labeled images from five countries where FGC is practiced: Kurdistan, Kenya, Australia, Indonesia and the UK. While these images flash across the screen, the video soundtrack plays verbal descriptions of FGC sourced from cultures other than that of the featured image. For example, as the video displays an image of a Kurdish girl in a red dress, a Kenyan man describes the tradition of FGC in Kenya. "There is this culture of ours," he says, "that our forefathers has [*sic*] been doing." Although "Highlights" never identifies this speaker as Kenyan, his ethnicity becomes clear in another campaign video.<sup>103</sup> A similarly incongruent audio-visual pairing appears twenty-two seconds later. As girls around age six receive surgery in an Indonesian

hospital setting, a non-Western accented female voice describes her FGC experience, remembering, “It was the pain and the bleeding after that.” The *Guardian* never identifies this woman’s country of origin either, but in another campaign video her shadow image indicates an African ethnicity.<sup>104</sup> By coupling images of one culture’s FGC practice with audio descriptions from other, unidentified cultures, “Highlights” elides differences among FGC rituals to suggest that practices are the same everywhere.

Beyond the reduction of FGC to a uniform practice, “Highlights” conflates other aspects of non-Western cultures. At the end of the introduction, the video declares, “Chinese footbinding ended in a generation/We can end FGM now.” Said describes Orientalism as the “distillation of essential ideas about the Orient” and claims that just the word “Oriental” calls to mind an entire body of assumptions.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, the word “China” contains a distillation of essential conceptions. Via the comparative argument, the video confers these Western conceptions of China onto cultures that practice FGC. The video’s mention of China and focus on non-African countries that practice FGC does complicate James’s and Robertson’s claim that “FGM” discourse tends to reduce all of “Africa’s fifty-four countries and hundreds of cultures to one uncivilized, ‘traditional’ place.”<sup>106</sup> The addition of the non-African places spreads the burden of degeneracy across the globe. On the other hand, these references to other FGC-practicing cultures also homogenize all non-Western countries into a single “other.” Gayatri Spivak claims that such homogenization is one of the central tenants of discursive imperialism and insists that the colonized subaltern subject is “irretrievably heterogeneous.”<sup>107</sup> For Spivak, there is no such thing as a collective subaltern conscience, nor can there be uniformity between non-Western cultures.

“Highlights” presents violence as a key characteristic of this body of “other” cultures. Throughout the video, a white map against a red background indicates transitions between countries. This full screen of red may invite associations with spilled blood to craft a violent sketch of FGC-practicing cultures. The campaign’s language choice supplements this visual. Near the end of the UK segment, headlines of the campaign’s progress clutter the screen. Most prominently, the video announces, “Gove<sup>n</sup> urged to help stop barbaric practice.” The adjective “barbaric,” meaning, “Savage in infliction of cruelty, cruelly harsh,”<sup>108</sup> colors those who perform FGC as uncivilized torturers.

The video also emphasizes violence by constructing a dichotomy between innocence and corruption. During the introduction, “Highlights” emphasizes young girls as the primary recipients of FGC. These girls include the Kurdish girl in the red dress, the Indonesian girls in the hospital setting, and another Kurdish child around age four stamping her feet to resist entrance through a door into a dark interior. Western culture aligns children with innocence.<sup>o</sup> This conception of childhood innocence magnifies for female children, whom the West associates with virginity. The Western concept of virginity, asserts sexuality scholar Hanne Blank, is always female.<sup>109</sup> Blank argues that Western “ideology holds that female virginity is singular and valuable.”<sup>110</sup> In the West, then, any violent act appears even harsher when exerted on a girl-child. By presenting

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<sup>n</sup> Michael Gove was the United Kingdom’s Secretary of State for Education from 2010- 2014.

<sup>o</sup> The Aristotelian conception of childhood holds that children are immature human organisms who have the potential to develop into mature adults. This understanding of childhood has disseminated throughout Western ideology. In Stanford University, “The Philosophy of Childhood,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed December 9, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/childhood/>.

young girls as the primary recipients of FGC, the *Guardian* amplifies its violent representation of FGC-practicing cultures.

Audio adds to the sense of non-Western culture's ubiquitous violence. At the beginning of the segment about Kenya, two thin, black, female hands, adorned in beaded bracelets, fill the screen. A subtitle reads, "I pull it out, and I cut all the way down, including the vulva." The woman illustrates the subtitle's words with her hands in mock demonstration. Suddenly a heavy drum beat drops and the woman yanks her hand downwards, as if attempting to pull a finger off of her other hand. The surprise and force of the drumbeat intensifies the moment of clitorrectomy to an always-violent act. Also, many of the campaign videos end with an image of a shiny razor blade, shattered into twelve pieces against a grey-green background.<sup>p</sup> As the domain name for the campaign appears at the center of the blade, the sound of a sharp slice rings out twice, accompanied by a blinding white light.<sup>111</sup> This slicing sound augments the image's forceful suggestion of a bloody wound. Relying on color, word choice, contrast between purity and impurity, audio and image, violent representation of FGC-practicing cultures abound in the *Guardian* campaign.

The video presents FGC as a longstanding tradition to suggest violence as a static pillar in "other" cultures. During the introduction, the Kenyan man explains the deeply ingrained tradition of FGC, "that our forefathers has [*sic*] been doing." By drawing parallels between the past and the present, this quote suggests continuity in cultural practices over time. Said argues that discursive imperialism adopts the tense of the "timeless eternal."<sup>112</sup> To convey this sense of stasis, he claims that "it is frequently

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<sup>p</sup> "Highlights" is anomalous in its lack of this ending. In the second section on the campaign page, twelve of the fifteen videos conclude with the blade sound and image.

enough to use the simple copula is.”<sup>113</sup> In “Highlights,” the Kenyan man employs that very verb. Also, the video never identifies him, his words extend meaning to all FGC-practicing cultures. Lacking context, his quote implies that if left to their own devices, all “other” cultures cling with concrete resolve to violent traditions.

Just as “Highlights” reduces non-Western cultures to a homogenous bloc mired in violence, it also reduces the people of those cultures to static stereotypes. The video represents men of cultures that practice FGC as heartless patriarchs. At a community event for immigrant Gambians in the United States, Jaha approaches two Gambian men with a clipboard in hand:

Jaha: “Do you think FGM is a problem?”

First Man: “No.”

Jaha: “You don’t think so?”

First Man: “I don’t think so.”

Second Man: “What’s that?”

Jaha: “It’s a survey about FGM,”

Second Man: “What’s FGM?”

Jaha: “Female genital mutilation.”

The camera pans to the second man’s chest and face. “Oh,” he says, and walks away. This clip suggests that Gambian men either celebrate FGC or consider it irrelevant to their lives. The clip is one of the few appearances of men in the video. While the introduction features the Kenyan man’s voice, it never shows his face. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon speaks at length to offer his support for the *Guardian* campaign, but he does not represent an FGC-practicing culture. For a few seconds, the video shows men hanging the winning poster from the *Guardian* sponsored contest in Kenya. As the only audio-visual representation of a male attitude about FGC, the clip of the Gambian men takes on meaning as the universal male perspective of FGC, and solidifies a stereotype of men from “other” cultures as harsh and selfish.

In stark contrast to these entitled men, “Highlights” presents genitally cut women as diminished victims. During the introduction, the screen melts into black with small white text reading “UK.” The shadowy profile of a girl with afro-textured hair in a ponytail moves her neck emphatically as she wonders, “[1] What is too harsh? [2] To ruin a little girl’s life? [3] Take all of her organs? [4] So she’s just like a shell? [5] Just walking?” The girl’s second question, “To ruin a girl’s life?”, suggests that uncut genitalia are a condition for a happy life. Her third question, “Take all of her organs?”, functions as a hyperbolic reverse synecdoche: the whole—“all her organs”—stands in for a part—the unmentioned “genitals.” By taking “all her organs” the subject of the girl’s questions becomes “a shell.” One meaning of “shell” is “the empty case of a fruit.”<sup>14</sup> In this biological definition the shell carries import only as it protects the fruit. When the fruit is gone, the shell loses value. The girl’s fourth question, “So she’s just a shell?”, implicitly positions an uncut girl as the metaphorical “fruit.” With the loss of this “fruit” through FGC, the subject becomes an invaluable “shell.” The girl’s questions suggest that once cut, a woman cannot lead a full life. The alliance of female genitalia with female flourishing is not necessarily a universal concept. Janice Boddy points towards an alternative understanding of femininity when she wonders why contemplating the loss of the clitoris “augurs such serious personal diminishment?”<sup>15</sup> For Boddy, unlike the questioning girl, FGC does not necessarily signify a ruined life.

The feminine “victims” of FGC stand in stark opposition to the powerful, liberated women who speak out against the practice. “Highlights” opens with a close up on the face of a pale brown-skinned woman with pearly white teeth and plump lips coated in red lipstick. The text under another campaign video identifies this woman as

Warsan Shire, London's first Young Poet Laureate.<sup>116</sup> In this clip, she stares directly at the camera, and in a crisp British accent, says just three words with staccato enunciation: "Cut, cut, cut." Shire's red lips may insinuate blood and the sharp consonants of the word "cut" are reminiscent of a knife. The implied violence of this clip indicates that Shire does not approve of FGC under any circumstances. Her stare into the camera translates to a fearless eye contact with the viewer and highlights her steadfast condemnation of the practice. Fahma speaks with similar enthusiastic enunciation when she first appears, appealing for "FGM" education in schools. Fahma's concluding assertion, "We will not back down and we won't go away," defies compromise. At her first appearance, Jaha also speaks directly to the camera in a clear and entitled tone. She asserts, "I know first hand the horrors of this practice, and I need your help to end it." Through Shire's, Fahma's and Jaha's confident and direct tone, the video implies that unlike the "victims" of FGC in non-Western cultures, these women shape the world around them to their liking.

Fahma and Jaha further control their worlds through political organization. Fahma displays "FGM" signs on the street, meets with Michael Gove and Ban Ki-Moon, and speaks to reporters. Likewise, Jaha approaches people with her "FGM" survey at the Gambian community gathering, presents to the US congress and to *Guardian* staff, and drives and makes phone calls on the campaign trail. Fahma's and Jaha's passionate campaigning reveals them as active authors of social change. The contrast between these liberated Western activists and the diminished non-Western "victims" realizes Bhabha's theory by making visible the necessity of the *Guardian* campaign.<sup>117</sup>

Like much Western "FGM" discourse, the *Guardian* campaign constructs reductive representations of FGC, the places where FGC occurs, and the people who

participate in the practice. These reductive portrayals obfuscate deviations from the *Guardian* narrative. Despite its suppression of variation, “Highlights” purports to celebrate difference by featuring multiracial women with multicultural fashion. In the next section I argue that the campaign fails to represent real difference.

### III. Plurality, Not Difference

Liberal societies place value on deliberative spaces that privilege no opinion over another.<sup>118</sup> Seth argues that this conception of the political arena relies on a Western worldview and thereby inherently foils its own project.<sup>119</sup> He asserts that liberalism values diversity only when “differences are within a certain range.”<sup>120</sup> The *Guardian* campaign manifests this spirit of liberalism by celebrating different racial backgrounds and diverse fashion choices but avoiding differences of opinion.

“Highlights” forefronts women and girls with black and brown skin. The campaign’s two figureheads, Fahma and Jaha, are both ethnically African. The video opens with a close up on brown-skinned poet Warsan Shire. In a clip of Fahma’s UK campaign in action, all but one of the seven campaigners are black-British teenage girls. When Jaha attends the Gambian community gathering, she receives support for her petition from numerous Gambian women. In Kenya, black-skinned girls display their “FGM” posters. The campaign also leverages the authority of Pakistani education activist Malala Yousafzai and Korean Ban Ki-Moon, both high profile, non-White social justice advocates. The video’s plethora of non-white figures implies the *Guardian*’s tolerance for people of all racial backgrounds.

“Highlights” also suggests tolerance of non-Western culture through its figures’ display of multicultural fashion. Both Fahma and Jaha wear head coverings that Western

women would not typically display. Five of Fahma's seven fellow campaigners also cover their heads. By spotlighting girls and women with covered heads, the *Guardian* expresses tolerance for the religious and cultural traditions that encourage female modesty. While Fahma wears different clothes in different scenes of the video, her fashion trends remain similar throughout. Jaha's fashion, on the other hand, changes notably between scenes. In some scenes, she exhibits Western clothing and in others she wears what a Western audience would likely interpret as traditionally "African." For example, she participates in a ribbon cutting ceremony wearing a grey pantsuit, white blouse, purple-pink lipstick, and a neon green headscarf. Aside from the headscarf, Jaha's outfit would blend perfectly with many young, white female professionals in New York or London. In contrast, when she visits the *Guardian* offices in London, she wears a full-length yellow dress with a green, red and gold triangle pattern, and a matching headscarf. This outfit stands out as distinctly "other" among the *Guardian* employees. Jaha's fluid switch between Western and non-Western fashion symbolizes her ability to retain her traditional roots even while she adopts Western morals. Through Jaha's clothing, the *Guardian* honors Jaha's non-Western heritage and synecdochly represents its respect for many different cultures.

The video's celebration of non-White women and girls and their multicultural fashion choices disguises the campaign's avoidance of true cultural difference. "Highlights" excludes counter narratives, like the ones discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, that may provide alternative representations of FGC-practicing cultures and people. Like Mohan Dutta and Mahuya Pal's description of the indigenous people denied access to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues due to their inability to speak in

the idiom of international argumentation, the *Guardian* denies access to those unable to speak in the campaign's idiom of discursive imperialism. Through the appearance of multicultural acceptance, the *Guardian* renders the absence of alternative viewpoints inconspicuous. While the campaign achieves plurality, it eschews true difference.

#### IV. A Single Narrative

In her study of 1990s US newspapers, Lisa Wade found that Western media espoused a single condemning narrative of FGC. Now, the *Guardian* campaign performs the same consensus. I insist, however, that the *Guardian*'s censure of FGC is not inherently immoral or wrong. Those that articulate the *Guardian* stance, like Fahma and Jaha, are not deluded or malicious; women and girls who undergo FGC may indeed suffer physically and psychologically; thus, objection to the practice is a legitimate posture. The issue I take with the *Guardian* campaign is not its condemnation of FGC, but its narrow and reductive portrayals. Where in the campaign is the differentiation between infibulation and the much less invasive *sunna*? Where are the men who advocate against FGC? Where are the outspoken African women like Fuumbai Ahmadu, who insist on the continuation of sexual pleasure after FGC?

The campaign's exclusion of these alternative viewpoints may carry material consequences. Boddy argues that "FGM" discourse caused the issue of FGC to "overdetermine" the lives Sudanese of women in Canada in the early 1990s.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, the *Guardian* campaign promotes the perception of FGC as a central identity component for immigrant women from FGC-practicing cultures. Seth contends that multiculturalism tends to embody the latent view that immigrants should accept the "values and institutions" of their host country and be grateful that they are not required to completely

abandon their own.<sup>122</sup> According to Seth's argument, non-immigrants may perceive women who practice FGC as ungrateful or deficient members of society. By highlighting FGC as central to immigrant women's identity, the *Guardian* campaign could contribute to immigrant women's social exclusion. More generally, the campaign's stereotypical portrayal of non-Western degeneracy authorizes not only its own interventionist project against FGC, but also the continuation of other forms of imperial governmentality. Although it is impossible to determine the *Guardian* campaign's direct effects, it surely contributes to the conditions of immigrant women's social exclusion and fosters the perpetuation of imperialist intervention.

Spivak argues that discursive imperialism, like that of the *Guardian* campaign, materially affects subaltern people by usurping their ability to communicate. She claims that epistemic violence fixes certain narratives as hegemonic, while effacing alternatives. The power of the episteme collapses the knowledge network that enables the comprehension of non-dominant narratives. It is the loss of this knowledge network that silences the subaltern. In the interview two decades after the publication of "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak explained that subaltern voices remain silent because of the lack of "infrastructure for people to recognise it as resistant speech."<sup>123</sup> Due to a history of Western colonial advocacy against FGC, the *Guardian* operates in a knowledge network devoid of the "infrastructure" that supports subaltern speech. According to Spivak's theory, if the *Guardian* featured a woman who claimed FGC as an essential element of her identity, Western viewers would lack the contextual knowledge to understand the woman's claim. Likely, most would consider the woman a victim of false consciousness. However, by excluding such a woman from their campaign, the *Guardian*

furnishes the episteme with power and perpetuates the erasure of a Western knowledge infrastructure that offers the possibility of resistant subaltern speech. Ronald Greene defines a rhetorical subject as one that both “speaks and is spoken to.”<sup>124</sup> In a discursive environment that forecloses the possibility of subaltern speech, subaltern subjects lose the rhetoricity of their subjecthood. Without a voice, they become objects rather than subjects.

Social justice strategies operating without the reductive and colonial tropes of the *Guardian* campaign certainly exist. Perhaps the best alternative to the outside interventionism of the *Guardian* are localized, grassroots campaigns. These movements reflect contextualized cultural awareness and represent a democratic ethos of the people they affect. Unlike the *Guardian*'s single narrative model, grassroots movements promote agency. Hidden among the videos of “The Campaign So Far” section, appearing only after clicking a small button labeled “More the campaign so far,” the *Guardian* touches on a Kenyan group of village elders' grassroots effort to promote alternative initiation ceremonies that do not involve FGC.<sup>125</sup> This group organizes with culturally specific strategies. But movements do not necessarily need to be grassroots in order to avoid the *Guardian*'s pitfalls. Postcolonial critic and feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty theorizes a transnational feminist solidarity model that advocates connections between women “across the divisions of place, identity, class, work, belief, and so on”<sup>126</sup> with attention to “power, privilege, agency, and dissent.”<sup>127</sup> Mohanty's model relies on the recognition of “common differences”<sup>128</sup> among women from all cultures, or the idea that women across the world all face oppression but its manifestations are culturally specific. Mohanty's

recommendations lay the groundwork for the possibility of global social justice efforts that challenge colonial power structures.

Mohanty's faith in the possibility of transitional feminist solidarity provides important encouragement for those who wish to work towards global peace and equality. Indeed, it can be disheartening to dissect well-meaning campaigns like the *Guardian's* in search of silenced subaltern voices. To watch these champions of justice unravel their own projects is to expose to doubt dreams of a more peaceful world. Rosalind Morris, the editor of an anthology of essays responding to Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak," offers hope for the discouragement that may arise from needed analysis of social justice campaigns. Morris points out that, although Spivak's seminal essay answers its own question in the negative, the "corollary question, How can we learn to listen? remains radically open."<sup>129</sup>

Dutta and Pal argue the "researcher/scholar/practitioner" can serve as "an entry point to transformative politics by sincerely seeking to engage in dialog with subaltern voices."<sup>130</sup> I agree with them that the Western scholars' and social justice campaigners' attempt at sincere dialogue with the subaltern may be the best answer to what Morris calls the corollary to Spivak's titular query. Spivak is right that without a Western knowledge framework for subaltern communication, some subaltern sentiments may evaporate into unintelligibility. But attempts—even failed—at subaltern dialogue must start somewhere. How else may the West begin to construct a knowledge infrastructure that supports subaltern narratives? A good first step is to forego the *Guardian* campaign's single narrative mold in favor of a multiple narrative model that offers the subaltern a platform for expression.

## Notes

### Chapter One. The *Guardian* Campaign in Context

1 Lisa Wade, "The Function of Balance in US News Coverage of Uncontested Issues: The Case of Female Genital Cutting," *Journalism* 13, no. 7 (2012): 870.

2 Wade, "Function of Balance," 870.

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