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DEFINING GENDERED OPPRESSION IN U.S. NEWSPAPERS

The Strategic Value of “Female Genital Mutilation”

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According to the logic of the gendered modernity/tradition binary, women in traditional societies are oppressed and women in modern societies liberated. While the binary valorizes modern women, it potentially erases gendered oppression in the West and undermines feminist movements on behalf of Western women. Using U.S. newspaper text, I ask whether female genital cutting (FGC) is used to define women in modern societies as liberated. I find that speakers use FGC to both uphold and challenge the gendered modernity/tradition binary. Speakers use FGC to denigrate non-Western cultures and trivialize the oppressions that U.S. women typically encounter, but also to make feminist arguments on behalf of women everywhere. I argue that in addition to examining how culturally imperialist logics are reproduced, theorists interested in feminist postcolonialism should turn to the distribution of such logics, emphasizing the who, where, when, and how of reinscription of and resistance to such narratives.

Keywords: *feminism; postcolonialism; female genital cutting; female genital mutilation; sexuality*

Both colonialism (Chatterjee 1989; McClintock 1995) and contemporary neocolonialism (Basu 1995; Grewal 2005) have been justified with the need to rescue women from traditional cultures. This rescue is predicated on a conflation of the notions of traditional and patriarchal that positions women in societies believed to be traditional as uniquely or extremely oppressed (Harding 2008; Mohanty 2003; Yuval-Davis 1997).

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This finding points to the gendered nature of the modernity/tradition binary. That is, the West is considered modern, while the non-West remains premodern with an adherence to tradition that inhibits progress. Because the binary is gendered, the condition of women becomes a measure of the advancement of a society.

The logic of the gendered modernity/tradition binary also has implications for representations of modern women insofar as it functions to define women's oppression in a way that excludes them (Nader 1989; Volpp 2000). There has been relatively little research, however, demonstrating this phenomenon. While modern women are the valorized category in this binary, investigating it is important because, were modern women's oppressions trivialized or erased, the binary could function to undermine feminist movements on their behalf. In this article, with an analysis of documents from U.S. newspapers, I ask whether female genital cutting practices (FGCs), frequently used to demonstrate the severity of women's oppression elsewhere, are also used to define women in modern societies as liberated. Specifically, I sample newspaper documents—articles, editorials, letters to the editor, and art and book reviews—in which speakers use FGCs as evidence with which to build an argument, instead of those in which they discuss the practices themselves. With these data, I am able to evaluate the extent to which the presence of “female genital mutilation” as a symbolic resource for Western speakers translates into an affirmation of a gendered modernity/tradition binary that undermines domestic feminist activism.

REPRESENTING TRADITIONAL AND MODERN WOMEN

Place and progress are linked in the Western imagination in a phenomenon described as “anachronistic space” (McClintock 1995, 40). As Sakai (2005, 183) explains: “Thanks to this spatial mapping of a chronological order onto a cartographic plane . . . the West [is understood to be] ahead of the rest of the world.” Being “ahead” is not a value-neutral idea, but one that carries advantageous connotations of being forward instead of backward and gives the West a multidimensional “positional superiority” (Said 1978, 7; Harding 2008). Accordingly, Western culture and, from an American perspective, especially the United States, is understood to be the pinnacle of civilization and an exemplar for the rest of the world. I call this idea *American exemplarism*.

American exemplarism (hereafter: exemplarism) differs in important ways from the more familiar terms of American exceptionalism,

nationalism, ethnocentrism, and racism. Unlike American exceptionalism, which suggests that the United States is unique, exemplarism suggests that the United States is the purest manifestation of an ideal that is, in fact, approximated by other countries, especially those in Western Europe. Unlike nationalism, loyalty is due not just to the United States, but to all societies that approximate the American way of life. Unlike ethnocentrism, exemplarism includes not simply a judgment that the exemplar is superior, but a moral imperative on cultures deemed inferior to emulate the exemplar. Finally, unlike racism, exemplarism emphasizes cultural instead of racial superiority. Exemplarism, then, posits that the United States is culturally superior to all other nations, but rejects the idea that the United States alone is capable of attaining a superior way of life. Ideological adherents are not interested purely in the well-being of the United States and, in fact, may consider assisting other societies in becoming more like America to be an imperative. Essentially, exemplarism facilitates cultural imperialism in that it lends moral authority to the spread of Western culture.

One of the achievements of Western culture in the exemplarist narrative is (near) gender equality. While women may still be disadvantaged here in the West, it is argued, the oppression women suffer elsewhere is believed to be incomparable to ours (Alexander 2005; Mohanty 2003; Volpp 2000). Kesic (2002, 318) writes that Western media “. . . present the situation of women in these parts of the world as so exceptional, so different, so exotic that nothing like it can be imagined in the West.” Ahmed (1982, 522) writes:

Americans “know,” and know without even having to think about it . . . that Arabs are backward, they know also with the same flawless certainty that Muslim women are terribly oppressed and degraded . . . it is one of those “facts” lying around in this culture, and most freely admit that actually they know nothing about Islam or Middle Eastern societies.

When the lives of *women* are symbols of *cultural* depravity, any oppression they (are believed to) face becomes a justification for denigrating their culture, restricting their rights, and justifying transnational aggression. In the colonial era, footbinding (Teng 1996) and plural marriage (Ahmed 1982) were used by colonial powers to excuse exploitative and forceful intervention. In these instances, women’s autonomy was often not the central concern, but the terrain on which contests about tradition and modernity occurred. Today, conflicts over veiling in Western countries are shaped by the belief that the veil is inherently oppressive. Yet, as Asad (2004) and Werbner (2005) explain, debates in France are primarily about

the secular identity of the state and, in the name of feminism, have led to the restriction of women's right to veil. Support for the war in Afghanistan was mobilized in the U.S. media with similar, ostensibly feminist, logic (Alexander 2005). Yet the close attention to Afghan women's status in the U.S. media began only when strategic interests changed after September 11, 2001 (Stabile and Kumar 2005) and Afghan women remained objects, not subjects, in U.S. news (Fowler 2007). Feminism, then, can be co-opted by exemplarist logic to serve exemplarist instead of feminist ends.

Like footbinding, plural marriage, and veiling, FGCs have been framed for Western audiences as both women's oppression and cultural depravity, potentially inspiring both feminist and exemplarist sentiment. The U.S. public was largely unaware of FGCs until 1992 when media coverage of the practices was sparked by the publication of Alice Walker's novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (Boyle and Hoeschen 2001). Media coverage then peaked in 1996 with attention to an asylum case. On the threat of forced marriage and genital cutting, Fauziya Kassindja became the first woman awarded U.S. asylum for gender-based oppression (Kassindja and Bashir 1998). In addition, that year the United States passed a federal law against "female genital mutilation" and began imposing economic sanctions on nations that did not attempt to eliminate FGCs among their citizens (Boyle 2002). After these developments, news coverage declined.

Critics of that coverage show that "female genital mutilation" was used as a convenient marker with which to place a culture on one side of the dichotomy between the modern and the traditional (Njambi 2004; Robertson 2002; Walley 2002). Summarizing the rhetoric, James and Robertson (2002, 5) write that it ". . . reduce[d] Africa's fifty-four countries and hundreds of cultures to one uncivilized, 'traditional' place outside of history to be compared with the 'modern' 'West.'" By 1997, the idea that FGCs were a severe form of women's oppression and fundamentally characterized the barbaric nature of African culture had become "hegemonic" (Piot 2007, 162) and, thus, a useful "fact" with which to point to women's ongoing worldwide subordination, the inferiority of whole regions of the globe, or both.

As with veiling, U.S. political and legal interventions regarding FGCs have been criticized as nationalist/racist initiatives couched in feminist rhetoric. Eradication campaigns have been described as culturally imperialist (James 1998; Morsy 1991; Nnaemeka 2005); asylum law has been criticized for reproducing ideas of U.S. superiority (Lewis and Gunning 1998; Piot 2007); and laws against FGCs have been argued to be penalizing instead of protective of immigrant populations (Allotey, Manderson,

and Grover 2001; Rogers 2007; Shweder 2000). Gunning (1999, 51) argues that such laws are not really about women's well-being, but a ". . . way [for politicians] to pretend to address race and gender issues." Comparing concern over FGCs and veiling in France, Bloul (1997) argues that the more aggressive treatment of the latter reveals that the state was concerned more with the threat of Islam than a threat to women. Likewise, Winter (1994) explains, legal debates over FGCs in France were essentially a competition between cultural relativists and feminists over the right to define women's interests.

This review thus far reflects the extensive empirical literature on how the gendered modernity/tradition binary shapes representation of women in traditional societies (e.g., Chatterjee 1989; Lutz and Collins 1993; Teng 1996). In contrast, the argument that the binary structures thought about modern women in societies has been largely speculative. Scholars suggest that though the binary places the West above the rest, it does not necessarily translate into an advantage for Western women vis-à-vis Western men. Instead, the ability to make meaningful statements about American women's oppression is subverted when such articulations provoke a response such as: ". . . while it may be bad here it is really worse in the Middle East or elsewhere" (Nader 1989, 330). The binary may suppress discontent and agitation on behalf of Western women by defining gender-based oppression as a foreign phenomenon (Volpp 2001).

In one exception to the dearth of research on how the gendered modernity/tradition binary shapes perceptions of modern women, Barlow (2000, 1100) shows how celebration of the success of the U.S. women's soccer team in the 2000 Olympics involved a self-congratulation that rested on differentiating the "empower[ed]" U.S. women and the "devalued" Chinese women. Choo (2006), also a notable exception, explains that South Koreans, who consider themselves modern, characterize North Koreans as backward and, when they immigrate to South Korea, they are required to take citizenship classes that include modernity training with lectures on rejecting patriarchy. However, because the South Korean commitment to egalitarian gender relations is more true in spirit than in practice, women who emigrate from North Korea are subject to discriminatory work conditions and sexism. Yet the struggles of North Korean women are often attributed to their fathers' and husbands' patriarchal beliefs and practices. This makes it more difficult to challenge sexism in South Korean culture.

These studies support the theoretical claim that the gendered modernity/tradition binary will shape how we think about "our" women as well as "theirs." Here I contribute to this research with an examination of how

speakers in U.S. newspapers draw on the symbolic meaning of FGCs as a sign of cultural depravity, patriarchy, or both when making arguments about women, gender equality, and national character.

METHOD

This study examines whether speakers in U.S. newspapers use the practices to define gender-based oppression in ways that include or exclude U.S. women. I restrict my sample to documents in which speakers reference FGCs (in just one sentence) instead of those in which the practices are described to the reader because I am interested not in talk about FGCs per se, but in how the practices are brought to bear on other topics such as women, Africa, public policy, health, and immigration. Because newspaper coverage of FGCs began in earnest in 1992 and peaked in 1996, I sample documents beginning in 1997. By that year, FGCs had become part of the American imagination, at least for U.S. newspaper readers. Accordingly, I expect that, when speakers bring FGCs to bear on a topic, they do so because they believe the practices carry a specific strategic value (one they assume the reader understands). Essentially, sampling only documents in which speakers reference FGCs brings to the fore strategic uses of the practices. Since media coverage described FGCs as concrete manifestations of both women's oppression and cultural backwardness, I expect that many speakers will use the symbolism of FGCs to either draw connections between gendered oppression "here" and "there" (a feminist argument) or to disturb those connections by suggesting that gendered oppression "here" is nothing like it is "there" (an exemplarist argument).

I draw on a 75 percent sample of documents published between 1997 and 2004 in seven high-circulation newspapers in which speakers refer to female "circumcision," "genital mutilation," or "genital cutting" ($n = 308$). From this set of documents, I selected those that addressed FGCs in just one sentence ($n = 137$). I then excluded those that had no overall argument (e.g., television listings) ($n = 17$) or one that I could determine ($n = 2$). My final sample consisted of 118 documents published in *USA Today* (*USAT*) ($n = 4$), the *New York Times* (*NYT*) ($n = 21$), the *Los Angeles Times* (*LAT*) ($n = 17$), the *Washington Post* (*WP*) ($n = 26$), the *Houston Chronicle* (*HC*) ($n = 13$), the *San Francisco Chronicle* (*SFC*) ($n = 24$), and the *Boston Globe* (*BG*) ($n = 13$).

Using a systematic approach to text analysis (influenced by Ferree et al. 2002 and Phillips and Hardy 2002), I read each document thoroughly for

the specific argument FGCs were used to make and the general ideological context of that argument in the greater document. I derived the symbolic meaning the practices carried in context (the frame) from the argument FGCs were used to support (the ideological thrust of the comment) (Oliver and Johnston 1999). I identified an argument as feminist when it discussed gendered oppression both in the United States and elsewhere without suggesting that they were different in degree. I identified an argument as exemplarist when it characterized people in non-Western culture (e.g., the "third world," "Africa," or "Islam") as uniquely bad (e.g., willfully cruel to their children), ignorant (e.g., unable to make ethical choices), or otherwise deeply troubled (e.g., hopelessly plagued by war or disease). More often than not, those exemplarist arguments mobilize feminist ideology, positing that cultures are inferior to Western culture by virtue of the existence of (more severe) gendered oppression (patriarchal beliefs and false consciousness).

The distribution of arguments across the newspaper tells a story about the relative importance editors and readers attribute to each argument. When an argument is included in news articles or as an authorized opinion in editorials, it suggests that it is of serious concern. In contrast, when an argument is placed in the entertainment pages or included in a letter to the editor, it is not necessarily understood to be one that journalists or editors believe to be important or valid. Accordingly, my analysis differentiates between types of documents (news articles [$n = 49$], editorials [$n = 20$], letters to the editors [$n = 12$], and art and book reviews [$n = 37$]). I further differentiate between different types of speakers (journalists and editorialists; reviewers; writers of letters to the editors; and quoted and paraphrased speakers). In the case of speakers quoted in news articles and reviews, I compared the argument with the context to determine whether the argument was contested by the journalist or reviewer respectively. In almost all the cases, the quotation was part of an uncontested point of view and, when it is not, I specify as much.

My findings are organized into (1) exemplarist arguments in support of U.S. (or Western) superiority ($n = 59$) and (2) feminist arguments that politicize gender relations in the United States ($n = 48$). In the former arguments, feminist ideology is usually present but, filtered through a belief in (an entitlement to) U.S. superiority, it serves to reproduce the gendered modernity/tradition binary and the notion that gendered oppression in the United States is absent or insignificant. In 11 documents, speakers make nonexemplarist nonfeminist arguments. These documents make other kinds of ideological arguments (in favor of, for example, bodily integrity and children's rights to self-determination) by comparing

TABLE 1: Number and Percent of Feminist and Exemplarist Arguments Appearing in Each Part of the Newspaper

<i>Type of Document</i>	<i>Type of Argument</i>		
	<i>Feminist</i>	<i>Exemplarist</i>	<i>Total</i>
	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>
News article	13 (27)	32 (54)	45 (42)
Editorial	2 (4)	17 (29)	19 (18)
Art and book reviews	28 (58)	6 (10)	34 (32)
Letters to the editor	5 (10)	4 (7)	9 (8)
Total	48	59	107

FGCs to male circumcision, intersex surgery, and transsexual surgery. Because these arguments are infrequent and I am interested in the interplay of feminism and exemplarism, I exclude them from analysis.

Table 1 shows the distribution of feminist and exemplarist arguments across the newspaper. Exemplarist arguments are found in the news and editorial sections of the newspaper 83 percent of the time, frequently appearing as the opinion of politicians, pundits, and journalists. In contrast, 68 percent of feminist arguments are found in letters to the editor and book and art reviews as the opinions of artists, scholars, and the general public. I will discuss this distribution again, and in more detail, as I discuss the range of exemplarist and feminist arguments.

MAKING EXEMPLARIST ARGUMENTS WITH FGCs

Speakers use FGCs to make four different kinds of exemplarist arguments as to the superiority of U.S. (or, more broadly, Western) culture and, therefore, affirm the (gendered) modernity/tradition binary. Some speakers, mostly writers of letters to the editor or speakers quoted in articles, use FGCs to defend anti-immigrant sentiment ($n = 5$). Other speakers, mostly journalists in articles and editorials, engage in “banal exemplarism” by generalizing FGCs to non-Western places ($n = 19$) or omitting Western women when discussing the “global” oppression of women ($n = 12$). Still other speakers, primarily editorialists, use FGCs to congratulate or chastise politicians’ positions on U.S. policy ($n = 12$). Finally, some speakers use FGCs to trivialize U.S. women’s oppressions by articulating a two-tiered model of gendered oppression ($n = 11$). I discuss each below.

Justifying Anti-Immigrant Sentiment

In five instances speakers invoke FGCs to argue against tolerance for immigrants or against immigration altogether. For example, in a news article, a journalist quotes a police officer who explains:

There are some cultural practices, however, that are simply unacceptable in the U.S. . . . and officers must arrest the immigrant suspects regardless of their traditions. Female circumcision, for example, a ritual practiced in some African countries, is illegal in the U.S. (*LAT*, January 10, 2000)

Here FGCs are used as an example of an unacceptable practice to argue that we must be prepared to police immigrant traditions. Similarly, in a discussion of problems that Britain faces when immigrants bring unfamiliar customs, a journalist paraphrases the British Home Secretary:

. . . immigrants should uphold the cultural norms of the country. By way of example . . . Muslims should reject the “unacceptable” and “intolerable” practices of forced marriages and female genital mutilation, which are illegal in Britain. (*HC*, December 12, 2001)

While this article is about Britain, it fits into the familiar U.S. concern (expressed above) about immigrants bringing “unacceptable” practices to Western nations. When FGCs are invoked in this way, “intolerable” traditions are generalized to all ethnic or religious foreigners (in these cases Muslims and immigrants).

Other speakers use FGCs to argue against immigration altogether. For example, in a letter to the editor a woman argues that individuals from patriarchal cultures should not be allowed to immigrate:

There is a world of difference between an American black family and Somali immigrants whose women have been mutilated by barbarities now illegal in this country. (Among the many objectionable cultural practices accompanying Third World immigrants has been female genital mutilation.)

Seeing brutal cultural norms in Islamic countries has awakened many naive Americans to the fact that cultures are not all equal or worthy of respect. As a feminist, I have particular misgivings about the U.S. admitting millions of immigrants from cultures that regard women as subhuman property. I could do without such diversity. (*LAT*, March 2, 2002)

The writer insists that all “black famil[ies]” are not alike, emphasizing that her disdain is not racial, but for those whose culture is not “equal or worthy of respect” (she mentions Somalis, Third World immigrants, and Muslims).

The use of FGCs to justify cultural intolerance is also found in a response to an editorial that questioned U.S. intervention on behalf of women in other countries:

The simple fact of the matter is that “sexist abuses in the Third World” . . . including genital mutilation, sati . . . strict rules related to clothing and public appearance, denying education and forced arranged marriages have nothing—nothing to do with Western imperialism, colonialism, or Western racism/exploitation or whatever other rhetorical bombs Sudbury [the editorialist] wishes to lob.

They are in fact “rooted in tradition,” and denying it is a triumph of anti-Western ideology over reality. Difficult as it is for the radical multiculturalists to admit—not all “diversity” is worth celebrating. (*SFC*, April 5, 2000)

In this letter, the writer questions the identification of “genital mutilation” and other things occurring to women in other countries as “sexist abuses,” instead insisting that they are manifestations of a deficient culture or religion (“tradition” in “certain Islamic states”).

In these examples speakers use FGCs to justify condemnations of both patriarchal relations and non-Western cultures. They conflate large parts of the world—“Muslims,” “Islamic countries,” “African countries,” and the “Third World”—and characterize them with a broad brush. However aggressive, these anti-immigrant arguments are relatively infrequent and found in letters to the editor or included as a quotation in an article, not articulated or authorized by a journalist representing the newspaper.

Banal Exemplarism

Not all exemplarist arguments appear as overt condemnations of the Other. Some speakers inaccurately generalize FGCs (and other problems) to “Africa” or, less frequently, the “third” world, the “developing” world, or “Islam” ($n = 19$) or omit Western women from discussions of gendered oppression *worldwide* ($n = 12$).

Following Billig (1995), I call this “banal exemplarism.” Billig coined the term “banal nationalism” to draw attention to the ways that nationalism was not only a quality of “extremists” (Billig 1995, 5), but quietly and rather invisibly reproduced by all of us in our daily lives. Like banal nationalists, banal exemplarists reproduce notions of our exemplar status in mundane and routine ways. I found banal exemplarism in officially authorized parts of the newspaper: news articles and editorials.

In the first type of banal exemplarism, FGCs are attributed to an undifferentiated “Africa” or “Islam.” For example, in an article about “Africa,” a journalist writes:

. . . young men from Mali pounded their colorful cylindrical percussion instruments, enlivening the main hall with haunting rhythms from an Africa beset by warfare, genocide, AIDS, malaria, slavery, child soldiers, female circumcision, illiteracy and poverty. (*WP*, February 18, 2000)

In another article “teenage pregnancy . . . pollution, domestic violence . . . school dropout . . . forced [female] circumcisions, war, discrimination against women, [and] AIDS” are identified as “pressing problems in developing countries” (*LAT*, April 24, 2001). In these sentences FGCs, as well as a whole host of terrible crises, are attributed to, alternatively, the entire continent of Africa and all “developing countries.” These conflation fail to acknowledge that their descriptions characterize some parts of those places and not others. Using the practice to characterize the “developing” world, “Africa,” or “Islam” contributes to the idea that “they” are homogeneously plagued by widespread devastation.

In the second type of banal exemplarism, journalists and editorialists omit Western women when they purport to discuss the *global* oppression of women ($n = 12$). In these cases, the exclusion of Western women’s issues in articles that are ostensibly about all women gives the impression that there are no problems in the West to address. For example, a news article and an editorial with the titles “How Far Have Women’s Rights Really Come?” and “The Scorecard for Women’s Rights” respectively, both report on a United Nations conference considering women around the world, but only discuss the progress (and lack thereof) in non-Western nations (*BG*, June 15, 2000; *HC*, June 18, 2000). Together, these articles mention only suffrage, sexual trafficking, honor killings, bride burnings, and “female genital mutilation.” Similarly, two articles about the Global Fund for Women, called “Ripple Round the World” and “Palo Alto Group Donates Millions Worldwide,” discuss only grants to non-Western countries (*SFC*, May 28, 1999; *SFC*, December 3, 2000). The omission of Western women’s gendered oppression affirms the exemplarist idea that the West is characterized by (near) gender equality, while the rest of the world is not.

Protecting U.S. Superiority

In still another type of argument, found exclusively in editorials, speakers do not concentrate on problematizing the Other but instead reveal an assumption of and sense of entitlement to U.S. superiority ($n = 12$). This

emerges most explicitly when this superiority is believed to be at stake. Here FGCs are used to chastise policy makers for threatening to topple the United States from its (rightful) superior position in the world. George W. Bush, especially in connection with his repeated denial of funding for the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), is a frequent target. Although Bush's denial was largely meant to appease U.S. anti-abortion activists, editorialists sometimes avoid this contentious issue in favor of FGCs. For example, an editorialist warns readers that the environment is "gradually becoming deadly" for women under the Bush administration. She uses Bush's decision not to fund the UNFPA, and the fact that it will slow the eradication of "female genital mutilation," as proof of the administration's misdirection (*SFC*, November 3, 2002). Another editorialist, in "Devastated Women," challenges Bush:

The debate about funding a United Nations program may seem an arcane budget issue. But for ordinary Sudanese teenagers, less money has practical consequences: more genital mutilation, more AIDS and more fistula. Is that what the Bush administration wants to stand for? (*NYT*, April 26, 2002)

This editorialist asks the Bush administration whether it is on the side of "female genital mutilation" and all it "stand[s] for" or not. Here the symbolic meaning of FGCs is appealed to directly; the question is rhetorical.

Two years later, citing Bush's continued denial of funds to the UNFPA, an editorial compares the United States to other countries who *are* working for women's rights:

Despite such blind resistance [by the Bush administration], there have been substantial improvements since 1994. More women have access to education and other rights, including political participation. Early-marriage traditions are being opposed as a health risk for young girls. Most countries have adopted laws prohibiting violence against women, female genital mutilation, and other violations of human rights, and more countries are working to enforce these laws.

The U.S. ought to place itself firmly on the side of this progress. But first it must remove its willful blinders. (*BG*, October 6, 2004)

This editorialist champions the progress in women's status around the world that has been achieved in the face of an unsupportive administration. Calling for a correction, she explains that the United States "ought" to be "firmly on the side of this progress." The "progress" metaphor reveals that the modernity/tradition binary is both hierarchical and chronological.

That the relationship between the West and the non-West is characterized chronologically as well as hierarchically is evident in other editorials. In “Bush vs. Women” an editorialist identifies “the brutality that kills and maims girls and women across much of Africa and Asia” as “our” (contemporary U.S.) “central moral struggle.” He names “genital mutilation” as an example and explains:

Alas, this summer President Bush is putting the U.S. on the wrong side of the battle lines.

. . . the Bush administration is allying the U.S. with the likes of Iran, Sudan and Syria to frustrate international efforts to save the lives of some of the most helpless people on earth. Somehow we have become the core of an Axis of Medieval. (*NYT*, August 16, 2002)

This speaker condemns Bush by arguing that, by abdicating our responsibility for the “struggle” of the “century,” Bush is not just coming down on the “wrong side,” but turning back the clock on American civilization. Here the speaker conflates Other places with another time in making accusations of primitiveness (“Axis of Medieval”).

While these editorialists do not reinforce U.S. superiority in the same way that those making aggressive anti-immigrant arguments do, their frustration speaks to a sense of entitlement: Cultural superiority is due to Americans. When U.S. politicians fail to preserve our exemplar status, we have a legitimate gripe.

Articulating a Two-Tiered Model of Gendered Oppression

While some speakers use FGCs to attempt to spur politicians into action, others use the practices to distinguish degrees of oppression or even to trivialize U.S. women’s oppression ($n = 11$). These arguments are found throughout the newspaper. For example, an editorialist differentiates between the “discrimination” that women suffer and examples of gendered oppression elsewhere when she says: “Words like ‘discrimination’ seem far too mild to describe female genital mutilation or sexual trafficking” (*BG*, July 14, 2002). The writer of a letter to the editor titled “American and Proud of It” argues that in “. . . some countries, women experience not just discrimination, but atrocities such as subjugation, genital mutilation and even death for imagined wrongs” (*SFC*, July 9, 2000). In a news article, FGCs are used to emphasize the severity of gender oppression “[i]n some countries” where the “situation is worst” like “from the Mediterranean to the edge of Southeast Asia” (*NYT*, March

9, 2000). Suggesting that the oppression women suffer in South Asia inspires feminist sentiment in a way that the “discrimination” women in the U.S. experience does not, the executive director of UNICEF is quoted explaining that “. . . there’s gender discrimination everywhere . . . But South Asia—when we assign people there they come back raving feminists in six months.” In another example Hillary Clinton is quoted saying: “. . . although women in our own country had made gains economically and politically, the same could not be said for the vast majority of women in the world” (*SFC*, August 7, 2003). In the next paragraph, the journalist supports her claim, noting “wife beating, genital mutilation, dowry deaths, and honor killings” in “Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, India, Pakistan and Thailand.” Finally, an editorialist supporting the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW) makes discrimination against women in the United States invisible by saying that the Convention “. . . would make no difference in America but would be one more tool to help women in countries where discrimination means death” (*NYT*, August 16, 2002). In these documents we see a two-tiered model of gendered oppression in which women in the U.S. experience “discrimination” and women elsewhere experience “atrocities.”

In other cases, however, FGCs are not used to emphasize the seriousness of gendered oppression elsewhere, but to intentionally trivialize what women experience in the United States. It is not simply that U.S. gendered oppressions are less serious; they are not serious at all. For example, an art show reviewer comments that, unlike:

. . . countries in which female circumcision is practiced . . . in the West . . . [women’s] oppression is largely a matter of fashion, as laid down by magazines, newspapers and television and subtly enforced by female society. (*NYT*, January 19, 1997)

In an editorial (*WP*, December 10, 2002), another journalist expresses “indignation” at the outcry over “the [denial of] admission of a handful of millionaire women to a men’s golf club.” She uses “female circumcision” to trivialize the exclusionary policy when she writes that there are “. . . more significant women’s issues . . . The systematic rape of Iraqi women come to mind, for example, as well as female circumcision . . .” In these two cases, FGCs are used to put things like voluntary starvation and cosmetic surgery (“largely a matter of fashion”) and equal access to spaces (a golf club) into a sort of perspective. FGCs are invoked by writers to depoliticize women’s status in the United States.

In sum, some speakers use the practices to affirm (an entitlement to) U.S. superiority. They do so with outright assertions, by accusing politicians of wrongly shepherding the nation away from its rightful place at the top of the hierarchy, by generalizing backwardness and patriarchy to the non-Western world, by establishing a two-tier model of women's oppression, and mocking or trivializing U.S. feminism. Some of these expressions include vigorous condemnations of the Other that express intolerance for immigrants and trivialize U.S. women's gendered oppression. These are less frequent and more likely than banal and other exemplarist arguments to appear in reviews and letters to the editor (see table 1). Taken together, however, exemplarist arguments appear in news articles or editorials 83 percent of the time and the arguments are frequently made by journalists or editorialists themselves. The result is an authoritative affirmation of the gendered modernity/tradition binary that reinforces the idea that the West is gender egalitarian and the rest of the world, or entire regions of it, are not.

MAKING FEMINIST ARGUMENTS WITH FGCS

In contrast to the examples discussed thus far, 41 percent of documents include arguments in which FGCS are used to mobilize feminist sentiment in ways that challenge the gendered modernity/tradition binary ($n = 48$). In most of these documents FGCS are discussed alongside several Western and non-Western gendered oppressions in ways that globalize women's oppression ($n = 37$). The remaining 11 do not simply include both Western and non-Western manifestations of patriarchy, but make an argument for equivalence, suggesting that, while U.S. women do not undergo "female genital mutilation," the practices to which U.S. women are subject are just as bad. I discuss each in turn.

Globalizing Women's Oppression

Most feminist arguments include discussions of oppressive conditions and practices found in both Western and non-Western places. For example, in an article about women's rights, a journalist reports that "The crowd held signs supporting issues like the defense of abortion rights and protests of female circumcision, or genital mutilation" (*NYT*, October 16, 2000). In another article a journalist reporting on the U.S.'s failure to ratify CEDAW cites activists who say that: "Among the major issues affecting women . . . are female circumcision and genital mutilation, family

violence, compulsory sterilization or abortion, and inequality in education and employment” (*BG*, March 9, 1999). And in a review of the *Vagina Monologues*, Eve Ensler’s feminist organization, V-Day, is described as “fighting female genital mutilation in Africa, honor killings in Pakistan, and sexual violence and discrimination at home” (*HC*, October 30, 2002). In all of these cases, gendered oppression understood to occur in the United States is discussed alongside FGCs and other gendered oppressions understood to occur elsewhere. By doing so, speakers contest the idea that gender inequality is only a foreign problem.

The impact of listing FGCs alongside oppressions known to occur in the United States, however, is difficult to evaluate. On the one hand, the comparison that emerges between FGCs and U.S. women’s experiences (they list, for example, inequality in education and the need to defend abortion rights) could make it seem as though fighting U.S. patriarchy should be secondary to fighting patriarchy elsewhere. On the other hand, the inclusion of FGCs alongside U.S. women’s oppressions could inspire feminist sentiment on behalf of all women. Some speakers do not leave this to chance.

Arguments for Equivalence

A few speakers make a case for equivalence between U.S. practices and FGCs to argue that gender inequality in the United States is as serious as it is elsewhere. Two letters to the editor provide examples. In one a woman responds to an article about breast implants:

It is the antithesis of health to promote unnecessary and expensive medical procedures for media- [and] culture-driven “beauty” reasons; in fact, it is a form of mutilation that, in societal function (control over women) is identical to the genital mutilations performed on women in some parts of Africa and the Middle East. (*LAT*, July 23, 2001)

This speaker deliberately draws a connection between FGCs and breast implants to politicize the latter. In a second letter, a speaker draws a similar connection between FGCs and the fact that U.S. women “shape their bodies, sometimes drastically, as with surgery, to embody the physical attributes that men desire . . .” Mentioning “surgical breast augmentation, feet binding, genital mutilation, corsets” and the body projects of sorority sisters, she links women’s oppression here and there, then and now, and suggests that women everywhere and always have found themselves subject to social pressure to change their bodies: “The power of socialization is too big to be ignored or glossed over . . . The drive to conform to

society's rules is nearly universal" (*SFC*, July 25, 2004). Similarly, in a news article a U.S. activist is paraphrased arguing that "many Africans counter Western indignation [to FGC] by likening the pain of circumcision to Western women suffering face-lifts and anorexia," thus drawing together U.S. and African practices (*WP*, June 7, 1998). Finally, five reviews of Germaine Greer's book, *The Whole Woman*, tell of her comparisons between FGCs and episiotomies, pap smears, mammograms, fertility treatments, ultrasound tests, and cosmetic surgery (*HC*, July 11, 1999; *BG*, June 10, 1999; *LAT*, June 3, 1999; *WP*, May 23, 1999; *WP*, June 12, 1999).

In these instances FGCs are used in ways that could inspire feminist outrage on behalf of women everywhere. Such arguments account for 48 of the 117 documents in my sample. Feminist arguments, however, are significantly less likely to be placed in news articles and editorials than exemplarist arguments. While arguments for U.S. superiority are found in authorized parts of the newspaper (news articles and editorials) 83 percent of the time, feminist arguments are found here only 32 percent of the time. The remainder are found in letters to the editor and book and art reviews, expressed by individuals unaffiliated with and unendorsed by the newspapers. Those arguments in which FGCs are said to be equivalent to the oppressions U.S. women face are even more likely than other feminist arguments to be found in the review and letters sections (9 out of the 11) and this is the only argument that is explicitly rejected. In four of the five reviews of her book, Greer's arguments are called into question by the reviewer. She is identified as a "lunatic" (*LAT*, June 3, 1999) and her comparison of American bodily interventions with FGCs is called "outright silliness" (*WP*, May 23, 1999), "outrageous" (*WP*, June 12, 1999), and "bizarre" (*LAT*, June 3, 1999). One reviewer does not attack her directly (short of calling her inconsistent), but explains that others have called her "[un]germane," "sloppy, anti-male, and contradictory," and her book "castrated," "exasperatingly disjointed and scattershot" (*BG*, June 10, 1999).

CONCLUSION

The attention drawn to FGCs by U.S. journalists was an opportunity to reach the hearts and minds of the American public. Objections to the treatment of women elsewhere could translate into support for feminist activism on behalf of women everywhere. The danger, however, was that the introduction of a practice understood to be oppressive to women elsewhere would be used to denigrate non-Western cultures and trivialize gendered oppression in the U.S.

In fact, FGCs are used in both ways. On the one hand, as postcolonial theory predicts, speakers use FGCs to negatively portray non-Western cultures or affirm U.S. superiority. In some of these cases, speakers mobilize feminist sentiment, but posit a two-tier model of women's oppression—mild oppression that we find in the United States and severe oppression that we find elsewhere—or mock the idea that feminism has any role in U.S. politics at all. On the other hand, in contrast to the predictions of postcolonial theory, speakers use FGCs to make feminist arguments on behalf of women everywhere. They include FGCs alongside familiar American practices that are oppressive to women. Some even argue that U.S. gendered oppressions and FGCs are equivalent in severity, thus attempting to transfer outrage regarding FGCs to U.S. practices.

Exemplarist arguments are more frequent and more heavily authorized by newspaper elites than feminist arguments, but the exemplarist narrative is far from hegemonic. Feminist arguments account for nearly one out of every two documents. Their presence in the reviews and letters to the editor points not simply to a marginalization of feminist ideas, but an effort by feminist artists, authors, and others to contest exemplarist narratives. The logic of the gendered modernity/tradition binary is flourishing, but it is under assault.

These findings have specific lessons for postcolonial theory. First, the concern that the West will “rationalize the [subordinated] position of their women” by “taking a position of superiority vis-à-vis the ‘other’” is well-founded (Nader 1989, 328). This reminds us that, while postcolonial theorists often point to the fact that Western and non-Western women are in a binary that advantages Western women, because the binary is not independent of the other hierarchies that inform Western thought, it does not necessarily operate in ways that benefit Western women. The binary is far more likely to benefit he who finds himself at the pinnacle of all hierarchies. That is, the gendered modernity/tradition binary acts as a complex control mechanism that reinforces not one, but multiple interlocking hierarchies. As feminist postcolonial scholarship moves forward, it behooves us to remember that Western and non-Western women, though bifurcated by the binary, are essentially on the same side.

Second, while postcolonial scholars excel at illustrating instances of culturally imperialist narratives, the presence of both banal exemplarism and resistance to exemplarism suggest that postcolonial scholars might focus less on the existence of such narratives and more on how they are distributed. This requires an empirical turn in postcolonial scholarship that pushes the standards of evidence beyond case studies (whether literary, historical, or cultural). Such a turn will help us look at an all-too-often

homogenized “Western culture” with a more refined lens, one that brings the details into focus: how such narratives vary, where they are found, who reproduces them, and what enables and constrains them.

This is a promising line of research. Banal exemplarism, for example, may be just as threatening as its more aggressive cousin. Billig (1995, 5) argues that, while it appears harmless on the surface, “banal nationalism can be mobilized and turned into frenzied nationalism . . .” The profound sense of national pride required for war, for example, depends on a sense of nationhood internalized over a lifetime. Similarly, banal exemplarism may lay a foundation for the more “frenzied” exemplarism that we see elsewhere in the newspaper. How do we “know,” in Ahmed’s (1982) sense of the word, that African or Muslim women are oppressed? We know, in part, because of the regular, unremarkable overgeneralizations and omissions that fill U.S. newspapers.

Investigating resistance to the exemplarist narrative may also prove to be an important line of research. The fact that the exemplarist narrative was not hegemonic, but contested, reminds us that it is important to differentiate between systems of cultural imperialism and cultural imperialists. Insofar as Western cultural imperialism is going to be challenged, that challenge will come from individuals within both Western and non-Western cultures. Only once we are able to see resistance can we begin to theorize what enables and constrains antiexemplarist narratives and, thus, how to shape Western engagement with the non-Western world toward more just ends.

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