REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICAN WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN AND FRENCH PRESS, 1990-2005

by

DOVILE RUGINYTE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Africa has been subject to Western misrepresentations since the earliest ventures of Europeans into the continent. The colonial clichés of Africa as the “Dark continent” and its people as lazy, licentious savages incapable of progress have been established to justify Western exploitation of Africa. African women have been particularly subject to the derogatory Western gaze. Most existing studies of the Western media’s representations of Africans suggest that the media continue recycling these colonial stereotypes.

The study examined four hundred forty four articles about African women in the New York Times and Le Monde from 1990 to 2005 to determine to what extent their representations continued to be shaped by colonial clichés. The study found that only about half of the portrayals of African women are crisis-driven. The rest of the stories present African women outside crises situations: e.g., going about their daily lives, participating in politics and interested in fashion. The study also demonstrated that Le Monde’s discourses about African women are somewhat more subtle and sophisticated than those of the New York Times, which often relies on simplistic and reductionist interpretations of complex situations. Le Monde’s coverage nevertheless deteriorates when the issues discussed are perceived as having political currency in France. The coverage in both newspapers also suffers from systematic omissions.
of a larger political and historical context that would better contextualize situations and would also expose France and America’s role in African events. Finally, the New York Times’ reporting is distinguished by the trend of advocacy journalism. While the intentions of journalists/advocates are necessarily benevolent, the outcome of these writings is somewhat ambiguous, often projecting African women at their worst: suffering, desperate, and to be pitied.

**Key words:** African women, the New York Times, Le Monde, colonial discourses, wartime rapes, Islamism, female genital cutting, AIDS, hyperfertility, advocacy journalism.
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Introduction

The continent of Africa has been subject to Western misinterpretations and misrepresentations since the earliest encounters of Europeans with its countries and people. Discourses of “othering” served to justify Western exploitation of African lands. Africanist scholars have carefully documented how European endeavors in Africa gradually led to the establishment of a European-invented/made Africa. According to them, located outside of Western history and without much ability to speak for itself vis-à-vis European publics at large, Africa became a “world manufactured in image” (Mengara, 2001, p. 8) and ridden by colonial stereotypes and clichés (Mudimbe, 1988). The metaphor of Africa as the “Dark continent” summed it up as a place of misery and suffering. Africans were in turn portrayed as irrational, backward, savages in need of rescue (Brantlinger, 1986; McClintock, 1995; Pratt, 1992).

Northern African countries, on the other hand, were subject to religious “othering.” They were imagined as part of the “Mysterious East”: the place of ruthless religion, exoticism, and sexually submissive women in harems (Allaloua, 1995; De la Gueriviere, 2001; Said, 1994). Yet, while Northern Africa was exempt neither from discursive “othering” nor from the actual exploitation, Northern Africans did, however, from the European perspective, remain higher up on the human classification scale than the black Africans (Miller, 1985). The different skin color of the latter was, over the course of the 19th century, established as the ultimate “scientific” proof of degeneracy following the pseudo-scientific theories of the time (Gilman, 1985a; McClintock, 1995; Pick, 1989; Stepan, 1985). Apart from this racial and religious division, in colonial discourses, Africa has been perceived as a singular entity, disregarding the fact that in reality it is a continent composed of more than fifty countries, and of many different peoples, languages, cultures, and customs (McClintock, 1995).
Existing academic literature on Western media’s representations of Africa more or less unanimously proclaims that the continent makes it into the Western media in times of crises, and that colonial clichés continue to influence ways of narrating different African countries and people. As a result, these studies most often suggest that Africa continues, as established in Western colonial discourses, being represented in one or more of the following ways: as a place of misery and perpetual crisis; as a continent of uncontrollable fertility; as a land of irrational and backward people, ruled by the ruthless religion of Islam and/or submission to abnormal, “savage” practices, e.g., female genital cutting (Abdullahi, 1991; Allimadi, 2003; Bookmiller & Bookmiler, 1992; Ebo, 1992; Fair, 1996; Fair & Chakravartty, 1999; Fair & Parks, 2001; Grise, 2001; Hawk, 1992; Ibelema, 1992). These conclusions regarding contemporary Western media representations of various African countries, however, might be somewhat limited due to the fact that most of the studies in question focus on particular crisis events and situations rather than investigating a larger range of stories about Africa.

In addition, there are very few studies that focus on Western media’s representations of women. Jo Ellen Fair, a professor of journalism and mass communication at the University of Wisconsin, has written most extensively about Western media’s representations of African women. She notes in several of her studies that in the midst of crises, African women are often utilized to embody human suffering and signal a need for outside intervention (Fair, 1996; Fair & Chakravartty, 1999; Fair & Parks, 2001). Her studies are nevertheless also limited to coverage of crisis situations, including famines in the Horn of Africa and U.S. food aid (1996; 1999), and a refugee crisis in Rwanda (2001).

In fact, African women played crucial and complex roles in Western countries’ relationships with Africa, including territorial occupation of African countries and slavery. African women were used as concubines and relied upon by Europeans, who called their African mistresses “sleeping dictionaries,” for their survival in new environments (Allen,
They were exploited for their reproductive capacities on American slave plantations. Their bodies were scrutinized by European medics in the 19th century and proclaimed as the ultimate physical proof of black Africans’ inferiority. In fact, the medics concluded that the black female possessed “not only ‘primitive’ sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament – ‘primitive’ genitalia” (Gilman, 1986, p. 232). Northern African women, hidden behind veils and in harems, represented for Europeans an ultimate sexual fantasy (De la Gueriviere, 2001). In short, colonial clichés represented black African women as having “abnormal” bodies (with a white female’s body as a measure of normalcy), overly licentious, and hyperfertile. Northern African women were equally sexualized and portrayed as submissive, naïve and oppressed by their own men and the “savageness” of their mores.

Given the importance of women as rich symbolic reservoirs for building and maintaining colonial empires and institutions, and the scarceness of studies looking specifically at the coverage of women, I chose to focus on representations of African women. This study then aims to examine what kinds of stories are told in contemporary Western media about African women, when they become newsworthy and how much their representations continue to be shaped by colonial clichés. Moreover, in order to compensate for what I regard as the obvious limitation of existing academic literature on Western media’s representations of Africa in general and of African women in particular, which almost always focus on specific crises, I chose a different approach by looking at a wider range of stories about African women in a given period of time.

In order to get a fuller range of African women’s representations in Western media and to go beyond the Anglophone press, the study analyzes newspapers from the U.S. and France. These two countries were chosen as representatives of Western media for the following reasons. For the purposes of this study, which is interested in examining colonial clichés in contemporary media texts, the two countries represent different types of colonial
power. From the 19th century on, France was one of the biggest territorial colonialists with its colonial possessions in Africa including, among others, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Senegal, Mali, Benin, Togo, Ivory Coast, Mauritania, Niger etc. The end of WWII marked the collapse of European colonial empires. And while European countries were recovering after the devastating effects of the war, the U.S. emerged as the principal economic, military, and political power in the international arena, ready to take up the role of empire building.

The American relationship with the African continent was nevertheless much different in nature from that of European colonialism. Rather than occupying territories, the U.S. was primarily invested in exerting influence over strategically important regions and rendering them dependent on the U.S., mostly through economic and military maneuvering. Current relations of the two countries with Africa are also different, and these differences are likely to leave an imprint on media texts. Historical experiences of French territorial colonization, significant numbers of African immigrants, and geographical proximity, all of which increased French awareness about Africa, should make the French press warier of recycling colonial stereotypes regarding African women (Said, 1997).

Moreover, journalistic norms and traditions diverge in France and in the U.S. In the U.S., journalism developed as an independent professional field with the ideal of objectivity, which calls for separation of factual information and commentary, evaluation etc. as one of its defining characteristics (Allan, 2010; Chalaby, 1996; Schudson, 1987; Tuchman, 1972). In France, on the other hand, the development of journalism was closely related to political and literary fields. Benson (2002) calls the French model of journalism the “political/literary model” and explains that “historically, journalistic professionalism in France has been defined not as a detachment or distance from political or ideological allegiances, but as the right to hold and defend a set of ideas” (p. 53). The partisan nature of the French press is well-known even today. French journalists and media scholars alike have been skeptical about the
American drive toward objectivity by suggesting that French journalism has always been “journalism of expression” rather than “journalism of observation” (Albert, 2008, p. 47). These different journalistic traditions and cultures might also play a role in perpetuating or disrupting colonial discourses.

The study focuses on American and French print media. Although looking at the broadcast media would have certainly been equally interesting and informative, the study limits itself to the press, because the latter allows for more in-depth reporting. I selected The New York Times and Le Monde for the analysis. Both are prestigious publications with an obvious potential of setting the news agenda in their respective countries, and therefore are appropriate for the analysis of mainstream news media discourses. Comparing the two newspapers, Spurr (1993) notes the similarity of the roles that they play in their countries. Although they are able to challenge and critique government politics, they remain loyal to each country’s status in the arena of international politics. For instance, he explains in relation to the French publication: “Le Monde is capable of opposing government policy, but never of opposing the principle of France’s preeminence in the arena of world affairs” (p. 123).

On the other hand, Said (1997) points to some differences between the New York Times and Le Monde. Discussing their reporting on Iran, he suggests the following:

France’s (and by extension Le Monde’s) attitude to the East is an old and experienced one: studiously postcolonialist yet with colonialist attitudes towards its former colonies and protectorates ... Whereas the New York Times seems guided principally by crisis and newsworthiness, Le Monde tries to record or at least to note most of what takes place abroad. Opinion and facts are not so rigorously separated as they seem (formally, at least) to be in the Times: the result, when stories or issues of unusual complexity are concerned, is a far greater flexibility in length, detail, sophistication of reporting. Le Monde in its reporting suggests worldliness, the Times a grave, rather selective concern (p. 127).

In short, while similar in status and in the role that they play in their respective countries, the two newspapers reflect each country’s different historical experiences and diverging journalistic norms that influence the discourses produced.
The study analyzes the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*’s stories about African women from 1990 to 2005. A fifteen-year period provides a substantial range of stories, and allows for better insight into the thematic range beyond specific events or crises. The 1990s mark a new era in global politics with the end of the Cold War. In short, I was interested in examining whether after the colonization and Cold War, in the absence of colonial interventions and strategic maneuverings of the Cold War, American and French reporting on Africa takes a new path, breaking with the old colonial clichés and ways of narrating.

When examining the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*’s stories, I employ a cultural studies approach grounded in feminist analysis. Furthermore, I attempt to contextualize each of the issues that come up within its broader political and historical background in order to provide a more accurate picture that is void of colonial logic and ways of narrating. Throughout the study, I consider the writings of individual journalists and their apparent intentions of writing about African women in certain (and not other) ways to the extent it is possible and appropriate. I also invoke professional and institutional constraints placed upon them where useful. My ultimate interest nevertheless lies in the final product, i.e., in the discourses that journalists contribute to producing (intentionally or unintentionally) and in evaluating these discourses against the colonial histories rather than detailing professional, structural and/or institutional constraints of Western news production processes related to Africa, which could be an interesting avenue for another study.

The *New York Times*’ articles were found using the NewYork Proquest and LexisNexis search engines. *Le Monde*’s articles were obtained through the European press database at the *Bibliotheque Nationale de Francois Mitterand*. I used the following key terms to locate articles about African women: “African women”; “women in Africa”; “women and X country in Africa”; “African women leaders”; “African women and politics”; “rapes in Africa”; “female genital cutting”; “African women and AIDS.” African women for the
purposes of this study were defined in geographical rather than racial or religious terms. That is, any story talking about women in any of the African countries was included in the sample, despite their color or religious affiliation. In the study, however, some differences in narrating Northern African and black African women emerge and are analyzed.

I found two hundred thirty four stories in the *New York Times* and one hundred ninety in *Le Monde*. The thematic range of stories in both newspapers is quite similar, which seems to suggest that the same events and issues are considered as newsworthy in France and in the U.S. About half of the stories in both newspapers (50% in the *Times*, 43% in *Le Monde*) are devoted to themes related to various crisis situations, female genital cutting and the AIDS pandemic. This is in line with the existing scholarship that focuses almost exclusively on these types of stories and, as a result, proclaims the negativity of the coverage and persistence of the colonial image of “Dark Africa,” where suffering abounds (Abdullahi, 1991; Allimadi, 2003; Ebo, 1992; Fair, 1996; Fair & Chakravartty, 1999; Fair & Parks, 2001; Hawk, 1992; Ibelema, 1992). Following these conclusions, I have grouped these stories under a thematic category titled “Conventional themes of suffering.”

In *Le Monde*, articles in this section are divided fairly equally around four sub-themes: “Wars and crises”; “Women and Islamism”; “Female genital cutting”; and “Women and AIDS”. In the *New York Times*, however, the theme of female genital cutting dominates. Fifty-nine stories about the issue constitute 25% of its total coverage and attest to the practice’s unwavering contestability and the *New York Times*’ perception of its elite audience’s interest in the issue (for more details, see table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The New York Times</th>
<th>Le Monde</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wars and crises</td>
<td>25 (11%)*</td>
<td>18 (10%)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Number of stories representing conventional themes of suffering in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde* 1990-2005*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>New York Times</th>
<th>Le Monde</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women and Islamism</td>
<td>14 (6%)</td>
<td>20 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female genital cutting</td>
<td>59 (25%)</td>
<td>19 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>18 (8%)</td>
<td>17 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>119 (50%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>74 (43%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates the percentage of the total number of stories about African women included in the study

The other half of the stories analyzed pertain to less familiar themes related to African women. In fact, 50% of the articles in the *New York Times* and 61% in *Le Monde* are stories that represent African women outside crises situations. For instance, in these stories, African women are portrayed in their daily lives, concerned with changing traditions, beauty and fashion, participating in politics, achieving world-wide recognition as human rights activists, sportswomen, and artists. Some of the situations that these types of stories invoke reveal the harsh realities of African women’s lives and are similar to the stories about the “conventional themes of suffering” in that respect; for example, demanding physical work of rural African women living in conditions of poverty and patriarchal societal norms or the suffering of women with fistulas who struggle to receive medical aid. However, although sometimes painting a bleak picture of African women’s lives, these types of stories still differ from the ones in the previous category in that they focus on everyday realities rather than on what Western media, academic literature suggests, regard as conventional, newsworthy events in Africa: violent conflicts, medical pandemics or what the West considers as “abnormal” or “exotic” African practices, notably female genital cutting.

I have grouped these articles under the following sub-themes: “Women’s issues” (family planning, fistulas etc.); “African women’s conditions” (legal rights, poverty, traditions); “Beauty and fashion”; “Powerful African women”; “Women’s activism and women in politics” (for more details, see table 2). In both newspapers, the sub-category
“Powerful African women” dominates, with 27% of the overall coverage in the *New York Times* and 33% in *Le Monde* representing this type of stories.

**Table 2:** Number of stories representing less conventional themes regarding African women in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde* 1990-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The New York Times</th>
<th>Le Monde</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women’s issues</td>
<td>18 (7%)*</td>
<td>11 (6%)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African women’s conditions</td>
<td>18 (7%)</td>
<td>24 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty and fashion</td>
<td>6 (2%)</td>
<td>5 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful African women</td>
<td>63 (27%)</td>
<td>64 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s activism and women in politics</td>
<td>13 (7%)</td>
<td>12 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>118 (50%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>116 (61%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates the percentage of the total number of stories about African women included in the study

The fact that both newspapers contain a large number of stories that represent African women outside of crises and, in some instances, in power positions is significant in itself. As explained before, the existing academic literature has almost always focused on representations of African women in specific crises situations (Abdullahi, 1991; Allimadi, 2003; Ebo, 1992; Fair, 1996; Fair & Chakravarty, 1999; Fair & Parks, 2001; Hawk, 1992; Ibelema, 1992). Although these studies contribute to our understanding about Western media’s representations of Africa and African women, their rather negative conclusions, claiming that Africa continues to be portrayed as the savage, “dark” continent, where crises and suffering, especially those of African women, prevail, might slightly obscure the real situation. As this study demonstrates, these types of stories constitute only a part of the picture. Other types of stories about African women do exist, although they are perhaps less dramatic and controversial, and have not frequently become the object of academic inquiry.
The first three chapters provide theoretical background for the empirical analysis by tracing the emergence of Western discourses on Africa and African women. Chapter one documents the Western world’s encounters with Africa from early exploratory missions to slave trade to current neoliberal policies. It sheds light on how the actual colonization and exploitation of Africa by the West was accompanied by the creation of complex discourses that crafted Africa as the “Dark continent.” Chapter two looks more specifically at Western attitudes toward African women. It reveals the importance of African women in Western endeavors in Africa by presenting the history of Western colonization and exploitation of Africa as the history of the conquest of African women. Finally, chapter three presents an overview of the literature discussing contemporary media representations of Africa, which proclaims more or less unanimously the continuity of colonial discourses in today’s media.

The next four chapters comprise the second section of the dissertation. They discuss the representations of African women that fall under the thematic categories that have been most analyzed in academic literature to date, and that I have titled “Conventional themes of suffering.” Chapter four looks at African women’s situations in wars with a specific emphasis on wartime rape. Chapter five carries on with a similar theme by investigating African Muslim women’s situations vis-à-vis the rise of Islamism, with most attention paid to the Algerian civil war and Nigerian stoning cases. Chapter six analyzes the representations of the much contested practice of female genital cutting. Finally, chapter seven discusses African women and AIDS.

The last two chapters analyze the coverage of African women that goes beyond the stories previously defined as relating conventional themes of suffering. Chapter eight looks at the representations of African women outside of crises by discussing a range of articles about their daily lives, fashion, beauty and other women’s issues. Finally, the study ends with a chapter that looks at portrayals of powerful and well-known African women politicians and
human rights activists, sportswomen and artists. It also discusses African women’s activism and involvement in politics.
Western Colonial Discourses on Africa

The following three chapters constitute a first section of the dissertation and trace the emergence of Western discourses on Africa and African women. While documenting the Western world’s encounters with Africa from the early exploratory missions and slave trade to the current neoliberal economic policies, the chapters shed light on the role African women played in these endeavors, and demonstrate the complex relationships between the discourses and the realities. They also expose how carefully crafted colonial discourses on Africa at once enabled and justified various forms of exploitation. Reaping economic benefits and perpetuating the West-created image of Africa, the Western world succeeded in doubly colonizing Africa – both literally and discursively. And the discursive colonization, as demonstrated by some current media representations of Africa and Africans, might have survived the literal occupations.

These chapters, then, are essentially historical essays about Western colonization of Africa and, even more importantly, about the discursive colonization of Africa’s image, in which hardly any place was left to Africa’s self-representation on its own terms vis-à-vis Western publics at large. For the purposes of my dissertation, this historical overview is written primarily with France and the U.S. in mind, although various other European colonial powers, and especially Britain, come into the picture at various points.

African women appear to occupy ambiguous and complex positions in Western endeavors and imaginings of Africa. As seen in the second chapter, on the one hand, early travelers were struck by African women’s physicality, nudity and sexual attractiveness, which underwrote many core myths about Africans and Africa. On the other hand, black African women’s physical differences became an ultimate – pseudo scientific - signifier of racial inferiority that is at the heart of civilizing rhetoric. Colonial administrators and settlers alike took African women as concubines and relied on them to survive in new countries and
environments. In the U.S., slave owners copulated with female slaves in order to increase the number of slaves in their possession. In colonial discourses time and again, Africa itself was feminized and imagined as a virgin shyly waiting to be penetrated and possessed. Thus, here, the history of Western colonization and exploitation of Africa and African people, is presented as the history of the conquest of African women, both literal and discursive.

The section ends with the overview of the literature discussing contemporary media representations of Africa, which more or less unanimously proclaims the continuity of colonial discourses in today’s media and the perpetuation of the image of the “Dark continent.” The study, however, challenges this pessimistic consensus and suggests that new ways of approaching the analysis of African women’s images in the contemporary media are necessary and will be employed in the further empirical study.
Africa and the West

Atlantic Slave Trade

European contact with Africa before the 17th century was primarily confined to various exploratory missions. These were mostly carried out by Spain and Portugal and were intended to establish trade relations, even though, in the process, bits of territory were occupied and claimed by these European countries. In the 17th and 18th centuries, other European countries also became interested in trade with Africa. It was, however, primarily the slave trade that summed up Europe’s relationship with Africa at the time (Rodney, 1974). Similarly, America’s first link to Africa was also derived from slavery (e.g., Duignan & Gann, 1984), as Americans were the ultimate consumers of African slaves, supplied by Europeans.

The Atlantic slave trade originated in the 16th century with some sources indicating that first Africans were enslaved in 1502. Between 1564 and 1569, Sir John Hawkins, the pioneer English slave trader, traveled to Sierra Leone River four times, taking a total of 1200 Africans across the Atlantic to sell to the Spanish settlers (Hazlewood, 2004). The French were the first to ban the slave trade in 1794, but the ban was annulled by Bonaparte in 1802. The British Parliament banned the slave trade in 1807 and so did the U.S. The ban was extended to all European countries by the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Then, Britain adopted the Abolition of Slavery Act in 1833 with the U.S. following in 1865, in the aftermath of the Civil War.1 The Atlantic slave trade presents a crucial stage in the Western world’s relationship with Africa and has left an indelible imprint on Europeans’ understandings of Africans. Despite continuing debate, scholars suggest that no less than 12 million2 Africans were sold into the slavery; 10-20% of these died on the ships on their way to the Americas.

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1 See the timeline of the transatlantic slave trade at: http://www.nmm.ac.uk/freedom/viewTheme.cfm/theme/timeline
2 There is still much debate with regard to the actual numbers. Some estimate numbers as high as 20 million. For a brief overview of the issue, see Inikori & Engerman, 1992, p. 5-6.
(Inkori & Engerman, 1992). Slavery persisted for so long because it was greatly profitable, even though the human costs were equally extraordinary. A commonly accepted explanation for the rise and fall of the Atlantic slave trade is furnished in terms of capitalist development (Rodney, 1974; Williams, 1964). According to Rodney (1974), “slavery [was] useful for early accumulation of capital, but … [proved] too rigid for industrial development” (p. 87). The industrial revolution of the 1800s that swept Europe, then, had much to do with the end of slavery. Further support for Rodney’s argument can be found in the abolition of slavery in the U.S., where it was the industrialized North that fought to end it.

There has been much discussion about whether the Atlantic slave trade was racist in its essence (Fredrickson, 2002; Davis, 1997; Drescher, 1992). While some debate still exists, the overall consensus gravitates towards the acceptance of the classical thesis of Williams (1964) that “slavery was not born of racism, racism was the consequence of slavery” (p. 7). As Fredrickson (2002) notes, the trans-Atlantic slavery was to a great extent justified by the fact that Africans were not Christians, rather than by the fact that they were black; even though, here, Christianity also provided a readily available legitimization by casting black Africans under the curse of Ham3 (see also Davis, 1997; Schneider, 1980). Others claim simply that the difference of African ways of living and their institutions could have been enough reason to enslave them (Schneider, 1980).

Underscoring the non-racist nature of slavery, Davis (1997) demonstrates that characteristics eventually attributed to black Africans, which supposedly established their inferiority, in fact had their origins in the much earlier conceptualizations of slaves in general. That is, according to him, “stereotypes of slaves … [were] stereotypes that had been applied since earliest antiquity to slaves of numerous ethnicities and of non-African origin” (p. 16).

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3 The curse of Ham is based on a passage of the book of Genesis. Ham was cursed by God because he saw his father in a naked and apparently inebriated state and mocked him. For this, his son Canaan and all his descendants were condemned to be “servants unto servants.” This curse was later interpreted as a physical mark of dark skin (Fredrickson, 2002, p. 43-45).
What added to the negative image of Africans in particular was the fact that slave trade continued on the African continent after the trans-Atlantic slave trade was officially over. Inter-African slavery served as a crucial starting point in vilification of Africans, while simultaneously allowing Europeans to displace their own culpability (Brantlinger, 1986; Landau, 2002). It is for this reason that slavery also remained of great concern to Europeans during the colonization of Africa (Conclin, 1997; Hyam, 2006). Somewhat ironically, the ban on slavery was one of the top priorities on the European agenda of “civilizing” Africans, as Europeans had already “civilized” themselves out of it. In short, the profits that Europeans reaped from the Atlantic slave trade were twofold: on the one hand, slavery brought enormous economic rewards; on the other hand, in the carefully planned-out twist of fate, Europeans were able to turn around their culpability and project it onto Africans themselves, all the while framing slavery as the ultimate proof of African otherness and inferiority.

The end of the Atlantic slave trade brought with it “the full flowering of scientific racism” (Drescher, 1992, p. 362); or yet the peak of “Southern Negrophobia” (Fredrickson, 1971). That is, in the aftermath of the Atlantic slave trade, there was an inevitable need for both Europeans and Americans to discursively rewrite the history of the Atlantic slave trade. More specifically, Europeans looked for the ways to a posteriori justify themselves in the rising “universal human rights for all” era, and keep up their image as intellectually and technologically superior. Americans, on the other hand, searched desperately for new means of controlling the freed slaves in order to keep them restricted to the second-class citizen status. Thus, along with the underdevelopment of African continent, slavery had another long-lasting consequence – the discourses of African inferiority that served the strategic goals of Europeans and Americans alike and furnished the ways for further exploitation of Africa.

The post-slavery situation was even more complex in the U.S. because of the presence of thousands of formerly enslaved Africans who attempted to integrate into U.S. society.
Here, the discursive attacks on Africans were garnered to invent and justify the novel means of controlling and restraining them, such as Jim Crow laws, segregation, lynchings etc. It was, therefore, not surprising that the theories of Darwinism and scientific racism flourished in the U.S. to a greater extent than in Europe, where anti-slavery sentiments were gaining ground. Curtin (1964) sums up the situation in the following manner: at the beginning of the 19th century, Britain exported to America antislavery crusaders, and received, in return, American scientific racism (p. 370-71). It is important to note, however, that various groups in the U.S. imagined the future of the former slaves differently. Fredrickson (1971) distinguishes between the extreme racism that projected the ultimate bestiality and inferiority of blacks and competitive and accommodationist racism as a more moderate answer to the former one. Yet, even the more moderate approaches to the “black problem” in the U.S. were discursively framed at the Africans’ expense. Fredrickson explains:

Where the competitive racists … saw the American Negro as a degenerating and vanishing race, accommodationists envisioned the black future in terms of a permanent and allegedly benevolent domestic colonialism. Their program of moral uplift, industrial training, and racial integrity really meant, therefore, that they regarded the American black population, not as an incorrigible menace to white civilization, but as a useful and quiescent internal colony (p. 311).

That is, even when Africans were not imagined as dangerous inferior beasts, they were at best granted the status of children who were in need of paternal control. Thus, both in Europe and in the U.S., slavery paved the way for European territorial colonization and American modern imperialism in Africa. Both relied on discourses of African othering and projection of the latter as inferior, be s/he a beast or a child.

**Western Imperialisms and Africa**

**European colonialism: The partitioning of Africa.** The European territorial colonization of Africa acquired its full force in the 19th century. The French Napoleon
Bonaparte’s expedition of 1798 to Egypt, even though it ended in a fiasco, marked a significant shift in European attitudes towards getting a piece of the “African cake.” Similar to the slave trade, the development of capitalism went hand in hand with the projects of territorial colonization. The industrialization underway in the Western European countries in the 1800s greatly increased the need for new markets and raw materials. Naturally, the competition among the European countries intensified, while the U.S., for its part, remained aloof and isolationist. As Lockman (2004) aptly concludes, “the French invasion of Egypt inaugurated a new era in which the lands of the Middle East and North Africa would be increasingly subject to European economic and political encroachment, and finally European colonial rule” (p. 71). This “encroachment,” however, would not be limited to North Africa only; moreover, it would be dressed up in the ideas of bringing civilization to the African people, in pseudo-scientific explanations of their inferiority, and the impenetrable, though imaginary, lines of us vs. them, the grounds for all of which were laid during and, especially, right after the end of the Atlantic slave trade.

Napoleon’s expedition not only marked the shift in political and economic ambitions of Europeans that were about to materialize in colonial occupations, it also signified a clear beginning of discursive colonization. As the team of scholars and scientists that accompanied Napoleon to Egypt attest, it was as much an attempt to learn, decipher the mysteries of the unknown continent, as it was an attempt to conquer and possess (Said, 1994). That is, European territorial colonization, as will be seen, was from its earliest attempts conditioned and sustained through the creation/invention of knowledge about Africa and Africans that justified the occupation and exploitation.

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4 In 1798 Napoleon’s army invaded Egypt and proceeded to conquer most of its territory. Scientists that accompanied Napoleon conducted comprehensive studies of the country. But the victory was short-lived: by 1801 the British and their allies the Ottomans had forced the French forces occupying Egypt to surrender and withdraw (Lockman, 2004, p. 71).
The occupation of coastal territories of Africa, mostly by Spain and Portugal but also by the British, Dutch and French, was carried out as early as the 17th century along with the exploratory missions. However, the European countries started occupying African interiors beginning with the 19th century. And it was Britain and France that went on to become the two greatest colonizers of Africa. Both of them began early in the 19th century: the British, for example, claimed Gambia in 1816, while France occupied Algeria by 1830. Both countries also had various coastal posts and ran most of their occupied territories as protectorates rather than full colonies at this point (Pakenham, 1991; Wesseling, 1996). The only territorial relationship that the U.S. had with Africa at the time was through the establishment of Liberia in 1817. The U.S. sought it as the solution for the relocation of freed slaves. In short, the beginning of the century marked a rather relaxed period of the European colonization. However, as the need of France to reassert its status as the world power and English economic ambitions grew, and so did the tensions between European countries, the stakes in Africa significantly increased.

The Berlin conference that took place in 1884-85 has become an ultimate symbol for Africa’s final partition. In reality, however, as Wesseling (1996) emphasizes, there was little partitioning of the territories at this conference. Rather, the actual partition of inferior territories of Africa, according to him, was a result of bilateral diplomatic agreements between various European nations after the conference (p. 126-128). Rather than serving as grounds for partitioning of Africa, the conference was more important in providing an international forum for discussing African affairs and in supplying a guise of legitimacy, when the European countries engaged ever more arduously in the colonization of Africa. In fact, certain humanitarian issues were brought up at the conference, such as condemnation of slavery, sales of liquor to natives, safety of missionaries (Middleton, 1936; Wesseling, 1996). The German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, who initiated the conference, claimed in its opening address
that the primary tasks of the conference were to bring Africa the benefits of civilization in
genral and of trade in particular (Wesseling, 1996, p. 114-115). In other words, the Berlin
conference was the first international forum, in which the idea of Europe’s civilizing mission
that was later used to justify the occupation and exploitation of Africa, was clearly articulated
and agreed on by its international participants.

The final Act of Berlin only proclaimed that any power which will take any new
possession of coastal regions of Africa must notify other signatories. However, as most of the
coastal territories were already claimed, this declaration had little actual meaning. The most
important outcome of the Berlin conference was the establishment of a Free Congo state to be
run by the Belgian King Leopold II, as a private individual. The final Act also designated the
Congo basin as a free trade zone.5

On the eve of the Berlin Conference of 1884, the two greatest European imperial
powers-to-be in Africa were in very different positions. France had only scarce colonial
possessions left after Napoleon III’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870; namely, a few
islands and several trading posts along African and Indian coasts, to which during the course
of 19th century it added Algeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. In contrast, the British Empire was
impressive from the very beginning of the 19th century with its possessions of Canada, India,
trading posts in West and East Africa, Cape colony, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New
Zealand, and later, Lagos, and Egypt.6 In short, Britain was a much better established colonial
power than France.

Not only did France’s colonial possessions not match Britain’s at the time, France also
did not quite catch up with Britain in terms of its industrial development. Consequently, as
Wesseling (1996) suggests, in France there was seemingly “little need of a colonial empire, of

6 This is not an entirely exhaustive list of the colonies of Britain and France at the time. For more detailed and
precise history of each country, see, e.g., Middleton, 1936; Pakenham, 1991; Wesseling, 1996.
foreign outlets and of industrial raw material. There was no economic call for imperialism” (p. 11). Britain, on the other hand, in Wesseling’s view, was at the time the most dynamically developing country in the whole of Western Europe. Thus, “overseas expansion [for Britain] was a one logical consequence. That expansion assumed a variety of forms: emigration and colonization, trade and overseas investments, the transfer of culture and religion, establishment of naval bases” (p. 34). In other words, while Britain’s colonialism was dictated by its economic objectives, that of France was more political in nature. That is, defeated in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, and having lost Alsace-Lorraine to Germany, France started seriously thinking about compensating for it by the overseas expansion. And while France was pushed into the scramble for Africa by political interests, as an attempt to regain its international prestige and power, this had an effect on Britain’s stance. It changed its policy towards its African possessions from being satisfied with informal influence and “paper colonies” to embracing the conquest and full political and economic colonization. In short, while for France the occupation of African territories was a rather reluctant, even though, strategically necessary move in order to regain its status as the world power, for Britain, the colonization of Africa came more naturally, as the extension of its already well-established colonizing experiences, led primarily by economic incentives.

The U.S. was also present at the Berlin conference, although its actual role and influence is not entirely clear. Middleton (1936), for example, claims that it was a mere “innocent bystander or, if you like, the impotent observer” (p. 45). Duignan and Gann (1984), on the other hand, suggest that the U.S. was able to exert a considerable influence over the decisions through Stanley Morton, at the time an American citizen, whose ideas greatly impacted the final shape of the Congo project (p. 133-139). In any event, the U.S. was not a signatory of the Final Act, and was never legally bound by it. In short, while the U.S commercial interests in Africa gradually increased over time, Africa did not become the focus
of American foreign policy until the WWII. It is, then, that the U.S. entered the world political arena as the new dominant imperial power.

**Modern imperialism: The U.S. and Africa after the WWII.** The end of WWII marked the collapse of the European colonial empires. Most African countries sooner or later after WWII became independent states. The U.S. was fully committed to the processes of decolonization, as it wished to see the European colonial might destroyed, even though its support to various African countries was heavily influenced by its strategic interests (Mamdani, 2004). At the same time, after WWII, when the European countries were recovering after the devastating effects of the war, the U.S. unequivocally emerged as the principal economic, military and political power in the international arena, ready to take up the role of empire building. American imperialism such as it emerged in the 20th century was, however, much different in nature from that of European colonialism. Rather than occupying territories, the U.S. was primarily concerned with exerting influence over strategically important regions and rendering them dependable on the U.S. in various ways. Parry (1987) suggests that “imperialism” is a broad term that encompasses various forms of dependence and exploitation, of which “colonization” is just one example (p. 34). Following this definition, then, the U.S. became an imperialist power *par excellence* stopping short, however, of occupying territories.

In the newly reconfigured world order after the WWII, the powerful U.S. had only one “enemy” - the communist Soviet Union with which it engaged in ideological warfare and an arms race for several decades. It is in the context of the Cold War between the two countries, that decolonized Africa became one of the most important strategic terrains, on which this ideological war was fought out. Frequently, U.S. interests in Africa were determined and executed in light of the tactical trade-off between anti-colonial ideals and the alleged fear of
the spread of communism. As Weinstein (2008) puts it well, “African states became weak pawns in the world economy, subject to Cold War rivalries, their path to development largely blocked by their debilitating colonial past.”

The U.S. had several objectives with regard to Africa. First and most obvious was its aim to stop the spread of communism and, for that matter, all kinds of left-wing ideologies in African countries in the background of the Cold War. And as Duignan and Gann (1984) suggest, foreign aid became the principal way of counteracting the alleged spread of communism and casting Africa under the U.S. influence. Throughout the Cold War years, the U.S. provided individual military and economic support to various regimes and rebel groups in African countries that it regarded as the anti-communist forces in the region (Dreyfuss, 2005; Duignan, & Gann, 1984; Mamdani, 2004). While the central official rationale for these actions was the containment of communism, America, with its enormous military industry, also clearly benefited economically from its sale of weapons to Africa. The U.S. support to these groups, however, was not only questionable in its efficacy in terms of stopping communism, but also proved to be strategically miscalculated. Dreyfuss (2005) documents that the U.S. aid to the regions’ various Islamic groups that were seen as a possible bulwark against communism helped greatly to mobilize political Islamism that has become its new greatest enemy in the post-Cold War era of war on terrorism. Moreover, in many instances, such American interventions resulted in furthering the political stratification and corruption, and in destabilizing new African countries, which then played out in brutal civil wars.

Americans also provided humanitarian aid to Africa, again mostly in the context of the West-East divide. Fair (1992) demonstrates how during the Reagan administration, for example, food aid to the famine-struck Africa was greatly politicized and provided only

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For example, the U.S. attitude towards Algerian War of Independence was very ambiguous: while it sympathized with Algerians, which was in line with their anti-colonialism logic, it also wanted to maintain its good relationship with the French and, thus, was constantly tempted to cast the Algerian independence fighters as communists or terrorists, see: Bookmiller & Bookmiller, 1992.
belatedly to certain countries, such as Ethiopia, which was accused of its ties with the Soviet Union. At the same time, providing food aid even to those countries that were seen as the Soviet allies, according to Fair, designated Africa as “a site of moral victory” for the U.S. (p. 117). Proving further the strategic nature of the U.S. involvement with Africa, Shepherd (1985) documents that military aid surpassed any other forms of aid for Africa in the 1980s.

Second, the U.S. wanted to see Africa integrate the world economy on terms favorable to the U.S. and the West, as dictated by the neoliberal ideology, particularly after the 1970s. Ezeonu (2008) defines neoliberalism as proposing that “underdevelopment in poor countries is a factor of poor resource allocation due to unnecessary state intervention” (p. 5). The neoliberalist policies as they were implemented in Africa primarily meant building or restructuring African economies oriented exclusively towards export of raw materials and natural resources – basically, the new version of the model that already existed during European colonization. The U.S. shaped the African economies through the IMF and World Bank, and the millions provided to Africans in loans that were allegedly supposed to help develop infrastructures, domestic industries and cut African countries’ reliance on imports. In reality, however, the indebted African countries were quickly oriented towards export of raw materials and natural resources on terms favorable to the Western world. For instance, Terrell (1989) reports that by the end of the 1980s, America had already more than $5 billion invested in Africa and depended heavily on certain African countries for receiving resources, such as manganese, cobalt, platinum or yet petroleum (p. 132). Moreover, the debts had disastrous consequences for African governments’ spending on social services that they were forced to cut, which pushed many Africans even further into poverty. The hypocrisy and unreasonableness of the IMF and World Bank loans is exposed when one looks at numbers: as Weinstein (2008) reports, since 1980 African countries have paid back four times the original borrowed amount, $225 billion in total. In short, the economic exploitation of Africa
continues. As Hawk (1992) puts it, “economic development is to the twentieth century what missionary evangelization was to the nineteenth century – a justification for intervention” (p. 9). Ezeonu (2008) claims that from the perspective of criminology the impact of neoliberalism on African countries’ development should be regarded as a crime of globalization. A number of Africanist scholars and activists suggest that the first step towards eradicating African poverty is forgiving the debts (Colgan, 2002; Eozenu, 2008; Turshen, 1999). Those, however, who have been most invested in rendering Africa into the neoliberal paradise for the West, remain convinced of their righteousness, by projecting, once again, the Western culpability on Africans themselves. R. Calderisi, the former World Bank Africa chief and the author of “The trouble with Africa: Why foreign aid isn’t working” (2006) explains the situation in the following way:

[Some Africans] believe all of Africa’s problems are basically rooted in Western nastiness: colonialism, slavery, debt, and the like. But my own sense is that opinion has shifted tremendously in Africa over the last ten years, that there’s greater openness to accepting that African problems have roots in Africa…. [O]ne of the good legacies of colonialism [is that] there are Western nations that could have turned their backs on Africa a long time ago if they didn’t have some historical, economic, and sentimental connection…. For me to suggest that we reduce rather than increase aid to Africa will sound to many people like spitting in the face of a dying man, but I see it as analogous to dragging a dope addict to his feet and bringing him to a rehabilitation clinic (in Weinstein, 2008).

Finally, African oil resources have become increasingly of more concern to the U.S. Weinstein (2008) suggests that the current “new scramble for Africa” rests entirely on the rivalries of the biggest world powers, including the U.S., but also new powers on the rise, such as China, over African oil resources. In 2007, the U.S., which consumes a quarter of world’s oil resources, for the first time imported more oil from sub-Saharan Africa than from the Middle East. 8 Kiernan (2007) goes as far as suggesting that in the near future, Africa will become much more important as a supplier of crude oil than the Middle East. As Weinstein

8 According to data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), the United States imported 1.736 million barrels per day (b/d) from Sub-Saharan Africa in February 2007 -- the bulk from Nigeria and Angola but also from Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. This amount was slightly greater than imports from the Middle East -- Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and a small amount from Yemen -- which totaled 1.708 million b/d. In March 2007, the United States imported 2.194 million b/d from sub-Saharan Africa compared to 2.095 million b/d from the Middle East (Kiernan, 2007).
(2008) notes, the U.S. is, thus, quite concerned with the competition, coming especially from China. She claims that some African countries favor the trade with China over the trade with the West in order to free themselves from punitive IMF-World Bank loans and other forms of dependency; for example, Angola as the second largest oil source in Africa is now in such a position as to completely reject IMF loans. In short, the U.S. stakes in Africa are likely to continue increasing. And the Bush’s administrations ideology of war on terrorism has provided new means of exerting influence over the important African regions. Africa’s proximity to the Middle East and significant Muslim populations in many of the countries have been enough of a justification for the U.S. to continue surveillance and increase military aid to the allegedly anti-terrorist groups (which is nothing, but a déjà vu scenario of the Cold War). For example, the U.S. has been funding the Ethiopian warlords to pursue terrorists on its behalf (Dearden, 2006). And while military aid has been constantly increasing, the humanitarian aid has been slashed (Weinstein, 2008).

Thus, modern imperialism, as carried by the U.S. in Africa, does not involve physical occupation, but rather the implementation of the economic or political policies that rend countries dependable. Having emerged as the main political and economic power in the WWII aftermath, the U.S. has quickly established itself as an imperial power as well. Its exploitation of Africa went from the Cold War rivalries to the economic exploitation through the IMF and World Bank to the current war on terrorism.

**Discursive Colonization of Africa**

The history of the Western world’s relationship with Africa is essentially the history of exploitation. Beginning with the Atlantic slave trade and ending with the current neo-liberal policies, the Western world profited time and again by depriving Africans of what rightfully belonged to them. This long story of Western exploitation, however, could not have lasted, if it were not for the simultaneous discursive colonization of Africa. The colonial discourses that
emerged and evolved in the aftermath of the slave trade marked Africans as inferior, destined to be controlled by others or yet in need of saving. These discourses that throughout the centuries were maintained, perpetuated and enhanced by writers, scientists and masses at large were crucial in rendering the territorial occupation and other forms of exploitation possible.

In order to justify itself, the Western world carefully documented its endeavors in Africa by framing them in civilization or humanitarian rhetoric. The catch-phrase for territorial colonialism was coined in a poem by the British Rudyard Kipling. His notorious “white man’s burden” came not only to embody colonialist expansion as legitimate and desirable, but also positioned it as burdensome to the colonizers. That is, according to this logic, Western countries needed to take colonization upon themselves, as they have allegedly mastered higher forms of civilization than the rest of the world. The poem was published in 1899 in the *London Times*, at the time when Britain was involved in the occupation of South Africa, and the U.S. had just conquered the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and gained control over Cuba (see, Cloud, 2004, p. 301). Thus, it had wide currency in Britain as well as in the US. As Spurr (1993) notes, the Kipling poem published with the subtitle “The United States and the Philippine Islands” was nothing less than a call for America to engage into the territorial colonization, of which Britain was the greatest expert (p. 113). The poem is indeed written as addressing an unknown, and perhaps reluctant, colonial power, and encouraging it to take up its “mission.”

Although Kipling’s poem has become an ultimate symbol of the colonial rhetoric, the very same logic can be found in the works of the others in both the U.S. and France at earlier points in time. For example, the idea that the U.S. was superior to other countries and people, and occupied a special place within the world’s history, which came to be known as the idea of “manifest destiny,” was, according to Lens (2003), tentatively stated by John Quincy
Adams as early as 1811 (p. 3). It was later rearticulated once again in Roosevelt’s Monroe Doctrine of 1823 as “the imperative for the United States to defend small nations from seizure by European powers, as well as to defend them from themselves” (Lens, 2003, p. 4). The latter is particularly important, as it underscores the logic of positioning a certain group of people as inferior, either as savages or as child-like, but in any event, unable to govern and care for itself. At the same time, the U.S. task of legitimizing its own endeavors was facilitated by positioning the European powers as evil.

Similar ideas permeate the French Chateaubriand’s writings from the early 19th century. In his memoirs of traveling to North America he says the following about the local people, “savage ladies and gentlemen,” as he sometimes refers to them: “Under the roof of that shelter, my astonished eyes beheld the first savages I had ever seen. There were a score of them, men and women, all daubed with paint like sorcerers, with half-naked bodies, slit ears, crow’s feathers on their heads and rings in their noses” (1961, p. 141). He also recounts a Frenchman living with “the savages” and teaching them to dance, or what Chateaubriand perceives as the act of “carrying the civilization to the hordes of savages” (p. 141). Thus, once again, the rhetoric of inferiorizing is clearly visible, as is the belief in the civilizing mission.

In her analysis of Chateaubriand’s memoirs, Dallal (2000) claims that his literary work functions as “a counterpart to the imperial and missionary enterprises” in that it is an attempt to restore the French imperial glory (p. 258), which, as discussed earlier, at the beginning of the 19th century was greatly diminished.

Although the idea of the “white man’s burden” became a catchphrase for colonial discourses across the countries, and scholars, such as, Morgan (1997), note a certain triangulation of the colonial discourses among Europe, America and Africa (see p. 176), differences still exist. In fact, Spurr (1993) asserts that Kipling’s “white man’s burden” “seems to have been an especially British idea, for reasons of style as well as history” (p.
The poem entrenches Britain as the most powerful colonial empire and as an expert of colonialism that is in position to give advice to others. Thus, while the French Chateaubriand or the French poet and essayist Nerval, for example, still resonate similar ideas, their writings about colonialism are not permeated with imperial glory but are rather dominated, as Said (1994) notes, with the metaphors of loss, ruins and memory. Similarly, the U.S.’s engagement in territorial colonialism was limited, and even though, its idea of the manifest destiny began to emerge early in the 19th century, its colonial discourses became reshaped with its embrace of modern forms of imperialism in the second half of the 20th century.

Comparing the colonial discourses of various countries, Spurr (1993) suggests that Britain’s version of colonial discourses promoted “a set of secular and quasi-religious ideals borrowed from the humanism of high culture” (p. 114). For Britain, the colonial spaces were the embodiment of purity of aristocratic values, untouched by capitalist forces. Consequently, they ultimately became the place for nostalgia. For the U.S., on the other hand, Spurr says that it was the emphasis on moral goodness and material wealth that was incorporated into colonial discourses. Even though material benefits were at the forefront of most of the colonial endeavors, Spurr suggests that “the faith in commercial expansion as a moral and even spiritual phenomenon is fundamental to the historical consciousness of a nation built on the principles of Manifest Destiny” (119). The same idea is expressed by Lens (2003), when he claims that in American history commerce has always followed the flag. It is clear that U.S., as an imperial power, has primarily focused on commercial interests enmeshed with the moral undertones of spreading freedom and democracy, and these have become ever more pronounced throughout the Cold War era and beyond (see, e.g., Ottosen, 1999). The U.S. involvement in the Middle East to ensure its access to the oil-rich region, disguised in rhetoric of liberation and democracy, is another example par excellence. It is also important to note
that American imperialism in the 21st century, after the September 11th, has become even more firmly grounded in Orientalist outlooks (Kumar, 2010).

Finally, in French colonial discourses, drawing on Spurr (1993), the idea of French culture becomes central and “has a rhetorical equivalent of the ideas of British character and American enterprise” (p.121). Chateaubriand illustrates the case in point when he recalls that the French “marines say that in the new colonies the Spanish begin by building a church, the English a tavern, and the French a fort; and to this I add a ballroom” (quoted in Dallal, 2000, p. 231). In fact, as Dallal (2000) concludes, “in contrast to British imperialism, conceived by the British primarily in economic and administrative terms, French imperialism conceived of its chief offerings as language and culture” (p. 231). That is, for France, the colonial spaces were not just added territory to be exploited, but also the necessary reservoirs of cultural and symbolic power for France to survive and uphold itself as the dominant world power. It perceived the colonial lands as the integral part of its own self.

What is also peculiar about the French colonial discourses is the lack of clear colonizing ideology at the beginning of the 19th century. As discussed before, France was pushed into colonization processes rather than rushing into them itself. Wesseling (1996) suggests that occupying foreign territories was not held in high esteem; France’s colonial endeavors “had never made much impression on the populace … France had no colonial vacation. Nor did it have a colonial ideology” (p. 13). However, once it did get involved into colonizing Africa, Spurr (1993) notes that by the 1930s “the colonial empire has been rhetorically endowed with the nobles sentiments of the French Revolution, the humanist ideals of the Third Republic, and the historical grandeur of French civilization” (p. 6; see also Conclin, 1997). In short, France’s is an example of the type of colonial discourses that emerge most clearly as the justification for the actual occupations rather than a priori held ideas of the U.S. special “manifest destiny” or Britain’s “white man’s burden.”
The Western world, thus, wrote its version of history all throughout the centuries of its African exploitation. As the consequence of this, for the Westerners, Africa was established as the ultimate “Other” that can be civilized, saved or helped but could never be equal. That is, Africans quite literally became the objects rather than subjects of the history that was written exclusively by the Western world (see, e.g., Rodney, 1974). This history, as McClintock (1995) notes, delegated Africans to what she calls “anachronistic space,” i.e., in fact put them outside of history and perpetually out of modernity and progress (p. 30-42). Such an objectification is inherent in the processes of colonization. As Mudimbe (1988) claims, “the colonists … have all tended to organize and transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs” (p. 1), which ultimately quite literally led to a European-invented/made Africa. Located outside Western history and without much ability to speak for itself vis-à-vis European publics at large, Africa, in the words of Mengara (2001), became a “world almost totally manufactured in image” (p. 8), without any real substance.

The Western world thus is guilty not only of the actual violence and exploitation it committed to Africans but also of what Parry (1987) names the “epistemic violence.” That is, discursively violent and annihilating colonial discourses were inevitably needed to furnish and effectuate various forms of imperial exploitation. At the same time, they were equally necessary to define the colonizing power’s self and make sense of its actions by shaping and re-shaping its own identity through the colonial experiences. As Spurr (1993) explains: “the problem of the colonizer is in some sense the problem of the writer: in the face of what may appear as a vast cultural and geographical blankness, colonization is a form of self-inscription” (p. 7). In short, the long-lasting exploitation of Africa relied on the Western world’s ability to tell its story of Africa, while the latter remained relatively silent vis-à-vis

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publics at large. However, this discursive relationship was not without consequences for Europeans. Africans did exert influence on how Westerners defined and regarded themselves at various points in time. In other words, the colonized territories became the discursive alter ego of the Western world.

Racism and the “Dark Continent.” The history of Africa written by Europeans resulted in the inscription of Africa as the “Dark continent,” whose darkness, and by extension, inferiority and savageness, contrasted with the whiteness and superiority of the Western world. Although it seems logical that in the current popular discourses Africa is the “Dark continent” because a great number of Africans have always been black, the relationship between the skin color and European attitudes towards Africans has been much more complex. A number of scholars point out that color was not necessarily the defining factor in how Europeans articulated their encounters with Africa and Africans and their differences before the 19th century (Drescher, 1992; Fredrickson, 2002; Snowden, 1970). Going well back in history and drawing on extensive research by Snowden on perceptions of Africans in Antiquity, Fredrickson (2002) claims that there is “no evidence that dark skin color served as the basis of invidious distinctions anywhere in the ancient world” (p. 17). Similarly, Drescher (1992) points out that Europeans have regarded “large number of peoples on various continents and of all colors with disdain” (p. 364). As previously discussed, a number of scholars also emphasize that slavery was not conditioned by racism but rather by the fact that Africans were not Christians or were simply different (Fredrickson; 2002; Schneider, 1980; Williams, 1964). Thus, the blackness of Africans went relatively unnoticed until the 19th

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10 One example of the Africans’ ability to speak and get their voice heard by Europeans is slave narratives. However, they were not capable to attain the audiences as wide as were reached by the colonial discourses perpetuated by a number of actors. Another instance of Africans speaking is the voices that emerged during the national liberation struggles, one of the starkest examples being the writings of F. Fanon, whose book *The wretched of the earth* includes a preface written by the French thinker J.P. Sartre (original edition, 1961).

11 For the critique of Snowden’s conclusions that color did not matter see Miller, 1985.
century, which, as established before, witnessed the radical changes in European attitudes towards Africa.

At the same time, while the actual skin color might have not been at the forefront of the early Europeans’ perceptions of Africa, the color black *per se* in the European Christian mentality has come to be associated with negativity. As Miller (1985) sums up, “blackness would appear to be a rock of negativity: from Sanskrit and ancient Greek to modern European languages, black is associated with dirt, degradation, impurity” (p. 29). The fact that blackness has become an ultimate Western signification of negative, inferior and outcast is attested by European depictions of their *inner* “Others” as black. For example, Freedman (1999) documents how the same curse of Ham, which later came to be attributed to blacks, in the medieval times, was actually frequently cast onto European peasants. The latter were often described as “black,” as a result of their exposure to sun and soil. McClintock (1995) gives another example of how working-class women were portrayed by a famous Victorian man of letters, A. Munby, as black. Given such cultural conventions,12 Africans were *a priori* situated in a disadvantaged position from the European point of view.

The maritime explorations of African coasts started in the 15th century, whereas the interior of Africa remained very much undiscovered until the late 18th and 19th centuries. As a number of scholars underscore, the Western world, then, had very little actual knowledge about Africa, and especially African interiors, until the end of the 19th century (see, e.g., Miller, 1985; Pratt, 1992; Schneider, 1980). In fact, before the 15th century, “Libia Interior” and “Ethiopia Interior” were the last places, known to Europeans, and the early maps mark the territories beyond as “Terra incognita.” As Miller (1985) explains, “from earliest times, Black Africa was experienced as the literal end of European knowledge” (p. 22). When the first Europeans ventured into discovering African interior, it was, in the words of Mazrui (1969), a

12 For the limitations of this outlook, see Fredrickson (2002), especially pg. 26.
“Dark continent” with the darkness being “essentially geographic” (p. 668). Similarly, Curtin (1965) also emphasizes that the “Darkest Africa” was “an expression of geographical ignorance, or … cultural arrogance” (p. 9) of Europeans. In other words, the invention of the “Dark continent” was actually, somewhat ironically, conditioned by the “darkness” of Europeans, constituted in absence of knowledge about Africa.

Slavery was one of the earliest opportunities for the Western world to get to know Africans. However, while the contact with Africans greatly increased, Schneider (1980) cautions that this did not necessarily translate into the greater knowledge of African countries or ways of living; rather, Europeans learned “little of Africa beyond a greater appreciation of traits of African physiognomy” (p. 16). Others paint a much bleaker picture by claiming that the images of slavery and degradation of millions of Africans registered them as almost bestial in minds of Westerners (Fredrickson, 1971; Landau, 2002; William, 1964).

Beginning with the earliest European attempts to educate themselves about Africa, the available sources of information entailed certain distortions of objective knowledge. Mazrui (1969) emphasizes that it is not entirely clear whether the first European explorers were actually the “discoverers” or the “darkeners” of Africa, given the inherent biases in their stories. As he rightly concludes, “it is far more heroic to have encountered savagery and unknown depth of eccentricity than easy friendliness and familiar human traits, if one wants to appear as a victor against the exotic in distant lands” (p. 667-668). The impact that travel writings had on the evolution of racism and discourses of Africans will be discussed in detail later; for now, it suffices to say that the early travelers’ accounts of Africa were already full of distorted knowledge: tropes of the exotic, forbidden desires and often sexualized dangers, which is not surprising since they were essentially adventure narratives. Yet even given all these distortions, the early accounts did not necessarily register the inferiority of Africans. In his history on Europe’s “search” for Africa, Davidson (1994a) concludes that “the Europeans
of the 16th century believed that they had found forms of civilization which were …
comparable with their own, however differently and variously dressed or mannered. …The
early records … speak of ‘difference’; they do not speak of inferiority” (p. 43). In other
words, the building blocks for portraying Africans as exotic, animalistic and monstrous were
already given to Europeans, yet, as Fredrickson (2002) also notes, the demonization of
Africans at this point might have “operated at the level of popular belief and mythology rather
than formal ideology” (p. 45). In other words, although the grounds for it were laid in the
popular imagination long before, it was not until the 19th century, when scramble for Africa
between Europeans acquired clear contours and was envisioned in concrete territorial
occupations, that “darkening of Africa” and demonization of Africans became the official
policy of European powers. At the same time period, the increasing tensions in relation to
slavery in the U.S. also found their expression in racist discourses against blacks.

Pratt (1992) defines the turn of the 18th century as the legitimation crisis of what she
names Euroimperialism. In the context of the French revolution, colonial uprisings in various
parts of the world, and the end of slavery, Europeans searched for plausible narratives to
alleviate their consciousness and justify their further endeavors, as the capital demands and
competition between rival European powers continued to grow. Therefore, as Brantlinger
(1986) asserts, “Africa grew ‘dark’ as Victorian explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded
it with light, because the light refracted through an imperialist ideology that urged the
abolition of ‘savage customs’ in the name of civilization” (p. 185). To conclude, the modern,
“color-coded,” to use Fredrickson’s (2002) term, racism was born out of this “legitimation
crisis.” It is here that one witnesses the establishment of racism as a rationalized ideology. For
this, the appropriation of science in the form of Darwinism and its many variants with the
ensuing scientific racism that went hand in hand with the idea of civilizing mission was
needed to boost the already existing popular mythology of African difference.
In 1859, Charles Darwin wrote his book *On the origin of species*, and in 1871, *The descent of man*, in which he presented his evolutionary theory that survival of fittest is the inevitable order of nature. In debates and theorizing that followed Darwin’s original theory, blacks were consistently assigned the lowest place on the ladder of human progress (e.g., Miller, 1985; Stepan, 1985). In relation to the French writings, Miller (1985) claims that “it is only the black African that Gobineau and other writers seek to depict as a pure ‘human machine,’ stripped of reasoning faculties and moved only by a blind sensorial desire” (p. 17). From the perspective of Europeans, the evolutionary theories of racial classification could not have been timed better, given the end of slavery and growing imperial ambitions. Stepan (1985) describes the situation in the following way:

As slavery was abolished and the role of freed blacks became a political and social issue, as industrialization brought about new social mobility and class tensions, and new anxieties about the “proper” place of different class, national and ethnic groups in society, racial biology provided a model for the analysis of the distances that were “natural” between human groups (p. 98).

Pick (1989) comes to a similar conclusion that, “evolutionary theory … must be understood historically; we can trace in Darwin’s metaphors and narrative patterns, wider Victorian social concerns and fears” (p. 6). In fact, a number of authors document the mid-19th century Europe’s obsession with the concept of degeneracy that becomes the ultimate marker of racial but also class divisions (Gilman, 1985a; McClintock, 1995; Pick, 1989; Stepan, 1985). In short, social Darwinism and the theories of racial difference, distance and danger of intermixing that followed it, finally provided the scientific legitimation for discrimination against non-whites and helped to finalize the articulation of the European’s “civilizing” projects in Africa. As Stoler (1995) concludes, “in the nineteenth century … race becomes the organizing grammar of an imperial order in which modernity, the civilizing mission and the ‘measure of man’ were framed” (p. 27). The scientific racism of the late 19th century that unquestionably draws on the previous centuries of mythology in relation to African difference provided the allegedly legitimate explanation for why some people should rule and others be
ruled. Africans were established as intellectually inferior, as proved by their bodily differences, and thus, in need of civilizing. To conclude, in his history of racism in Europe, Fredrickson (2002) asserts that racism is always “a scavenger ideology.” His idea is perfectly validated in the context of Western world’s involvement with Africa, where racism, to use his words, “reared its ugly head” by adopting the garb of civilizing mission (p. 22).

The colonialist discourses, born in the 19th century Europe as the result of strategic “darkening of Africa,” were racist par excellence. Black Africans were dissected, measured, and paraded before the Western audiences all with the goal of proving their inherent intellectual inferiority that was allegedly registered in their bodily differences, the starkest of which was the different skin color. However, these racist colonial discourses were not nearly as fervently enacted in the colonies as they were perpetuated in the metropolises at the level of discourse. For example, a number of writers assert that French colonial policies were relatively color-blind, at least until the WWI (see Conclin, 1997; White, 1999). As will be further demonstrated later, the discursive colonization of Africans, which enabled the actual exploitation, was, thus, much more racist than the actual colonization proved to be.

**Orientalism: Northern Africans vs. black Africans.** To further establish the importance of skin color in the European understanding and treatment of black Africans, at least from the 19th century on, it is necessary to consider the European attitudes towards Northern Africans. The latter were frequently spared many of the most degrading stereotypes that were attributed to the black “monsters” and “cannibals.” Hawk (1992) goes as far as claiming that throughout centuries, Europeans employed racial, rather than geographical, definition of Africa; i.e. Africa meant for them black or sub-Saharan Africa, and racist categories and vocabulary was employed to think and talk about it. However, while the discourses on North Africa might have overall been more positive and less demeaning, North Africans were still framed as inherently different and inferior, even though, *religious othering*
here took the place of\emph{racial, ("color-coded")} one. “Mysterious East,” just as the “Dark Africa,” embodied the European attempts to discover, scrutinize and possess what was \textit{a priori} conceived as the “Other.” In completing the picture on European attitudes towards Africans at large, then, the Orientalist scholarship, and primarily Said’s works (1993; 1994), is of great utility.

Drawing on Foucault’s theory of discourse and power, Said (1994) defines Orientalism as artificially manufactured body of knowledge that constantly assumes certain power positions, but at the same time remains ever changing. As he puts it, Orientalism is “a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power” (p. 12). Just as the European-invented black Africa, Orientalism is the discursive construct that has no real referent, no substance. Furthermore, Orientalism is maintained and perpetuated by the unequal exchange: the power of the Occident over the Orient is signified by the former’s ability to speak about the latter, just as the earlier discussed the Occident’s ability to speak about and for the black Africa.

The Orient, just like sub-Saharan Africa, became clearly entrenched into the logic of the “imaginative geography of the ‘our land-barbarian land’” (Said, 1994, p. 54), which was successfully co-opted for colonization purposes. At the same time, there are important differences between Orientalist and what Miller (1985) terms Africanist discourses. Analyzing European writings on Africa, Miller concludes that Africa is not Europe’s “Other,” but in fact its “Another Other,” or, alternatively, the “Orient’s Other.” He explains: “Africa often occurs as the third part in cultural hierarchies, but, from the moment it is spoken, ‘Africa’ is subsumed by one of the other two. In the relationship between the self and the other, the third is null” (p. 16). Indeed, the extreme negativity of the European images and narratives about specifically black Africans substantiates his claim of Africa as nullity and
should be kept in mind, while inspecting the differences between the narratives about sub-
Saharan and Northern Africans.

Moreover, given that Africa for a long time has remained the “Dark continent” simply
because of the lack of knowledge about the interiors of the continent, the contacts with the
Northern African countries, situated in the Mediterranean, were established much earlier and
were easier to maintain. Landau (2002) suggests that the discourses on Northern Africa were
substantiated by real referents to a greater extent than those of the rest of Africa (see also
Miller, 1985). He explains: “In contrast to the cacophony of the bazaar and the music of the
harem, sub-Saharan Africa appears muted and speechless, deriving almost exclusively from
descriptions of Africa and Africans” (p. 5). In other words, it was the sub-Saharan Africa in
the European imagination that was pushed to the logical extreme of discursive denigration,
silencing and objectification. While Northern Africa was exempt neither from discursive
othering nor from the actual exploitation, Northern Africans did, however, from the European
perspective, remained higher up on the human classification scale than black Africans.

**Empire for masses.** The 19th century corresponded not only with the greatly
accelerating speed of the “darkening” of Africa and the rise of scientific racism but also with
its infusion into popular discourses. For one, the travel accounts, which faithfully documented
the European attempts to get to know Africa from the very beginning, reached their apogee.
Second, the 19th century brought forward new means of popularizing racism, such as mass
print media and the world exhibitions. Colonial discourses with their racist or Orientalist
overtones, then, became largely circulated and well-entrenched in the minds of wide
audiences. Discursive colonization seized to simply be of concern to the imperial-ambitions
driven politicians and of scientists, obsessed with degeneracy and classification of races; it
transformed into what Schneider (1980) terms the “empire for masses.”
**Travel Writings.** Documenting their adventures in the distant and unfamiliar lands was a well-established convention for the Westerners, who ventured into “discovering”\(^\text{13}\) Africa, since the earliest times until well into the 20th century. For a long time, travel writings, most of which were bestsellers, were one of the very few sources about Africa that were available to wide audiences. Thus, they have played an essential role in crafting and furthering the imaginary discourses on Africa in the minds of masses.

In her history of European travel writings, Pratt (1992) divides them roughly into three phases: first was the survival literature of the pre-18th century, full of “sensationalist discourse of monstrosities and marvels” (p. 51). Then came the natural history phase of the 18th century, inspired by Linnaeus system of classification,\(^\text{14}\) in which landscape, flora and fauna rather than people become of primary importance. And finally, Pratt distinguishes the sentimental writing phase that gained its full force in the 19th century and drew on the earlier survival literature, but also emphasized personal experiences and brought to the forefront what she calls “the utopia” of reciprocity and exchange, which underwrote the commercial and imperial ambitions of these explorations (p. 81-85). In other words, she demonstrates that travel writings, especially in the 19th century, reflected the explorer’s individual ambitions but also the political or commercial interests of the country or organization, financing the explorations. In short, these writings were not simple accounts of travels, but rather, complex discourses, enmeshed with political and economic interests of Europeans as well as the egos of travelers. It is worth noting that many of the early explorers of Africa actually came from socially modest backgrounds and these exploratory expeditions represented to them their ticket to social acceptance and fame. In other words, a certain no one would become someone,

\(^{13}\) The concept of discovery that is so frequently utilized in travel literature is very problematic. Invoking a “discovery” implies the finding of the empty lands, previously unoccupied, which was never the case (see McClintock, 1995).

\(^{14}\) In his book *The system of nature* of 1735, Carl Linnaeus provided an innovative classificatory system for all known and unknown plants. He later also provided the classification for *homo sapiens.*
if he was only able to stay alive and tell his story. Given this, the accidental but also conscious distortions in travel narratives are not at all surprising. The more danger one has gone through, the more admired he would be (see Mazrui, 1969; Pratt, 1992).

By the mid-19th century Africa was established in travel writings not simply as exotic, full of dangers, adventures and desires but also as the “Dark continent” *par excellence*. The very titles of the books embody the images of the darkness and savagery, and this continues well into the 20th century, as the following examples demonstrate: *Savage Africa* (1863), *Through the Dark Continent* (1878), *In Darkest Africa* (1890), *The Heart of Darkness* (1902), *The Black Land* (1928), *Africa Phantom* (1934). Once again, the 19th century explorers of Africa, such as Dr. Livingstone, Stanley Morton, Joseph Conrad, Richard Burton, to name just a few, drew on the earlier survival literature, but also encoded in their writings growing imperial ambitions of the Europeans and Americans.15 It is here, then, that the travel writings come to best exemplify Parry’s (1987) notion of epistemic violence. Brantlinger (1986) deconstructs the concept by claiming that, “such accounts of African exploration exerted an incalculable influence on … [European] culture and the course of modern history. It would be difficult to find a clearer example of the Foucauldian concept of discourse as power” (p. 195). The discursive power of these travel narratives were at once enabled by and enabling the actual exploitation of Africa.

Not only the travel accounts from Africa entertained the imaginations of many at the time, Africa also became the setting of many contemporary fictional novels. While purely fictional, these accounts drew on the already existing mythology about Africa and Africans and in such a way furthered the imaginary discourses that were actually granted the status of

15 The stories of individual explorers are very telling: some of them, e.g., Dr. Livingstone, who went to Africa as a missionary, was driven by humanitarian motives that were quickly co-opted for the imperial projects; others directly corroborated with the imperial powers in implementing colonial projects, e.g., Stanley Morton, who helped to design the forced labor system in King Leopold’s Congo. For a further discussion and other examples, see Brantlinger, 1986; Mazrui, 1969; Pratt, 1992.
reality. Their fictional nature also enabled them to become the locus where the secret desires that colonial endeavors invoked in many European men were most clearly expressed. For example, interracial love was a subject of many 19th and 20th century French novels, some of which with very provocative titles, e.g. *Black lover, Black woman, Black skin* (De la Gueriviere, 2001). In other words, both the travel accounts that allegedly documented the “realities” of the African countries and also the fictional novels set in Africa helped to create and perpetuate the image-Africa that was well imprinted in the minds of Europeans. While fictional novels relied on travel accounts for their inspiration, the latter in their turn also, at least to some extent, relied on the previously established fictional notions of adventure, danger and fame to articulate African “realities.”

In the midst of the 19th century the travel accounts reached a completely different dimension with the rise of print mass media. As Schneider (1980) convincingly demonstrates, the colonies were of continuous interest to the first French mass newspapers, *Petit Journal* and *Petit Parisien*. By the beginning of the 20th century, France had a large number of publications, dedicated exclusively to the colonization; moreover, most of the more general publications had sections on colonial endeavors (De la Gueriviere, 2001; Schneider, 1980). Alongside with those, came the postcards and advertising that recycled and reinvented the colonial images (De la Gueriviere, 2001; McClintock, 1995). Smith (1980) projects a very direct connection between the early explorers and the 19th century reporters, who “deeply involved in the problems of colonial and other conquests” approached reporting as “exploration carried on by other means” (p. 22-26). Given the tabloid nature of the early mass press, the colonial accounts of “Other’s” difference and exoticness were frequently perpetuated. In short, colonialism became a mass enterprise.

Because of this rise of “empire for masses,” the 19th century also saw the birth of what McClintock (1995) terms commodity racism. According to her, there was an essential
shift from “scientific racism,” restricted to the intellectual and political elites, to the commodified racism as a mass-consumer spectacle, in the forms of Victorian advertising, photography, exhibitions and museum movement (p. 31-33). This mass spectacle targeted the growing middle class and was aimed at popularizing the idea of colonial expansion, where it was not so popular, as was the case in France (Hodeir, 2002; Schneider, 1980).

In short, travel writings, fictionalized accounts of Africa and the later journalistic narratives about colonial endeavors played a crucial role in the discursive colonization of Africa. The travel writings helped to very much create the original imaginary discourses on Africa that gradually became intertwined with the political and economic ambitions, as travelers themselves were drawn into the orbit of political interests and search for fame. Moreover, as the narratives about Africa and Africans gradually became available to bigger and bigger audiences, the shift from the empire for elites to empire for masses was able to happen.

**Mass exhibitions: The savage African on the European Stage.** Travel writings and mass print media have certainly played an important role in popularizing the imaginary narratives about Africa and Africans that increasingly reached wider and wider audiences. The colonial exhibitions of the 19th and 20th century, however, provided an unprecedentedly “authentic” visual imagery of Africans and allowed to “explore” Africans, allegedly, in their natural habitat, without any effort. In Paris alone there were six exhibitions of this type in the last decade of the 19th century, and as many as twenty million people, if not more, are believed to have possibly visited them (De la Gueriviere, 2001; Schneider, 1980). Thus, these exhibitions not only embody the idea of the “empire for masses” but also exemplify the imperialism as the mass-spectacle *par excellence*, where for a fee, any European could consume history as commodity and find proofs of his/her own progress and the modernity at the expense of the “Other” (McClintock, 1995).
While up until this point, many Europeans, unlike their American counterparts, had little actual contact with Africans and fed their imagination mostly on travel and fictional accounts, the “great exhibitions” in a number of European cities at the turn of century changed it. As Bancel et al. (2004) suggest, “at the mid-19th century, the ‘human zoos’ were born. The myth of savage, thus, became reality” (p. 5). Europeans who went to the exhibitions in hopes of meeting “real” Africans, however, became the victims of their own imaginations. That is, the Africans brought to France or England were, in fact, paid performers, hired to perform the roles of inferior, primitive savages that Europeans had imagined for them. In short, Africans whom Europeans encountered at the exhibitions were not simply Africans; rather, drawing on Mudimbe’s (1988) vocabulary, they were European-invented Africans.

These exhibitions that drew on theories of racial anthropology and enacted the pre-existing imaginary visions of Africans, just like the press, facilitated the shift from scientific racism, the elitist theory, to popular racism, known and shared by everyone. Bancel et al. (2004) claim that to visit these exhibitions signified “not only the ability to observe the world’s diversity; it was also the ability to inscribe your and Other’s place. If all the world goes through the human zoos – freaks, exotic, colonized -, one will quickly learn that there is an inalterable barrier between those who see and those who are seen” (p. 13). That is, the re-inscription of colonialist logic was at once the premise and the consequence of the “human zoos.”

The main goal of these exhibitions was to popularize the colonialism as well as further justify it in the eyes of publics at large. Paul Reynaud, the French minister of colonies, stated that the objective of the expositions is “to give the French a consciousness about their colonies” (in De la Gueriviere, 2001, p. 12). In line with this, in her analysis of French colonial exhibitions, Hodeir (2002) demonstrates that, particularly in France’s case, exhibitions were meant to instill the idea of civilizing mission into masses. She claims that at
the time “French public opinion was not yet convinced for the need for a colonial empire … and it was precisely the function of the exhibitions to instill a popular will into and a sense of collective responsibility for the colonial enterprise” (p. 244). In other words, the exhibitions were to convince the French people of the “Other’s” savageness and inferiority, and by extension, of his/her willingness to be controlled and “civilized.”

Shocking as it may seem, in 2005, a village of African people was set up in the zoo of Augsburg in Germany in the midst of its usual inhabitants — an exact equivalent of its 19th century counterparts. While some anti-racist and human rights groups found it scandalous, the zoo director Barbara Jantschke reassured the publics by saying: “You can be sure this wasn’t a mistake in planning. I think the Augsburg zoo is exactly the right place to communicate an atmosphere of exotic.”¹⁶ In other words, while this particular exhibition no longer played an instrumental role in perpetuating European colonial endeavors, it was grounded in the same colonial logic of putting the “exoticness” of the “Other” on display for the European voyeuristic gazing.

Conclusion

The long Western history of Africa’s exploitation would not have been possible without its discursive colonization. That is, from the earliest Westerners’ endeavors in Africa, they became complicit in creating and perpetuating the European created image-Africa, such as it best fit their interests and strategic goals. Europeans became increasingly more interested in getting a piece of “African cake” in the course of the 19th century, and justified their occupations with claims that Africans represented the inferior race that was incapable of ruling themselves and, thus, in need of saving and civilizing. In other words, the occupations and issuing exploitation were framed as benign and favorable to the colonized. As the early colonial discourses demonstrate, the colonial powers really seemed to believe that they were

¹⁶ See: http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,359799,00.html.
bringing higher forms of civilization and culture to lands that eventually came to represent their alter ego.

The U.S. similarly treated Africans who were brought into its territory as slaves, even after the slavery was abolished, as second-class citizens through the explicitly racist institutions that lawfully established their inferiority. And Westerners did not stop at simply establishing Africa as the “Dark continent” in popular discourses, but also aimed to find scientific proof of their inferiority, using evolutionary theories and concepts of degeneracy. Not surprisingly, the scientific racism peaked in the 19th century, when Americans were coping with the freed slave populations and European powers finalized the partitioning of African continent.

The strategically crafted discourses about Africa’s “darkness” and inferiority gradually reached wider audiences. Beginning with the earliest travel writings filled with exaggerated images of exotic, dangerous and savage Africa and ending with the mass exhibitions in Europe at the turn of the 20th century, Westerners were captured by the allures of the “Dark continent” and its inferior races. The rise of press also played an important role in popularizing the colonial endeavors and furthering the degrading images of Africa. All of these means successfully finalized what the Western politicians have started – the establishment of the crystal clear division between modern, civilized, superior West and its inferior, savage, “dark” “Other,” whose exploitation was so masterfully dressed up in civilizing rhetoric.

After the WWII, Europe lost its colonial grip on the African continent. Its former colonies became independent states in the process fully supported by the U.S. that emerged as the principal political and economic power in the post-WWII era. Sadly, with regard to Africa, the U.S. picked up right where the European colonizers had left. Although it was not interested in occupying territories, it wanted to see African continent locked under its
influence. In other words, it continued its economic exploitation under the ideology of neoliberalism implemented through the IMF and World Bank. And it cast its political influence over the region through the support and military aid for various governments and non-government groups that it saw as its strategic allies in various points in time (be it “anti-communist” or “anti-terrorist” forces). The war on terrorism started by the Bush’s administration provides new means of surveying and controlling Africa, as the U.S. is becoming increasingly more interested in African oil.
Real and Imaginary African Women: From Cleopatra to Saartjie Baartman

African women have played a crucial role in both the actual and discursive colonization of Africa. Imaginary African women were seen and represented in ways that best suited the Westerners in carrying out their colonial projects, be it the Atlantic slave trade or the territorial occupation of Africa. However, in the course of this discursive colonization of African women by the West, the former became not only instruments for justifying the West’s exploitative endeavors, but also a part of its self-identity. In such a way, somewhat paradoxically, African women ceased to be simple objects, possessed and misused by Europeans, and instead exerted active influences on defining what it meant to be a European man and a woman at the time of Europe’s territorial colonization of Africa.

African Women during Slavery and Colonization

The important roles of African women in the Atlantic slave trade and colonization have been established by a number of scholars (Gilman, 1986; McClintock, 1995; Morgan, 1997 & 2004; Pratt, 1992; Stoler, 1995 & 2002; Spurr, 1993). During slavery, women slaves were highly valued, for they provided not only productive but also reproductive labor (Morgan, 2004). Nussbaum (1994), drawing on Lovejoy’s (1990) study, states that female slaves cost up to one-third more than men, and that the primary reason for the higher price must have been their value as sexual objects and reproducers.

However, despite beliefs in African women’s great reproductive capacities, literature demonstrates that slave women were not overly fertile and did not have many children (Jordan, 1968; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997; Morgan, 1997). Because of the higher price of women slaves, but also because female labor, especially in agriculture, and reproductive capacities were equally highly valued in African countries, the numbers of men sold into

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slavery remained much higher than those of women. On the contrary, many domestic slaves in Africa were women (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997). In her discussion of the status of various African women at that time, Coquery-Vidrovitch (1997) in fact rejects the distinction between slave and free women, concluding that their situation in many cases did not differ much, because the workload was similar but also because “slaves or not, they always belonged to someone – their lineage, their husband, or their master” (25). This was particularly true for rural women who were largely responsible for the subsistence economy and had very little autonomy. The situation, however, varied depending on women’s social status and various social and cultural practices of particular societies, and no generalizations can be made. Coquery-Vidrovitch’s (1997) history of African women includes an entire chapter about “Powerful women,” where she gives examples of African women in power – warriors, chiefs and queen mothers, with their power mostly stemming from matrilinear social structures - from the ancient times to the colonization (p. 34-56). She also explains that when the Europeans started colonizing Africa, different organized groups of women existed – from peasant women living in rural areas within traditional social structures, to working-class women in towns who were often illiterate and poor, to wealthy market women, to educated elite women in the urban areas -- with the latter two groups being able to exert some political influence at the time. Disparities between these groups, however, increased with the colonization (p. 159-172).

Going back to African women’s situations during slavery, it is common knowledge that slave owners in the American South frequently copulated with their female slaves, both with and without the latter’s consent, to increase the number of slaves in their possession. Jacob’s (1973) nineteenth century narrative provides a slave woman’s perspective on the issue: “Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves. They do not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable
as the pigs on the plantation” (p. 146). Such behavior from the white slave owners’ part contradicts the discourses created about African women, their ugliness, inferiority and the myth of “taint blood,” all of which will be discussed in detail later. It is true that after the official abolition of slavery in the U.S., in 1913, anti-miscegenation laws prohibited interracial marriages in the Southern states. These are perhaps most accurately understood as an attempt to limit the rights of the freed slaves, along with Jim Crow laws and racial segregation, and to control a potential danger from the “exotic others,” which seemed to apply primarily to black men, no longer bounded by slavery.

It was in the early 20th century, when the political and economic tensions surrounding the post-slavery era in the U.S. reached its peak that “Southern Negrophobia,” as Fredrickson (1971) terms it, also peaked. Here, lynchings allegedly inflicted as punishment for rapes of white women by black men, perceived as “an attack of integrity of the race” (p. 274), exemplify how the derogatory racist discourses were actually enacted in reality. It is interesting, however, that this enactment of discursive violence took form against black men rather than against black women. Sexual intercourse with and/or rape of black women were less likely to be framed in Darwinist or eugenic terms in the U.S. In short, the place accorded to African women in slavery reveals the discrepancies between realities and discourses, as is also true for territorial colonization.

African women were also of essential importance in implementing European colonial expansion into Africa. First and foremost, local women facilitated European colonizer’s acclimatization in Africa by providing domestic and sexual services as well as the necessary knowledge on local customs, food, and disease prevention. As Allen (1979) notes, British colonial officers called their African mistresses “sleeping dictionary[ies]” (p. 164), which at once objectifies African women and projects them as repositories of invaluable knowledge, somewhat disrupting the racist logic. The term was also known and used by the French
In short, concubinage was considered, in the words of Pratt (1992), essential to “European survival” (p. 96), at least at the beginning of the colonial endeavors (see also, White, 1999).

Concubinage with local women was allowed, if not encouraged, by at least some colonial administrators. It was seen, as the French doctor Louis Joseph Barot put it in his practical guide of 1902 on living in the colonies, as a “necessary evil” (in White, 1999, p. 15). At the beginning, European women and even wives were not allowed to move to the colonies because of the possible negative effects on health and morals that such a move was believed to exert. Various theories at the time attempted to explain how climatic differences could affect Europeans, and especially European women, negatively by turning them into “Africans,” if they stayed in Africa for too long (Curtin, 1965; Pick, 1989; Stepan, 1986). Moreover, as White (1999) documents, many French colonial administrators, for example, were against married officers; colonial administrators and the writers of the time alike perpetuated the image of the empire as an exclusively masculine sphere, filled with sexual desires, exoticism and adventures (see also McClintock, 1995).

In the French colonies in Africa, even longer than elsewhere, concubinage remained an officially sanctioned form of relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. While facilitating colonizers’ acclimatization, local women who cohabited with Europeans could possibly move up the social status ladder by becoming évoluté rather than an uncivilized native, or at least ensuring that her offspring would attain such a status.¹⁸ As Conclin (1997) convincingly demonstrates, France’s idea of a civilizing mission, at least until the WWI, was more firmly grounded in secular republican ideals than in racist dogmas. Part of France’s colonial ideology was its idea of “civilization through intermarriage” that was abandoned as

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¹⁸ According to Conclin (1997), the French created several categories to differentiate local people: assimilé (largely Catholic métis), évoluté (French-educated African clerks), hommes utiles (useful people, labor suppliers), and uncivilized natives (p. 151).
discursive attacks on Africans under the guise of scientific racism as well as other actual tensions rose (see p. 20-22; also White, 1999). In any event, concubinage and petites épouses were not banned until the 1920s, when the French faced growing African resistance but also an augmenting number of métis, whose integration started to pose problems (see also White, 1999). It is then that the French women were called to follow their husbands to the colonies and “create France” everywhere they went” (Conclin, 1997, p. 171). In line with this, Stoler (2002) discusses the solution proposed by the French colonial administrator Georges Hardy of “white women looking after white men” to counter what was increasingly perceived as “a social problem and political danger … a growing population of mixed-blood children born out of these ‘mixed’ unions, of men who had ‘gone native.’” (p. 2). Concubinage or temporary unions, however, persisted well into the 1930s and beyond (White, 1999).

The institution of concubinage, like that of slave mistresses, contradicted the discourses about African women as inferior and sexually dangerous monsters. For one, the need for such an institution arose from a certain “inferiority” of European settlers who relied on the knowledge of these women for successful survival. In the process, local women were also initiated into European ways of living, but such a relationship is best described as an exchange rather than exclusive “civilizing” of Africans. Moreover, it was inevitable that certain relationships between European men and African women evolved into marriages or at least led to an official acknowledgment of descendants. For example, Louis Faidherbe, described by De la Gueriviere (2001) as “the father of colonization à la French, Jacobin, assimilationist, interventionist, very different from the British indirect rule” (p. 39), who was a governor of Senegal, married an African woman but only à la mode du pays and had a child

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19 In English colonies, for example, the circular released as early as in 1909 threatened colonial officers with punishment for concubinage (White, 1999, p. 16).
with her, whom he officially acknowledged as his offspring.\textsuperscript{20} As De la Gueriviere adds: “Could we imagine a British governor who makes a child to a \textit{native}?” (p. 39). In short, acknowledging African woman as an official, even legally sanctioned, spouse or at least as a mother of one’s children granted them the “normality” that they were otherwise discursively deprived of. On the other hand, when the discrepancy between realities and discourses became too large, racial intermixing was gradually condemned. Yet, these gradually changing attitudes towards concubinage were not only the result of increasing discrepancies between discourses on the danger of miscegenation that were produced in the metropolis, but also a consequence of more pragmatic realities. As White (1999) notes, even Faidherbe, while willing to defend temporary unions, was not as readily willing to compete with the \textit{métis} on equal terms in commerce (p. 12).

That racial intermixing was the antithesis of official discourses of African inferiority is further established through a look at Germany’s case. It is not surprising that among the European imperial powers only Germany, which, according to Fredrickson (2002), had the most developed system of overt and institutionalized racism, never allowed any racial mixing – neither extramarital interracial sex nor intermarriage in their colonies. In fact, Hitler in \textit{Mein Kampf} claimed that the “French toleration of black-white intermarriage and its seemingly color-blind conception of assimilation was turning France into an extension of Africa into the heartland of Europe” (in Fredrickson, 2002, p. 121). In other words, as Fredrickson (2002) rightly concludes, extreme racism that operated not only at the level of discourse but also at the level of actual governance, as in Germany, was in fact anti-imperialist to a certain extent (p. 108-109).

\textsuperscript{20} It is interesting to note that the woman that Faidherbe married was only 15 years old and she was abandoned after he left the colonies – the fate that awaited most of the African women who entered into relationships with Europeans. The child, however, was raised by him in his other family, which he created upon his return from the colonies (see White, 1999).
France and England paid little other attention to African women and their situation during the colonial rule, aside from utilizing them to advance their own goals, as through concubinage, which was essentially just another form of exploitation (see Pratt, 1992). Moreover, it is well known by now that the European colonization of Africa (and other parts of the world) was covered up in claims of liberating or saving native women from their men or simply from their own savageness. For instance, the British Lord Cromer, who oversaw the British occupation of Egypt, argued for “liberating” Egyptian women from oppressive Islam, while fighting against women’s suffrage back at home (Kumar, 2008, p. 26-27). In Kenya, the British attacked the practice of female genital cutting, but only as a part of their “civilizing the natives” agenda (Thomas, 1998). As far as the French are concerned, Conclin (1997) concludes: “Although there was some interest in emancipating women from oppressive marriage customs and paternal authority – and this interest would increase in the 1920s and 1930s – the administration’s official attitude was that such social change should proceed at its own pace” (p. 281). The French nonchalance is not surprising given that even in the French metropolis at the time women were still considered as inferior, second-class citizens; and the French did not grant women the right to vote until 1944, one of the last to do so in the Western world.

Not only did France do little to ameliorate the status of colonized women, but colonization also presumably had a negative effect at least on certain groups of women. In general, it is agreed that across various countries, colonization disrupted the pre-existing gender order in African societies. As Mengara (2001b) documents, many indigenous African societies, previous to Islamic and European interventions, were “genderless societies.” That is, there were no strict labor divisions or hierarchies between males and females. Instead, “depending on the context, male powers and female powers [we]re assumed ‘hermaphroditely’ and interchangeably by both males and females, while preserving a
structure of social parallelism where males rule males, and females rule females” (p. 294; see also Amadiume, 1987; Sudarkasa, 1996;). Moreover, the principle of age, rather than gender, has also been established as one of the governing rules of African societies. In matrilineal societies, where they existed, certain women occupied positions of power and authority, even though limited to varying degrees.

Europeans brought with them and enforced or strengthened the patriarchal social order. As Conclin (1997) explains in relation to the French case, “the subordinate status of African women would … receive little attention from a local administration as patriarchal overseas as the republican government was in France” (p. 88). It is once again important to emphasize that it is impossible to generalize the effects of colonization on African women of various ages, social classes, education level, and religious and cultural upbringing over vast variety of countries and societies. Yet, what should be kept in mind is Coquery-Vidrovitch’s (1997) conclusion that, given that all colonial powers engaged in colonial occupations were concerned with the economic profits they could extract from their colonies, they were primarily interested in men (p. 59-69). As a result, not only did the colonizers favor men’s entry into the cash economy, but they also turned to them for help in controlling local populations and running administrations, thus strengthening the authority and power of men as well as facilitating their access to education and social mobility (see also Rodney, 1974). Women were, thus, from the colonialists’ point of view, relegated to the private sphere and granted only limited importance as providers of domestic and sexual services, although women’s contribution to agriculture should not have been negligible.

This does not mean, however, that African women should be seen as helpless victims of colonization; rather, as Allman et al. (2002) underscores, “through their daily lives, through their families and their communities, in ritual and belief, in their travels, their struggles, and their travails, African women, as historical subjects, were active agents in the making of
colonial world” (p. 1). In Allman et al.’s (2002) edited collection, one can find plenty of examples of how individual African women negotiated and resisted colonial order, and invented strategies to profit from it. For instance, Musisi (2002) shows how Baganda women rejected colonial biomedical practices, aiming to retain control over their bodies and lives. Bastian (2002) revisits the Nigerian women’s collective resistance to the colonial rule in the notorious “Women’s War” of 1929, when women, among other, “sang ‘abusive songs’ to colonial officials … even going as far as to ‘slap their tummies’ in a derisive fashion at the officials and their uncomfortable African collaborators” (p. 261). Many other such examples can be found. Here, I simply tried to sketch in the broadest sense possible, the main roles and positions that African women assumed most frequently during slavery and the territorial colonization of Africa.

**Africa as “Porno-tropics”**

While it is very difficult to discuss the real situations and positions that African women occupied during colonialism due to the variety and complexity of the cases, it is relatively easy to generalize in relation to European discourses about African women at the time. First and foremost, Europeans were obsessed with African sexuality, which became the primary dimension of othering Africans in general and African women in particular. Morgan (2004) suggests that “ideas about black sexuality and misconceptions about black female sexual behavior formed the cornerstone of European’s and Euro-Americans’ general attitudes toward slavery” (p. 7). Her argument can also be extended to European attitudes towards territorial colonization of Africa without any reservations. In fact, as Stoler (2002) affirms, “no subject is discussed more than sex in colonial literature and no subject more frequently invoked to foster the racist stereotypes of European society” (p. 43). European discourses on African sexuality and sexual behavior reveal at once the racist European imaginations of African inferiority but also the captivating sexual allure of African women.
It is well established that territorial colonization itself was frequently framed in terms of gender relations and gender violence. Lands-to-be-colonized were imagined as virgins shyly waiting to be discovered and penetrated. In fact, as Spurr (1993) notes, the “allegorization of colonized nations in terms of the female figure (bodily [and] rhetorical) has been a cliché of colonial history” (p. 71; see also McClintock, 1995; Shohat, & Stam, 1994). In other words, colonial conquests in colonial discourses were frequently explained and legitimized as the normal expression of gender hierarchy. McClintock (1995) puts it in the following way:

The myth of the virgin land is also the myth of the empty land, involving both a gender and a racial dispossession. ... Within colonial narratives, the eroticizing of “virgin” space also affects a territorial appropriation, for if the land is virgin, colonized people cannot claim aboriginal territorial rights, and white male patrimony is violently assured as the sexual and military insemination of an interior void (p. 30).

These discourses of emasculating, and even more so, virginizing the lands, that had a straightforward utilitarian dimension, somewhat paradoxically, went hand in hand with hyper-sexualizing African women.

Hyper-sexuality projected onto Africans played a crucial role in affirming the alleged need to “civilize” Africans during the peak times of colonial expansion, but it was not invented during colonial occupations. Gilman (1986) provides examples, demonstrating that the association of black Africans with sexual lust goes back to the middle Ages. Thus, by the 19th century, the sexuality of black Africans was firmly established as “an icon of deviant sexuality” (Gilman, 1986; p. 228; also Gilman, 1985b) and was presented as desperately in need of control. While Africans in general were accused of licentiousness and immorality, and the alleged size of African men’s sexual organ was sometimes seen as the cause of this (Fanon, 1967; Jordan, 1968), it was the women’s sexuality that came to the forefront of African sexual othering. As Nussbaum (1994) concludes in relation to the 18th century travel writings of John Foster, “Africa is the torrid zone of sexuality where large numbers of
passionately sexualized women roam unsatisfied” (p. 157). This exemplifies perfectly the European vision at the time.

Given African women’s alleged hyper-sexuality, they were naturally imagined to always be ready and willing to engage in sexual intercourse with European men. In order to satisfy their alleged enormous sexual appetite, they supposedly also copulated with apes (see, e.g., Gilman, 1986; Jordan, 1968; Morgan, 1997). In light of the previously discussed rhetoric of virgin lands, the hyper-sexualization of African women has served another function, not only that of othering Africans, but also of establishing their accessibility. This European-created sexual availability of African women, Morgan (1997) concludes, became “the defining metaphor of colonial accessibility … [and] alone might have been enough to implicate the entire continent” (p. 183). That is, the sexual availability of African women became equated with the availability of African lands and resources, including in the most literal sense, the availability of African bodies -- be it black slave mistresses or African concubines. Succinctly summarizing the situation, Middleton called his history of the European colonization of Africa, written in 1936, which is critical of the European course of action, *Rape of Africa*.

In her discussion of European attitudes towards polygamy, which was seen as yet another proof of African sexual deviance but also inferiority, Nussbaum (1994) concludes that “portraying African women, especially the wives of other men, as unabashedly seductive and unclaimed for monogamy was necessary for European travelers who were impregnating African women and fathering illegitimate children of mixed race” (145). That is, the European discourses on African women’s hyper-sexuality and lack of morality served well the overall

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21 Compare this well-established 19th European myth of African women’s sexual willingness to copulate with Europeans with the following excerpt from the 17th century narrative of Richard Jobson: “These people had never seen white men before; and the women that came with them were very shy, and fearfull of us, insomuch as they would runne behind the men, and into the houses to hide from us” (Jobson, 1904, p. 119).
colonialist logic of rendering the continent accessible; and was also useful to justify the
efforts of individual men. Many European men were not prevented from entering into
temporary sexual unions with African women or even marrying them à la mode du pays by
the fact that they already had wives back at home (see White, 1999). To mask the de facto
immorality of European men, then, all that was needed was to firmly establish the imaginary
immorality of African women.

Not only were African women imagined by Europeans to be immoral and hyper-
sexual but also hyper-fertile. That is, allegedly abnormal reproductive behavior represented
yet another dimension through which African women’s extreme difference was marked. In
various travel writings, African women were said to be very fertile and give birth without any
difficulty or suffering; they were also accused of what were perceived as bizarre mothering
practices or even of murdering their infants. To counter these imaginary discourses, Jordan
(1968) rightly emphasizes that enslaved women in the 17th and 18th century, for example, did
not give birth to many children, but descriptions of them almost always underlined their
imaginary fertility (p. 39). As Morgan (1997) points out, such “erroneous observations of
African women’s propensity for easy birth and breastfeeding reassured colonizers that these
women could easily perform hard labor” (p. 185), which was of essential importance both in
Southern American plantations and in African colonies. These imaginary discourses about
African women’s hyper-fertility gave birth to one of the most adamant stereotypes about
Africans that was later transformed into the overpopulation rhetoric, where African high
fertility rates have been projected as a threat to the Western world. This conventional Western
thinking projects high birth rates in Africa as an obvious cause of poverty in these countries
and a threat to the Western resources. In an article in the Guardian, Rice (2006) suggests that
“Development may not be the only casualty of the population boom. With increased
competition for scarce resources such as land, conflict is likely to increase. Consequences will
be felt far beyond Africa: pressure to migrate abroad - already great - can only grow, experts say.”

The eroticization of African women in many instances was only imaginary, operating exclusively at the level of discourse, but remained nonetheless alluring to European men well into the 20th century. In the context of the strict Victorian sexual ethics, African women’s sexuality and the alleged sexual promiscuity functioned as the space for escapist sexual fantasies for sexual pleasures-deprived Europeans. The colonies were perceived by young men across Europe as places of sexual excitement and adventures (De la Gueriviere, 2001; Hyam, 2006). These fantasies were immortalized in many novels of the era (see De la Gueriviere, 2001; Pratt, 1992). De la Gueriviere (2001) gives an example of an “imaginary Congo,” which was dreamed about by many young French men. This Congo was represented “by a gorgeous Negro woman from the advertisement for recruitment of colonial troops” (p. 48). White (1999) in his discussion of the French doctor’s Jacobus X book, *The art of love in the colonies*, written in the 1890s, claims that all too often the book reads as a guide for sexual tourists, going far beyond the medical standards of the time for description of sexuality. In short, McClintock (1995) concludes that Africa became “a porno-tropics for the European imagination – fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears” (p. 22; see also Pick, 1989; Stepan, 1986). Imagining African women as hypersexual and licentious served not only to establish them as inferior, but also to simultaneously render Europeans, with their allegedly contrasting sexual mores and ethics, as unquestionably ulterior. It was as much a project of self-definition as it was of creating an imaginary “Other.” The colonies became the spaces of illusions and secret desires; human

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vices were displaced onto Africans in the act that at once discursively purified Europe and
denigrated Africa.

It is worth noting that although all African women were equally eroticized, there exist
important differences between Northern African and black African women. The familiar
image of the exotic, eroticized and submissive African female in Northern African harems is
the trope at the heart of Oriental discourses. Said (1994) states in his discussion of sexuality
and the Orient: “the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience
unobtainable in Europe” (p. 190), the conclusion, which mirrors that of McClintock’s (1995),
who talks about Africa in general. Black African women, on the other hand, while also with
their own sexual allure, were also more often portrayed as exotic, but also as savage and
dangerous because of their skin color. Skin color seems to have played an important role in
differentiating between the imaginary sexuality of Northern African and black African
women. De la Gueriviere (2001) in his discussion of the French publications that informed
publics about colonial endeavors in the early 20th century suggests that colonized women
were always presented by clichés; yet, those were different for different women: “A Maghrebi
generally hid behind her veil. An Indochinese seductively showed off the silks hanging on the
hips. Only an African demonstrated joyously the liberty of her insolent breasts” (p. 318) (see
also McClintock, 1995, p. 31). The sexuality of the latter was usually framed as more deviant
and, thus, by implication, more dangerous than that of Northern African (and Indochinese)
women. The difference is to be attributed solely to skin color. Boose (1994) proposes an
explanation by taking into consideration black woman’s “signifying capacity” in the process
of reproduction, which marks the offspring as the property of the mother. That is, according to
her, “[Black woman’s] signifying capacity as a mother threatens nothing less than the
wholesale negation of white patriarchal authority” (p. 46). In short, it is the black African
woman’s sexuality in particular that becomes the epitome of aberration and excess, as racist
discourses project the extreme nullity of Africa in the face of more positive Orientalist imaginings.

The discursive sexual allure of African, and, especially, black African women, then, was not without its dangers. African women could be perceived as beautiful and desired for a moment, but they were all too quick to turn into cannibals and monsters, castrating their men (Gilman, 1986; McClintock, 1995; Morgan, 1997). According to Morgan (1997), physical differences and unfamiliar sexual practices led many travelers and explorers to bring back home “expectations of extended breasts and dangerous sexuality” (170). Cannibalism and polygamy, which, as Freccero (1994) claims were two social practices that “most radically seem[ed] to differentiate the ‘cannibals’ from ‘civilized’ and Christianized Europe” (p. 75), were always looming in the background of narratives of deviant African sexuality. Yet, somewhat ironically, African women’s sexuality and engaging in sexual intercourse with them, became more and more dangerous, as the actual instances of it increased. As previously discussed, European colonialists frequently had sexual relationships with African women, which inevitably led to offspring of mixed origin. When the integration of the latter became too complicated, the discourses were garnered to emphasize the danger of African sexuality once again. This time, however, the danger was imagined differently and in more overtly racist terms – one who copulated with an African woman risked “tainting his blood” rather than being castrated and eaten by the object of his infatuation.

European discourses on African sexuality have as much to say about colonial endeavors as about 19th century European self-identity. Scrutiny of African women’s bodies and sexuality was, however, expressed not only in colonial mythology and rhetoric; it was also a part of a larger pseudo-scientific racist project of the 19th century.
Degeneracy and Saartjie Baartman

While travel writings, novels and the press from the 18th through the early 20th century all contributed to creating Africa as “porno-tropics,” these discourses, though sufficient to widely pervade popular imagination, were not enough to scientifically prove the inferiority of Africans. As previously discussed, the 19th century, obsessed with frequently misread and misused Darwinist theories and empiricism, was in search of “scientific proofs” of African degeneracy. That is, the already widely circulated discourses were in need of real, i.e. scientific, substantiation.

A number of authors document that mid-19th century Europe was consumed with the concept of degeneracy, which became the ultimate marker of racial and class divisions (Gilman, 1985a; McClintock, 1995; Pick, 1989; Stepan, 1985). Gilman (1985a) goes further to claim that the concepts of degeneracy and human sexuality were inseparably linked at the time, thus, the previously discussed European focus on African sexuality and on African woman’s body. As McClintock (1995) points out, “in order to meet empirical standards of the natural scientists, it was necessary to invent visible stigmata to represent – as a commodity spectacle – the anachronism of the degenerate classes” (p. 41). And as Gilman (1986) beautifully demonstrates, it was black African woman’s bodies that became this pseudo-scientific proof of African degeneracy, gradually turned into the commodified spectacle par excellence.

The nudity of African women was without exception the first thing that struck European travelers and observers. It was taken to signify the absence of moral norms as well as social institutions designating decency and regulating sexual behavior, especially, that of women. The French writer Leiris in his book Africa phantom, first published in 1934, commented on African women and their obvious nudity as rendering them “as beautiful as cows” or yet “as vulgar gazelles” (p. 95). He proceeds in the following way:
What stops African women from being truly exciting, in my eyes, is that they are daily too naked and that to make love to them does not allow to play with anything social. To make love to a white woman is to strip her off a huge number of conventions, to make her naked in terms of materiality but also in terms of institutions. Nothing like that is possible with a woman, whose institutions are so different from ours. In certain ways, she is no longer “a woman,” properly speaking (p. 148).  

In line with this, De la Gueriviere (2001) discusses how at first photographed in their natural state, i.e. nude, later African women were dressed up by colonial photographers. This act of dressing up was to signify nothing less but the achievements of colonizers in “civilizing” Africans (p. 318).

Logically following from the degeneracy-sexuality tandem, the sexual parts of nude African women were of primary interest both to random observers and the 19th century scientists alike. Travelers frequently noted and commented on the size or shape of African women’s breasts. The latter were simultaneously a part of imaginary sexual allure as well as proof of physical deviance. Morgan (1997) discusses how travelers exaggerated the size of African women’s breasts by claiming they could breastfeed over their shoulder while carrying their infants on their backs. This contributed greatly to the creation of the image of “savage African mother.” Morgan explains: “The image was a compelling one, offering in a single narrative-visual moment evidence that black women’s difference was both cultural (in this strange habit) and physical (in this strange ability)” (p. 184).

Male observers of Africa were not the only ones whose attention was drawn to the breasts of nude African women. Nussbaum (1994) gives an example of Anna Falconbridge’s writings from the 18th century, when she travelled to Sierra Leone with her husband.

According to Nussbaum:

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23 It is interesting to note that this “attack” on African women comes in a book written in diary form after the paragraph discussing the writer’s erotic dreams and “involuntary” ejaculation. While the book is punctuated by eroticized descriptions of African women and their physicality, the quote above shows his pragmatic and rationalized rejection of African women as sexual partners. The desires and the sexual appeal of African women, however, still seem to haunt him.
Falconbridge, like other travelers, locates racial difference in the fetishized breasts of the Other … These breasts place the women in a conjunction of the sexual and maternal which is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile in the … [Western woman], and the way she reconciles them in the African woman is through judging them to be aesthetically repellent (p. 154).

This example once again demonstrates how closely the discourses on Africans were related to the self-definition of Europeans. The highly restrictive status of European women, especially of those belonging to the middle class, and particularly in regard to their sexuality and domesticity, put them in huge contrast with African women, whose naked breasts in a way became indicative of their sexual liberty.

While nude breasts were easily observable and frequently discussed, African women’s genitalia and buttocks became the focus of primarily “scientific” observation. Gilman (1986) explains the interest in African women’s genitalia at the time in the following way: “if [African women’s] sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that the blacks were a separate (and needless to say, lower) race, as different from European as the proverbial orangutan” (p. 235).24 The medical authorities at the time agreed that African women’s sexual organs were more developed than those of whites, which quickly led to the conclusion that the black female possessed “not only ‘primitive’ sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament – ‘primitive’ genitalia” (Gilman, 1986, p. 232).

The epitome of this pseudo-scientific search for proofs of inferiority was the now-famous case of Saartjie Baartman. A young Hottentot woman from South Africa, also known as the “Hottentot Venus,” who was “demonstrated” in expositions in England and France in the 19th century, became the ultimate example of African women’s dehumanization and

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24 It is important to note that African male genitalia were also of interest to Europeans (e.g., Fredrickson, 1971; Jordan, 1968). The myth that African men had abnormally large penises helped to both explain the alleged sexual licentiousness in Africa and legitimize violence against blacks; the latter was especially true in the aftermath of slavery in the U.S. where the myth of black rapist facilitated the legitimization of lynchings (see, e.g., Davis, 1983).
overtly sexual objectification by Europeans. She was exhibited essentially to expose her protruding buttocks that European audiences found shocking at the time. However, after her death, only a few years after she came to Europe, it was her genitalia that became of primary interest to scientists. Her sexual organs were scrutinized in hopes of substantiating the “scientific” claims to what were seen as various deviances and “errors in development” of African women’s genitalia (Gilman, 1986). After Saartjie Baartman died in France, a cast of her full body was made and preserved in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris alongside with her skeleton, brains and sexual organs that were conserved in formalin. In such a way, the French, and the larger Western publics, could gaze at Saartjie Baartman, the anomalous Hottentot woman, until as late as 1974, when her remains were removed from the public exposition and could be viewed upon special request only.

In 1994 Nelson Mandela requested that France return Saartjie Baartman’s remains to South Africa. After long discussions in the French parliament, which were dominated by defending France and displacing guilt on England, the French returned Saartjie Baartman to South Africa. These debates at points were all too reminiscent of those of the 19th century, with the scientific purpose of Saartjie Baartman’s destiny often invoked. As one parliamentarian put it: “Today, Saartjie Baartman’s remains do not represent any scientific interest. It is therefore useless to continue keeping them in our territory.”25 At no point was the validity of the allegedly “scientific” exploits of the 19th century questioned.

Saartjie Baartman’s case reveals how far Europeans were willing to go to enact their created discourses as reality; or, to put it differently, to establish empirically and, thus, “scientifically,” the degeneracy of Africans. Here, discourses of racism met with discourses of sexism in a perfect symbiosis. In the environment, where female sexuality in general was a matter of interest and regarded as prone to deviance, hysteria etc., and, by extension, in need

25 See: http://www.senat.fr/basile/visio.do?id=qSEQ01101149S
of control (Foucault, 1980), it was only too easy to establish an African woman as a sexually deviant beast. It is also no coincidence that Baartman was a black African woman, a Hottentot, as according to Gilman (1986), Hottentots represented “the essential black, the lowest rung on the great chain of being” (p. 231). As early as in the 18th century, the British writer Long had already proclaimed that “an orangutan husband would [not] be any dishonour to an Hottentot female; for what are these Hottentots” (in Morgan, 1997, p. 189). Long uses a biological term “female,” instead of social terms “lady” or “woman,” and in such a way further emphasizes the dehumanization of Hottentot women. To sum up, victim to the European racism and sexism, Saartjie Baartman became the embodiment of the European-imagined African female sexual monster who allegedly served “scientific purposes,” but in reality simply furthered the imagined African inferiority that came dangerously too close to becoming real.

Another realm that was not spared the cast of degeneracy in 19th century France was miscegenation. Many writers and scientists of the time, including the influential Arthur Gobineau with his four volumes of *Essays on inequality of human races*, claimed that miscegenation eventually led to racial degeneracy and by the fourth generation, at the latest, to sterility. The decreasing fertility of the French at the end of the 19th century, which was all the more alarming in the context of the French loss in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 that was taken to indicate the French decadence, was blamed on racial intermixing that was freely happening in the colonies (White, 1999). White (1999) explains such stark discrepancies between the discourses of metropolis and the realities of the colonies by claiming that concubinage was a part of “a specifically colonial moral code” (p. 15). That is, while the fin-de-siècle intellectuals in France were dissecting Saartjie Baartman or inventing theories of métis sterility, all for the sake of establishing Africans as degenerate and dangerous, in order to keep up their own image as possessing superior morality and intellect, colonial officers and
other European settlers lived the colonial realities by taking local wives and fathering children of mixed race.

The Double Burden of African Women

Much has been said about the double burden(s) that African women were made to bear. Because of the complex intersections of gender, race, and cultural and socioeconomic differences, African women have always been not simply the European’s “Other,” but, more precisely, their “Another Other.” In comprehending the situation, the scholarship of African-American feminists is of some utility. Hooks (2000) explains in relation to African-American women in the U.S.:

As a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression. At the same time, we are the group that has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor in that we are allowed no institutionalized “other” that we can exploit or oppress. … White women and black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor and oppressed (p. 16).

Other scholars, writing more specifically about the third-world women, have also emphasized their most inferior status by pointing out that women underwent “double colonization” by becoming objects both vis-à-vis the colonial powers and vis-à-vis the patriarchal systems that in many instances were imposed or/and strengthened by those very same colonial powers (Aschcroft et al., 1995; Brooks, 1997; Oyewumi, 1997). As previously noted, at least certain African indigenous societies were matrilineal or organized around the principle of age before the European interventions, and thus the patriarchal social order was to a large extent introduced by European colonizers.

An African woman has been “Other” not only to a European and an African man, but also to a European woman. Hall (1995), in her study of English women’s writings of the early modern period, reveals the extent to which European women were implicated in the othering of African women. She suggests that black women, although sometimes perceived as physically attractive, were always portrayed as inherently foreign and negative, which was in
part a result of the European women’s anxiousness in relation to the alleged sexual desires
that African women aroused in European men (p. 177-188). From the perspective of the 19th
century middle-class women, whose status was restricted and who were mainly bound to their
households, the otherness of African women was multifaceted. Female observers of Africans,
just like their male counterparts, noted nudity, physical traits, and different sexual or maternal
practices. Women travelers also participated in furthering discourses on African women’s
deviance, ugliness and hyper-sexuality rather than challenging them (Nussbaum, 1994; Pratt,
1992). Nussbaum (1994) sees African women as occupying the following position in the eyes
of European women: “other of the ‘other,’” doubly colonized, and the Other woman of
polygamy, women who make Others of each other in competition for the male prize” (p. 140).
The image of the hypersexual, immoral and inferior African woman was essential in creating
and upholding a contrasting image of the Victorian housewife (McCIntock, 1995; Nussbaum,
1994).

Interestingly, the patterns of othering, even though different, and more paternalistic
than derogatory in essence, can also be detected in some 20th century Western feminist
writings that have been exposed and criticized by their Third world counterparts. The former
have been accused of overlooking racial or socioeconomic distinctions for the sake of
women’s solidarity; or yet creating a homogenized image of African women as a uniform
group, which is all that Western women are not (see, e.g., Mikell, 1997; Mohanty, 2004;
Oyewumi, 1997 & 2003). African women throughout the centuries have been located at a
complex intersection of gender, racial, cultural, and socioeconomic differences. As a result,
the images and narratives about African women produced throughout the history of European
encounters with Africa represent the extreme end of European illusionary myths about its
“Other.” At a level of discourse, as Hall (1995) concluded in a slightly different context, the
black female came to represent “the extreme otherness” (p. 67).
The double burden that African women were subjected to is to be understood not only in terms of their double subjugation vis-à-vis European colonialists, both male and female, and their own men, but also as a discursive burden of being beautiful and desired, and monstrous and repulsive at one and the same time. African women have been made to bear what Miller (1995) aptly names “a double burden, of monstrousness and nobility” to its logical extreme. On the one hand, the writings of travelers are sprinkled with accounts of African female beauty and sexual allure; on the other hand, this beauty is quick to mutate into dangerous sexuality, monstrosity and cannibalism. For example, the beauty of African women was well established by the legendary beauty of Cleopatra. In fact, Hughes-Hallet (1990) suggests that the legend of Cleopatra has posed a challenge for European observers of Africa, as “her reputation for beauty … was not consonant with the possibility of her being anything other than a light-skinned European lady” (p. 202). It is true that Cleopatra was not black, which perhaps greatly facilitated the maintenance of her beauty myth in the European worldview. That the European definition of acceptable beauty was racist in its essence can be further seen is in Lady Mary Wortley’s accounts of her travels in the Orient and Africa, where she documents to have found beautiful and graceful naked women in Turkish baths but repulsive tattooed black women in Africa (in Nussbaum, 1994, p. 155-56).

These are, however, not without counterexamples. Morgan (1997) talks about the British traveler, Richard Ligon, who on his first encounter with a black woman, described her as “a Negro of the greatest beauty and majesty together” (in Morgan, 1997, p. 167). Similarly, Miller (1995) discusses the writings of the Frenchman, Charles-Antoine Pigault-Lebrun, who described black women in the 19th century in the following way: “On the banks of the Niger, the women are almost all beautiful in the exactness of their proportions. Modest, tender, and faithful, an air of innocence rules their glances and reveals their timidity. Their accent is extremely sweet; their names alone indicate charm” (in Miller, 1985, p. 5). Thus, both black
and white African women were at times defined as beautiful and desired by individual observers. Hall (1995) explains the connection between race and the concept of beauty in the following way:

Differentiation by beauty shares its arbitrariness – and power – with differentiation by race, and both categories increasingly enable each other … The emerging racialized language of beauty is one way in which the category ‘race’ is made to act as a ‘natural’ difference. In a like manner, this ‘willed’ sense of natural difference runs throughout the discourses of beauty in the early modern period when signs of racial difference are embedded in so-called aesthetic descriptions (p. 182).

In other words, categorizing African women as more or less beautiful becomes a seemingly innocent substitute for racial classifications, as Western definitions of beauty were, for the most part, racist.

Although accounts of African women’s beauty, be they white or black, do exist, the more prevalent narrative is the one of African women’s ugliness, monstrosity and savageness. As previously discussed, European observers frequently exaggerated the bodily traits of African women. In the European imagination, African women had fat lips; their breasts were portrayed of enormous size, hanging down as another set of legs; the protruding buttocks, once again, larger than usual, signaled their licentiousness and inferiority, as in Europe only prostitutes were proclaimed to be in possession of similar buttocks (Gilman, 1986). To add a final touch to African women’s ugliness, their genitalia were also pronounced to be larger than that of European women and obviously abnormal. Saartjie Baartman was made the embodiment of this black female ugliness.

In her discussion of Henry Rider Haggard’s best-selling novel *King Solomon’s Mines* of 1885, McClintock (1995) demonstrates that access to Africa and its resources is imagined by Haggard as only to be acquired, if Gagool, the black “witch-mother,” who represents the ultimate monstrosity of black femaleness, is killed (p. 1-4). To go back to Ligon, Morgan (1997) concludes that “taking the female body as a symbol of the deceptive beauty and ultimate savagery of blackness, Ligon allowed his readers to dally with him among beautiful
black women, only seductively to disclose their monstrosity over the course of the narrative” (p. 169). Thus, African women are both beautiful and desired, but at the same time dangerous and savage. The idea that their beauty is deceptive, which is the ultimate corollary that arises from the ambiguous and often outright contradictory narratives, carries within itself a more politically-laden message for Europeans. Although Africans might appear beautiful, gentle, innocent etc. that is only the façade, under which monstrosities and savageness are hidden.

The result of this, as Miller (1985) rightly notes, is “a European discourse at odds with itself” (p. 5). That is, what one witnesses when looking at European encounters with African women, is not only the discourse that frequently contradicts existing realities (e.g., African concubines vs. their abnormal sexual organs and degenerate sexuality) but also the discourse that is contradictory in itself (African women ugly yet still desired). As Nussbaum (1994) further concludes: “The [African female] Other is the self undressed, admired yet held fast in the male and white female gaze, freed within confinement, erotic, repulsive, excessive, a princess yet a slave, the noble female savage, superior yet inferior, multiple yet all the same” (p. 158). As is evident from this quote, Nussbaum underscores not only the contradictory nature of Western discourses on African women, but also their projection as the alter ego of Europeans.

**Conclusion**

African women were present at all stages of actual and discursive Western colonization of Africa. They helped Europeans to settle in African countries, serving as their *de facto* wives and companions, and providing domestic and sexual services. Their sexual and reproductive capacities were also claimed by American slave owners. African women suffered particularly from the Western exploitation. Since the latter was essentially economic in its nature, Westerners were primarily interested in men, relegating women to private and domestic spheres. In fact, it is documented that Western colonization of Africa disrupted
previously existing gender hierarchies and imposed or at least strengthened the patriarchal structures (Amadiume, 1987; Mengara, 2001b; Sudarkasa, 1996;). As a result, African women underwent “double colonization” by becoming objects both vis-à-vis the colonial powers and vis-à-vis the patriarchal systems that were imposed or/and strengthened by those very same colonial powers.

Western images and narratives about African women came to represent the extremity of colonial discourses, where racist and Orientalist logic was buttressed with sexist rationale. The colonial discourses about African women were, however, contradictory, entailing at once their exotic beauty and extreme sexual allure for European men, and their savageness that implied dangers. The discourses also diverge in terms of European views on Northern African and black African women. The former are imagined as submissive, fragile, hidden under their veils, while the latter are often cast as exotic, deformed, if not monstrous. In fact, as is attested to by the unfortunate story of Saartie Baartman, it is black African women that became the embodiment of the most degrading images of Africans. Their “protruding” buttocks and “deviant” genitalia were pronounced as scientific proofs of African difference and inferiority.

It is not a coincidence that Western colonial discourses with regard to African women are underwritten by concerns with sexuality. African women were imagined by Westerners as hyper-sexual, licentious, without no conception of morality. They were also allegedly hyper-fertile and marked by what Europeans considered abnormal mothering practices. All of these images not only marked the colonized lands as the “porno tropics,” but also spoke a lot about the Victorian Europe’s sexual ethics and gender hierarchies. That is, the image of hyper-sexual (or perhaps sexually liberated) African woman was constructed in a direct opposition to the Victorian middle-class woman, and embodied the sexual desires of European men. Western obsession with African sexuality found its logical extreme in portraying Africa itself as a virgin shyly waiting to be penetrated and possessed. In other
words, the occupation and exploitation of the continent were projected by Westerners as the inscription of patriarchal gender relationships.
The Western Media and Africa

If discursive colonization has outlasted the actual occupations and other forms of exploitation, as is sometimes suggested (Spurr, 1993), then it is most likely to appear in today’s mediated discourses. Here, I will first briefly discuss some trends in international reporting and journalistic norms and practices that shape foreign coverage. I will then move on to the scholarship on contemporary media coverage of Africa and Africans with a particular focus on African women.

Foreign News and Its Biases

Reporting about events in foreign countries has always constituted an important part of journalistic activities. The role of journalists in informing their audiences about distant places, events, and people is particularly significant, given that relatively few people have any first-hand knowledge or experience about foreign lands. The resources and attention devoted to foreign news have nevertheless been on a constant decline. This decline has been particularly well documented in the American media. For example, Sparrow (1999) reports that the total number of minutes devoted to international news on major American TV networks fell almost half from 1988 to 1996 (p. 85). The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism maintains that 27% of front-page news in newspapers was devoted to foreign news in 1977, and only 14% in 2004. Newsweeklies devoted 20 to 25% of their coverage to international news from 1980 to 1990. In 2010, the amount reaches on average 16%.26 Although statistics are difficult to come by in the case of France, there are some indications that a similar trend exists. For example, in an interview in 1998 a news producer of the private TV channel TF1 responded to the question about lack of international news in his news program in the following way: “This is a French news program for the primarily French

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The decreasing attention to foreign news has gone hand in hand with the decline of foreign bureaus and permanent correspondents abroad. In the U.S. only a handful of major newspapers still have foreign bureaus (Constable, 2007). In 2010, French *Le Monde* had 51 foreign-based permanent correspondents; its right-wing counterpart, *Le Figaro*, has 10; and the left-wing daily, *Liberation*, has only 7 (Mediasig, 2010). At the turn of the century, American TV networks drastically diminished their foreign presence: CBS slashed its foreign bureaus to four, NBC to five, ABC from seventeen to six (Shanor, 2003, p. 8). French TV channel TF1 in the course of the 1990s reduced a number of its foreign bureaus from 9 to 5 (Halimi, Vidal & Maler, 2006; p. 11); public French TV channels (F2, F4, F5) still maintain 9 foreign bureaus (Mediasig, 2010). The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism in its 2009 report on American journalism notes that a newsmagazine *Time* reduced its correspondents assigned to bureaus outside the U.S. by 25%.27 French *Le Figaro* has lost two of its permanent correspondents – in Switzerland and in New York – in the past ten years.28 In short, a common trend is towards less and less continuous presence in foreign locations.

Media outlets close foreign bureaus primarily because they are costly to maintain. Shanor (2003), in his study of foreign news, suggests that it is simple economics: the cost of a foreign bureau ranges from $250,000 to $1 million per year and only keeps rising (p. 53). A former foreign correspondent, Alain Chaillou, suggests that a trend towards cutting foreign correspondents and decreasing attention to foreign news in France can also be explained by the privatization of certain media outlets since the 1980s that have become more profit oriented (quoted in Halimi, Vidal & Maler, 2006; p. 11). Fewer and fewer foreign

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28 Information obtained through a personal conversation with the chief foreign desk editor, Philippe Gelie, on September, 27, 2010.
correspondents, however, means not only that there is less news from abroad, but that the quality of the news is questionable. As foreign bureaus disappear, the media “parachute” journalists into foreign locations as breaking news happens or rely on local sources or freelancers. Journalists themselves are quite pessimistic about the results of such sporadic reporting. Journalist Reena Vadehra (2007) in her article about the loss of foreign bureaus concludes that “the danger is that such journalists may lack context and in-depth cultural knowledge needed to cover news in another country.”

Another journalist, Monica Campbell, agrees:

Bad examples see journalists rush in without knowing the language and clinging to English-speaking locals, analysts and the like. They lack the historical context and miss valuable references and comparisons that can only be made by studying or living in the country. So bring on the clichés and stereotypes. And too bad for the readers who may know little about the story, which is why they’re reading it, and get served a piece filled with slapdash conclusions (in Mueller, 2007, p. 2).

A former *Boston Globe* foreign correspondent, Pamela Constable (2007), makes the following argument for maintaining foreign bureaus: “Foreign correspondents can burrow into society, cultivate strangers’ trust, follow meandering trails and dig beneath layers of diplomatic spin and government propaganda.”

Halimi, Vidal & Maler (2006), in their study of the French media, note that because of the lack of foreign correspondents and specialized knowledge, the media outlets inevitably fall on the well-known clichés in their international reporting: “after having dealt with insecurity in the French suburbs, here comes insecurity and terrorism. They use the same recipes to confirm the hierarchy of the society and the world, and support the consensus, order and power” (p. 12). In short, while newspapers cut back on foreign correspondents and bureaus in order to diminish costs and claiming that people are little interested in foreign news, the foreign news that is produced by new practices might be of

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even lesser interest to knowledgeable audiences that might instead turn to the Internet as their primary source for international news.

When considering the quality of news, the ideal of objectivity, which has been one of the most contested objectives in journalism, might add some insight. It was articulated as a professional value calling for separation of facts and values in an idealistic attempt to avoid all biases and distortions and to assure the quality of the news. Journalists were called to report information as factually as possible without commenting, evaluating or interpreting. A place accorded to objectivity has been more significant in Anglo-Saxon journalistic tradition than in French journalism. In fact, objectivity was officially articulated and firmly established as a professional objective in American journalism after WWI. The growing use of public relations and overt government propaganda aimed at mobilizing support for war efforts showed journalists how easily public opinion can be manipulated (Allan, 2010; Burton, 2007; Schudson, 1978). In fact, Walter Lippmann (2010) in his *Public opinion*, first published in 1922, claimed that the quest for objectivity was motivated by the growing awareness of the subjectivity of human nature. According to him, if journalists were to contribute to well-functioning democratic societies, they would have to act as professionals providing quality news, and his solution for this was “science.” He called reporters towards a stance of “a disinterested observer,” which he believed could bring journalists away from personal biases and propaganda to constructing stories grounded in facts in a sort of social scientific fashion to the greatest possible extent. As Allan (2010) concludes, regarding the American and British press in the post-WWI period, “impartiality’ demanded of journalists that they distinguish ‘facts’ from ‘values’ if their respective newspaper was to be recognized as a free arbiter of truth” (p. 44).

Schudson (1987), in his history of American newspapers, also suggests that journalists adopted the ideal of objectivity because they wanted to “escape from their own deep
convictions of doubt and drift” (p. 159), and find a way to protect themselves from “self-inflicted wounds” (p. 186). Similarly, Tuchman (1972) claims that objectivity was invented as a “strategic ritual,” a compulsory adherence to a set of conventions (i.e., routine newsroom practices, such as attribution of sources, fact checking etc.) that in a way minimizes journalists’ responsibility for what they write or say. Beyond these concrete practices, however, the ideal of objectivity has always existed only as an ideal. More than that, Schudson (1987) provides examples of the critique of objectivity on various grounds. For instance, it is said that objectivity in journalism has favored official news and failed to challenge structures of power and privilege (p. 160-186); or that it has assigned to journalists a role of passive observer rather than participant (p. 189). Feminist scholars criticize the ideal of objectivity for “invocation of a monologic truth [that] is masculinized to the extent that (predominantly white, elite) men’s orientations to ‘the world of fact’ are accepted as the most appropriate vantage points from which the immutable truth of reality is to be revealed” (Allan, 2010, p. 149). Despite these critiques and emergence of various other types of reporting (e.g., investigative, advocacy journalism etc.), Schudson concludes that journalism students, in the Anglo-Saxon world, will continue learning the “same old basics of who, what, where, when reporting” in an attempt to “reenact the rituals of objective reporting” (p. 192) that has become a staple feature of American journalistic tradition.

If in the U.S. objectivity has been a contested ideal, in France, it has been of a lesser concern and value because of differently conceived journalistic roles and practices. Benson (2002) terms the French model of journalism the “political/literary model,” and explains that “historically, journalistic professionalism in France has been defined not as a detachment or distance from political or ideological allegiances, but as the right to hold and defend a set of ideas” (p. 53). As journalism in France has developed in tandem with literary and political fields, Benson suggests that “in contrast to the ‘fact-centered discursive practice’ of ‘Anglo-
American’ journalism, the French press placed greater emphasis on political critique and literary style” (p. 53; see also Chalaby, 1996). While Americans adhered to the ideal of objectivity after WWI, perceiving it as an improvement in the quality of their work, the French “condemned a worsening quality of journalism, which put facts before ideas, and attributed it to ‘americanization’” (Lee, 1976, p. 231). This distinction between American and French journalism seems to be equally articulated by the contemporary media scholars in France. For example, Albert (2008), in his study of the French press, claims that:

French journalism has always been journalism of expression more than journalism of observation … It has been just as interested in presentation of facts as in exposition of ideas and analysis of situation; it has always critiqued intentions and forecasted consequences. Thus, it is fundamentally different from a factual Anglo-Saxon journalism which calls for a neat separation of facts and commentary (p. 47).

Benson (2002) defines the following as “hallmarks” of the French political/literary model in the press: page one commentary, “reaction” stories, and interview transcripts (p. 55). French philosopher Felix Guattari (1998), in his article Les mythes des pros de l’info published in a French magazine, sums up well the French perspective on journalistic writing by claiming that: “Information is nothing! What matters is commentary, presentation, aesthetic dimension, all of which give the information its existence and its rhythm” (p. 14-15). Another defining feature of the French press is its partisan nature, with the principal dailies divided along party lines and drawing the readership that maintains corresponding political views (Albert, 2008; D’Almeida, & Delporte, 2003). However, despite a plausible assumption that because of its closer ties to political field and actors, the French press might be less critical of government, Benson and Hallin (2007) in their comparative study of French and American press, found that the French press is, in fact, more critical than its American counterpart in several respects (p. 34).

Despite differing journalistic traditions in various countries and value attributed to the ideal of objectivity, the media around the world seem to be guilty of systematically making certain errors in their international reporting. Hafez (2007) in his study of media globalization
talks about several systematic biases that occur in foreign reporting of the Western media. According to him, the following structural features of international reporting are theoretically significant: 1) regionalism (tendency to cover only certain, but not all regions of the world and focus on national/local news); 2) conflict perspective; 3) political focus; 4) elite focus; 5) decontextualization; 6) failure to portray the structural problems that beset international relations (p. 30). The last feature is closely related to the decontextualization that is “typical of international reporting and the fact that media reporting is more events-than process-oriented” (p. 35). These systematic distortions in foreign reporting at least partially correspond to those introduced by the so-called “news values.” Various media scholars, beginning with the seminal study of Galtung and Ruge in 1965, have addressed the question of how events become news by pointing to certain criteria called “news values” (Braun, 2009; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001; Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Although a lot of controversy still persists over what “news values” are most important and to what extent, certain of them, widely accepted by many scholars - such as proximity (cultural or geographical), negativity, unambiguity, unexpectedness, elite and conflict orientation (Braun, 2009; Fedler, Bender, Davenport & Drager, 2005; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001) - certainly account for the systematic distortions discussed by Hafez.

Hafez further dissects the distortions of international reporting by distinguishing three levels at which these occur. Micro-level-distortions arise as a result of journalists’ individual biases, assumptions and interests. Meso-level-flaws are due to the peculiarities of the international flow of information (from the South to the North), lack of means etc. Finally, macro-level-distortions are largely explicable by the fact that international reporting is shaped by the mutual interactions of politics and media (p. 35-38). Later, I will discuss how many of Hafez’s general observations are also applicable to the case of Western media’s reporting on Africa.
Coverage of wars is particularly prone to various distortions. Allan and Zelizer (2004) call reporting in wars a “litmus test” for journalism. They argue that the acts of witnessing and truth-telling for war journalists are “shaped quite systematically by a weave of limitations – political, military, economic, and technological” (p. 5). A former BBC chief news correspondent, Kate Adie (1998), suggests in relation to war reporting that the belief that journalists can remain distant, remote, and unaffected by often horrific realities of conflicts “tends to go out of the window” (p. 54), when they are in the midst of conflict and action. Moreover, in war reporting, there is a tendency for the media to support and reinforce a patriotic consensus, and this is true even for the media that are generally known to be critical of their governments (Bennett & Paletz, 1994; Hafez, 2007). This is a practice defined by a former journalist, Marvin Kalb (1994), as “the most dangerous of professional practices, namely, patriotic journalism.” For instance, many studies discuss the American media’s support for the Persian Gulf War and their influence on public opinion (Iyengar & Simon, 1994; Zaller, 1994). The French media also supported the Gulf War in 1991, as they supported the campaign against Serbia in 1999, and the intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. In 2003, the same media nevertheless turned against and demonstrated their hostility towards the Anglo-American operation against Iraq. Halimi, Vidal, and Maler (2006) have an explanation for such a change of attitudes: “An ally of the United States in the first three conflicts, Paris happened to be a champion of the opposition to Washington during the fourth one” (p. 10). Backmann (1996) in his essay *Crises médiatisées et crises cachées* analyzes the French media coverage of 18 violent conflicts around the world and demonstrates that the ones accorded the most attention are necessarily those where Western interests or the destiny of the French are directly threatened.

Reporting on human rights issues around the world poses similar difficulties. Journalists are necessarily compelled to choose certain issues, often at the expense of
others, and are often emotionally engaged with the issues reported. This becomes particularly problematic when humanitarian issues reported concern the so-called Third World: that is, when coupled with the issues of speaking and acting on behalf of the culturally inferior Other - the configuration that underlines the powerfulness of the speaker at the expense of those spoken about. This is further complicated by the unequal flow of information from the South to the North, but rarely the other way around (Hafez, 2007). Moreover, advocacy goals that journalists sometimes set for themselves working hand in hand with human rights advocates and humanitarian workers have significant consequences on the discourses produced about those who are reported about. As Girardet (1996) explains, although relief workers have noble intentions, they often promulgate the inherently colonial assumption that the world is divided into benevolent Western media consumers and “problem-ridden” masses of the third world. Spurr (1993) similarly warns that “the sympathetic humanitarian eye is no less a product of deeply held colonialist values, and no less authoritative in the mastery of its object, than the surveying and policing eye” (p. 20).

Human rights advocates and humanitarian workers often become important contributors to journalists’ work as sources and witnesses, and can provide qualitative information in frequently difficult circumstances. Journalists should nevertheless remain aware that human rights advocates and humanitarian workers have their own agendas which might influence information and images they communicate. Mamdani (2009), in his analysis of the organization Save Darfur, which positions itself as a crusader against violence in Darfur and has consistently called for a military solution in the region, shows that its campaign has not taken into account the facts on the ground. In fact, he concludes that the organization has provided its proponents and publics at large with a greatly distorted image of the problem, but one that fits its own agenda (p. 51-56). The
humanitarian worker Conor Foley (2008), in his account of humanitarian interventions around the world, also warns that human rights concerns frequently diverge from political humanitarianism, and that the latter often does indeed have negative side effects of prolonging or even inciting conflicts and wars. In other words, humanitarian concerns, when not grounded in sound knowledge and analysis of complex historical, economic and socio-political realities, can easily become politicized and have harmful secondary effects.

Further underscoring the problem of mediated humanitarianism, Lipotevsky (1992) defines the situation as “media charity,” which, according to him, is post-moralist in that it reconciles good intentions and pleasure (p. 138), as the rules of the market posit the commodification of suffering as perfectly legitimate. The complexity of the issue is also accentuated by the fact that the mediated commodification and display of suffering does not necessarily lead to the desired result. “The spectacle of suffering,” to borrow Arendt’s (1966) term, might remain just that and nothing else (Boltanski, 1999) because of compassion fatigue (Moeller, 1999) or other reasons. For example, a journalist, Ratih Hardjono (2001), in her essay about women’s experiences in war, claims that the decision of whether to report rapes is always an extremely difficult one, partially because the outcome of such reporting remains uncertain: “By reporting them, I highlight the atrocities and, perhaps, lead to stopping the perpetrators, but at the same time I know the shame that the women and members of their community feel when their story is told to an international audience. I also cannot be certain if my reporting would help or worsen the woman’s life.”

Even worse, the images of human suffering can actually be manipulated to achieve strategic goals and lead to the hegemony of “philanthropic imperialism” (Ottosen, 1996), which marks a new era of neoliberal endeavors, especially those of the U.S.

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In short, declining systematic attention to foreign news and journalists’ presence in foreign locations affect the quality of news produced. International events, including wars and other types of events that often entail human rights issues, are in and of themselves difficult to report. The task is made even more difficult for journalists who are “parachuted” into such events for short-periods of time, without much prior preparation and specialized knowledge. That is at least partially why international reporting suffers from certain systematic biases (Hafez, 2007), most often sought as shortcuts to comprehending extremely complex situations. Reporting on wars or human rights issues in the world also poses some unique challenges that often severely contradict the ideal of objectivity, even in its least strict form (as a set of professional practices), as when journalists engage in “patriotic journalism” or when they report about human rights issues in the Third World without taking into consideration the underlying power dynamics and the privileged vantage point from which they speak about distant others. In what follows, I will look more specifically at the case of the Western media’s reporting on Africa and African women by looking more in-depth at certain systematic distortions in this coverage and the effects they have on representations of Africans.

Contemporary Representations of Africa

The existing literature on the Western media’s reporting on Africa more or less unilaterally suggests the invisibility of Africa and certain systematic distortions in its coverage. First of all, more than twenty years of research attests to the fact that Africa is underreported (El Zein, & Cooper, 1992; Fair, 1992; Hachten, & Bail, 1985; Hawk, 1992; Kenney, 1994; Pratt, 1980; Stokke, 1971; Terrell, 1989), which reflects the larger trend of decreasing attention to international news in general that Hafez (2007) calls the trend of “regionalism.” Moreover, it is not only Africa as a continent that is continuously overlooked, but the media attention to it is unequally divided among African regions. Certain countries
receive a disproportionate amount of overall coverage; this attention is mostly determined by
the involvement of Western countries in Africa and their strategic interests there (Donck,
1996; El Zein, & Cooper, 1992; Pratt, 1980; Terrell, 1989). In an attempt to find a more
general pattern, Donck (1996), in his analysis of Dutch news, suggests that the amount of
coverage on different African regions corresponds to their level of Gross National Product,
i.e. most frequently covered countries are the wealthiest ones.

Several studies propose that overall, the coverage of Africa declined, as the Cold War
attenuated, even though a zigzag pattern can also be seen at certain times (Hachten, & Bail,
1985; El Zein, & Cooper, 1992). Furthering the logic that, in the eyes of the West, Africa was
more important and newsworthy during the Cold War, Ottosen (1999) states that the coverage
of Africa continued to decrease in the post-Cold War era. This is because, media attention
shifted to the new “hot” spots, such as Central and Eastern Europe or the Middle East. All of
this has eventually led, in the words of Pratt (1980), to “the miniscule coverage of continent,
both in terms of geographic areas and typology” (p. 43). It is worth noting, however, that the
new ideology of the “war on terror” and Africa’s role in fostering as well as fighting against
terrorism coupled with the U.S.’s increasing interest in Africa’s oil might bring Africa back
into the media spotlight.

The problem of underreporting Africa, with most of the coverage being events-related,
is clearly linked to economic factors (Bodie, 1992; Hawk, 1992; Kenney, 1994; Ottosen,
1999; Stokke, 1971). It is expensive for journalists to go to Africa and report from the spot,
although advancing technologies are facilitating the task. While the major media outlets
around the world can afford to do so,32 many smaller ones, even those that are interested and
invested in reporting on Africa, such as, e.g., the African-American press, can only

32 Ottosen (1999) gives an example of the CNN deployment in Somalia during the famine. He reports that CNN
coverage of this visit cost more than the entire food relief operation mounted by Care International in Baidoa (p.
183). So, while media outlets as powerful as CNN can afford to go to the spot and report from there, some
ethical issues, especially from the humanitarian perspective, arise.
infrequently provide its readers with first-hand observations (Bodie, 1992). Yet, while the
bigger and more influential media outlets do send their reporters to cover various African
events, as they occur, even media of such caliber as the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*
maintain only very limited continuous presence on the continent. For example, in 2007, out of
*Le Monde*’s fifty-one correspondents working in forty foreign bureaus, four are stationed in
Africa. The other two national French dailies, *La Liberation* and *Le Figaro*, however, have no
permanent foreign correspondents in Africa. For the *New York Times*, out of its twenty-four
foreign bureaus, four are based in Africa, and *Los-Angeles Times* has two foreign bureaus on
the continent. Livingstone (1996) discusses how a handful of journalists in the vast African
continent, even with the best of intentions, usually can cover only the events that the West
deems most newsworthy and are forced to forgo the rest. In other words, because Africa, as a
whole, is no longer strategically very important to the West, and reporting from Africa on a
daily basis is complicated and costly, most Western media outlets opt for only a short-term
presence, “parachuting” journalists to cover the biggest events, such as wars and crises.

Logically following from this, then, is the second accusation coming from the
academic field: the Western media only notice Africa in the case of wars and crises (Fair,
1992; Fair, & Chakravartty, 1999; Harding; 2003; Hawk, 1992; Mamdani, 2009; Pratt, 1980;
Terrell, 1989). In other words, in those infrequent instances when the media portray Africa as
anything other than exotic landscapes and safaris (Harding, 2003; Lutz, & Collins, 1993), it
most likely happens against the background of either natural or human-made disasters. Pratt
(1980) demonstrates in his study of American opinion and news magazines back in 1976 that
while media concentrated on all kinds of conflicts and crises, reporting on African social
events, arts, culture, sports and science was obsolete. El Zein & Cooper (1992), in their study

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33 For both *Le Monde* and *The New York Times* information was obtained through personal correspondence in
34 This is not to say that certain Western countries do not have important interests in some African countries or
regions but “over-reporting” of those particular countries only results in the already discussed geographical bias.
of the *New York Times*, document that the U.S. penchant towards reporting African disasters and misery fluctuated over time, reaching an all-time high of 87.7% in 1985. But the trend was significantly reversed in the 1990s (p. 141). Mamdani (2009) in his recent study of the Darfur conflict, concludes that corporate media’s interest lies “in covering only war, [and] thereby continually misrepresent[ing] the African continent” (p. 19).

This almost unanimously accepted consensus, however, might be a little exaggerated. For example, Hachten and Bail (1985), in their study of coverage of Tanzania and Ghana in the U.S and English press, found that only 40% of articles were crisis-related. Koomson’s (1991) study of U.S. newspaper coverage of sub-Saharan Africa reports that 45.3% of it was crisis-related. Lutz and Collins (1993), in their study of *National Geographic*, emphasize that at least up till the 1960s it consciously avoided the negative and controversial coverage of conflicts and presented Africa as “gracious, sunlit and smiling” (p. 46). If one takes into account the media’s general obsession with spectacular drama and Haskin’s (1980) estimate of about 33% of negative news as a norm (p. 157), then African crises seem to be only slightly “over-reported.” Moreover, it is important to note that many African countries did indeed go through various crises in the post-independence era, most of which were in one way or another related to the legacy of colonialism and exploitation. Thus, the problem might not necessarily be “too much bad news” but rather not “enough variety of news.” However, even though no quantitative studies documenting the most recent trends exist, it is possible to assume that improving technologies and access as well as the ever increasing interdependence on the global scale would encourage Western journalists to bring more varied stories on Africa to their readers. In light of financial burden of reporting in foreign countries, news

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35 For a list of African wars, for example, see Turshen (1998), p. 6.
36 Here, however, the ultimate responsibility lies not with reporters but with their editors. A number of studies suggest that journalists have always filed and sent various stories about Africa, but the overwhelming majority selected by editors to reach the readers were on crises and conflicts or yet otherwise biased (see Cabaco, 1984; Girardet, 1996; Livingstone, 1996; Wilhoit, & Weaver, 1983).
outlets reach out to technological advances to cut the costs. For example, American television network ABC has been experimenting with “one-man” foreign bureaus that consist of a single reporter equipped with hand-held digital technology that can gather information, audio, photos, and video materials alone at a fraction of a cost of maintaining a traditional foreign bureau (Dorroh, 2008; Gough, 2007). Finally, the blooming of African civil society throughout the 1990s could have also exerted a positive influence on shaping Western media images of Africa.

It is also interesting to note that despite the Western media’s interest in African wars and crises at the expense of other themes and issues, they do not cover all of African wars and crises with equal intensity. As the British journalist Pawson (2007) has suggested based on her own experience, “most African wars are all but ignored by the mainstream British media” (p. 45). Such disregard for certain, but not other, conflicts must be explained by the West’s economic stakes in various African countries. Mamdani (2009) explains the U.S. media’s disregard for the brutal war in Angola in 1998 by pointing out to its oil interests in the country. He says that the “war may have led to the death of 3 percent of Angola’s population, but it did not halt the flow of oil to the United States” (p. 21; see also Pawson, 2007).

The issue of the Western media’s obsession with African wars and crises might also be potentially overestimated by scholars’ focus on the media coverage of crises and other negative events. With very rare exceptions, the scholarship on media’s reporting on Africa analyzes the media coverage of wars (Bookmiller, & Bookmiller, 1992; Ibelema, 1992; Livingstone, 1996; Maloba, 1992); famines (Fair, 1992; 1996; Fair, & Chakravartty, 1999; Ottosen, 1999); refugee crises (Fair, & Parks, 2001); and female genital cutting (Grise, 2001). While this goes hand in hand with the claims that the media only report crises and conflicts, the existing literature overlooks a number of media texts that are not about the crises but have never become the object of academic inquiry.
As a stark contrast to the conventional scholarship comes Harding’s (2003) atypical study about the South African version of the reality program *Big Brother* that was broadcast around the world and discussed extensively in the British press. Harding convincingly demonstrates that the very lack of overt ideology in this seemingly populist programming might be constitutive of the strongest alternative representation of Africa recently seen. Another study that attests to the possibility to talk about Africa differently and outside the colonial discourses is that of Lutz and Collins (1993) on *National Geographic*. Here, however, the authors conclude that even portraying Africa outside the colonial discourses, the magazine does little good to the representations of Africa in the long-run, as it simply denies social, political and historical realities of European exploitation of Africa. In any event, studies of alternative representations of Africa by the Western media that are perhaps best suited to challenge the well-entrenched image of Africa as locked up in perpetual crisis are still lacking. In other words, not only is the Western media perhaps slightly too obsessed with African wars and crises, but perhaps so are the Western academics. Thus, my study offers an important contribution to the existing literature by looking, in the following chapters, at a variety of media texts about African women, including the ones outside the conventional themes of crises and suffering.

**The legacy of colonial discourses and simplicity.** Not only does Africa seem to be underreported both in terms of quantity and in terms of a range of issues covered, but the Western media has also consistently presented its readers with simplified and trivialized African realities. There are several trends, identified in the literature, that the Western media have been consistently employing to discuss Africa: 1) choosing those stories or angles of the complex issues that are most easy to recount to Western audiences; 2) emphasizing tribalism or what Ibelema (1992) calls “tribal fixation” when reporting African wars; 3) focusing on the individual and the emotional at the expense of detached explanations grounded in historical
and sociopolitical realities; 4) inclination to bipolar identification (where good guys are those who are the closest to the West and bad guys, those who lag behind) or what Ibelema (1992) calls “cultural affinity frame”; 5) and finally, reporting stories through the perspective of Westerners. All of these framing strategies have their origins in the previously discussed colonial discourses. That is, as Hawk (1992) concludes, much of the existing scholarship points to the fact that “the simplest way to communicate the African story in comprehensible form in limited space is by colonial metaphor familiar to reader” (p. 7; see also, Abdullahi, 1991; Ebo, 1992; Fair, 1996).

Africa, consisting of more than fifty states, each with varied cultural, ethnic, social, and religious groups, is not a simple matter to understand or to relay to Western audiences. Moreover, underlying the Western world’s historical as well as current relationships with Africa are exploitation and Western culpability, which the media aim to disguise or, even better, avoid altogether. For example, African conflicts and crises are never portrayed as resulting from colonial or neo-colonial policies. Fair’s extensive studies on the coverage of famine in Africa (1992; 1996; Fair, & Chakravartty, 1999) stress time and again that famine is presented as a natural (not human-made) disaster, for which the short-term solution in the form of the Western food aid is projected as completely adequate. The Western media have never, according to her, discussed the structural factors of famine and considered it as a long-term phenomenon, linked to poverty issuing from the long-lasting exploitation of Africa by the West. This has clearly allowed the West to keep up its image as the benefactor who still willingly assumes the “white man’s burden.”

If the Western media largely omits the historic context that led to African countries’ current underdevelopment and impoverishment, it hardly does any better job in explicating the role of corrupt local elites who have been complicit in what Bond (2006) terms “looting of Africa.” Fanon (2001) writing on the “Pitfalls of National Consciousness” in 1960s explains
the curse of the African elites in the post-independence era by suggesting that when the colonizers were defeated, African countries were left with an “underdeveloped” middle class with no economic power, unable to destroy the colonial structures left behind. As a result, he claims, this middle class readily took upon its new role as a “manager for Western enterprise, and … set up its country as a brothel of Europe” (p. 123), gradually becoming more and more corrupt, turning the country into the “bourgeois dictatorship” (p. 133). To achieve such a status, Fanon suggests, the new middle class was obliged to use “class aggressiveness to corner the positions formerly kept for foreigners,” as a result, antagonizing other classes and inciting racism, ultra-nationalism, chauvinism and religious rivalries (p. 125). Rodney (1972) is also categorical about the role of African elites: “The presence of a group of African sell-outs is part of the definition of underdevelopment” (p. 45). However, Bond (2006) argues that corruption of local elites in search for the individual satisfaction at expense of people at large is in fact favorable to the Western neoliberalism advocates. He suggests that it is easier for the West to strike economic deals with such governments, as a result, locking in place “low-intensity democracy” and “neoliberal economic regimes” (p. 122). In fact, he goes as far as suggesting that to continue the neoliberal exploitation of Africa, the West needs a “sub-imperial” ally, of which South Africa is a perfect candidate (p. 111-130). In other words, while the complicity of local elites in corrupting and exploiting their own people cannot be underestimated, the complex historical conditions need to be put forward in order to get the full picture. That is, nevertheless, exactly what is missing in the Western reporting that readily portrays the corruption, failed states and ethnic, religion or political rivalries as trivial signs of African “savagery.”

African civil wars are never explained as the intricate and inevitable ethnic rivalries that are frequently the result of the *irrational* political divisions drawn during the European
colonial rule 37 or the inevitable corruption of the “underdeveloped” middle class. Quite on
the opposite, they are simply presented as the outcome of African irrationality: i.e., as tribal
wars or yet “black-on-black” (e.g., South Africa) or “Muslim-on-Muslim” (e.g., Darfur)
violence. In other words, these wars are conceptualized as primitive rivalries that have no
rational explanation and occur only as a result of African inferiority and savagery (Fair, &

In some instances, to orient its audiences, the Western media eagerly put labels on the
sides involved. Bookmiller and Bookmiller (1992) document that the U.S. media consistently
referred to the Algerian independence fighters as “Muslims,” “Muslim natives,” “Muslim
masses” (p. 64). By bringing to the forefront the religious dimension of othering, so familiar
to Western mentalities, the media, in this single act of identification, validated the French
violence against Algerians. Not surprisingly, the label of “Muslim” later mutated into one of
“terrorist,” as U.S. support for France increased.38 If religious labeling becomes unavailable,
other identifications are coined. For example, the current war in Darfur is conceptualized by
the U.S. media as a conflict between “Africans” and “Arabs,” as both groups are Muslim.
This, once again, allows the media to emphasize the alleged irrationality of the war. It is,
however, yet again, the Western media that present themselves as limited, if not outright
irrational, in their quest to see and project the complex conflicts as bipolar quarrels, depicting
them in the most simplistic terms as between two groups that need to be defined at all costs.
The Western media, as Ibelema (1992) convincingly demonstrates in his analysis of the
Nigerian civil war, are driven by the inevitable need to always “identify” who the bad and the
good guys are. And in the instance of the Nigerian civil war, the good guys, following the

37 Consider the case of the Rwandan genocide (e.g., Des Forges, 1999) or yet the ongoing crisis in Darfur (e.g.,
Idris, 2005).
38 Also see Abdullahi (1991) of his discussion of how Libya was unequivocally discussed as harboring
communism and terrorism. These examples point to the U.S, but also the wider Occidental, tendency to equate
Islam with terrorism.
well-established colonial logic, were those who were more modern and, thus, closer in their characteristics to the West (p. 84). He concludes that both tribal and cultural affinity frames informed the reporting of the Biafran war.

When the conflicts in Africa get too complicated for the Western media, they simply omit what does not fit into their simplified frames. For example, Fair and Parks (2001), in their study on the Rwandan refugee crisis, state that it received much more extensive media coverage than the genocide that triggered the displacement of huge numbers of Rwandans. The explanation, according to them, is to be found in the media’s unrelenting drive towards simplicity: “Covering genocide meant having to understand politics, to assess both domestic and international accountability. By comparison, covering refugees was simple” (p. 47). Similarly, Ibelema (1992) notes in relation to the coverage of the Biafran war that “not only did *Times* ignore aspects of the conflict that would have enhanced its readers’ understanding of the war’s complexity, it also overlooked or downplayed those aspects that contradicted the theme of African savagery and hatefulness” (p. 86). What these examples illustrate is that the Western media simplify and trivialize Africa and do so by drawing on the centuries-old colonial discourses.

That the Western media’s motto in relation to African coverage seems to be “the simpler, the better” is also proven by several studies that consider the Cold War frame in reporting of Africa at the time. A number of African crises, such as, for instance, the Algerian independence war (Bookmiller, & Bookmiller, 1992) or the Ethiopian and Somalian famines (Fair, 1992), were reported through this lens and conceptualized as the site of struggles between the U.S. and the Soviet Union (see also, Abdullahi, 1991; Govea, 1992; Terrell, 1989). Abdullahi’s (1991) study demonstrates how images and narratives about Africa were maneuvered to serve the strategic goals of the West in the Cold War. He claims that the two countries, besides South Africa, that were most visible in the Western media at the time were
Ethiopia and Libya, both associated with communism. He concludes that the abundant coverage of these countries concentrated on “highlighting the ills of communism,” with Ethiopia, thus, emerging as a “poverty-stricken nation” and Libya as the hot bed of international terrorism (p. 9-12). The attraction of this interpretation to the Western media is explained by Govea (1992) in the following manner: “the Cold War approach ha[d] the advantage of being simple” (p. 96). That is, the definition of bad guys vs. good guys was handed down on the plate and, thus, there was no need for the media to try to analyze and understand the domestic factors at play in each of the African countries. As in the post-Cold War era this frame has lost its relevance, it is interesting to look at how the media cope with the fact that such a simplistic shortcut to intricate African realities is no longer available to them.

One of the instruments still at the Western media’s disposal is to report African events through a Western perspective. Many studies underscore that because most of the journalists working in Africa are Westerners and have little *a priori* knowledge or specialized expertise in Africa, there is a built-in Western bias (Piot, 2006; Terrell, 1989; Torchia, 1981). Here is an explanation by a journalist who spent ten years in Africa:

> Most foreign correspondents, in my experience, arrive unprepared for Africa. I certainly did. We may lack language skills. We almost certainly lack a relevant cultural background. It may take us two or three years to make a swing around our beat … By the time we begin to understand a little of what is going on, we are exhausted, frustrated, and probably about to be assigned out of Africa (Torchia, 1981, p. 41).

At the same time, one can certainly assume that the “darkness” of Western journalists in relation to Africa has diminished since the 1980s.

Another way through which the Western perspective is perhaps more consciously communicated is by resorting to white/Western sources. The reliance on Western informants has its roots in the journalism of the colonial era, during which white journalists reported about whites for whites, rendering Africans in their home lands simply obsolete (Terrell,
While Africans are now certainly visible when the media talk about Africa, they are still not necessarily heard. Fair and Chakravartty (1999) report that the sources for the stories about Ethiopian and Somali famines were predominantly Western and white relief workers, despite the fact that in most acute crisis areas, 75% to 95% of the relief workers were locals (p. 154). It is important to take into account that in some cases, when access to a country/region is hindered because of a conflict or crisis, Western humanitarian organizations might be considered as the only reliable source of information (see, e.g., Livingstone, 1996). Yet, this does not seem to be the case in the situation described by Fair and Chakravartty, where other than white and Western perspectives were available but were not chosen. In her other studies, Fair (1992; 1996) emphasizes that during coverage of famines, Africans and, more specifically, African bodies are utilized to symbolically embody suffering. But the situation is most frequently commented and interpreted by Western journalists themselves with very little commentary coming from those who are actually undergoing the suffering. Such a reliance on Westerners and their interpretations resonates all-too-well the colonial fashion of rendering Africans as objects to be gazed at and talked about but infrequently heard or consulted. Fair and Parks’ (2001) analysis of the Rwandan refugee crisis takes this analogy to its extreme. They discuss how refugee camps with their imagery of wired fences on television came to signify the confined spaces filled with marginalized people who needed “to be monitored, taken care of and pitied” (p. 39). In other words, Western media presented to its audiences nothing less than the new type, televised, “human zoos.”

This simplified coverage of complex African events has the unequivocal effect of painting a bleak picture of Africa in Western minds. Africans are constantly seen as irrational, helpless and backward, just as the colonial discourses have already established. Neither then nor now, are they able to take care of themselves and, thus, depend heavily on Western intervention and aid. Yet, according to the Western media, it is never Western exploitation
that is to blame for the current conditions in many African countries but rather Africans themselves. Spurr (1993) gives an example of a cartoon that appeared in many American newspapers throughout 1985, during the Ethiopian famine. The cartoon has four frames that feature a starving black child who explains the situation to Western audiences in the following way: “Africa’s problem is very simple. We make babies and they starve to death”; “We make more babies and they starve to death”; “We repeat the cycle over and over again”; “This is called the rhythm method” (p. 181). Here, reminiscent of colonial discourses, Africans are portrayed as childlike (the representative who speaks to the outside world is a child), but also as hypersexual, as unable to control sexual urges. That is, African sexual ethics and practices are represented as still very much the “other” when compared to those of the “modern” Western world.

Africa then, as concluded in the existing academic critiques of the media, is still the same “dark” Africa, placed outside of history, objectified and in a status of perpetual crisis and stasis. While presenting a trivialized and simplified picture of African countries, the Western media seem to not hesitate to resort to the well-familiar colonial logic and rhetoric that remains unchallenged. There is a visible shift from colonial discourses proper of “savages in need of civilization” to neocolonial discourses projecting “desperate people in need of salvation,” but the implications are the same. Thus, what is of interest is to look whether among those simplified and (neo)colonial-logic abiding stories, one can find emerging alternative representations and narratives.

**Negative news and human rights perspective.** It is well-known that the news media play an important role in educating people by providing information. In fact, given the lack of alternative sources of knowledge and personal experience, the various media become the main channel of information, especially with regard to issues, such as foreign politics. Clearly, Africa, for many Westerners, remains the distant continent that most of them learn about
exclusively from the media. Thus, the impact of the media representations of Africa on Western understandings and beliefs about Africa is ever stronger. At once underscoring this and also criticizing the U.S. policies at the time, *Le Monde* in 1994 published a cartoon with a message about the Rwandan genocide, in which the U.S. president B. Clinton was featured as saying: “I know Rwanda exists, I saw it on the CNN.” Talking more generally about representations of human rights issues around the world, Stevenson (2005) concludes that the order of the day is the “politics of mediated human rights” (p. 76). That is, it is in the discourses of the media that, borrowing from Cohen and Seu (2002), “the human rights problem[s] become socially constructed” (p. 188), and visible (see also Rosenblatt, 1996).

The negativity of the news about Africa and the inherent distortions that most likely originate from colonial discourses pose a humanitarian dilemma. On the one hand, the representations of Africans as desperately in need of help, naïve, unable to control their environments and their irrational urges simply perpetuate the image of the “Dark Africa.” On the other hand, humanitarian organizations working in Africa in the midst of wars and crises rely on the media to display the human suffering in hopes of attracting more funding and aid. For example, Fair and Parks (2001) claim that during the Rwandan refugee crisis “aid workers hoped that the media circulation of aerial images might incite American citizens to pressure the U.S. government to intervene, for it would force American … viewers to see and confront the magnitude of the refugee crisis” (p. 44). To comprehend fully the force of colonial logic in human rights discourses, one should look at Piot’s (2006) study of how the media and the courts articulated and presented Kasinga’s case. Kasinga was a young Togolese woman who fled her country in order to avoid female genital cutting and forced marriage. Piot concludes that her case, both in the media but also in the courts, was framed by colonial metaphors. However, he does not blame the media or Kasinga’s lawyers but rather suggests that “to win their case, they *had* to portray
[Kasinga] as coming from an unchanging patriarchal society of mutilators” (p. 232). In other words, in order to receive attention and help from the Western world, Africa needs to live up to the Western imaginations of Africa as the place of misery and desperation.

Equally problematic is the mediated involvement of Western stars in African humanitarian affairs. The last decade has witnessed a growing number of famous volunteers who have been using their name recognition and cultural capital to draw attention to various African issues (e.g., G. Clooney on Darfur; A. Milano on mines; A. Jolie on poverty, etc.).39 While the media accounts about such “star charity” might have been effective in reaching wide audiences, the attention in those types of stories is displaced from Africans who are undergoing the suffering or dealing with various issues onto the benevolent Western stars who emerge as selfless heroes. Not only are Africans pushed into the background, but also media consumers, once again, receive simplistic and trivialized accounts of African realities. As Fair and Parks (2001) note, “simplifying humanitarian stories for domestic audiences in terms of what the West is doing for Africans allows journalists and news consumers alike to assume a certain superiority” (p. 47). This superiority is all the more visible if it is a world-known musician or a Hollywood star that has chosen to voluntarily undertake the “white man’s (or woman’s) burden.”

The solution to the problem is not, however, avoiding or ignoring negative news about Africa. In their study on *National Geographic*, Lutz and Collins (1993) note that the magazine’s “gracious, sunlit, smiling” images of Africa have represented a stark contrast to the negative and frequently demeaning ways of reporting on it elsewhere (p. 46). Yet, the authors conclude that a systematic and long lasting denial of social issues in the

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39 See Mamdani (2009) on the discussion of the celebrities’ involvement into campaign against violence in Darfur.
magazine, which allowed it to report on Africa outside of the colonial discourses, has become problematic, especially in the later decades of the 20th century. They explain that “the message that we are all alike under the skin takes on new meaning in a social context which denies that discrimination exists or that race has been used to consolidate the privilege of some and oppress others” (p. 166). In other words, *National Geographic* opted for the creation of a new set of imaginary discourses on Africa, which while negating the colonial discourses neither adequately represented contemporary African realities, nor acknowledged the Euroamerican history of African exploitation to explain those realities.

In short, even journalists who are knowledgeable and invested in reporting on Africa face the dilemma of how to report on African realities, which are often dire, in order to seek justice and help without perpetuating the colonial traditions of “darkening” Africa. Several suggestions can be made. While reporting on short-term events and conflicts, journalists should take time to explain the causes of these events, going beyond the simplified colonial metaphors and divisions, of which they should be aware. Moreover, they should avoid reporting on these events by drawing on Western perspectives and seek the testimonies of a variety of people who are involved and capable of providing the least biased first-hand accounts. Finally, in order to engage in responsible advocacy journalism rather than simply providing media consumers with “the spectacle of African suffering,” journalists should equally report on African realities in times of peace and stability. The variety of accounts would not only make the media scholars happy, but would also advance the goals of humanitarian organizations by presenting Africans to Western publics as humans, not merely as desperate and helpless victims or ruthless dictators and savages. As Kumar (2008) suggests in relation to Muslim women, what is needed is the project of “transnational solidarity,” which involves “taking sides and
building social movements that can challenge the US’s imperial agenda” on the international scale (p. 28). In other words, Western journalists should be active participants in such solidarity movements looking and reporting beyond the colonial discourses and continuing Western imperialism.

**African women and contemporary media.** Much of the criticism of the general Western media coverage of Africa can be easily applied to the media coverage of African women as well. This straightforward projection is justified by the fact that scholarship on specifically African women’s portrayals in the media is very scarce (Fair, 1992; 1996; Fair, & Parks, 2001; Grise, 2001; Treichler, 1999; Piot, 2006). In other words, in academic literature, just like in the media, African women are even less visible than Africa/Africans in general. Given the multiple burdens that African women have been made to bear throughout centuries, the obscurity that they have been cast in signifies the sexist bias of both the patriarchal Western media and academic structures. On the other hand, since African women in original colonial discourses frequently embodied the extremity of the Western myths about the “Other,” their contemporary representations should clearly be of interest to media scholars.

The existing few studies (Fair, 1992; 1996; Fair, & Parks, 2001; Grise, 2001; Treichler, 1999; Piot, 2006) bring forward African women’s victimization and a somewhat strategic utilization of African women and their bodies by the media. As Fair (1996) cautions, African women in the Western media might be marginalized but are still employed and deployed by them for instrumental purposes (p. 1). In other words, they might be frequently seen but are rarely heard. This is not surprising since in the media coverage of crises, both in Africa and elsewhere, images of female bodies have been established to play an important instrumental role (Fair, 1996; Kumar, & Stabile, 2005; Wilson, 2002). Thus, in the contexts of African crises and conflicts, African women’s images are frequently used to demonstrate the
magnitude of a crisis, evoke sympathy or symbolize victimhood and desperation. For instance, with regard to images of African women in the U.S. media coverage of famine, Fair (1996) found that female bodies were utilized “to map hunger and deprivation [through] … objectification that works to structure knowledge about groups of people and classify individuals in ways that support their subordination” (p. 14). That is, here, the most vulnerable of Africans, women (and often also children) are chosen to embody African misery and also to establish the distance between Africans and Westerners. In short, even if African women make it into the Western media, most frequently in the context of crises, they often remain silent and objectified, while the battles over identity, resources and natural conditions are inscribed onto their bodies, which ultimately contributes to the image of Africa as inferior, in line with the colonial logic.

Suffering and victimized African women, rarely allowed to speak for themselves, are displayed in Western media for a sort of voyeuristic gazing, even though this gazing does not necessarily carry sexual overtones. In fact, in the context of war and crises narratives, African women’s sexuality, in contrast to colonial discourses, is deemphasized. For example, big breasts, a staple of African hyper-sexuality, come into sharp contrast with the flaccid breasts of African female refugees suffering from hunger, shown repeatedly in the course of TV coverage of the Rwandan refugee crisis (Fair, & Parks, 2001, p. 40). Similarly, Fair (1996) found that in the coverage of famine, women’s bodies were “discursively desexualized and medicalized” (p. 14), and functioned once again just as a narrative device to magnify the crisis. In short, the rhetoric of hyper-sexuality seems to no longer greatly inform the narratives and images of African women in times of crises. However, what does remain is the dismemberment of female bodies and focus on particular body parts, especially breasts, which has its roots both in colonial but also, more generally, in Western sexist discourses (see, e.g., Kilbourne, 2003).
Where African women’s sexuality reappears is in the media’s discussion of the African “overpopulation problem,” which in the last decades has been closely related to discourses on AIDS. Western conceptualization of high fertility rates in Africa as an “overpopulation problem” has been circulated widely throughout the 20th century.\textsuperscript{40} These have their roots in the early false colonial imaginings that African women were hyper-fertile. In fact, Momsend and Townsend (1987) state that fertility is the most studied aspect of women’s lives in the third world. This association of Africa with high fertility, which in a way invokes hyper-sexuality, has been so well entrenched in the minds of Westerners that sometimes even images and narratives that are seemingly unrelated to population issues become linked with them. For instance, Fair (1992) cautions us that images of African women with many children during famine crises, in her analysis, may have led media consumers to perhaps unconsciously attribute blame to those very women for being irresponsible and having too many children for whom they cannot properly care (p. 15). That is, it is women who are ultimately assigned the blame for famines, not the West that has underdeveloped and exploited Africa for centuries.

Even when African women enter Western media outside the contexts of crises and wars, the choice of stories and images are likely to perpetuate the othering. In other words, the media tend to bring forward the exotic and the unusual. For example, Bookmiller and Bookmiller (1992) discuss how during the Algerian Independence War, American Times and Newsweek were fascinated with the treatment of Algerian Muslim women, continuously

\textsuperscript{40} These Western concerns resulted in extensive eugenic projects at the beginning of the century (see, e.g., Dikotter, 1998; Klausen, 1997), and contraception distribution campaigns during the second half of the century (e.g., Bledsoe, 2002; Kaler, 2003).
entertaining issues, such as marriage at a young age, marital laws and the colonial times’
favorite – polygamy. To further demonstrate the Western media’s bias, one should look at the
issue of female genital cutting, extensively covered by the Western media (e.g., Grise, 2001;
Piot, 2006). Presented as the ultimate evidence of African women’s oppression, the cultural
practice of female genital cutting emerges, even if unintentionally, as the essential
paternalistic narrative for creating African women as the victimized “Other,” still in need of
saving. As Grise (2001) explains, “given the prevalence of negative images of Africa in the
Western media, the practice is likely to be understood in the West in the context of
stereotypes of Africa rather than in the context of worldwide devaluation of girls and women”
(p. 251). Alternatively, if one considers the fact that not in the very distant past, in Europe,
female genital cutting was endorsed by the medical profession as a treatment for a variety of
female psychiatric conditions (Bell, 2005), a very different perspective on the practice in
Africa emerges. Yet, these qualifications are omitted by the Western media either because of
cultural ignorance (the “darkness” of reporters) or strategic (political or economic) interests of
portraying Africa as inferior and savage.

The existing scholarship on specifically African women’s representations in
contemporary media seems to suggest that African women continue to be discursively
colonized. This conclusion, however, might be impaired not only by the scarcity of the
literature but also by the previously established inclination of the existing scholarship to
analyze the coverage of crises and conflicts. The academic literature on African women is no
exception, as it looks at the representation of women in times of famine (Fair 1992; 1996);
refugee crisis (Fair, & Parks, 2001); AIDS crises (Treichler, 1999); war (Bookmiller, &
Bookmiller, 1992); or yet discusses the issue of female genital cutting (Grise, 2001; Piot,
2006). Thus, I propose that this approach to the analysis is a priori flawed: instead of
selecting a certain crisis or conflict as an object of study, one should look at the entire range
of coverage in relation to Africa or African women for a defined period of time. Only in this way is it possible to draw better-grounded conclusions on whether colonial discourses persist in contemporary media and in what forms. Such an approach equally permits discerning alternative and changing patterns in contemporary representations.

Conclusion

Western media’s capability of providing quality news from abroad seems to be compromised by declining attention to foreign events as well as limited means provided for journalists to report from foreign locations. Complex events, distant cultures and people are often reported through shortcuts comprehensible to the Western audiences, and the coverage is frequently shaped by political and economic factors as well as individual journalists’ perspectives. Reporting on Africa is not an exception. The existing literature on representations of Africa and Africans in Western media underscores the continuity of colonial clichés and note several problems with reporting about Africa. First, Africa continues underreported in the Western media with attention to certain African countries correlating with West’s strategic interests in those countries. Second, African events are reported in simplistic terms, often using colonial clichés as shortcuts to understanding complex and intricate realities. In general, the explanations entailing larger political and economic factors as well as historical realities are omitted, leaving the established colonial discourses the easiest and quickest means to construct the Western-biased stories. In short, according to the current scholarly consensus, Africa is still portrayed as the “dark continent” in the state of perpetual crisis with its desperate people in need of saving or at least help. The images of African women have particularly been employed to map and underscore the magnitude of African crises and suffering, and have been tied into the more general colonial logic-resembling discourses of African savageness, irrationality and backwardness.
The literature also seems to suggest that Western media bring their attention to Africa only in the times of crises. It is true that a lot of reporting about Africa concerns stories about wars, famines, refugee crises and alike. However, it is also true that since decolonization, a lot of African countries have suffered from various natural and human-made disasters. What is problematic is not that these particular types of stories are given most attention, but the fact that they usually fail to explicate the origins of these crises, as it would require exposing the long-lasting Western exploitation and hypocrisy vis-à-vis African countries and people as well as the corrupted politics of local elites in many African countries. I suggest that the real issue is the lack of variety of stories about Africa, rather than simply too many negative stories. Moreover, the scholarly concern that Africa makes it into Western media only at the times of crises might be exaggerated as academics themselves have mostly studied representations of Africa in the media in the times of crises, foregoing the larger spectrum of stories.

Reporting on Africa is shaped not only by political realities and strategic interests, but also structural and economic factors of the Western media industry. Sending reporters and technology to Africa is extremely costly, and only the major media outlets can ensure some sort of continuing presence on the grounds in Africa (even then, however, the number of reporters is usually ridiculously small to cover the continent comprised of more than fifty countries). Moreover, reporters themselves are rarely very knowledgeable on Africa, and thus, are likely to resort to colonial mentalities for comprehending and relaying African issues.
**Conventional Themes of Suffering in the New York Times and Le Monde**

The following four chapters analyze articles that discuss the conventional themes of suffering in relation to African women. Chapter four looks at African women’s situations in wars with a specific emphasis on wartime rape. Chapter five carries on with a similar theme by investigating African Muslim women’s situations *vis-à-vis* the rise of Islamism, with most attention paid to the Algerian civil war and Nigerian stoning cases. Chapter six analyzes the representations of the much contested practice of female genital cutting. Finally, chapter seven discusses African women and AIDS.
African Women and Wars, Crises and Wartime Rapes in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*

I start my analysis of the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*’s coverage of African women by looking at their representations during wars and crises that have attracted most scholarly attention to date (Abdullahi, 1991; Allimadi, 2003; Ebo, 1992; Fair, 1996; Fair & Chakravartty, 1999; Fair & Parks, 2001; Hawk, 1992; Ibelema, 1992). The *New York Times* contains 25 and *Le Monde* 18 stories about African women in the midst of crises over the study period, which represents respectively 11% and 9% of the total number of stories included in the study. The stories fall under two thematic sub-categories: general stories about war and stories about wartime rape that dominate the coverage of the *New York Times*.

In general, women’s situations and roles in stories about war in *Le Monde* are less developed and detailed than in the *New York Times*. In *Le Monde*’s articles about wars and crises, women are visible, but usually not central to the stories. In the *New York Times*, on the other hand, many articles address women’s issues exclusively, primarily that of wartime rapes (with 18 of the stories devoted to the issue, and with the remaining few articles touching randomly on various crises in the region). In contrast, only one article in *Le Monde* is about wartime rapes, with the rest of the stories covering military conflicts, refugee crises and famine in Niger. Such an interest in wartime rape on the *New York Times*’ part and its absence in *Le Monde* raise interesting questions in themselves.

In this section, I first briefly discuss the reasons for the widespread violence and conflicts in many African countries, with a specific focus on sexual violence. Then, I analyze *Le Monde*’s stories about African women in crises that reveal some of the well-established trends of such portrayals. The chapter ends with a discussion of the *New York Times*’ extensive coverage of wartime rapes, and some speculations on why the latter are virtually invisible in *Le Monde*. 
Violence in Africa

Unfortunately, violence and extreme poverty, both of which are often at least partially a result of the Western colonization and continuing exploitation of the African continent, have been part of a landscape in many African countries since decolonization. Civil wars and violence ravaged countries from Algeria to Angola, Burundi, Senegal, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), Congo (Kinshasa), Eritrea/Ethiopia, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania/Senegal, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda to Western Sahara (Turshen, 1999, p. 9). Collier (2004) notes that Africa has experienced so much civil violence because of the structural conditions brought forward by colonization and neo-liberalism, which sustained underdevelopment and impoverishment of many African countries. He suggests that the main reasons for civil wars are economic: they most often occur in countries with low income, that are in economic decline and dependent on natural resources, a combination of factors that exists in many African countries. Collier refutes the idea that ethnic diversity is at the origin of African civil wars. He suggests instead that when civil wars do arise, most often because of economic tensions, they are fought along the ethnic lines.41 To get an even fuller picture, we should consider Mamdani’s (2001) observation that political violence in post-independent African countries is also “animated by distinctions crafted in colonial law” (p. 19). That is, depending on whether colonizers chose to govern through direct or indirect rule, they had to discriminate against the colonized either simply on the basis of race (colonizers vs. colonized, direct rule) or on the basis of both race and ethnicity (colonizers vs. nonindigenous vs. natives, indirect rule), as a result producing bifurcated political (not ethnic!) identities that later became pitted against each other (p. 19-34).

Additionally, the behavior of local African elites in many instances has not helped the situation. As Fanon (2001) suggests, the elites that replaced the colonialists constituted what he calls an “underdeveloped middle class,” unable to shatter the left-behind colonial structures and prone to self-enrichment at the expense of the interests of people at large. Such behavior, according to him, quickly led to corrupt governance and various – race-based, ethnic, religious etc. – rivalries (p. 119-129). Such elites did not think twice about striking neoliberal deals with the Western powers that proved to be extremely harmful to their countries and people, further locking many African countries in impoverishment and in some cases, civil wars (see also Bond, 2007).

When covering civil wars in Africa, the media have a tendency to focus on personalities (ruthless dictators, brutal warlords etc.), atrocities, and the immediate events that triggered the war, merely getting close to revealing the real structural causes of conflicts. In other words, instead of explicating the complex constellation of economic, political and historic factors, the media resort to putting forward simplified identities and events, presenting African wars as primitive rivalries without rational explanations (Collier, 2004; Hawk, 1992; Ibelema, 1992). Such a manner of reporting violence inscribes itself into what Mamdani (2009) has termed the “pornography of violence” and described as “an assault of images without context” (p. 56). In short, he suggests that such a reporting presents the violence as happening outside history and context, as “part of an eternal clash between evil and innocence” (p. 66). The reporting that minimizes context ensues from a long-lasting colonial tradition, as colonialists have always projected the colonized into what McClintock (1995) terms the “anachronistic space,” i.e., outside of history and modernity (p. 40).

Images of women are a significant element in reporting about crises in general and in Africa in particular, as they are often utilized as symbols of suffering and victimhood. In the case of Africa, these images are often embedded in colonial narratives that deny women
Voices and agency. Fair, who has analyzed extensively the images of African women in crisis contexts, concludes in her study of Ethiopian and Somali famines (1996) that images of silent African women are shaped by the Western-centric perspectives and are used to signify the horror of the situations and evoke pity, which works to underline and sustain the power relations between the superior West and its inferior “others.” In a study of a refugee crisis, Fair and Parks (2001) note another representative trend of Western media’s reporting about Africans, including African women: the conspicuous visibility of Westerners trying to “save” Africans, which quickly renders the latter incapable of political agency, and turns them into the “objects of western benevolence” (p. 15). In other words, the Western media’s representations of African women during crises, as the existing literature indicates, have been especially limited and flawed. In short, African wars have been mostly portrayed in the Western media as “primitive rivalries,” fought by irrational personalities, among groups that are cast as irreconcilable, outside any historical context. Women in these portrayals play a crucial role of embodying the suffering and the need of rescue by the West.

**Sexual violence**

Sexual violence is of special interest when considering African women’s situations in wars. Turshen (1999) explains that violence and ensuing chaos in many African countries that have experienced civil wars has particularly undermined the situations of women, also invoking the issue of rape:

Today nearly 90% of all war-related deaths are civilian. Death and injuries are caused mainly by the light weapons now found everywhere … and by tens of millions of land mines yet to be removed. The proliferation of guns makes it harder for women to resist rape and survive, yet few treatment services are available to help women to cope with the physical injuries of rape and virtually none to help them handle the mental health consequences, which are compounded by the grief and loss of war. And armed forces are vectors of disease, especially sexually transmitted diseases (p. 9).

Sexual violence has been a part (even though often not a visible one) of most wars, including those in Africa. It can take various forms, such as gang rapes, sexual slavery, sexual

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42 For a good historical overview of rapes in wars, see Bronwmiller, 1993a.
mutilation, and forced pregnancy. Green (1999) reports that from 1989 to 1997 rape was widespread in 21 African countries, 17 of which fell under the most extreme category of systematic rape (p. 90). Although recording the instances of rapes during violent conflicts remains extremely difficult, the UN estimates that, for instance, anywhere from 100,000 to 250,000 women were raped during the Rwandan genocide; over 60,000 women were raped in the Sierra Leonean civil war that started and more than 40,000 were raped in the Liberian conflict. Amnesty International claims that “tens of thousands” of women and girls have been raped in the Democratic Republic of Congo; and Human Rights Watch reports that rapes have also been systematically employed in the more recent conflict in Darfur, Sudan. Turshen (1998) explains that rape is a particularly effective weapon in African conflicts, as many Africans are involved in “unconventional” identity wars, not between the states, but between a number of state and non-state actors. As a result, women “confront issues of identity that assume new significance …. Ethnic, religious or social identity, often ingrained under colonial rule, is made to seem the very basis of the internal dispute” (p. 9). Rapists also rely on patriarchal and conservative nature of many African societies, which serves to stigmatize and exclude, as raped women are considered “damaged” property.

Although widespread sexual violence in African conflicts inscribes itself into the long tradition of world-wide sexual assaults against women, it also has some specifically African explanations. Green (1999), in his analysis of sexual violence in various African countries, adopts a Marxist feminist approach and claims that such a violence increases at the moments of social crises, upheavals, rapid change. He situates the roots of sexual violence in Africa in the crisis of masculinity caused by European colonization. According to him, colonization and

the ensuing economic instability, poverty, migration, and civil conflicts have threatened African masculinity and have “given rise to various forms of remasculinization, including acts of individual and collective violence against women” (p. 61). Africanist scholar Obbo (1989) similarly explains that this crisis of masculinity in Uganda has resulted in sexual violence, because colonization encroached particularly on African men’s sexual rights – African women were used as concubines and servants, they were raped, their fertility was controlled etc. These theories might also shed some light onto high rates of domestic violence and rapes outside of crises in several African countries (Boyd, 1989; Green, 1999; Mwau, 2000). These explanations by no means justify rapes of African women, but simply provide a broader context for understanding the underlying structural conditions for widespread sexual violence.

There are no studies that look at the Western media’s representations of sexual violence in Africa, but there have been several studies of sexual violence in Western media. Benedict (1992), in her study of how local sexual crimes are covered in the American press, found that representations of rape are underwritten by manifestations of domination and subordination typical of patriarchal gender relations. She suggests that when writing about women victimized in sex crimes, journalists combine: 1) biases of language (e.g., there are 220 words for a sexually promiscuous female and only 20 for such a male, p. 20); 2) traditional patriarchal images of women (docile, obedient or seductress); 3) and rape myths (e.g., “rape is sex”; assailant is of lower social status; women provoke rape etc., p. 14-19). The result of a combination of these are stereotypical narratives about sex crimes that portray a woman either as a “vamp” (a woman drove a man to commit the rape) or as a “virgin” (a man was a monster who sullied an innocent victim) (p. 23). Moorti (2001), in her book about representations of rape on television, analyzes how these are underwritten by gender and racial divisions. According to her:
When the rape coverage is concerned with nonwhite participants, the news tends to foreground race-based assumptions of sexuality … When the coverage is concerned with white participants, the news foregrounds gender-based assumptions of sexuality. In these instances, it is the accuser, and more generally, woman, who comes under scrutiny, and news coverage reiterates numerous patriarchal myths about sexual violence (p. 73).

Projansky (2001), in her study of rape representations in the U.S. films and television programs, suggests that rape might be used in war films to distinguish enemies from friends and/or to attest to horrors of war (p. 46). She concludes that representations of rape are such as to distance the U.S. and American identity from them. That is, the U.S. is the place where women are safe, where rapes do not exist. In other words, American soldiers never rape, but only save women from such a horrible crime, which resonates with the colonial rescue narrative. Similarly, discussing the Persian Gulf War, Jeffords (1991) notes that the notorious rhetoric of rape (“the rape of Kuwait”) left little room for discussions of rape as a crime, which was instead “metaphorized to stand for a threat to a community at large” (p. 212), and utilized to help designate villains and victims. Although these observations might be of some utility when analyzing the coverage of sexual violence in African countries, such stories must first and foremost be read within the Western tradition of discursive colonization of African women, discussed in chapter 2.

**African women in wars and crises in *Le Monde***

*Le Monde* has published eighteen stories on African women during wars or crises over the study period. In general, women’s situations and roles in these stories are not very detailed, but their presence is still significant and reveals some common trends of portraying women in such situations. Ultimately, I suggest that particular themes, details or explications are foregone either for political reasons or because reporters both project and assume a certain common knowledge of how crises in Africa are to be reported and understood by their readers. For instance, reporting on a refugee crisis in Burundi, Ourdan (Feb. 24, 2000) states that the refugee situation “has moved little the international community that is used to the
spectacular images of Africa: famines, breakouts of cholera, refugee camps with record mortality rates.” In such a context, portrayals of women, then, become a part of the well-established and familiar imagery of the crises-ridden Africa.

Women in *Le Monde*’s stories are a necessary constitutive element in painting broad contexts of wars and crises. For example, a story about the Nigerian famine crisis (Belleret, Aug. 4, 2005) opens up with a geographical pinpointing of the location, of which women seem to constitute an integral part: “In front of a small Center of Integrated Health of Djan Toudou, an hour of road from Maradi, the city situated 500km east of Niamey, around 200 women in colorful boubous are peacefully seated under acacias.” Another story on a refugee crisis in Malawi (Simon, Aug. 24, 1992), similarly paints a grim picture of the situation by foregrounding women: “Faces without expression. Defeated looks, lost in dust. The majority of women are dressed in dirty clothing, poorly put together. Some of them are dressed in old corn bags.” That is, women presented here are not important either as active agents or even as victims, but simply become a part of the setting. This narrative strategy approximates the one observed in early European travel writings about Africa. Early European adventurers who ventured into the African continent also often made local inhabitants virtually obsolete, i.e. simply a part of landscapes. Pratt (1992) suggests that such a rhetorical device served to project African lands as “empty,” and thus, meaningful and promising in terms of capitalist development and Western exploitation. At the same time, it “sanitized” the Western colonization of Africa, portraying its lands as available, and precluding the possibility of collateral damage in terms of confronting locals (see also, McClintock, 1995). In *Le Monde*, making women a part of a broad context of crises, however, reaffirms the noted tendency to feminize wars and crises (Fair, 1996; Kumar, 2004), while at the same time effectively reasserting their passivity and helplessness.
It is also interesting to note the writers’ attention to women’s clothes in both of the given examples. Without contributing much to the content of the stories, it adds to the visuality of the narratives by graphically invoking either the colorful traditional African women’s clothing or, in the second case, the lack of the latter, as it is being replaced by simple corn bags. The attention to such detail is rather typical for *Le Monde*’s writers, who carefully construct the background of situations in the analyzed stories by relying on the visuality of the images.

The trend of rendering women into visual objects is brought to its logical extreme when they are straightforwardly cast as victims. Such instances, however, remain rather rare in *Le Monde*’s reporting. Staff writer Bruno’s story on riots in Somalia (Dec. 21, 1992) recounts the destiny of a young Somali woman, who was taken hostage by a “crowd of men,” undressed, beaten, scratched, spit on. He quickly concludes that these images that he interprets as underwritten by misogyny are “universally degrading for the human race” by establishing this woman (and by extension, women in general) as a universal symbol of victimhood. The culmination of “women as victims” frame is found in an op-ed piece by Kofi Annan (Aug. 30, 2005), at the time, the UN Secretary General, on Nigerien famine crisis. His speech opens in the following way:

> Tuesday, 23 of August, in Zinder, one of the principal agriculture regions of Niger, I met a twenty-three-year old woman, named Sueba. She has walked more than 75 km with her two-year-old daughter, Zulayden, in her hands to get food aid. Sueba had already lost two children to famine and the one she had left did not reach 60% of weight appropriate for a child of her age.

> She was scarred that, at worst, Zulayden would not survive, and that, at best, for her entire life she would be confronted with famine and deprivation that she herself knows all too well. With the look in her eyes that I will never forget, she implored the world to hear her cry for help, not just that day but in the months and years to come (emphasis mine).

In other words, Annan formulates his political objective of mobilizing aid to Niger in the midst of a famine crisis in what is a formal political speech through the personalized and highly emotionally-charged account of a suffering mother (images of children work effectively to intensify the victimization (see, e.g., Fair, 1996)). This suffering Nigerien
mother, in her capacity as an innocent victim, becomes a perfect embodiment of both the crisis itself and the humanitarian appeal for aid. The woman in question is surely in a deplorable situation that deserves attention. However, instead of displaying her suffering to appeal for the Western financial aid, Annan could have chosen to provide a broader socio-economic context within which the Nigerien famine had unfolded and by doing so could have demonstrated that the need for aid went far beyond the story of this particular young woman.

On a more positive note, in several instances, Le Monde’s writers note African women’s resourceful survival strategies in the midst of crises. For instance, Simon (Sept. 5, 2004) in her article on the war in Darfur reports on the insecurity that reigns in displaced persons camps, whose inhabitants are essentially women and children. In light of widespread attacks by militia groups who pay regular visits to the camp, women, according to the writer, “defend themselves as they can.” In Niger, women are said to be obliged to use fruit that contains toxic acid to feed themselves and their families due to the famine. The writer (Belleret, Aug. 12, 2005) assures the readers, however, that women, who are projected as principal breadwinners, are capable of cooking the fruit in such a way as to avoid its poisonous effects.

Other examples of agency pertain to more sophisticated, political mobilizing. For instance, in a refugee camp in Guinea, Belleret (Apr. 10, 2002) reports on a democratically elected committee that consists of an equal number of men and women representatives who are in charge of distributing aid, guaranteeing security and carrying out agricultural projects. Here, Africans, in contrast to colonial clichés about lack of civilization and incapability to govern themselves, are seen as having established a perfect democratic structure in the circumstances of ultimate precariousness. Moreover, women emerge as participating equally in this process, which is far from the case in many Western countries, where women remain
underrepresented in political structures.\textsuperscript{47} Finally, the image attenuates the myth of African women’s extreme oppression.

In general, \textit{Le Monde}’s stories are quite representative of how women are portrayed in wars and crises. Their images become instrumental in staging the setting of the crises or establishing its extent and human suffering. “Women as victims” frame is not, however, often utilized by the newspapers’ writers; in fact, its starkest example is found in an op-ed piece by Kofi Annan that reaffirms that images of women are used to embody victimhood and mobilize humanitarian appeal. Such images are counteracted by more positive portrayals of women’s agency and resourceful strategies they employ to cope with dire situations.

\textbf{Wartime Rapes in the New York Times}

There are few stories about African women during wars and crises in general in the \textit{New York Times}, but it extensively discusses wartime rapes (18 out of 25 stories). The latter stories are exclusively focused on women and reveal well the narrative strategies and images used to recount their situations. At the same time, they are not limited to wartime rapes, but also speak about women’s situations in the militarized conflicts in more general ways. Thus, the following analysis concentrates only on the \textit{New York Times}’ stories about wartime rape.

The \textit{New York Times} first brings up the issue of wartime rape in 1995, in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. According to various international organizations, in Rwanda rapes were used systematically as a weapon of war, and anywhere from 100,000 to 250,000 women were raped.\textsuperscript{48} The International Tribunals on Rwanda and Yugoslavia ruled in 1998 that wartime rape was a war crime in its own right.\textsuperscript{49} Thus, the year 1998 represents a key moment

\textsuperscript{47} For the numbers of women in national parliaments as of September 30, 2008, see: http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm


\textsuperscript{49} The Arusha Tribunal handed down the first guilty verdict by an international court that included rape as a genocidal crime in 1998, when Jean-Paul Akayesu, a civilian mayor in the Hutuist regime of Rwanda, was found guilty of overseeing the systematic rapes of Tutsi women. See: http://69.94.11.53/default.htm
in the fight against rape. The number of stories on the Rwandan rapes in the *New York Times* peaked this year as well (6 out of 18 stories). The inclusion of rape into international human rights law was applauded by editorials and op-ed pieces. Later, the issue reappeared in discussions of rapes during the war in Congo and, most recently, in Darfur. The coverage of the Darfurian rapes has been more abundant and systematic than it was with the Rwandan rapes; the starkest difference being that the Darfurian rapes are being reported as they are actually happening, whereas the Rwandan rapes entered the mediated discourses exclusively *post-hoc*, which suggests that the Rwandan rapes might have set an important precedent not only within the legal realm, but also in the mediated discourses. The low visibility of the Rwandan rapes in the *Times* might also be explained by an uneasy U.S. political attitude towards the genocide. President Bill Clinton’s administration was wary of publicly acknowledging that the genocide was happening, and chose a policy of inaction.50


**Rape during the Rwandan genocide.** The scarceness of narratives on the Rwandan rapes in the aftermath of the genocide in light of more abundant discussions of the Darfurian rapes in the *New York Times* seems conspicuous. There are only three stories on the Rwandan rapes from 1994 (when the genocide took place) to 1998 (when the wartime rape was defined as a war crime). This clearly attests to the fact that wartime rape until the Rwandan genocide was not considered either as an important war crime in its own right (Copelon, 1998) or as a newsworthy topic. Despite the fact that rapes have existed in all wars around the world (Brownmiller, 1993a), in the media, it is their propaganda value and their potential to establish victims and denigrate villains that has been most utilized (Brownmiller 1993b; Ivie,

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50 See, e.g., Power (2007).
1980; Jeffords, 1991; Lens, 2003; Projansky, 2001). On the other hand, it is also important to note the difficulty of reporting wartime or, more generally, political rapes for the lack of witnesses and material proof (Strassler, 2004). Lastly, the political context in the U.S. in relation to the Rwandan genocide might have also played a key role in undermining their visibility in this particular case. Thus, I will first sketch briefly the historical and political context of the Rwandan genocide.

**The Rwandan genocide.** According to various estimates, from 800,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandans were killed in the period of roughly one hundred days from April to July of 1994.51 Most of these who perished were Tutsis, but some were members of the Hutu opposition, the moderate Hutus who were against the massive killings of Tutsis. A long history of opposition between the two groups preceded the genocide. As Mamdani (2001) explains in his book on the subject, Tutsi and Hutu should be regarded not as ethnic, but as political identities. Belgian colonial rule instituted Tutsi and Hutu as polarized political identities by racializing and legally enforcing them. As a result, Tutsi identity, defined as nonindigenous and alien, came to signify the privileged relationship to power, whereas Hutu became the indigenous identity of subjugated groups. The 1994 genocide had its roots in the 1959 revolution, when Hutus took power and drove masses of Tutsis into exile. In 1990, a part of these in exile in Uganda established the Rwandan Patriotic Front and entered Rwanda claiming to liberate it, in the process displacing large groups of Hutus. The first abhorrent massacres on both sides occurred within the context of this civil war. As the Rwandan Patriotic Front was gaining ground, and the government was losing the war, the extremist Hutu power got more organized and vocal. In fact, Mamdani (2001) suggests that the genocidal tendency was a result “of a double crisis, of both democratic opposition and of Hutu Power … turning away from the

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51 The UN estimate the number of killed at 800,000, see: http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N99/395/47/IMG/N9939547.pdf?OpenElement. The Rwandan Government estimate is 1,071,000, see: http://www.democraticcentral.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=1862
enemy on the battlefield – the enemy it could not defeat – it looked for an enemy within’’ (p. 215). The death of the president Habyarimana marked a start of the genocidal extermination of Tutsis and moderate Hutus. It was symbolic in that killing the president the Hutu extremists annihilated the political power that called for reconciliation of the two parties.

The Rwandan genocide marks a disastrous failure of the outside world, including the U.S., to intervene to stop the genocide from happening. Traveling to Rwanda in 1998, President Clinton gave a speech that later became known as the “Clinton apology” for his failure to intervene in a timely and effective fashion. With no particular strategic interests in the country, the Clinton administration was wary of acknowledging the genocide, despite the documented evidence that it knew about the bloody events in Rwanda. In her critical account, Power (2001) claims that the U.S.:

Did much more than fail to send troops. It led a successful effort to remove most of the UN peacekeepers who were already in Rwanda. It aggressively worked to block the subsequent authorization of UN reinforcements. It refused to use its technology to jam radio broadcasts that were a crucial instrument in the coordination and perpetuation of the genocide. … U.S. officials shunned the term ‘genocide,’ for the fear of being obliged to act.52

The major general Romeo Dallaire who was appointed the commander of the UN Assistance Mission in Rwanda called repeatedly and desperately for reinforcement that never came. In 2005, he published his personal account in the book called *Shake Hands with the Devil: A Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*, where he called the hundred days of the genocide when the international community turned its back and condemned the peacekeepers on the ground to being mere witnesses of massive killings “a nightmare.” In short, the U.S. politicians were unwilling to get involved in the Rwandan genocide. A few years after, when the post-genocide horrors came out into the open, American politicians were faced with the dilemma of how to deal with the moral guilt of having let the genocide happen. The early rape stories were very likely largely shaped by this nonchalant political context.

Another important factor in understanding narratives about Rwandan rapes is the fact that the Rwandan genocide was not just the state project. Mamdani (2001) emphasizes repeatedly its popular character, calling it “an intimate affair” carried out by “hundreds of thousands … and witnessed by millions” (p. 6). Given such a context, Rwandan women were not just victims, but also active participants in the genocide. Although statistics are hard to come by, it is known that several thousands of women charged with participating in the genocide are imprisoned in Kigali. ⁵³ Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, the former Minister of Women’s and Family Affairs, has been the only woman indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and found guilty of violating the Geneva Convention; charges against her included inciting the rapes of Tutsi women, including by her own son. ⁵⁴ The Times has several mentions of such women’s involvement (e.g., McKinley, Nov. 2, 1997; Lacey, Sept. 7, 2002). The rest of the shockingly scarce attention accorded to the Rwandan women focuses on their suffering.

The early stories of rape. The first three articles about Rwandan rapes are human-interest stories that focus on defining wartime rape and explicating its disastrous consequences for women and communities at large. Projanski (2001), in her study of rape representations, defines a feminist paradox between “a desire to end rape and a need to represent (and therefore perpetuate discursive) rape in order to challenge it” (p. 19, emphasis mine). The scarcity of the early coverage of Rwandan rapes does not do justice to the suffering of thousands of women sexually assaulted during the genocide. Yet, writers’ focus on intimate testimonies, lingering consequences and their attempt at credibility through reliance on human rights organizations result in sympathetic portrayals of the rape survivors.

⁵³ According to statistics provided by the Rwandan Ministry of the Interior, as of April 2001, there were a total of 92,541 prisoners in Rwanda, of whom 3,105 were women and girls. See: http://www.womensrightscoalition.org/site/publications/vol4No1/womenaccusedofgenociderwanda_en.php#sdfootnote3sym.
It was Donatella Lorch, a seasoned foreign war correspondent, who first brought the issue of the Rwandan rapes into the pages of the New York Times in May of 1995, more than a year after the genocide. Her front-page article could have been prompted by the report “Rape as a weapon of war in Rwanda” from the humanitarian organization Doctors without Borders. The author cites the report as her principal source. She utilizes it to define rapes in Rwanda as “systematic, arbitrary, planned and used as a weapon of ethnic cleansing to destroy community ties” (May 15, 1995). At the same time, the fact that the article was datelined Kigali, Rwanda, shows that the reporter was at the scene herself. In any event, it is clear that the post-genocide-evidence gathering missions by various international bodies and humanitarian organizations by then established the existence and systematic nature of rapes during the genocide, and the media, therefore, had only to follow.

The horror of wartime rapes is present, but not central in Lorch’s article. The women are said to have been “gang-raped and then abandoned” or taken as “prizes of war.” She quotes Doctors without Borders report that suggests that “it appears that every adult woman and every adolescent girl spared from a massacre by militias was then raped.” Yet, the principal focus of the article is on the gravity of the lingering consequences, such as unwanted children born out of those rapes, numerous orphans, traumatized women, and the fear of spread of H.I.V. Although Lorch does a fine job in explaining the complex aftermath situation for women who were violated during the genocide, she remains silent about the reasons that led to this violence in the first place. Besides a few sentences briefly defining the genocide itself and a systematic emphasis on ethnic identities (e.g., “Hutu militiamen” vs. “the 18 year old Tutsi,”; “in the ethnically charged atmosphere” etc.), there is no larger historical or political context that would enable readers to understand these rapes as a final result of complex historical and political conditions.

55 See: http://www.donatellalorch.com/
Given the conservative patriarchal nature of Rwandan society, rape is presented in Lorch’s article as a taboo. Raped women are portrayed as rejected and ostracized, which is a realistic portrayal of the situation on the ground. The eighteen-year-old Marie-Chantal, “pregnant with the Hutu officer’s child,” despite her terrible experiences and her dire current situation, is able to attest to the extent of rapes and simultaneously articulate her innocence: “There were many other girls like me … The militias took them with them. We weren’t willing to be raped. We should not be blamed” (May 15, 1995). The legacy of rape, then, exposes not only the horror of the crime and its consequences, but also the patriarchal oppression of women, expressed in a deeply rooted tradition of blaming rape victims for what has happened to them. This tradition, however, transcends the geographical boundaries: even in the West, women who seek justice after rape find themselves under scrutiny and are often blamed.56 A survey conducted in the early 1990s found that 53% of American adults over the age of fifty and 31% of adults over thirty-five believe that a woman is to be blamed for the rape if she is dressed provocatively (Benedict, 1992, p.13).

Indirectly, Lorch also touches upon the issue of collecting rape testimonies. Even Marie-Chantal, who distinguishes herself by saying “she is not afraid of telling her story,” is said to speak “in a whisper” and “on a condition that her last name not be used.” Another raped woman is reported to answer questions “in monosyllables as she breast feeds her child.” The difficulty of testifying about sexual violence in the given context is obvious and should not be underestimated in the stories; however, from the perspective of colonial discourses, the question of being able to speak about themselves and for themselves indicates agency and power. And thus, the description of the manner of speaking becomes in itself somewhat

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suggestive of power dynamics. The desperation of women is further underscored by their motherhood (“breast feeds her child,” “six-months pregnant”), even though Marie-Chantal remains relatively untainted by this shade of hopelessness.

It took another year for the New York Times, after the Lorch article, to return to the issue of the Rwandan rapes. In other words, while wartime rapes had been by then established as a crucial component of the Rwandan genocide in human rights and legal discourses, the New York Times remained relatively uninterested and unconcerned about the Rwandan women’s plight. It was James McKinley Jr.’s story that made it into the first page in September 1996. The article closely resembles the previous one by framing the issue as a human-interest story. He also takes a similar approach, as Lorch, by focusing on the “legacy” of rapes.

The article portrays a number of “children of bad memories,” whose raped mothers are now encountering issues of poverty, rejection and ostracism. In fact, the situation is almost entirely recounted through the eyes of women who have born children as a result of rapes; only one woman who figures in the article does not have a child as a result of rapes. The tendency to tell the story of the Rwandan rapes through the eyes of the mothers with children born out of rapes has several consequences. It allows attention to be shifted from the horror and brutality of rapes, which is easy to overexploit, to the lasting negative consequences that need solutions. Yet, at the same time, the conceptualization of children as “problems” by their mothers or communities plays into Western colonial myths about African hyperfertility and overpopulation that project African children as such as a “problem.” That is, Western countries have long been concerned with fertility and population growth in Africa, in the course of which the alleged hyperfertility and overpopulation was established as perpetual problems for Africa and for the West (Bledsoe, 1999; Kaller, 2003; Momsen &Townsend,
In short, the issue of unwanted children is an issue of political importance that is worth attention. On the other hand, framing rapes exclusively through the images of raped mothers with unwanted children somewhat undermines the emphasis on the fact that the real problem remains wartime rape and its perpetrators.

The horror of wartime rapes is more clearly visible in McKinley’s account. He gives the following description taken almost verbatim from the Human Rights Watch report of 1996:

Women were raped by individuals, gang-raped, raped with sharpened stakes and gun barrels and held in sexual slavery, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups, the report says. In many cases the genitals and breasts of rape victims were mutilated (Sept. 23, 1996).

McKinley relies on the Human Rights Watch report to provide a definition and convey the brutality and horror of the rapes. In such a way, he is able to forestall any criticism that his conception of rapes is imprecise or that the horror of rapes is artificially inflated, which is of considerable concern knowing both rapes’ potential to be employed as a tool of propaganda (Brownmiller 1993b; Ivie, 1980; Jeffords, 1991; Lens, 2003) and also the media’s drive towards sensationalism, violence and drama (e.g., Lull & Hinerman, 1997). At the same time, by incorporating the human rights organization’s report into his article, McKinley sides with their views and implicitly expresses his agreement and support; the pattern that reoccurs in many other New York Times’ articles and goes beyond the issue of rape.

A systematic reliance on human rights organizations reports attest to the fact that the latter are considered to be credible and reliable sources. Often, these represent the only first-hand documents available. However, it is worth keeping in mind that human rights organizations have inherent interests in portraying situations in certain ways rather than others, even though these interests might be widely accepted as legitimate. For example,

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57 This Western concern with the alleged hyperfertility of Africans that systematically reapers in the different NYT narratives is, to say the least, unjustified; for instance, Turshen (1999) points out, only 10% of the world’s population resides in sub-Saharan Africa.

Mamdani (2009), in his analysis of the organization Save Darfur, demonstrates that its objectives have gradually become detached from the real needs of Darfurians and, even worse, might have hindered the establishment of the peace process. Moreover, only well-established, international human rights organizations, as opposed to local African organizations, have sufficient resources to conduct investigations as well as publish reports that are regarded as credible sources, thus, reinforcing the pattern of African stories relayed through Western perspectives. Spurr (1993) concludes in his study of the *Rhetoric of Empire* that “the sympathetic humanitarian eye is no less a product of deeply held colonialist values, and no less authoritative in the mastery of its object, than the surveying and policing eye” (p. 20).

The last is Elizabeth Royte’s lengthy article (Jan. 19, 1997) that develops the issue of rapes and their consequences beyond women with children born out of rapes. She locates the heaviest burden for women in their status as widows, whose numbers are high in the post-genocide era. She explains that a widow “cannot inherit property, houses, cattle … Without her husband’s permission, a woman cannot work at night, testify in court or get credit.” These discriminatory practices are often coupled with the negative consequences of wartime rape. In such a way, she artfully intertwines the discussion of wartime rapes with the difficulties issuing from patriarchal societal order that exist for women even in the times of peace. In other words, the early articles on Rwandan rapes clearly reveal the multiple burdens that the raped women are obliged to bear. Sexual violence and assault goes hand in hand with unwanted children, H.I.V., poverty and ostracism, which attests to the Rwandan society’s inability to cope with the issue of rape.

In all three articles, the narratives of Rwandan rapes are framed as human-interest stories in which raped women participate as principal witnesses and story-tellers. However, while such an approach to reporting rapes -- through allegedly authentic stories of the
survivors -- reveals the horror of wartime rapes as well as the gravity of the consequences in a seemingly humane manner, it leaves little place for explicating the structural reasons that enabled this widespread violence against the Rwandan, mostly Tutsi, women. All three articles include several sentences about the genocide itself and all of them put emphasis on the allegedly ethnic identities of Hutu and Tutsi, nevertheless none of them question the U.S. inactivity during the genocide. If the U.S. government had admitted sooner that the genocide was happening and, as a result, assumed its international responsibility to act to prevent it, very likely, fewer Tutsi women would have been raped. Such a manner of reporting violence is an example of Mamdani’s (2009) notion of “pornography of violence,” described as “an assault of images without context” (p. 56). In other words, he suggests that such a reporting presents the violence as happening outside history and context, as “part of eternal clash between evil and innocence” (p. 66), and nowhere is this abstraction of innocence better embodied than in raped women.

All of the articles also rely on international human rights organizations, either by quoting their reports (May 15, 1995; Sept. 23, 1996) or their workers (Jan. 17, 1997), which attests to the writers’ drive towards credibility and objectivity when reporting on such a complex and delicate matter as wartime rape in Africa. On the other hand, by incorporating the human rights organizations’ reports and perspectives, the writers implicitly side with them, thus, embracing their views and concerns, but without necessarily critically evaluating how these concerns shape information and discourses produced by these organizations. The definition of rapes is also entirely based on human rights accounts, which might be indicative of the relative novelty of the issue and inexperience on journalists’ part to report on it.

**Rape as a war crime.** Year 1998 marked an important victory for women’s rights advocates around the world, as wartime rape was established as an individual war crime by
the Arusha Tribunal that tried Rwandan war criminals. Correspondingly, the *New York Times* devoted six articles, mostly editorials and op-ed pieces, to discussions about this significant legal change, which was unanimously applauded.

While most of the articles discuss the important legal change primarily in relation to Rwandan crimes, Barbara Crossette (Jun. 14, 1998) contextualizes the Rwandan rapes by pointing to other wartime rapes outside Africa. She lists Bosnia, Rwanda, Algeria and Indonesia, to mention just a few. In doing so, she takes wartime rapes out of the African context and universalizes them, by pointing out that wartime rape with all its ensuing horrors is not an *African* issue. That is, it can neither be located in Africa only nor be attributed to “darkness” or “savageness” of Africans. Crossette was at the time the *New York Times* bureau chief at the UN, thus, it is not surprising that her approach to the issue relies on historical and political overview of events and facts rather than on witnesses’ accounts.

The tone of the articles on Rwanda rapes in 1998 changes significantly from the previous stories on the subject. While raped women were at the center of human-interest stories about rapes before 1998, they are no longer in the picture during that year. The focal point is now on legal discussions and procedures rather than on rape survivors, who simply fade into background. Wartime rape and the important legal changes that surrounded it in 1998 are definitely worthy of the attention the *New York Times* accords it. Equally laudable is the fact that the articles develop the discourses on wartime rape by embedding it in some historical context (“new punishment for an ancient war crime” (Apr. 5, 1998); “old scourge of war” (Jun. 14, 1998)) as well as many technical details about the trials. However, in the relative absence of raped women, who are brushed aside in these quite sanitized, technical debates, the legal victory becomes primarily a victory for the international community and

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60 See: [http://members.authorsguild.net/bcrossette/](http://members.authorsguild.net/bcrossette/)
Western legal workers (Sept. 8, 1998; Nov. 1, 1998) rather than for rape survivors. In fact, where raped women do appear, they are unequivocally defined simply as “rape victims” (Apr. 5, 1998), the term problematic in itself, as it implies the state of victimhood and helplessness; or yet “desperate women and girls” (Sept. 8, 1998). The problem of the breach between international actors, applauding the legal victories of the genocide trials, and survivors of the genocide in Rwanda is best articulated in McKinley Jr.’s article in which he cites the Rwandan spokeswoman for a group of Tutsi widows: “The survivors are the people who need justice the most. But we don’t know about or understand the procedures of the tribunal” (Sept. 3, 1998). In other words, discourses on trials and legal procedures become detached from the experiences of original witnesses and survivors, becoming an embodiment of a successful colonial rescue narrative.

Rwandan women are infrequently seen in the roles of witnesses at the tribunal. For instance, Rosenberg limits their inclusion in her article by declaring that the “sheer numbers” of raped women “have guaranteed witnesses” (Apr. 5, 1998); Sara Darshori who served as co-counsel for the prosecution in the trial of Akayesu praises the courage of witnesses, but also points out to their “lack of sophistication” (Sept. 8, 1998). In short, although the testimony of raped women was clearly a major factor in the tribunal’s decision, their roles are sharply undermined by rare mentions and little visibility. Instead, the roles of Western individuals are emphasized. For example, an article about the U.S. lawyer who put his career in the U.S. on pause and went to fight for justice in Rwanda, describes the witness situation in the following way:

Most of the women who survived the ordeal [rape] were terrified of traveling from their rural villages to neighboring Tanzania, where the tribunal is located, and on top of that could not bear to tell strangers in public how they had been violated. But Mr. Prosper … slowly won their confidence (Nov. 1, 1998).
In other words, it is not raped women who agreed to testify, despite a number of obstacles, but the American lawyer, Mr. Prosper, who is projected as the ultimate hero. This image is further strengthened by the following statement: “Mr. Prosper also succeeded in persuading the judges to include rape among the crimes that constitute genocide.” While other articles attribute the success to women’s organizations, the female judges and investigators (Apr. 5, 1998; Sept. 5, 1998), here, it is reduced to a single individual, Mr. Prosper. Equally problematic, is Sara Dareshori’s op-ed in which she describes her contribution to the Akayesu’s trial as a personal journey of trials and undulations. Here again, Rwandan genocide survivors, including raped women, fade into the background, and the challenges and courage of the Western individuals are brought forward.

In short, at the end of 1998, the New York Times narratives about rapes take an egocentric turn from the humanized stories of rape survivors to sentimental stories of Western actors’ involvement in the trials, in the course of which the latter are projected as the ultimate heroes. While the issue of wartime rape’s definition as a war crime itself is definitely worthy of attention, the fact that stories are completely void of testimonies and opinions of rape survivors renders the discourses on rape problematic. By eliciting the Western contributions to achieving justice in Rwanda, the Times, perhaps, unwittingly suggests that it is the West that is able to find a solution to the Rwandan genocide and help the “desperate” African “rape victims.”

**Wartime rape after 1998.** In this time period, the number of stories about wartime rape in Africa increases markedly in comparison to the earlier coverage. While there were only three stories about Rwandan rapes before 1998, there are nine stories about wartime rape post-1998, with most of them devoted to Darfur. While these are still minuscule numbers when compared, for instance, to around 500 stories about plastic surgery for the same period of time, the number has tripled in less than a decade. There is also a visible return from
detached, legal debates that dominated the year 1998 to the human-interest stories, where raped women are again central to telling the stories. At the same time, what distinguishes the coverage of this period from the earlier one is an individual writer’s long-term engagement with the issue. Nicolas Kristof, the New York Times’ editorial writer, awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of Darfur in 2006, repeatedly brings the issue of rapes in Darfur into his opinion columns. In fact, his personal involvement in the issue is clearly visible in his writings, where the emotional value of the rape narratives is often brought to its logical extreme. His writings are significant in that writing for the editorial desk, he is not only free to voice his subjective opinions and views, but also has a potential to set the agenda for the entire newspaper. Before examining Kristof and other writers’ stories about rapes in this period, I will first briefly sketch the historical background of the civil war in Darfur.

**Situation in Darfur.** Unlike in the case of Rwanda, the Bush administration was quick to label violence in Darfur that especially intensified in 2003-2004 as genocide. The administration did not reconsider its position even after the findings of the U.N. Commission on Darfur (2005) that conducted an investigation and concluded that “the Government of Sudan has not pursued a policy of genocide,” because, despite the brutality with which all of the sides fought the war, the ‘genocidal intent’ was missing (p. 4). Nor did the Bush administration seem to care much about the fact that more people were dying in Iraq, as a result of the U.S. invasion, than in Darfur, especially after 2004 (Mamdani, 2009).

Mamdani (2009), in his book about Darfur, suggests that naming the war in Darfur as genocide served U.S. strategic interests. According to him, the reason why the U.S. was so

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61 N. Kristof is said to have received the Pulitzer Prize for “his graphic, deeply reported columns that, at personal risk, focused attention on genocide in Darfur and that gave voice to the voiceless in other parts of the world” (see: [http://www.pulitzer.org/year/2006/commentary/](http://www.pulitzer.org/year/2006/commentary/)).

62 For example, Kristof’s arguments expressed on September 11 reappear in Sengupta’s story of September 27, written for the foreign desk; his October 20 story is again followed by Sengupta’s article on October 26, 2004 etc.


willing and ready to call the violence in Darfur genocide was that fighting was cast in racial terms, i.e. brutal “Arabs” vs. innocent “Africans.” Such a division inscribed itself perfectly into the “War on Terror” discourses, where vilification of Arabs has been of vital importance. In his study of Darfurian history, De Waal (2005) further explains the falseness of these Darfurian identities. He suggests that:

As Darfur has been further incorporated into national Sudanese processes, wider African and Middle Eastern processes, and political globalization, its complex identities have been radically and traumatically simplified, creating a polarized ‘Arab versus African’ dichotomy that is historically bogus, but disturbingly powerful” (p. 197, emphasis mine).

De Waal also notes that this polarization of false identities has gone hand in hand with the militarization of the region, and that the U.S. proclamation of Darfur conflict as genocide had an effect of further entrenching both the polarization and the militarization of Darfur identities.

According to Mamdani (2009), the conflict in Darfur started as a localized civil war between militias (1987-89) and then turned into rebellion at the beginning of 2003. The initial conflict was caused in part by the unprecedented deterioration of environmental conditions in the northern part of Darfur that led to a movement of population towards the south (what Mamdani calls the north-south axis of the conflict, p. 242). At the same time, the cattle nomad tribes of the south were also pitted against each other (south-south axis, p. 242). In both cases, those with the rights to land fought against those without such rights. The system of rights to land was a direct consequence of colonization, as the “colonial system had two features: It defined rights on the basis of ethnicity rather than citizenship, and it discriminated in favor of settled groups … as opposed to nomadic groups” (p. 237). That is, racial definition of “Arabs” vs. “Africans” utilized in Western discourses to speak about the violence in Darfur is completely unjustified, as the alliances often transcend ethnic or tribal, let alone, racial identities.
The Sudanese government got involved in the conflict after the failed attempts to reform the land right system in 1995. The opposition followed in 2003. The insurgency was organized around two main rebel movements: the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement. The rebel groups drew support mostly from non-Arab groups, whereas the government drew its support from the landless camel nomads in the north and in the south of Darfur, most of them, but not all, Arabs. Over time, the government gradually shifted from army to military intelligence, the air force and armed nomads (Mamdani, 2009, p. 254-55). Several attempts at peace negotiations (Abuja, 2005; Tripoli, 2007) so far have not been able to bring the violence to a complete halt, even though it has decreased considerably since 2004.

Although the war in Darfur hardly represents the worst case of violence in Africa,\(^6\) it has generated an unprecedented level of interest in the U.S. media and among American people. Mamdani (2009) argues that the reason for this is not just Sudan’s oil, but also “a domestic social and political movement … whose scale recalls the antiwar movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s” (p. 22, emphasis original). The bottom-up mobilization against the war in Darfur, under the umbrella of *Save Darfur Coalition*, orchestrated by various non-governmental organizations and with a visible involvement of celebrities, has reached an unprecedented extent and have added to the visibility of the conflict in the media.\(^6\) The powerful *Save Darfur Coalition*, with its network of 130 million people, which has been at the forefront of shaping the U.S. policy towards Darfur might have also been an inspiration for the *New York Times*’ writer Kristof who has written indefatigably about violence in Darfur, including the rapes.

\(^6\) See, Mamdani’s (2009) discussion about the counterinsurgency against the Lord’s Resistance Army in northern Uganda (p. 279-281) as an example of extreme violence of genocidal nature that did not, however, cause an outcry in the West.

\(^6\) See, e.g., “Save Darfur” campaign at http://www.savedarfur.org/content?splash=yes
Kristof’s fight against the Darfur rapes. Throughout his coverage of the Darfur situation, Kristof takes the same position as the advocates of the Save Darfur Coalition by bluntly accusing the U.S. government of inactivity vis-à-vis what he, too, considers to be the genocide in Darfur. In one of his articles, he compares the situation in Darfur to that of the Armenian genocide by Turks and the Nazi holocaust of Jews (Jun. 19, 2004); (his personal investment in the issue of Darfur is also perhaps related to the fact that he himself is of Armenian descent). He goes so far as to call Darfur the “New Rwanda” in the headline of one of his columns (Nov. 28, 2005). Kristof’s critique, however, is not limited to the U.S. government. In fact, he goes so far as to conclude that “the world has acquiesced shamefully in the Darfur genocide” (Jun. 16, 2004) or yet that “as this genocide unfolded, the West largely ignored it” (Jun. 19, 2004). Kristof’s critical stance towards the U.S. government inactivity is reinforced by concrete suggestions of what can be done to change the situation, e.g., as when he suggests “a no-flight zone in Darfur” (Sept. 11, 2004), which was also called for by the Save Darfur Coalition (see Mamdani, 2009). In other words, Kristof has very much pushed the Save Darfur Coalition’s agenda in his writings without considering alternative points of view. The problem with this is, as Mamdani (2009) demonstrates, that the Save Darfur’s calls for military intervention did not serve the best interests of those suffering in Darfur, but rather have become instrumental in advancing the “War on Terror” rhetoric.

In short, Kristof does not consider it necessary to question his initial assumption about whether the violence happening in Darfur does indeed constitute genocide. Moreover, while he has written about various human rights issues, including those in Iraq, he has overlooked many other African conflicts of the same, if not worse brutality, devoting his time and resources to Darfur. More specifically, out of his 607 columns written between 1998 and 2005, he has devoted 47 to Iraq, 14 to Darfur, but only 1 to Congo, and, for instance, none to Uganda, where according to Mamdani (2009), violence of the true genocidal nature was being
carried out against the Acholi people (p. 279-281). In short, his interest in and concern for human rights issues remains highly selective, as is his attention to Darfurian rapes.

While rapes are known to have been committed in Darfur, human rights organizations have been reluctant to report the numbers, and most of them limit themselves to maintaining that they have been systematic and reporting only those rapes in specific areas that have been factually established, even though extrapolation could establish more realistic figures. Moreover, those who were able to observe the situation up-close, such as the U.S. special envoy to Sudan, Andrew Natsios, claimed that “some of the rapes … that are going on are by rebels raping women in their own tribes.” Although the latter statement does not undermine the gravity of women’s situations, it does challenge the assumption that all rapes in Darfur have happened as part of genocidal cleansing, as was the case in Rwanda. Kristof’s attention to rapes in Darfur also comes at the expense of African women suffering from rapes in other conflicts, e.g., in Uganda or in South Africa, where even at the time of peace a woman is raped every 17 seconds - the highest rape rate in the world.

Kristof’s coverage on Darfur distinguishes itself by his on-the-ground reporting, at the time rare, given the restricted access to the region and considerable risks. Thus, the rape stories told by Kristof are also bestowed with the highest possible level of authenticity, which is a laudable feature of his writings. Kristof’s coverage of Darfur is permeated with rape accounts. As a number of these rape survivors testify in detail in Kristof’s articles, the horror of rapes is clearly crystallized and personified:


The Janjaweed took her and her two sisters away on horses and gang-raped them, she said. The troops shot one sister, Kuttuma, and cut the throat of the other, Fatima, and they discussed how to mutilate her (Jun. 16, 2004).

Nemat, a 21-year-old, told me that she left the camps with three friends to get firewood to cook with. In the early afternoon a group of men in uniforms caught and gang-raped her. “They said, ‘You are black people. We want to wipe you out,’” Nemat recalled. After the attack, Nemat was too injured to walk, but her relatives found her and carried her back to a camp on a donkey (Jun. 5, 2005).

Arifa Muhammad, 25, told of being caught by 10 men as she planted okra to have a little more food for her three children. One of the men said, “I know you are Zaghawa, so we will rape you.” Afterward, they beat her with the butts of their guns (Nov. 22, 2005).

His reliance on these personalized dramatic rape accounts has several consequences. On the one hand, by bringing the raped women back into the center of attention and allowing them to tell their own stories, Kristof at once grants them agency and ensures that his articles appear authentic and credible. At the same time, however, the raped women’s testimonies seem to ultimately serve other ends – alert the West and the U.S. government to its inaction and culpability in the face of the “genocide,” embodied here by sexually assaulted women. Thus, there is a risk that these women, as indicated in the academic literature (Fair, 1992; 1996; Kumar, 2004), simply become the human face of the war. In other words, in the context of Kristof’s strong position in favor of the U.S. (and world’s) involvement in Darfur to stop the “genocide,” rapes, revealed by the rape survivors in their most intimate, and, thus, terrifying details, serve Kristof’s goal of convincing his audiences that the “genocide” is so horrible that inaction is no longer an option.

The horrors of rapes in Kristof’s articles are not articulated by the survivors only. The writer himself provides a necessary contextualization for rapes. That is, in sharp contrast to the pre-1998 coverage, when journalists seemed wary of defining wartime rape themselves and rather resorted to human rights organizations’ reports, Kristof boldly advances his own conception of the situation. He projects the fact that the Darfurian rapes are committed as a war crime as unquestionable truth and emphasizes their strategic utilization as a tool of ethnic cleansing used by the government-sponsored Sudanese militias against several “African tribes” (Sept. 22, 2005). The writer, thus, employs the unjustified racialized categorization
that has been at the heart of the U.S. conceptualization of violence in Darfur (Mamdani, 2009; De Waal, 2005). Two of his articles have dramatic titles that bring rape into the forefront: “Sudan’s department of gang rape” (Nov. 22, 2005) and “A policy of rape” (Jun. 5, 2005), both of which underscore the systematic and premeditated nature of sexual assault. In other words, Kristof pursues his agenda of waking his readers up to the “genocide” in Darfur by putting the human face of raped women to this abstract and distant violence. Atrocities that civilians, including women, suffered from in Darfur are definitely horrible and worthy of news coverage, Darfurian women nevertheless have become “worthy” of news coverage not because of their suffering as such, but rather because their portrayals seemed to have served the larger goals of the writer.

Kristof goes to a great detail in explaining why rape is such an effective instrument in the war of Darfur; take, for instance, the following excerpt:

This policy [of mass rape] is shrewd as well as brutal, for the exceptional stigma of rape here often silences victims even as it terrorizes entire populations and forces people to flee (Nov. 22, 2005).

Or yet, an even more visual explanation that at once underscores the horrific nature of the crime and its futility:

The attacks are sometimes purely about humiliation. Some women are raped with sticks that tear apart their insides, leaving them constantly trickling urine (Jun. 5, 2005).

In other words, rapes are suggested to be all the more effective in the patriarchal Sudanese society, in which, just as in Rwanda, the rape of a woman amounts to an attack on property (see, e.g., Turshen, 2001). In other words, rapes leave women “damaged” and often rejected and ostracized. The ostracism of raped women in Darfur is attested to by the story of Ms. Noura who was expected to get married soon and would have likely received a bride price of thirty cows. After the rape, Kristof proclaims that “she will be lucky to find any husband at all – and will not get a single cow” (Nov. 22, 2005).
With the patriarchal oppression of Sudanese women lurking in the background of rape reporting, Kristof applauds women’s courage and resourcefulness. On many occasions, women emerge as primary decision-makers, often faced with unthinkably difficult choices. For instance, when explaining why it is women, and not men, who continue collecting firewood outside refugee camps, despite the pervasive knowledge about the rape, one woman puts it this way: “It’s simple … When men go out, they’re killed. The women are only raped” (Jun. 5, 2005). Kristof also underscores that the mere fact of women agreeing to recount their stories is laudable, because the raped Darfurian women, who dare to testify risk not only lifetime stigma, but also the repercussions from the government that is known to have imprisoned rape victims and accused them of adultery (Jun. 5, 2005). Thus, Kristof rightly proclaims that:

Ms. Noura, Ms. Arifa and Ms. Saida are among the heroes of Darfur. There is no shame in being raped, but plenty of stigma should attach to those who ignore crimes against humanity. In my book, it’s the politicians who don’t consider genocide a priority who aren’t worthy a single cow. These three women have the backbone to stand up and be counted. We in the West have so much less to lose, yet we can’t even find our own voices (Nov. 22, 2005).

Unlike the coverage of the year 1998, when the international community and Western individuals emerged as the ultimate heroes and protectors of raped women, here, the women themselves are designated as heroes. In other words, Kristof acknowledges that without the stories of these women that had taken much courage to be told, his articles would not have come into the existence. It seems reasonable to conclude that his worthy designation of rape survivors as heroes demonstrates his understanding that the display of the latter’s suffering is a necessary evil to advance his cause.

While Kristof’s writings dominate the reporting on Darfurian rapes, there are several other articles that treat the issue extensively. All of these are written for the foreign desk, and, thus, are much different in style and tone. For instance, Lacey’s story in July of 2004 is based

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exclusively on the discussion of the *Amnesty International* report “Darfur: Rape as a weapon of war. Sexual violence and its consequences,” released on the same day as the article.71 Lacey quotes the report extensively, and all of the accounts of the raped women also come straight from the report. Such a reliance on human rights organizations’ reports attests once again to the necessity of collaboration between journalists and human rights workers in the situations, where the access to the region and witnesses might be extremely difficult. Even Kristof, who was present in Darfur himself, interviewed human rights workers on a number of occasions and also acknowledged the importance of their work by calling them, along with raped women, the heroes of Darfur (Oct. 20, 2004).

Similarly, the articles of Somini Sengupta (Oct. 26, 2004) and Lydia Polgreen (Feb. 11, 2005), both reporting from Sudan, contain numerous mentions of various reports and findings of the UN, AU, AI and other international organizations. Both of them also approximate Kristof’s narratives, by combining the official statistics and facts with vivid personalized accounts of rapes and their legacy – unwanted children. Polgreen’s story, in which the central focus is on “scores of babies of rape,” so reminiscent of the pre-1998 coverage of the Rwandan rapes, is the only story on the Darfurian rapes that made it into the first page.

Sengupta’s and Polgreen’s articles, like those of Kristof, succeed in revealing the horror of Darfurian rapes. However, Polgreen and especially Sengupta also bring more complexity in discussing both rapes and the general situation of Darfur by summoning a variety of sources and opening the discussion to various related questions. For instance, Sengupta discusses in detail the forms of violence against women, the legal conundrum of whether this violence constitutes a war crime or genocide, and who the perpetrators of it are. In contrast to Kristof’s straightforward division of Arabs (i.e., bad guys) and Africans of

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71 See the report at: http://asiapacific.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR540762004?open&of=ENG-SDN
certain tribes (i.e., victims) (see, e.g., June 19, 2004; Sept. 11, 2004; June 5, 2005; Nov. 22, 2005), which is entirely unjustified, Sengupta is careful to attach labels and instead chooses to conclude that “who is committing the assaults remains unclear. Men in uniform here can be regular soldiers or members of pro-government militias. The lines are blurry.” (Oct. 26, 2004). Sengupta also puts Darfurian rapes into a historical context and compare them to those of Balkans, Colombia, Congo and Rwanda, which seems an obvious thing to do in the post-Rwandan era. Her attempt at a more historically contextualized portrayal of the women’s situation of Darfur is nevertheless somewhat drowned by Kristof’s emotional reporting.

In short, Kristof’s stories on Darfurian rapes are most dramatic and emotional and serve well the means of crystallizing the horror of rapes and, by extension, those of what he perceives, following the Save Darfur Coalition as well as the Bush administration, as the “genocide.” Kristof’s ultimate goal seems to be to appeal emotionally and encourage mobilization and action. In other words, he gets closest to the human rights workers and clearly shares their passion and concerns; he is no longer simply a detached reporter, but an invested advocate/journalist.

Rapes in Congo. The coverage of the Darfurian rapes, with seven stories, is reasonably extensive, especially when compared to the pre-1998 coverage of the Rwandan rapes (3 stories) or even the post-1998 coverage of the Congolese rapes (2 stories!). The invisibility of Congolese rapes is even more conspicuous, given the human rights organizations’ warnings that “tens of thousands women and girls have been raped by combatant forces since the conflict in DCR began in August 1998.”72 In other words, while neither the extent, nor the nature of rapes in the war in Congo has been much different from

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those in Darfur, as detailed in Sengupta and Cooper’s articles (Jun. 9, 2003; May. 22, 2005) or human rights organizations’ reports, they are almost invisible in the New York Times.

The U.S. does not have any specific strategic interests in Congo, besides its general interests in the African continent, including, most recently, the containment of terrorism. Oil resources in Africa are, of course, a major factor shaping the U.S. attitudes towards the continent. Weinstein (2008) suggests that the rivalry among main economic powers to control strategic oil resources in Africa constitutes the “new scramble for Africa.” The U.S. currently imports most of its oil from Angola and Nigeria. Congo, however, does not have oil resources, thus, the U.S. was reluctant to intervene in its civil conflicts (as it was reluctant to stop the Rwandan genocide). Congo has been supervised by the UN Peace Keeping forces, which constitute the largest such operation up to date. In other words, from a political perspective, the Congolese wars and, by extension, rapes committed throughout these wars have been of little interest or importance to the U.S. In contrast to Darfur, not only does Congo have no resources of interest to the U.S., but it has not become a focus of attention for the U.S. people in the way that Darfur has.

The comparison of the last two cases of wartime rape – in Darfur and in Congo - attests to the fact that the inclusion of wartime rape into the international law as an independent war crime has not radically changed its topicality in the eyes of the New York Times. That is, other factors still remain important when determining whether each case of wartime rape gets reported or is foregone. While the more obvious U.S. strategic interests in Sudan might have contributed to the greater visibility of Darfurian rapes, I suggest that their

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75 This is despite the fact that, according to Fleischman (2003), Human Rights Watch’s Washington Director for Africa, the U.S. bears responsibility for Congo’s civil unrest, as Rwanda and Uganda, the two countries who have supported the ethnic militias fighting in Congo are the U.S. current closest allies in West Africa. See: Fleischmann, J. (2003). Bush should do the right thing. At allAfrica.com.

relative importance in the newspaper is largely due to Kristof’s personal investment in the issue. As a comparison, Stabile and Kumar (2005), in their study on the U.S. media’s coverage on Afghanistan women, demonstrate that the marked increase of attention to them and their plight after the September 11 attacks, as a result of a systematic failure by the media to question authority in wartime, became merely a strategy to sell the war in Afghanistan to American public. The raped Darfurian women in Kristof’s columns are, thus, likely meant to sell the intervention in Darfur. That is, by drawing attention to rapes in Darfur in his editorials, he has helped define them as newsworthy and at the same time has joined the scores of civil activists, who have been advocating for stopping the “genocide.”

I do not suggest that the plight of raped women – in Darfur, Congo and many other places around the world – should not be reported. On the contrary, it is essential that rapes be discussed, if there is any hope for these to be stopped. However, journalists should avoid simplifying the situations and falling on the tried-and-true ways of reporting violence without context that amounts to, borrowing from Mamdani (2009), the “pornography of violence.” Raped women should never be reduced to the “face” of a conflict, but rather be represented as active agents, suffering from, but also surviving sexual violence, and Kristof’s acknowledgment of the raped Darfur women as heroes gets a tiny step towards this objective. However, his concern with Darfur and raped Darfurian women becomes questionable in the light of his silence about African women suffering from sexual violence elsewhere – in Congo, Uganda or South Africa.

**Wartime Rapes in Le Monde**

Stories treating exclusively the subject of rapes in the contexts of wars are virtually absent in *Le Monde* in contrast to the *Times*. Rapes figure in the narratives, but only as a well-established fact that is brought up fleetingly, and requires neither a technical explanation nor dramatic accounts. That is, rapes are portrayed as one of the grievances of wars and
militarized crises that affect women to neither lesser nor greater extent than other unfortunate events, such as murders of their family members, especially children, poverty, displacement etc., which is rather representative of the general mentality about wartime rapes throughout the 20th century (see, e.g., Brownmiller, 1993a).

Rapes during the Rwandan genocide and the debates afterwards in relation to the tribunal’s decision to define wartime rapes as an individual war crime, which occupied such an important place in the Times’ narratives, are also virtually absent in Le Monde. For instance, in a lengthy investigative piece on the Rwandan genocide (4724 words), Remy Ourdan (Mar. 31, 1998) underlines many legal “firsts” in the post-Rwandan justice process. He devotes, however, a single sentence to rapes by proclaiming that: “Equally historical for women’s rights activists … is an integration of the notion of ‘sexual violence’ into accusations, as one of the aspects of the genocide.”

France has had a complex relationship with Rwanda both before and after the genocide, which remains one of the most dubious episodes of its foreign policy. When the civil war started in Rwanda, France supported the Habyarimananian regime and the Rwandan armed forces. And even when the genocide ensued, France continued to provide significant political and military support to the temporary regime and governmental military forces. Towards the end of the genocide, the French returned to Rwanda as benefactors of an UN-sanctioned intervention, called “Turquoise,” officially presented as humanitarian, even though its actual objectives and consequences remain highly contested. As Mamdani (2001) concludes, “ostensibly undertaken to save the remnants of the Tutsi population …, it also turned out to be a protective umbrella for those in the leadership of the genocide,” many of them with ties in France (p. 214).

In her study of the French press portrayals of the Rwandan genocide, Klinkemallie (2007) describes “revisionism” and even “negation” as official directions of the French
political discourse after the genocide, brought forward to minimize the alleged French role in aiding the genocide and, even more so, its complete failure to stop it. She also claims that throughout the genocide and afterwards *Le Monde* relayed the official political discourse in favor of the revisionist readings of the event (p. 224-225). The invisibility of Rwandan rapes in *Le Monde*, then, appears to be straightforwardly political. That is, to be consistent with the political discourse of “sanitizing” the genocide and the French role in it, rapes were erased from the stories, because they would have effectively established the human suffering. The absence of Rwandan rapes in *Le Monde* is even more conspicuous considering the privileged political relationships between France and Rwanda; the French journalists were the only ones who were on the ground during the genocide and were able to interview the military leaders (Klinkemallie, 2007). Thus, the assumption that they did not know about rapes, given their extent, is questionable.

Similarly, the more current cases of rapes in Darfur that are quite visible in the *New York Times*, even though, mostly due to Kristof’s individual engagement with the issue, are little dealt with in *Le Monde*. In her story “In Darfur’s misery,” Catherine Simon (5 Sept., 2004) has several women speaking about the situation in the course of which rapes come up. But the writer does not seem to be interested in adding her own interpretation to that of her sources. Unlike *NYT*’s Kristof, she does not seize the opportunity to exploit the potential of rape images to dramatize the victimization or mobilize pity. In fact, a short account of rapes is wrapped up with the following remark from a Darfurian woman: “There are rapes. Certain girls would like to declare them. But to whom? There is nobody to bring justice.” The note of fatalism in the selected quote adds to establishing wartime rapes as unfortunate, but inevitable fact, at the same time raising questions of accountability and justice.

In *Le Monde*’s narratives, the presence of rapes is often established *post-facto*. For instance, in Ourdan’s article on the conflict in Burundi, in a subsection titled “Traumatized
women,” he considers sufficient to simply state that “mothers reject babies born out of rapes” (Feb. 25, 2000); thus, the logical deduction that rapes were conducted, which is in sharp contrast to the several New York Times stories that went into great length to detail the plight of raped women with unwanted children (Lorch, May 15, 1995; McKinley Jr., Sept. 23, 1996; Royte, Jan. 19, 1997). In another story on the Rwandan genocide trials, one of the female witnesses is presented in the following manner: “Aurea Mukakalisa, raped at the age of 27 by the Hutu militias” (Smolar, Dec. 10, 2005). Here, being raped functions as her primary identification, but the rape itself remains of little importance, and her personal account that follows does not even invoke the rape.

Only one story from 1993 (Vichniac, Oct. 23) addresses rapes of the Somali women in the refugee camps in Kenya to a greater extent. In the article, the author explains in more detail the extreme precariousness of women who are raped when they venture out of the camps to look for wood (like in Darfur), the extreme violence and the desperate lack of resources to protect these women and help rape survivors, often suffering from infections and AIDS. The main focus of the article, however, is hardly rape survivors or even women in general. Rather, the story is mainly a tribute to the powerlessness of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee to protect these female refugees. Vichniac describes the UNHCR as “desperate vis-à-vis the lack of international community’s solidarity,” “lacking funds” and “remaining powerless.” The only article devoted to wartime rapes, then, paradoxically becomes hijacked by the writer’s chosen angle: that is, it is the problems of the Western institution, the UNHCR, rather than the problems of African women that become central. On the other hand, the article can also be read as the critique of the Western impuissance in relation to the crisis situation, which negates the colonial myth of the West’s capabilities to save helpless Africans, especially, African women.

Conclusion
Portrayals of African women in wars and crises in both newspapers represent some of the well-established trends and are not void of colonial clichés. Images of women are at times utilized to establish the horrors of the situations and signify victimization and suffering, the trend particularly visible in the *New York Times*. Similarly, the colonial rescue narrative of the benevolent and powerful West saving helpless African women also emerges, as, for example, in the *Times*’ stories about Rwandan rapes. On the other hand, African women’s strength and courage as well as their resourceful survival strategies are also sporadically brought to attention.

It is obvious that poverty and violence that has ravaged many African countries have put African women in unfortunate and often desperate situations. Their plight, thus, should by no means be overlooked by the Western media. The problem, however, lies in the media’s tendency to report crises situations in simplified ways, as a result of which the portrayals of women’s situations stripped of larger structural and historical context, only contributes to what Mamdani (2009) calls the “pornography of violence.” In other words, women’s suffering reported in such a manner somehow becomes “normal,” because happening in the “Dark Continent” and is perceived as the continuation of dehistoricized eternal fight between good and evil.

The issue of wartime rape remains highly underreported and when it is reported it is hardly an acknowledgment of the issue’s newsworthiness in itself. The almost absolute invisibility of rapes in *Le Monde* is particularly striking and raises question about the French newspaper’s attitudes towards it. While the Rwandan rapes were most likely overlooked for political reasons (as the Congolese rapes were overlooked by the *New York Times* for the likely similar reasons), the absence of rapes in Darfur or Congo seems to also point to the editorial and journalistic attitudes towards the issue’s topicality. It is worth remembering, however, that although the *Times* has many more stories on wartime rapes for the same
period, most of them pertain either to the Rwandan rapes, which were unique for setting the legal precedent, much advocated for by women’s rights activists, or to the Darfurian rapes that are made systematically visible mostly by a single editorial columnist, Kristof. Yet, rapes in Congo, similar to the other two cases in their brutality or extent, are of little visibility even in the New York Times. That is, even in the case of the New York Times, wartime rapes make it into the newspaper for reasons that are quite random (legal novelty, individual reporter’s engagement) rather than for its consideration as an issue worthy of systematic attention. In Le Monde, then, given the lack of these random factors that propelled the visibility of rapes in the New York Times, they are virtually absent. This suggests that suffering brought upon African women by rapes, which raises significant questions about male power, African understandings of women’s roles in communities and a usage of rape as a war weapon, is still not considered by the Western media as important in itself.
African Women against Islamism in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*

Another important theme, which emerges in the coverage of African women in both newspapers, is their situation *vis-à-vis* Islamism in certain Muslim African countries, in the contexts of both militarized conflicts and more mundane matters. In more than ten African countries more than half of the population is Muslim. For instance, the populations of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Mali, Somalia and Senegal are predominantly Muslim.\(^{77}\) In the 1990s, many of Muslim countries have seen a significant rise and strengthening of Islamism.

Islamism is not the same as the religion of Islam, but rather designates its usage for political ends. It is a political ideology that seeks the establishment of an Islamic state based on Islamic law or *Sharia* (Turshen, 2002, p. 908). As Dreyfuss (2005) puts it, Islamism is a “different creature from the spiritual interpretation of Muslim life as contained in the Five Pillars of Islam. It is, in fact, a perversion of that religious faith” (p. 3). While currently positioning Islamism as the principal enemy in its projected clash of civilizations, the West has had much to do with strengthening the Islamist grip in the Muslim countries. First, within the Cold War divide, the U.S. supported and armed Islamist groups as a counterweight to the communist spread (Dreyfuss, 2005; Kumar, 2010). Second, the Islamist groups played an important role in many countries’ nationalist movements that opposed the European colonial domination (Maddy-Weitzman & Efraim, 1997). Lastly, the Western neo-liberal structural adjustment policies imposed on African countries by the IMF and the World Bank that made many African countries dependent on foreign debt, forced them to cut spending on social services and pushed them further into poverty are also responsible for the rise of Islamism. As Lubeck (1999) explains:

As a result of structural adjustment, state capacity to co-opt oppositional movements declined and services were increasingly restricted to urban middle class and elite areas. Income distributions

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\(^{77}\) These countries are: Algeria (99%), Egypt (94%), Mali (90%), Morocco (99%), Niger (85%), Nigeria (50%), Senegal (94%), Sudan (70%), Tunisia (98%). See: http://www.islamawareness.net/Africa/
polarized. Structural adjustment meant that states were unable to provide previously established levels of services or to ensure adequate supplies of commodities … The political and moral vacuum opened up great opportunities that were seized by Islamists, who established a social base by offering services that the various states have failed to provide.78

In fact, the peak of Islamism in the 1990s coincided with the acute socio-economic crises in African countries, the extreme case of which is represented by Algeria. The victory of the Islamist Salvation Front (FIS) was a result of economic and political instabilities caused by massive debt, government corruption and high unemployment (Maddy-Weitzman & Efraim, 1997; Turshen, 2002).

The rise of Islamism has had negative effects on women, but also on populations at large, notably because it corresponded to the worsening economic conditions. In other words, the negative effects of Islamism on women should not be taken as an affirmation of the Western misconception that Islam is an inherently misogynist religion. It should rather serve as a warning that the emergence of any religious fundamentalism with political ends in sight usually entails curtailing civil, including women’s, rights. Moroccan scholar Mernissi (1991), in her detailed history of the evolution of women’s roles in Islam, demonstrates that although the Prophet himself held very liberal views towards women and espoused egalitarian society, his teachings were quickly misinterpreted and succumbed to political objectives that gradually led to the establishment of standards of subordination for women. However, while the misogynist misinterpretations of Islam are consistently criticized in the West, equally, if not more, misogynist norms of Christianity are rarely called into question. As Kumar (2010) puts it well, “when only Islam is singled out for its sexist practices in the mainstream media and public discourse, this is not a historical oversight, but a systematic attempt to construct ‘our’ values and religion as being enlightened in contrast with ‘theirs’” (p. 8).

Islamism has infringed upon women’s rights and situations in several ways. First, the increasing reliance on the conservative version of the legal system based on Islam – Sharia – has disadvantaged women. For instance, the adoption of Family Code in 1984 based on the Sharia in Algeria made women into eternal minors in the areas of work, education, marriage, divorce, inheritance etc. and guaranteed polygamy to men (Turshen, 2002; Winter, 2001).

The Moroccan Family Code, modified in 2004, has established a less discriminatory legal environment for women, but its implementation remains uncertain. And while in Morocco the situation of women has been revisited, in Nigeria, for instance, Sharia was adopted as the main body of civil and criminal law in its 12 Muslim states at the end of the 1990s.

Additionally, women have increasingly become targets, rather than participants, in Islamist-waged wars in their countries. As Winter (2001) puts it, women have been “instrumentalized as the repositories or guardians of identity in both Islamist and anticolonial nationalist movements” (p. 29). However, their actual roles in nationalist movements and current political unrests seem to diverge. In her study of Algerian women, Turshen (2002) notes an apparent paradox between Algerian women’s roles in the war of independence (1954-1962) and the civil war of the 1990s. She claims that during the former “thousands of women were active participants, taking initiatives even on deadly missions”; while during the latter, “tens of thousands of women and girls were the victims of terrorists who denied not just their womanhood but their humanity” (p. 890). In other words, Algerian women were no

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79 For more information about the reforms and difficulties implementing the new Code, see: http://www.undp.org/poverty/projects_the_moroccan_family_code.shtml
80 In general, Morocco has been known for its relatively liberal brand of Islam with King Mohammed VI as its spiritual leader. However, since the late 1990s, Salafist radicals have become more organized and active, advocating for a more radical interpretation of Islam, which has affected Moroccan women in similar ways as those in other countries, e.g. when unveiled women become targets of violence. See: Pingree, G., & L. Abend. (2005). Morocco’s rising Islamist challenge. The Christian Science Monitor. Available at: http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1123/p06s02-wome.html.
longer needed as allies, and simply became the means: their bodies were turned into passive symbolic terrains on which violence has been inscribed (Enloe, 2000; Wilson, 2002).

The New York Times contains 14 stories about African women and Islamism, and Le Monde – 20, which represents respectively 6% and 10% of the overall coverage. For both newspapers, these narratives are concentrated around two main events: Algerian civil war of the 1990s, fought by Islamist rebel groups against the military regime – 50% of stories in the Times and 60% in Le Monde; and Nigerian stoning cases – 35% of stories in the Times and 40% in Le Monde. Throughout the coverage of these two events, the New York Times seems to rely to a great extent on the established clichés of women’s victimization in the face of “evil” Islam, while Le Monde maintains more critical distance and shifts attention from vilification of Islam as such to more complex political and nationalistic explanations.

In order to provide a larger context to understand the coverage of Islamism in the two newspapers, I will first briefly review the common Western misconceptions regarding Islam and its followers. Then, I will present the analysis of the New York Times and Le Monde’s narratives about Algerian and Nigerian women, each time preceded by a brief historical overview of the situation.

Muslims and Western Misconceptions

Western media’s representations of Muslim people draw on the centuries-old tradition of Orientalist discourses (Said, 1993; 1997). Classical Said’s thesis suggests that Orientalist discourses have served to define the West in contrast to its allegedly inferior, savage, threatening Oriental “Other.” That is, Orientalist logic suggests that the West is civilized, dynamic and evolving, while the Orient is static, barbaric and hopeless, in need of outside intervention and “civilizing.” The rhetoric, that first served as the justification for Western
colonizers occupying and exploiting foreign lands, has become well entrenched in the Western media discourses that perpetuate the original stereotypes. For the purposes of this study that focuses exclusively on representations of women, two sets of faulty Western assumptions about Muslims are of interest. The first assumption concerns the long-lasting vilification of Islam and its followers, who have been constantly equated with brutal terrorists; the image that reached its apogee in post-September 11 Islamophobia. The second assumption that informs Western thinking about Muslim women is their alleged perpetual subordination and submissiveness, as they are hidden behind the veil that the West have come to regard as the ultimate symbol of oppression, but which has also played a role in discursive eroticization of these women.

In the Western media, representations of Muslims have systematically relied on several misconceptions. First, Muslim people have been regarded as a uniform mass (thus, the “Muslim mind”). Moreover, they have been consistently vilified and/or defined by three Bs: billionaires, belly dancers and bombers (Shaheen, 2001). These three Bs sum up the Western imaginings regarding the Muslim people: their wealth (oil), exoticism, notably related to women and sexual practices, and threat that they pose to the West. In his book on media’s coverage of Islam, Said (1993) suggests that of “no other religion or cultural grouping can it be said so assertively as it is now said of Islam that it represents a threat to Western civilization” (p. lii). This indoctrination regarding the imaginary threat of Muslims starts with the early childhood. Disney’s animated film *Aladdin* opens with a song that describes the Middle East as a barbaric place “where they cut off your ear, if they don’t like your face.” And obviously the attacks of September 11 in the U.S. attributed to fundamentalist Muslims have not helped the matters. Egyptian scholar Abu-Lughod (2006) summarizes the situation after the September 11 in the following way:
… An even more simplistic oppositional discourse has become hegemonic, one that by and large reduces Islam to Islamists, but will not even dignify the complex and multiple worldviews and politics to which such a label might gesture. Instead, this discourse resorts to the nonspecific and ahistorical – and even history-denying – label of “terrorist” to describe an astonishingly wide range of Muslims and those who study them (p. 5).

Kumar (2010) also suggests that during the Bush II era, “Orientalist logic, expressed in the form of Islamophobia, has … become naturalized, akin to ‘commonsense’” (p. 1).

Another cliché that informs Western understandings and representations of particularly Muslim women is its obsession with the Oriental beauty and sexuality that was from the outset regarded as “exotic.” A familiar image of an exotic, eroticized and submissive African female in Northern African harems is the trope at the heart of Oriental discourses. Said (1994) states in his discussion of sexuality and the Orient in light of the strict Victorian morality in Europe that “the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe” (p. 190). But before obtaining these experiences, Europeans had to “unveil” Muslim women, a desire that, thus, has a strong sexual connotation enmeshed with a desire to appropriate and possess. Fanon (1965) explains that in the colonial male’s psyche, a veiled woman represented mysterious beauty, but also a potential object of violent possession stemming from frustration of being seen by her but not being able to see her back. Talking about the French colonialists’ attitudes towards Algerian women he concludes that “rape of the Algerian woman is always preceded by a rendering of the veil. We here witness a double deflowering. Likewise, the woman’s conduct is never one of consent or acceptance, but of abject humility” (p. 45).

So strong was the French desire to unveil and possess Maghreb women that the act of unveiling became equated with civilizing them (Alloula, 1995; De la Gueriviere, 2001; Fanon, 1965). As Winter (2001) explains in reference to Algeria, head scarf was “a great cultural battleground … as much as the French deplored the ‘veil’ …, indigenous Algerians waved it as a cultural banner” (p. 30). And even towards the end of colonial rule, veiled women
continued to be of strategic importance. For example, the forced public unveiling of Algerian women in 1958 by the right-wing French putschists has often been cited as a notorious landmark in “the French appropriation of Algerian women” (Winter, 2001, p. 30), and a desperate act of symbolic violence on France’s part in its attempt to reclaim its colonial territory that it was about to lose (see also Lazreg, 1994, p. 135). It is important to note that the veil in the context of Algerian colonization became more than just a cultural symbol, as during the war of independence from France veiled Algerian women were used to transport arms (Fanon, 1965). In France, Muslim dress continues to be a symbolic terrain onto which the former colonial power still inscribes its superiority: first, by banning the head scarf from public schools in 1994, then, by banning the face covering niqab and burqa in all public places in 2010, which attests to its lasting uneasiness with conspicuous signs of Muslim difference.

In general, the veil has come to stand in Western discourses as ineradicable proof of Muslim women’s oppression, in line with the well-established misconception of Islam as misogynist religion as well as the image of Muslims as barbaric savages. Mernissi (1991) nevertheless warns against such a simplistic interpretation by explaining that: “the concept of hijab is a key concept in Muslim civilization, just as sin is in the Christian context, or credit is in American capitalist society. Reducing or assimilating this concept to a scrap of cloth that men have imposed on women to veil them … is truly to impoverish this term” (p. 95). Unfortunately, the Western media has been well complicit in providing reductionist understandings of Muslim women’s dress, as the following analysis demonstrates. References to veil abound, as it is used as a shortcut to establish Muslim women’s oppression and suffering. The analyzed articles also reveal a conspicuously reductionist view regarding

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82 The ban prohibits women wearing burqa from taking public transport, thus, violating their freedom of movement.
women’s roles vis-à-vis Islamism. A predominant image in the *New York Times* remains that of women as victims at hands of brutal savages with little attempt at re-conceptualizing them as active agents. *Le Monde*, on the other hand, seems to glorify Algerian women - perhaps as an attempt at re-legitimizing Algerian independence war from France as an allegedly positive moment in Algerian women’s liberation.

**Algerian Women**

Since a big part of articles about African women and Islamism, both in the *Times* and *Le Monde*, concerns Algerian women, I will briefly sketch their situation and their changing roles from the independence war from France (1954-1962) to the civil war of the 1990s, waged by militants fighting for an establishment of Islamic state against the government.

Participation of Algerian women in the independence war from France was essential for the Algerian victory. Fanon (1965) promotes this war as the hallmark of national revolution’s potential to liberate women by suggesting that the inclusion of women into the war was a complicated, but a “wholly revolutionary step” (p. 49). However, an Algerian scholar Lazreg, who also lived through the war, explains in her study of Algerian women (1994), that although women of all social classes participated in the war, “the nature of this participation fit in a ‘traditional’ pattern of gender roles, where men held positions of responsibility and command, and women executed orders” by taking care of medical services and food supply (p. 124). Fanon (1965), in his rather sexist analysis, suggests that an obvious disadvantage of women’s participation in the war was her body itself. He argues that their “cloistered life” made them feel less at ease in war situations, thus, declaring that “a moral elevation and a strength of character that were altogether exceptional would therefore be required of the women” (48). He also notes that participation of women was not conceived of until after 1955, when “new difficulties appeared which required original solutions” (p. 83).

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83 For a critical reading of Fanon’s analysis, see Lazreg (1994).
48). In other words, despite a certain heroic imagery that is perceptible in Western thinking about Algerian women’s participation in this war (and that is quite visible in the analyzed *Le Monde*’s articles), the actual roles of women in this war were far from unambiguous. While providing them with certain freedom, the war required a lot of sacrifice and exerted a strict control over their actions.

As another Algerian intellectual, Benamour (1995), suggests, the war of independence was from the outset a contradictory project from the women’s perspective. The “Revolution” was based “on a confused mix of nationalist and liberationist ideas. It was a war of independence, and also a war for the ‘Arab nation.’” (p. 2). In other words, women participated actively and often paid with their lives for the liberation, but while socialist undertones of the revolution might have called for establishing equality between all people, including men and women, these were afterwards quickly abandoned in the name of strengthening the national identity. Thus, Benamour notes that after gaining the independence, “the regime was unable to manage the transformations taking place in Algeria,” which, coupled with the worsening economic conditions, brought back “archaic reflexes,” which meant that women were no longer welcomed in the public sphere (p. 4); (although the same could be said of Western women’s fate after the WWII).

In her study of Algerian women, Turshen (2002) discusses a seeming paradox between Algerian women’s active participation in the independence war and their deplorable situations in the 1990s. She documents that Algerian women achieved great social progress after the end of the independence war in terms of their social and political rights, but rapidly saw them deteriorate afterwards. Lazreg (1994) also speaks about dramatic transformation of Algerian society in the post-independence era by suggesting that “the presence of women in the public sphere no matter how limited … in absolute terms, is the most significant aspect of postwar Algeria” (p. 172). Yet, she also adds that “the dramatic entry of women into the collective
consciousness since the war is paralleled only by the equally dramatic rise of religiosity in politics” (p. 209). In short, Lazreg explains the worsening situation of women in the aftermath of the independence war as caused by what she calls a “legitimation crisis” of the new state, as the old leadership died, population grew younger, the relevance of National Liberation Front diminished, and economic situation worsened. In line with Benamour’s (1995), arguments, Lazreg (1994) suggests that a natural response to this need of legitimation was a return to tradition, of which two essential components were women and religion (p. 149-150).

The rise of Islamism in Algeria that resulted in a brutal civil war of the 1990s was triggered by a complex set of economic, social and political factors. First was the economic crisis that began in the 1970s because of the falling oil prices, as the country relied heavily on oil export, which revealed the government’s mismanagement of the economy. Young, unemployed, urban youth was becoming more and more disillusioned with their disappointment exploding into riots against the regime at the end of the 1980s (Kepel, 2002). But the reasons for strengthening Islamist grip were not just economic, but also cultural. Lazreg (1994) claims that Islamist political agenda entailed animosity towards Western style democracy as imposed, unnatural, linked to colonialism, thus, the project of Islamist state was appealing, even though it effectively excluded women. National Liberation Front’s legitimacy was after all rooted in its victory in the independence war, but it quickly degenerated into corrupt military regime with its Westernized elites out of touch with population at large (Kepel, 2002; Lazreg, 1994). Lazreg (1994) does, however, point out that even though women found themselves excluded from political project of Islamist state, they should not be regarded as passive subjects in the context of rise of Islamism. She points out that some Algerian women were a part of what she terms “the religiose movement”; they attended mosques; they also contributed to the victory of Islamic Salvation Front – the major Islamist
group – in the municipal elections of 1990. She concludes that if women found themselves excluded out of “the political mosque,” they are partly responsible for it:

Women’s circumstantial silence was not imposed upon them. They created it by failing to engage in self-criticism and recognizing that they are part and parcel of the cultural vacuum denounced by the religioso movement which rendered the quest for a sense of self as futile as the assumption of a ready-made modernist identity (p. 221; emphasis original).

The adoption of 1984 Family Code that preceded Islamist victory in municipal elections and the civil war is regarded as a starting point in retrogression of Algerian women’s rights. It rendered women into eternal minors and institutionalized their unequal status in a variety of areas. Lazreg (1994) concludes that the code represented an “anachronistic piece of legislation that erased with a stroke of pen the historical changes that had taken place” (p. 156). However, she also claims that the adoption of the code made Algerian women realize that the socialist project had gone astray and helped their organizing. In 2005, the 1984 Code was revised to allegedly improve women’s situation, but the changes have been criticized as highly inadequate.84

Violence against women has been established as a staple characteristic of the civil war in Algeria. Attacks against “inappropriately dressed,” and even more so unveiled, women at hands of Islamists are particularly visible in the Western media and have become notorious world-wide. As explained before, as a result of legitimation crisis, the strengthening Islamist power turned to women as repositories of Algerian identity. The Islamic Salvation Front issued a fatwa legalizing the killing of women not wearing a hijab in 1994; another fatwa legalized kidnapping and temporary marriages (Hessini, 1996). This type of horrible violent attacks is visible in both newspapers, as the following analysis will demonstrate. However, media and popular discourses are reluctant to acknowledge the fact that men who have not

complied with the Islamists’ agendas have also been targeted (e.g., gays, intellectuals etc.\textsuperscript{85}), thus, reinforcing simplistic understandings of Islam as a misogynist religion. Benamour (1995) claims that violence against women became a hallmark of the Algerian civilian war in the Western representations; however, she warns against this simplistic shortcut for understanding a complex set of conditions and power play by reminding that not all Algerians are “engaged in the spiraling violence … and they are not all killing Algerian women, as the rare news reports that reach the West might suggest” (p. 1). Moreover, as Lazreg (1994) points out, the “use of women by men in their ideological battles [as was so clearly the case in Algeria throughout the 1990s] is in keeping with historical tradition established since the colonial era” (p. 218). Finally, attacks against women not wearing the veil should also be read in the context of the French colonization of Algeria and previously discussed politicization of the veil. As Fanon (1965) concludes with relation to veil and the French fervor to unveil Algerian women during colonization: “What was an undifferentiated element in a homogeneous whole acquires a taboo character, and the attitude of a given Algerian woman with respect to the veil will be constantly related to her overall attitude with respect to the foreign occupation” (p. 47). In other words, if it were not for the French colonization and unveiling of Algerian women, Islamist attacks against women who chose not to wear the veil would make little sense. In short, attacks against Algerian women by Islamists were horrible and should by no means be condoned, however, they are not exceptional, but rather inscribe themselves into a long tradition of violence against women by European colonizers as well as by their compatriots.

Representations of Algerian women in both newspapers are not able to break away with stereotypes that are attributed to gender relations in Muslim world. The complexity of

\textsuperscript{85} See: http://www.hrw.org/en/node/83161/section/2
the Algerian situation is presented in reductionist manner and women mostly emerge within
the faulty binary opposition: either as victims or as glorified fighters.

**Algerian Women in the New York Times**

Representations of Algerian women *vis-à-vis* Islamism in the *New York Times* entail, at least to some extent, all of the previously discussed faulty assumptions about Muslim women. First, their portrayals are primarily articulated within a well familiar “Muslim women as victims” frame. That is, given a conventional equation of Islam with terrorism within the U.S. political discourses, which has intensified after the September 11th attacks, African Muslim women are easily stereotyped as helpless victims of what is projected as a ruthless and irrational religion. Second, the cliché of the veil, omnipresent in the articles, is projected as the ultimate symbol of Islam’s oppressive nature, in the process of which historical and political meanings of the veil are singlehandedly erased. Finally, the complexity of the Algerian situation is further reduced by unclear definitions: the *Times*’ writers do not use the term “Islamism” or “Islamists” to differentiate Islam’s usage for political ends; they rather employ terms such as “Muslim” or “Islamic militants” (e.g., Feb. 16, 1995; Sep. 30, 1997), or “fundamentalists” (e.g., Aug. 9, 1992; Jul. 1, 1995), which eventually adds to the confusion and, even more so, to the discursive vilification of Islam.

The pre-September 11th coverage on Muslim African women pertain mostly to the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, with several exceptions discussing the rise of Islamism in other Muslim African countries, such as Sudan and Somalia. The Algerian civil war was qualified by the *Human Rights Watch* as “one of the bloodiest conflicts” in the region at the time. However, the U.S. seemingly did not have much special interest in the region at the time. It officially condemned human rights abuses in Algeria, but its interests and

86 See: http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/WR96/MIDEAST-01.htm
involvement throughout the war and its aftermath remained limited. The State Department’s budget presentation to Congress for the fiscal year 2000 stated that the U.S. had no “vital” interests in Algeria, but that its transformation into a democracy with a market economy would present the U.S. with economic opportunities, and it would not be unreasonable to believe that Algerian oil has been of interest to the U.S.

The *New York Times*’ coverage of the Algerian civil war continuously underscores its negative implications for Algerian women. While there is little contextual explanation about political and historical circumstances of the war, violence against women is established as the primary characteristic of the conflict. The headlines announcing women’s victimization abound: “Algeria militants vow to kill women linked to government” (Ibrahim, May 4, 1995); “Atrocities against Algerian women” (Herbert, Nov. 30, 1997); “In Algeria, women are caught in the crossfire of men’s religious and ideological wars” (Jul. 1, 1995). The *New York Times* goes so far in emphasizing the victimization of women that it overlooks the suffering of men. For example, one headline announces: “11 Algerian women killed as rebel attacks continue” (Sept. 30, 1997). The women in question were teachers and were massacred along with a male instructor, who remains relatively invisible throughout the article; neither is the fact that women were teachers emphasized in the title. This example attests to the established value of “women as victims” frame with its ensuing emotional appeal that the *Times* unscrupulously utilizes in this case. Moreover, it is clearly in line with the American contempt for Islam that it regards as inherently misogynist.

Additionally, a link between Islam and terrorism is reinforced in these narratives, which is in accordance with the historical imaginings of Muslims as brutal savages. In fact, Bookmiller and Bookmiller (1992), in their study of the U.S. press’ coverage of the Algerian

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independence war, demonstrate that the FLN and indigenous Algerians who engaged in violence were, even back then, described, among others, as “terrorists,” and that the press generally treated the war as Algerians beginning the round of violence and the Europeans responding to it (p. 68). It is, therefore, not surprising that the link between Islam and terrorism is reiterated in the articles of concern in this study; e.g., Herbert’s article is called “Terrorism by the book” (Nov. 30, 1997). What the writer conceptualizes as terrorism is in fact violence against women. He opens his article describing a decree that was given to him by an organization defending Algerian women, which in his words, “explains, in gruesomely explicit terms, the protocol that is to be followed by terrorists who abduct women for the purposes of raping them” (emphasis mine). In other words, Herbert seems to unproblematically suggest that all Algerian militants are terrorists who abduct women with the sole purpose of raping them. While Algerian women surely suffered from sexual violence during the civil war, they were also raped in great numbers by the French during the independence war (Turshen, 2002). Thus, projecting a straightforward connection between terrorism and raping women would qualify scores of Europeans who participated in various wars throughout the 20th century, where rape was a normal part of military conduct (Brownmiller, 1993a) as terrorists.

Herbert’s position is not an exception, but a part of a larger trend in the newspaper of equating attacks against women, and more specifically, against unveiled women, with terrorism (e.g., Feb. 16, 1995; May 4, 1995; Jul. 1, 1995; Dec. 28, 1997), which serves to further underscore the “evil” nature of the so-called Muslim militants. Attacks against Algerian women were often indeed very brutal and violent (Turshen, 2002), nevertheless the fact that the NYT does not employ the term “Islamists” to indicate that these are carried out by radical groups with primarily political objectives in mind, becomes problematic, because it automatically attributes this violence to Islam and Muslims as the whole.
By largely framing the war in terms of terrorism and violence of religious nature, the *NYT*’s trivializes the complex nature of the conflict and women’s roles in it. For instance, it largely ignores the sad reality that women were targeted not only by Islamists, but also, according to the human rights organizations, by the illegitimate military regime.\(^8\) Moreover, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the suffering of women was not always a conscious expression of the ideological fighting, but simply collateral damage, as in any other war (Brownmiller, 1993a). In the *New York Times*, however, violence against Algerian women is presented as a systematic strategy of Muslim “terrorists.” As a comparison, the Muslim Iraqi women killed by the U.S. and coalition forces in the Iraq war are virtually absent in the *NYT*. While the U.S.-led coalition reportedly was responsible for 37% of civilian casualties in 2003-2005, 20% of which were children and women,\(^9\) the *NYT* has only 4 stories in this period that briefly mention Iraqi women killed by the U.S. soldiers. Yet, its general stories are permeated by the references to women’s suffering at hands of Saddam Hussein’s regime. In short, what renders Muslim women newsworthy is not their suffering as such, but only their suffering caused by those projected as the enemy.

What is also missing in the stories on Algerian women’s situations during the war is the role of the French colonialism that aided greatly in creating the crisis in Algeria. The FLN’s legitimacy was rooted in its victory in the independence war from the French (1954-62), but it quickly degenerated into corrupted military regime (Kepel, 2002). Moreover, Americans themselves played a significant part in aiding Islamist organizing by providing funding (Dreyfuss, 2005). The only article that references colonial rule is Peter Steinfels’s report (Jul. 1, 1995) on the academic gathering of Algerian women in New York. In the

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article, the organizer, previously cited Algerian scholar Lazreg, explains the situation not in terms of conflicting sides, but rather in reference to colonization experiences:

The French used Algerian women to justify colonial rule … promising to rescue them from the “oppression” of Islam. Now, three decades after independence … Islamic militants are doing the same thing in reverse: a society in which women are veiled and the state is subject to Islamic law will rescue women from Western secular decadence (Jul 1, 1995).

Lazreg exposes the futility of the colonial propagandistic narratives, and turns the argument against the West, by demonstrating that the rationale that so-called “terrorists” use to justify their actions is in fact the same as that which the Westerns used to advance their own goals. In other words, Algerian “terrorists” are not any better or worse than were the French colonialists.

Debates about Algerian women’s situation throughout the crisis are permeated by references to the veil. While the latter as such is not a focus of any particular story, it reappears systematically in the narratives as a well-established and easily recognizable Occidental symbol of Islam’s oppressive nature. That is, the NYT’s overarching message is that “Muslim militants” primarily target women, who do not wear or refuse to wear a veil. It is important to note that the Islamic head cover is always (with one exception) referred to in the NYT as the “veil,” the term that a number of scholars call inaccurate and misleading, as it implies a full covering of the face, when in fact only hair is covered; the more appropriate definitions would be a “headscarf” or the Arabic “hijab,” “hegab” (Turshen, 2002; Wallach Scott, 2007).

As previously explained, the veil was and very much continues to be a symbolic terrain that functions as a proxy for Western influence in Islamic countries in Africa and the Middle East. For the French colonizers of primarily Muslim Northern Africa, “unveiling” the local women was as much a part of their civilizing mission as stopping female genital

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90 Consider, for example, the debates surrounding the prohibition to wear veils in public schools in France (Wallach Scott, 2007).
cutting was for British (on the latter, see, e.g., Thomas, 1998). In other words, the unveiled women, dressed in modern clothing, were conceptualized within the colonial discourses as liberated and civilized, while the veil itself was regarded as at once an instrument and a proof of oppression, submission, backwardness, and deviant sexuality - the ideas that inevitably reemerge in the current debates about its prohibition in public spaces in the West (Alloula, 1995; Wallach Scott, 2007). During the independence war in Algeria, the veil acquired new meanings. It is here that the signification of the veil as opposition to the West became crystallized – both as the literal means of transporting arms and bombs during the war, as a result of which, it became associated with dangerous militancy, and also as a symbolic instrument of national identity (Fanon, 1965; Turshen, 2002; Wallach Scott, 2007). In the *New York Times* narratives these multiple meanings of the veil are reduced to the single Western stereotype of submission and oppression (which reappears in its stories about stoning cases in Nigeria).

The dominant theme of Algerian women’s helplessness and sufferings at hands of Muslim “terrorists” is rarely disrupted by portrayals of women’s resistance. Violent imagery of an Algerian woman shot “by the fundamentalists before the eyes of her family,” “having her arms and legs cut off, her throat slit or her head severed (Seinfels, Jul. 1, 1995) or a woman “who was kidnapped and gang-raped by terrorists when she was 17” (Herbert, Nov. 30, 1997) contrasts with images of women who attempt to fight against Islamism. These images of Algerian women as fighters are potentially significant, given the historical context of the previous independence war, during which women participated actively in the fight for independence against the French (Fanon, 1994; Turshen, 2002). In fact, Turshen (2002), discussing women’s roles in the independence and in the latter civil war underscores the stark regression of women’s status from those of active fighters to those of victims. Thus, the images of Algerian women as fighters in the *New York Times*, even if not abundant, are
important in defying this illogical retrogradation of women’s situation. Take for instance, the story of Houria Zedat, in Ibrahim’s article:

Houria Zedat was well on her way to becoming a national judo champion at age 22 when, she said, she got a letter ordering her to stop practicing the sport, wear a veil and stay home. She ignored it. … Today Miss Zedat wears bright red lipstick and short skirts; her expression is defiant and she carries a gun tucked into her skirt (Dec 28, 1997).

Houria Zedat is depicted as a woman of extraordinary courage, who, even after having several of her family members, including her mother, killed, refuses to give up. Once again, veil and attire in general comes into picture. Here, her Western dress code is projected as a matter of personal choice, attesting to her determination to fight, although the colonialist equation of Western clothing with civilization remains seemingly unchallenged. That is, Zedat, as follows naturally from her “red lipstick” and “short skirts,” which are projected as markers of liberation, is against “terrorists,” and thus with “us.” It would be reasonable to assume that Houria resists Islamism in other ways as well, but the writer chooses to focus only on her dress and make-up, thus, even images of resistance are portrayed in clichéd terms.

An extensive first-page article by Donatella Lorch on Somali women in the aftermath of the civil war that preceded the one in Algeria includes similar concerns for women vis-à-vis rising Islamism (Dec. 22, 1992). Here, however, the tone of the article is unambiguously positive with many images of strong, self-sufficient women, one of whom declares: “We will all fight against fundamentalism … No one can ever tell us to stay at home and not work. There will be another war” (Dec. 22, 1992). In this single statement, Mrs. Nur articulates her determination to fight against Islamism as well as patriarchy, which is embodied in private/public division she invokes. She also declares that she is willing to go as far as having “another war,” underscoring women’s collective power.

African Muslim women’s clashes with and fight against fundamentalism is not limited to times of wars. As is clear from the article on Somalia, the fight against Islamism that
inevitably goes hand in hand with the fight against patriarchy is an ongoing challenge. For instance, Sudan also comes into picture as one of the African countries with a significant Muslim population in which legal reforms are undertaken with the goal of institutionalizing Sharia (Oct. 27, 1996). It is clear from the article that women are meant to bear the greatest brunt of these reforms: the mixing of sexes in public is banned, women’s sporting events restricted, and even though, as the *New York Times* explicitly underscores, the wearing of the *veil* is not endorsed (the mention seems to signal the boundaries of possible Islamist expansion, which is not yet undertaken), women working in restaurants are required not to wear perfume or jewelry. Yet, at the same time, the Sudanese women are said to resist, for example:

… An earlier attempt to enforce the Government’s interpretation of appropriate Islamic dress for women – wearing veils to cover the hair – was rejected by Sudanese women, who did not want to give up their colorful “tobes,” flowing gowns like Indian saris (Oct. 27, 1996).

As in the previous example of the Algerian woman, women’s agency is situated within their right to choose their own clothing, including the veil. In other words, fashion emerges not only as an important factor in displaying or emphasizing one’s identity, but also as the signifier of women’s right to choose and control their own lives. Some third-wave feminist scholars have suggested that fashion is an exclusively feminine sphere, where women are the ultimate experts (Scott, 2005; Taylor, 2003). The role of colonization that has played a crucial role in politicization of the veil and Muslim dress is nevertheless never invoked in the *NYT*’s stories, thus, leaving an impression that battles over fashion choices are nothing more than an unreasonable quest of Muslim “terrorists” to control and restrict women in their most intimate choices.

The two stories – on Somalia and Sudan – are overall more positive, with more focus on women’s agency and resistance than the narratives about Algerian women. The latter, with rare exceptions, are established as helpless victims at the hands of ruthless Islamic (not
Islamist!) violence. Moreover, even resistance is portrayed in clichéd terms, mostly within the frame of fashion choices. This reinforces the stereotypical portrayals, embedded in colonial rhetoric of African women as in need of saving, but also in the Western misconceptions about Islam as inherently misogynist and violent (Kumar, 2010). The simplistic image of the veil as the ultimate symbol of oppression equally results from this intersection of colonial discourses (where “unveiling” was equated with “civilizing”) and discursive vilification of Islam.

Algerian Women in Le Monde

Given the historical ties between France and Algeria, the latter having won its independence from the former only in 1962, after one of the bloodiest colonial wars, it is not surprising that most of Le Monde’s articles about the rise of Islamism and its impact on women in Africa talk about the struggles of Algerian women – 12 in total. Direct historical involvement of France in Algeria, and the greater familiarity and interest of the French in the Algerian matters explains some differences between its coverage of Algerian women and that of the NYT. First, it is important to note that Le Monde systematically uses the terms “Islamism” and “Islamists” when talking about the war, which is the first step in avoiding the straightforward vilification of Islam that was the case in the NYT. Second, the images of women are seemingly more positive, as the dominant theme is that of women’s resistance, which is grounded in historical experiences of the independence war.

The French political position throughout the Algerian civil war, as Chenal (1995) point out, was that of “‘protecting’ France from the Algerian conflict.” That is, the French government and political parties unilaterally supported the unpopular military regime and opposed any Islamist organizing. This position was guided by its fears of Algerian immigrant influx, and the possible radicalization of Muslims already living in France as well as terrorist attacks (Chenal, 1995; Pierre & Quandt, 1995). Thus, while France remained, among all international players, most involved in the conflict, it also tried to distance itself from it as
much as it could. According to Chenal (1995), French media adhered to the main political direction in its simplified and dramatic reporting of the war by attributing all brutality and violence to Islamists “without the slightest methodic doubt” (p. 417) (this is not unlike the NYT, which simply projected Islamists as “terrorists,” which left little space for any complexity).

While the opposition to Islamism is a core thread in Le Monde’s articles, they gain in complexity by explicating situation and roles of Algerian women with recourse not only to religious, but also to political and economic factors. The dominant image of Algerian women throughout Le Monde’s narratives is that of fighters, which is in contrast to their portrayals in the NYT. The image is straightforwardly established in many of the titles, for instance: “Algerian women in fight” (Cressard, Jun. 24, 1991) or “The courage of Algerian women” (Colombel, Mar. 8, 1995). The frame of Algerian “women as fighters” in Le Monde draws directly on the references to the independence war; the literature has widely discussed the active participation of Algerian women in their country’s liberation struggles (Fanon, 1965; Turshen, 2002), even though their actual entry and roles in the war were not as unequivocal as Le Monde seems to imply.91 Since the independence war constitutes an important part of the French collective memory, the references to it do not necessitate much explanation. For example, an op-ed piece by an international group Solidarity with Algerian women for democracy and civil peace starts with a historical review of Algerian women’s participation in the independence war, and then moves to applaud their current resistance:

Numbers of Algerian women fought during the Independence war and, as a result, gained citizen rights … [Today] Algerian women have been leading a pacific resistance in the face of bullets and knives. They are trying to disregard fear. Thousands have chosen the streets of spring to confront the nightmare that’s being imposed on Algerian people. At men’s side … Algerian female citizens are mobilizing to say NO to all fundamentalisms, and stand for plural, democratic and open to the world Algeria (Apr. 7, 1994).

91 For a critical perspective on women’s participation in the independence war see Lazreg, 1994.
Algerian women are portrayed as active and equal (“at men’s side”) participants, capable of leading resistance, and the direct line is drawn between their participation in the independence war and current mobilizing. At other times, historical references are not as explicit, but still obvious for French audiences, as, when Cressard (Jun. 24, 1991) explains that Algerian women want “like their elders” to participate in the progress of the country and reject the Islamist discourses. Colombel (Mar. 8, 1995) goes so far as to declare, drawing on Foucault, that “if there’s a country in the world … where women prefer ‘the risk of death to the certainty of obedience,’ it’s Algeria”; the conclusion that she draws not only from her observations of the current situation, but also from historical lessons. Such an unequivocal emphasis on women’s resistance is laudable, as it annihilates the stereotypical images of passive and helpless Muslim women. It can perhaps be explained as an attempt on France’s part to glorify the independence war that was long and brutal. In other words, *Le Monde*’s narratives seem to suggest that despite the savageness and human cost of the independence war, its positive result was the liberation of women, although the latter was not as unambiguous as the newspapers discourses would seem to propose.92

Algerian women are also cast as important contributors to the eventual outcomes of the civil war and Algeria’s future. In fact, Colombel (Mar. 8, 1995) proposes that only Algerian women, constituting what she calls “the third force,” can open a way to a democracy, rejecting rival totalitarian projects. This underscores the importance of women’s leadership, but also their seeming opposition to both principal conflicting sides.93 It is noteworthy that, even when the direness of the Algerian women’s situation is so explicitly revealed, they are not cast as victims. An interesting example is the following question that Gussen (Jan. 24, 1992) raises in his article: “Should Algerian women align themselves with

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92 For a critical reading of women’s participation in the independence war from France, see Lazreg, 1994.
93 For accounts on various positions that Algerian women undertook during the war, including the support for the Islamist projects, see: Turshen, 2002.
the militaries who by their coup d’état stopped Islamists from taking the power?” In other words, the underlying assumption is that women are active agents capable of deciding which side to support and, even more importantly, significant contributors, who might alter the course of events.

The writers are also careful to point out that Islamist attacks against women (forcing them to wear a headscarf, rapes, forced retreat to private sphere, no sexual intermixing etc.) cannot and should not be read only in terms of Islam’s intrinsically misogynist nature. This is all the more important since the latter has been one of the best-established and persistent Western myths about Islam, although often unjustified (Kumar, 2010; Mernissi, 1994). Instead, Le Monde’s stories detailing women’s fight against Islamism shift attention away from Islam as such to nationalist and patriarchal explanations. For instance, the first-page story on the killings of two schoolgirls by an Islamist (Apr. 1, 1994), explains the current situation in the following way: “Beyond and above the ideological cleavages and religious alibi, the Algerian tragedy also, and perhaps, primarily, reveals the resurgence of sexism of another age, which the nationalist mythology has tried, for a long time, to camouflage or channel.” The explanation is line with academic observations that the new regime faced with a legitimation crisis turned to religion and women to fill the vacuum (Lazreg, 1994). In other words, the quote makes reference to social and political progress Algerian women made, while participating in the national socialist projects of Algerian development, which was not, however, sufficient to eradicate the underlining patriarchal structures. The latter, then, are resurfacing in the current situation of political and social instability and violence.

Similarly, Bessis (Nov. 2, 1994) also interprets what she calls the “Islamist obsession” with controlling women as their desperate response to a social crisis that challenges masculine supremacy. She suggests that for Islamists, “return to ‘order’ implies the reinstatement of sexual apartheid, which, by restoring sexual hierarchy, would give the society back its lost
coherence. … More than ever, politically sacralized religion will consolidate the patriarchal
system that refuses to put down arms.” In other words, Bessis correctly emphasizes that
violence against women generated by Islamists does not directly result from Islam per se, but
rather from its exploitation for political means; it is here that women become instrumental
targets for achieving the ultimate goal of seizing power.

Le Monde’s stories further refute the idea that Islam is against women by introducing
the concept of a “secular Muslim.” The latter is in fact a self-definition of several Algerian
women: e.g., Khalida Massoudi, the co-founder of the Association for equality between men
and women before law (Simon, Apr. 28, 1995) or Yasmina (Simon, Feb. 23, 1994). The idea
that being a Muslim does not prevent one from fighting for women’s rights is not limited to
Le Monde’s stories about Algerian women. Another telling example is Smith’s (Dec. 17,
2001) article about a Nigerian activist, who “having completed three times the pilgrimage to
Mecca, … abides by the rules of Muslim faith, while at the same time leading a ‘cold war
against the oppression of women,’” including, at the hands of Islamists. In short, these
examples underscore two things: first, Muslim women can and do freely choose their faith
and are actively complicit in following the religious norms; second, Muslim women are not
passive and helpless just because they are Muslim, but are capable of actively asserting and
defending their rights as women.

Nationalist and patriarchal explanations for women’s situation in Algeria by Le
Monde’s writers are important in rejecting the straightforward equation of Islam with
violence. Moreover, they are more in line with the realities in the country documented by
scholars (Benamour, 1995; Lazreg, 1994). However, the French journalists, like their
American counterparts, stop short of explicating the larger historical context and the role that
the French colonial exploitation played in creating crisis conditions leading up to the civil war
in Algeria. *Le Monde* remains silent about this greater historical and political context for reasons that are most likely political, given the history of French colonialism.

The Islamists’ war against women in *Le Monde*, as in the *New York Times*, is punctuated by the image of a Muslim headscarf. However, unlike in the stories on Algerian women in the *NYT*, where the veil is simplistically established as the symbol of oppression, here, the stories demonstrate various usages of a headscarf on Algerian women’s part and contest the proposition that the veil is the problem. First, writers provide differing explanations of why certain Algerian women wear the headscarf, and more importantly, its various variants (*hijab, haik, voile*). For instance, Gaussen (Jan. 24, 1992) quotes an economics professor, who explains that young women have spontaneously adopted a “lighter” headscarf, *hijab*, “better adapted to work and mixing than the haik [another type of headscarf] of their mothers and which allows them to respect conventions, while at the same time distinguishing themselves from elders.” She goes on to add that “by choosing her clothes herself, an Algerian woman shows that submission to God doesn’t pass through submission to a man.” That is, this Algerian woman in her authentic testimony suggests that a headscarf, adopted voluntarily, is a result of reasonable religious decision-making and is not a sign of religious and/or patriarchal oppression. Other writers interpret the adoption of headscarf throughout the 1990s as opting for peace and security (May 16, 1991; Bessis, Nov. 2, 1994). Yet, despite such diverging perspectives, all the stories seem to converge on the proposition that the headscarf is not the real problem, as many in the West tend to assert. As Bessis (Nov. 2, 1994) sums it up: “the reality of emancipation resides for a majority of women less in the abandonment of veil than in guaranteeing access to school, contraception and work.” Such an explanation is particularly meaningful, given the French realities: many immigrant Muslim women continue wearing a headscarf. Seen in such perspective, the veil loses its currency as a symbolic index of civilization and progress.
Le Monde’s writers also agree, then, that the veil has now become a political instrument in the hands of opposing parties in Algeria, just as it was at the hands of the French during colonial times. A front-page story (Apr. 1, 1994) opens in the following way: “‘If you don’t wear the veil, you die. If you wear the veil, you also die. So shut-up and die’: this succinct formula … resumes a terrifying dilemma of Algerian women.” Here, the opposing sides (Islamist groups vs. the regime’s supporters that assert Algeria’s secularity) are indexed by their position on a Muslim headscarf. Referring to politicization of headscarf, Bessis (Nov. 2, 1994) similarly concludes that the forced generalized adoption of hijab would add in a “spectacular fashion” to the visually perceivable Islamists’ victory. In short, a headscarf can be as effective of a political instrument as it now is in part due to the political meanings it acquired during French colonization (Fanon, 1965), as the veil remains a terrain that opposing parties use to assert and communicate their power. In short, Le Monde’s usage of more precise terms regarding the veil and its more nuanced reporting on it is likely to be influenced by the French historical experiences and significant numbers of African Muslim immigrants.94

In general, Le Monde’s stories about Algerian women are more complex than Chenal’s (1995) observation about the French media’s general reporting on the Algerian civil war that he concludes was overly simplistic and dramatic. These articles, most of which are written by women writers, detail complex situations of Algerian women, whose rights are being restricted by Islamists and by the general situation of political and social instability and violence. It is important to note that the writers reject the simplistic vilification of Islam, which emerges as the main explanation for Algerian women’s plight in the NYT, and rather resort to more intricate and realistic explanations in nationalist, patriarchal and political terms. However, the larger political and historical context of colonization and the role of the French

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94 According to the estimates for the year 1999, there are about 13.5 million immigrants in France, 30% of which come from Northern Africa. See: Tribalat (2004); also, Keaton (1999).
in leading up to the civil war in Algeria remain invisible in Le Monde just as in the New York Times. The dominant image of Algerian women themselves is not that of victims, as was in the NYT, but that of fighters, which is firmly grounded in references to the Algerian independence war (and is perhaps slightly exaggerated, ignoring the constraints that women were subject to during this war). Finally, a headscarf still emerges as a significant terrain on which the power of various sides is exerted, but, in contrast to the New York Times’ coverage, it is not interpreted as the ultimate symbol of Algerian (and by extension, Muslim) women’s oppression. Instead, writers suggest that for many Algerian women, wearing a headscarf is a matter of a personal choice, and, more importantly, that other issues (access to education, contraception, work etc.) are of more significance than wearing or not wearing of a headscarf.

Islamism in Nigeria and the Stoning Cases

Nigeria with its 132 million people and more than 250 ethnic groups is one of the largest and most diverse African countries. It is a federation of 36 states that have great autonomy over regional matters. Before British colonization, the area of West Africa that now constitutes Nigeria consisted of clans, city-states and kingdoms of diverse ethnic and religious origins that the British brought under one political umbrella for political and administrative convenience. Moreover, the colonizers ruled the country as two separate administrative units, the north and the south, thus, reinforcing the existing divide of ethnic and religious nature (Ibelema, 1994). Western education and economic industrialization advanced more rapidly in the south than in the north opening new cleavages between them. In fact, after gaining independence in 1963, Nigeria consisted of three political divisions: predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani north, the Christian and animist Ibo east, and half Christian, half Muslim Youruba west, the latter two groups belonging to the South (Ibelema, 1994). As Bretton (1962) predicted, political tensions inherent in regional and ethnic-based politics gradually intensified, with all sides fearing domination of others. Indeed, after gaining independence,
Nigeria saw a succession of attempts at establishing a democratic state and relapsing into military regimes, with the civil war (1967-70) in between. Animosity between the north and the south was perpetuated by economic disparities and by the domination of northerners in military and political positions during these periods of military rule. The last period of military rule ended in 1999 with the establishment of the Fourth republic.

Nigeria has significant oil resources, and is the U.S.’s largest trading partner in the sub-Saharan Africa. It supplies 8% of U.S. oil imports, about half of its daily production. Nigeria also maintains active commercial relations with the EU, thus, having great strategic importance from the West’s perspective. To protect its oil interests in the region U.S. reportedly offered military aid to Nigeria to combat organized gang groups that steal and export oil illegally (Igbikiowubo, 2004).

Despite its oil resources, Nigeria is one of the poorest of the oil producing countries in the world. Its dependency on oil economy has proved detrimental to the overall development of the country, especially after the collapse of oil prices in the 1980s (as was the case in other countries as well, notably, the previously discussed situation of Algeria). The oil boom of the 1970s led Nigeria to neglect its agricultural and manufacturing sectors in favor of crude oil exports. Massive migration to cities, collapse of social services and infrastructures, corruption and mismanagement of oil revenues has led to widespread poverty, especially in rural areas. Unscrupulous oil drilling has also caused environmental damage. Poverty coupled with ethnic diversity has repeatedly led to political tensions and violence. In 1986, the country had no choice but to accept a package of structural adjustment policies and loans from the

95 See: http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2836.htm.
World Bank. These policies emphasized reliance on market forces and the private sector for solving economic issues. A Nigerian technical report concludes that results of these structural adjustment policies “have not been far-reaching with low economic growth and more people becoming poor.”

It is within this context of dependency on oil exports, widespread poverty and religious and ethnic diversity that the rise of Islamism in Nigeria in the 1990s should be situated. In other words, as in the case of Algeria, Islamist ideas surged as a response to the government’s inability to manage the country and raise standards of living succumbing instead to questionable Western aid.

The rise of Islamism has been visible in the 12 northern, predominantly Muslim states. The hallmark of this rise was the extension of the Sharia – a system of Islamic law - to criminal matters. Sharia was applied in the northern part of the country before and during the colonial period; however, during the latter, its usage was restricted to matters of personal status law, such as divorce, inheritance or domestic disputes. In 1999, the governor of the northern state of Zamfara was the first to introduce Sharia to criminal law; by 2002, there were 12 states that followed. As a result of Sharia’s extension to criminal law, for instance, the scope of death penalty was expanded to cover offenses such as zina (extra-marital sex) and amputation was prescribed as a punishment for stealing. According to Human Rights Watch report (2004), since 2000 at least ten people have been sentenced to death by Sharia courts, dozens have been sentenced to amputations and floggings (p. 1). However, the report also notes that the state, whose Constitution specifies that Nigeria is a secular republic, has been reluctant to carry out these sentences, thus, out of the ten prescribed death sentences only

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98 Ibid.
100 It is important to note, however, that death penalty is prescribed in Nigeria not only by Sharia law, but also by the Penal Code that applies to non-Muslim Nigerians. See. Human Rights Watch. (2004). “Political Sharia”? Human Rights and Islamic law in northern Nigeria, p. 21.
one had been carried out before 2004 (p. 22). Both men and women have been subjected to Sharia law. However, critics note that some of the rules bear disproportionate burden on women. For example, in adultery cases, different standards of evidence are required from men and women: a man facing charges of adultery must have been seen in the act by four independent witnesses; a woman can be found guilty on the basis of pregnancy alone. Human Rights Watch (2004) claims not to be aware of any cases in Nigeria where a man has been found guilty on the basis of testimony of four independent witnesses; it nevertheless discusses two cases of men sentenced to death for adultery based on their own confessions. Moreover, rape under Sharia is treated as a form of zina (BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights, 2003).

Extending of Sharia’s application was initially welcomed by some of the northern Nigerians who had hoped it would bring order and improve living standards. It was also regarded as a welcome re-affirmation of religious identity. However, Sharia was not accepted unequivocally, and for example, in Kaduna state, where about half of the population is Christian, the introduction of Sharia led to massive riots and killings in 2000. Moreover, some of the Muslims are reported to have been disillusioned with how Sharia has been applied (Human Rights Watch, 2004).

Both the NYT and Le Monde mainly report on two cases of death sentences conferred upon Safiya Husseini from Sokoto state and Amina Lawal from Katsina state for zina. These cases, as will be discussed bellow, have gained widespread international notoriety. Both were divorced women in their thirties from poor background and were found guilty of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning at the instance. Neither of the women had legal representation during the trial. Both men who were involved in extra-marital affairs with the accused were acquitted for the lack of evidence. Pregnancy in both cases was considered as a sufficient proof of the criminal offence. There are some reports that Amina Lawal claimed to have been
raped, but this has not played in her favor. The sentences have not been carried out up to date for either of the women and they have won their cases on appeal.\footnote{For more detailed discussions of these cases, see BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights. (2003). \textit{Sharia’s implementation in Nigeria: The journey so far.} At: http://www.baobabwomen.org/Sharia\%20&\%20BAOBAB\%20publication.pdf}

Before discussing the coverage of each newspaper in detail, it is worth noting that by focusing on these two cases, the \textit{NYT} and \textit{Le Monde} have ignored many others that are equally shocking in terms of discrepancy between the offense committed and the brutality of punishment prescribed. For example, the newspapers remain silent about many cases where men found guilty of theft were punished to amputation of the right hand. Neither do they talk, for instance, about the following men, all sentenced to death: Yunusa Rafin Chiyawa found guilty of adultery (the woman was acquitted after claiming to have been hypnotized before having sex); Jibrin Babaji found guilty of sodomy; Umar Tori found guilty of incest.

According to the \textit{Human Rights Watch} (2004) report that documents these cases, none of the accused had legal representation, and thus, their cases raise similar questions of Sharia’s application and fairness as those of Husseini and Lawal’s. It is clear, however, that from the Western point of view, women found guilty of adultery as attested to by their pregnancies appear to be much worthier victims than men guilty of adultery or sodomy. The former meet a definition of perfectly innocent victims subjected to the possibility of perfectly brutal punishment – stoning to death. While the stories of Husseini and Lawal definitely deserve the attention they received, the reasons why they caught journalists’ eye and the way they are recounted are less venerable. When retelling their stories, especially in the case of the \textit{NYT}, journalists are not able to break away with colonial stereotypes of “dark Africa” and those of misogynist Islam, largely reducing the complex cases that must be read in a larger political and economic context to narratives that invoke the colonial rescue scenario, where helpless
African women are in need of saving, even though *Le Monde* is capable of retaining more critical distance towards the benevolence of the West.

**Nigerian Stoning Cases in the *New York Times***

Post-September 11 coverage of Muslim African women in the *New York Times* consists of five stories on Nigerian women sentenced to lashes or death by stoning for *zina*. Out of five articles, only one is authored by Somini Sengupta, who was the *New York Times* West African bureau chief at the time, while the rest are taken from AP and Reuters. This can be taken to signify that even these cases that received a lot of international outcry were not considered terribly newsworthy by the newspaper.102

All of the articles paint a picture of unequivocally “dark” Africa, where religious zealotry and irrationality abound, by graphical depictions of what the women in question are destined to. Women are said to be sentenced to death by stoning “with lower part of … [the] body buried in sand” (Mar. 26, 2002; Aug. 28, 2003), a vivid image of unthinkable violence that is justified by adherence to the religious laws. The deputy governor is quoted to have said on the state radio that a seventeen-year old mother who received a hundred lashes “is no longer disgraced” (Jan. 22, 2001). Another article presents a vision of fanatics, as if in trance, during one of the court proceedings after the death sentence was pronounced: “Many of the 60 people who packed the small courtroom shouted, ‘God is great!’ in the Hausa dialect, as Ms. Lawal wept” (Aug. 20, 2002). Even the legal defense of the accused is shown as tainted with irrationality, embedded in religious myths. For instance, in one of the cases, the defense lawyers have used the “sleeping embryo theory,” which proposes that under some interpretations of Sharia, an embryo can gestate for up to five years (Sengupta, Sep. 26, 2003; 102 All of the major international human rights organizations, many smaller ones as well as a myriad of private initiatives were mobilized world-vide to fight against the sentences being carried out (see, e.g., http://www.amnesty.org/; http://www.letterealidirettore.it/forum/showthread.php?t=3626; http://www.icl-fi.org/english/wv/archives/oldsite/2002/Nige787.htm; http://www.petitiononline.com/aminal/petition.html; http://www.ifeminists.net/introduction/editorials/2003/0916barnett.html).
Aug. 28, 2003). The NYT’s Sengupta is quick to propose a “rational” Western solution, the DNA tests, instead of the “sleeping embryo theory” to determine who the father of the baby in question is (Sep. 26, 2003). Human Rights Watch (2004) reports that the Sharia court did consider, but rejected the DNA testing, because of its absence in Koran (p. 34). In short, both the crimes and the proceedings are represented as hopelessly underwritten by irrationality and absurdness. It is true that some of the arguments are unarguably irrational; however, such unequivocal suggestions of absurd irrationality invoke readily the colonial discourses where such a behavior was always considered by the West as the norm for Africa.

Equally discouraging are the portrayals of the condemned women. They appear as “tearful,” “heavily veiled,” with her “veiled head bowed.” The veil is of outright importance both as a signifier of their oppression and dire situation, and as an identifier of religion that takes central place in these court cases. The class dimension is also present, as women are described as “poor, uneducated, single mothers from rural villages” (Aug. 20, 2002); the perfect “they” that establish the longest possible distance between the modernity of the West and backwardness of Africa. In sketching this pitiful picture of these poor Nigerian women, the NYT nevertheless does not consider it necessary to provide a larger context of the country’s widespread poverty and the role of the West in rendering the country even poorer.

As discussed before, the rise of Islamism has been greatly encouraged by the country’s reliance on oil exports (half of which goes to the U.S.), poverty and government’s inability to provide for its people.

Accused women’s desperation is further underscored by their motherhood, as their children, who are also, in these instances, the evidence of crimes, are always with them: “Amin Lawal clutched her baby daughter and burst into tears as the judge ruled” (Aug. 20, 2002); “a tearful 32-year-old woman nursed her daughter in an Islamic appeals court” (Aug.
Western countries have long been concerned with fertility and population growth in Africa, in the course of which the alleged hyperfertility and overpopulation were established as perpetual problems for Africa and for the West (Bledsoe, 1999; Kaller, 2003; Momsen, & Townsend, 1987). Here, African mothers are seen as in fact being sentenced to death for having children, even though it is not the child but the way that s/he was conceived that is rejected as criminal. Thus, religious context aside, the cases acquire symbolic meaning of a punishment of African women for having yet another child; the literal embodiment of the illusionary Western imaginings of African hyperfertility as the cause of all “African” problems.

The irrationality and backwardness of the accused mothers is emphasized by their inability to comprehend what they are being accused of or to speak about it. For example, it is repeatedly emphasized that Lawal “did not understand the Arabic term for adultery ‘zena’” (Aug. 20, 2002). Safiya Hussaini after the happy ending of her trial is said to have “murmured” her thank you to the supporters. That is, she is portrayed as so weak, helpless and fragile that she is not able to speak, but only whisper, which indicates the power dynamics that is at Hussaini’s disadvantage, even after she is acquitted. The victory is not really hers, but rather that of her supporters, “international campaigns,” even the U.S. representative Betty McCollum (Mar. 26, 2002). This powerful alliance effectively underscores Hussaini’s own powerlessness. In 2004, Hussaini published a book “I escaped from stoning” coauthored with Raffaele Masto. The French edition presents the story in the following way: “The humanitarian organizations of five continents mobilized to save Safiya from the shameful and appalling verdict,” reducing the story into a perfect example of the “white (wo)man’s burden” in action: the powerful West saves the helpless African woman from the irrationality and

103 Fair (1996), in her study on portrayals of African women during famines, also notes that images of women with children serve to strengthen their victimization.

104 For a discussion of the expressions of these imaginings in the Western media, see: Spurr, 1993.
savageness of her own people. In short, while the role played by the Western and international organizations in determining the ending of the case is not negligible and merits attention, African women’s organizing and contributions are completely foregone. For example, the Nigerian feminist human rights organization BAOBAB has been relentlessly fighting for women’s rights and has been involved and written about the cases of Husseini and Lawal, but its efforts are never mentioned in the *NYT* or in *Le Monde*. This attests to the Western media’s biases and to the world power dynamics.

These narratives about rural Muslim Nigerian women paint a bleak picture of the country, where women are helpless and abused, and men have absolute power: “the man denied the charge, swore on the Koran, and was deemed innocent” (Sept. 26, 2003). It would be interesting to see the *NYT* discuss the previously mentioned adultery case, where a man was sentenced to death and a woman acquitted on claims she had been hypnotized before sex. This case also raises a question of equality of the two people involved in the allegedly criminal act, but is foregone perhaps because it seems to contradict the underlying assumption that Islam is inherently misogynistic.

Graphically depicted harsh, inhumane punishments (though not carried out) for the absurd crimes attest to the “darkness” of Africa, so well-established in the colonial discourses and perpetuated by the West for centuries. I do not suggest that these stories that reveal suffering brought onto women by the Sharia law in Nigeria should not be reported. The problem is that they are framed exclusively in colonial terms and clichés and, thus, end up recycling the perpetual rescue narrative, in which the suffering of women and the “darkness” of Africa constitute the context necessary to make Western heroism stand out. As mentioned before, the cases discussed in the *New York Times* are not the only cases of the Sharia judgments. Yet, it seems that the newspaper focuses on these two stories, because they fit the

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105 See their website: http://www.baobabwomen.org/history.html.
colonial logic best; i.e., women are assigned a role of a victim, Africa that of a “savage” place
where irrational religion rules, and West that of a mythical savior. Finally, while the emphasis
in the stories is primarily on cruelty and irrationality of both crimes and the ensuing
punishments, the New York Times fails to mention that a single death sentence prescribed by
the Sharia court has been carried out before 2004 for a man that was found guilty of multiple
homicides (and who would have probably received a similar sentence in the U.S.).

Even more important, similar to the narratives about the Algerian civil war, the NYT
remains silent about the larger political and economic context that brought Islamists into
power and thus, enabled the suffering of Nigerian Muslim women, and in many cases, that of
men as well. The long-lasting Western exploitation of Nigeria, including British colonialism
and exploitation of its oil resources by the U.S. and other Western countries, has deepened its
economic hardships, reinforcing ethnic and religious tensions, all of which facilitated the
Islamist ascent to power. The cancellation of debts, according to many Africanist scholars and
activists, would be the first effective step in fighting poverty and other problems, including,
Islamism (Colgan, 2002; Eozenu, 2008; Turshen, 1999).

It is clear that given that the religious dimension is of pivotal importance in the stories
in question, the process of othering in this instance is exclusively embedded in discourses of
religious, not racial differences. That is, it is not Nigerians as the whole, but only Muslim
Nigerians in favor of Sharia law that are discursively vilified. The NYT underscores on many
occasions that only Muslims have to abide by this law. To further emphasize that it is a
religious matter, the New York Times repeatedly mentions the political Christian-Muslim
divide in Nigeria that has caused many violent confrontations. The Christian Archbishop is
quoted as saying that “application of the Shariah is unconstitutional” (Aug. 20, 2002); the
opinion that is also shared by the Nigerian president who is described as the “born-again

106 Ibid.
Christian” (Sept. 26, 2003). While such statements and descriptions rightly focus attention on
religion and not race, it also has a secondary effect of juxtaposing Christianity and Islam, in
which the former emerges as the ever more positive vis-à-vis the cruelty of the latter.

The NYT perpetuates the colonial discourses on Africa in recounting the Nigerian
stoning cases, but Western vilification of Islam also adds an important dimension to the
narratives. For instance, the cases are portrayed as a consequence not of African vices, as
colonial logic would call for (e.g., morality of women is never questioned), but rather of
“evil” nature of Islam that has emerged in public discourses as the biggest U.S. enemy since
the September 11. Thus, it is not surprising that the stories in the aftermath of the attacks take
the vilification of Islam and, in this case, perhaps unwillingly, that of black Africa, to its
logical extreme. In short, the coverage of these cases creates a new sort of problematic – the
misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam are coupled with the well-established colonial
clichés that are then evoked to tell the story of black Africa.

Nigerian Stoning Cases in Le Monde

Le Monde also has five stories in 2002, dedicated to the cases of Husseini and Lawal,
including a front page article and two op-ed pieces. Two stories in 2001 precede and set the
tone for the articles on the stoning cases. One is about a famous Nigerian writer, threatened by
an Islamist fatwa for her feminist ideas challenging patriarchal traditions (Smith, Dec. 17,
2001). Another is about an Egyptian feminist and human rights activist, similarly being
pursued by Islamists for apostasy (Buccianti, May 28, 2001). The story opens with a
following image: “The season of witch hunt is again open in Egypt,” which establishes the
irrationality and darkness of Islamism, but also evokes the imagery of medieval Europe,
where many active women who did not abide by the patriarchal laws were proclaimed to be
witches. Both articles seem to reinforce the assumption that Islam is misogynist and brings
only suffering upon women (even though a reference to witches in one of the articles should
remind readers of the Christianity’s patriarchal and misogynist nature as well). Both articles warn of spreading Islamism and, in the case of Nigeria particularly, of the strengthening grip of the Sharia law.

*Le Monde*’s staff writer Smith wrote three articles about Hussaini and Lawal. The underlying theme and a primary focal point of all three articles is the international support for the two women. Even more than in the *NYT*, the articles foreground the “saving process” embedded in the colonial rhetoric of rescuing helpless African women from savageness, irrationality and darkness. His first article opens up with an acknowledgment that “the fate of Safiya Hussaini has touched and mobilized the world” (Jan. 16, 2002). In all articles, he cites numerous examples of especially European support: she was pronounced an honorary citizen of Genoa and Naples; an Italian soccer team wore t-shirts with her name; Greek Minister of women’s affairs and the EU head publicly protested against the punishment; numerous non-governmental organizations around Europe staged protests (Jan. 16, 2002; Mar. 27, 2002; Aug. 26, 2002). Putting forward the Western responses to the cases, *Le Monde* narratives push the visual descriptions of the punishment itself (stoning to death while half-buried in sand), which occupy an important place in the *NYT*, to the second level. In short, it is not the punishment itself, but the heroic efforts of the West that are at the center of the narratives, as it is due to these efforts that the punishments can no longer be carried out. Just as in the *NYT*, Smith does not see it necessary to invoke efforts of local organizations that just as fervently fought against the implementation of the unfair sentences.

However, while this international mobilization and support, which clearly contributed to rendering the cases quite visible in *Le Monde*, is the focal point of Smith’s stories, he himself grows critical of this colonial rescue narrative. In his front page analysis (Aug. 26, 2002), he warns his readers that this solidarity “rendered readily available to save these two peasants, is not unconditional.” He then goes on to list several conditions that one has to
fulfill to be so worthy of “saving” in the eyes of the West: 1) to be perfectly innocent victims; 2) to be accused of a perfectly ridiculous crime; 3) to be prescribed a perfectly brutal punishment. To this, he adds Nigeria’s strategic importance, as one of the biggest West African countries, with big oil resources and in search for democracy and international respectability. In contrast, he also gives an example of Saudi Arabia, where women’s situation is deplorable, but attracts much less Western outcry. Smith’s skepticism is resonated in the two op-ed pieces on the issue as well. Ramadan (Sept. 10, 2002), the director of Islamic Center in Geneva, reproaches the West for ignoring other situations of Muslim suffering, e.g. extermination of Chechens by Russians or the fate of handicapped Palestinian children; the argument that is also accepted by an academic Levy (Sept. 13, 2002) in his op-ed. Thus, what seemingly starts like a retelling of a colonial rescue narrative, casting the West as the heroic saviors of helpless African women, is then, briefly unmasked, by demonstrating that the alleged generosity of the West is not without conditions and limits.

Yet, Le Monde, just like its American counterpart, falls short of providing a larger political context that would explicate the Islamist ascent to power, which brought forward the current suffering of Muslim women. It is clear that the Western media is complicit with the political elites and remains silent about the role that the Western countries have played in impoverishing Nigeria and propping Islamist organizing not only in Nigeria, but in various African Muslim countries (see, e.g. Dreyfuss, 2005).

The portraits of Hussaini and Lawal are not much developed. Unlike the NYT’s narratives, where their depictions serve to embody their victimization and suffering, in Le Monde, little detail is given about either one of them, besides the principal facts: they are mothers of allegedly illegitimate children, Muslim, rural women. The readers also learn that Amina is “illiterate” (Smith, Mar. 27, 2002), and that Safya was first married at the age of 12 (Smith, Jan. 16, 2002). That is, their social statuses are quickly sketched, but not dwelled on,
and their portraits do not serve to visually establish their suffering (e.g., unlike in the *NYT*, there is not a single mention of them being veiled or crying etc.). Only Ms. Hussaini is given a brief chance to speak for herself. According to Smith, her version of the events that led to her pregnancy was that of rape (that is also invoked in 2004 *Human Rights Watch* report), even though her defense argued that the child was conceived with her latest husband from which she was at the time already separated (Jan. 16, 2002) - (the same version is also advanced in the *NYT*). It is worth noting that the obvious discrepancy between the two versions does not evoke any interest on the writer’s part, who continues to recycle the “official” version, and in such a way, effectively discredits Hussaini’s own account.

As in the *New York Times, Le Monde* depicts these cases in religious, not racial terms. That is, at the basis of the perceived injustice and suffering is the Sharia law. However, *Le Monde*’s narratives do not straightforwardly vilify Islam by accentuating its irrationality and savageness, as is the case in the *NYT*. This is partly because the graphic images of punishment and suffering are rare, but also because of the specifically French interpretation of the events due to Smith’s systematic emphasis on the fact that the cases represent a political dilemma, not a religious issue. That is, he underscores that Nigeria is a secular state, as prescribed by its Constitution (Mar. 27; Aug. 26, 2002). Moreover, the government is seen as opposing the punishments and even credited for advocating for Hussaini and Lawal’s release (Aug. 26, 2002). In such a context, Smith sees the strengthening of Sharia’s grip in the Muslim north as a result of the economic crisis that needs to be addressed as such; according to him, Sharia represents “hopes of the poor” (Aug. 26, 2002), which is line with academic accounts. Yet, Smith does not go a step further in explicating the causes of this economic crisis, which would require acknowledging the Western countries’ culpability.

In short, given the importance of the principal of secularity (*laïcité*) in the French political discourses, the Nigerian stoning cases are presented as of interest to French
audiences primarily because the principal of secularity is at stake. *Le Monde* narratives are interwoven by a debate on whether Sharia law is compatible with the democratic and secular values that Nigeria claims to represent. The opposing views are expressed in the two op-ed pieces. Ramadan (Sept. 10, 2002), the director of Islamic Center in Geneva, tries to explain what he calls “Sharia misunderstood” by suggesting that punishments are mostly meant to dissuade others from committing similar sins and have purifying as well as punishing powers. His article constitutes a rarely-heard Muslim perspective in the Western mainstream media. A French academic, Levy, however, responds to Ramadan (Sept. 13, 2002), by claiming that his reading of Islam and Sharia takes for granted the “State of law and secularism that is provided to him [Ramadan] by Occident.” That is, he brings the question back to whether the implementation of Sharia law in Nigeria is possible, if its secular and democratic nature is to be maintained. In the end, the Nigerian government is shown to solve the dilemma in favor of secularism, by sparing innocent women, but not without Western support.

In general, the coverage of the stoning cases in *Le Monde* presents a stark contrast to that of the *NYT’s*. While making visible the process of saving of these innocent women from a brutal punishment, and thus, tapping into the colonial rescue rhetoric, *Le Monde* retains some critical distance towards the latter, by suggesting that the Western generosity is not unconditional. Even more importantly, *Le Monde* does not linger either on brutality of punishments or the victimhood of the women in question by visually detailing their plight, as is the case in the *NYT*. Rather, the debate is situated within varying perspectives on Sharia law and its compatibility with secular and democratic nature of Nigerian state. In such a way, the French narratives are able to avoid the straightforward casting of Islam as ruthless, irrational, and appropriate for “dark” Africa, as it was imagined by Europeans since colonialism. In short, while not ignoring Nigerian women’s suffering *vis-à-vis* the newly implemented Sharia law, *Le Monde* does not render this suffering the focal point of its stories. However, an
important flaw of the narratives is the fact that *Le Monde*, like its American counterpart, never breaches the issue of how and why Islamists came to power in many of Muslim African countries, including Nigeria.

**Conclusion**

The *NYT* and *Le Monde*’s coverage of African Muslim women is quite different. The *NYT*’s Algerian and Nigerian women, cast mainly as helpless victims *vis-à-vis* the ruthless Islam, contrast with more positive images in *Le Monde*. It is not like the latter does not tap into the colonial rhetoric (e.g., rescue narrative), but what makes the difference is its ability to retain more critical distance, which, at times, successfully exposes Western mythology and hypocrisy. Equally noteworthy is *Le Monde*’s usage of more precise terms (e.g., Islamism vs. Islam, hijab, haik, headscarf vs. veil etc.). French newspaper’s more nuanced and critical reporting on African Muslim women can perhaps be explained by significant numbers of African Muslim immigrants, and, thus, greater familiarity of large publics with historical events in question (especially, in relation to the Algerian civil war), including collective guilt, and simultaneously, a greater skepticism towards Western colonial rhetoric. In the case of the U.S., on the other hand, the casting of Islam in rather negative terms in the analyzed articles reflects a long-tradition of vilifying Islam (Said, 1993; 1997), which only strengthened after the Sept. 11 attacks. However, both newspapers fall short of providing any sort of critique of colonial interference and never breach an issue of how and why Islamists came to power, instead focusing on the suffering of Muslim women that is discussed in detail, especially in the *NYT*. 
African Women and Female Genital Cutting in the New York Times and Le Monde

The issue of female genital cutting constitutes another major thematic category in reporting on African women. It has been surrounded by controversy ever since Europeans set foot on the African continent. Inscribing themselves into the long tradition of covering up the imperial ambitions in rhetoric of women’s liberation (see Abu-Lughod, 2002; Kumar, 2008; Stabile & Kumar, 2005), Western colonizers and missionaries proclaimed the practice as a proof of barbarism and carried out campaigns to prohibit it, as part of their plan to “civilize” Africans. These efforts, however, were not very successful. In fact, European colonization and interventions had occasionally the unforeseen effect of strengthening African women’s identification with the practice that began to be seen as a sign of resistance against Western imperialism (Thomas, 1998; Pedersen, 1991). In other words, certain Africans’ conceptions of the practice as emphasizing African identity and their determined perpetuation of it is at least partially a consequence of violent Western interventions into the continent.

In the 20th century, it was Western feminists and human rights activists who embraced the issue. The sexual revolution in the West brought the issue to the attention of larger publics, as activists and feminist, such as, e.g., G. Steinem, R. Morgan, and F. Hosken, became concerned with the destiny of genitally-cut women, projecting the clitoris as a necessary element of female orgasm (see, e.g., Koedt, 1970). Some of the opponents of the practice went as far as establishing female genital cutting as a symbol of universal victimhood (e.g., Walker, 1992; Walker & Parmar, 1993). In short, it was now their turn to try to “save” African women from their men and themselves. In other words, although with good intentions in mind, many of these Western scholars and activists fell into the trap of appropriating the colonial rescue narrative by stoically projecting themselves as all too ready to take upon themselves the “white (wo)man’s burden.”
Various international organizations report that anywhere from 70 to 140 million women world-wide have undergone the procedure, and 3 million girls are estimated to be undergoing it every year. According to the World Health Organization, most of cases of female genital cutting are carried out in 28 African countries, but a few countries in the Middle East and Asia also practice it. The prevalence of the ritual varies within countries and regions; there are only six countries, where the prevalence of female genital cutting is almost universal. Moreover, there are several forms of genital cutting, ranging from excision of prepuce (type 1) to excision of clitoris (type 2) to excision of part or all of external genitalia and the stitching of the vagina – the most severe form, called infibulation (type 3). UNICEF reports that a majority of countries practice type 1 cutting, while infibulation is most common in Sudan (74%) and Eritrea (39%). The negative health consequences include bladder and urinary tract infections, cysts, infertility and greater risks at childbirth, and depend greatly on the type of cutting.

The conceptualizations of the ritual by those who practice it vary but are always a result of a complex set of beliefs. Attesting to the variety of interpretations, Gruenbaum (2001) reports that “circumcision is practiced by people of many ethnicities and various religious backgrounds … For some it is a rite of passage. For others it is not. Some consider it aesthetically pleasing. For others, it is mostly related to sexuality and morality” (p. 33). The varied and complex interpretations of the ritual, however, have little to do with the simplistic Western misconceptions that female genital cutting is only meant to enhance male dominance and reduce female sexual pleasure – the Western-centric understanding that projects the

108 These six countries are: Mali (92%), Egypt (97%), Sudan (90%), Ethiopia (80%), Eritrea (89%), Guinea (99%); see: http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/FGM-C_final_10_October.pdf; http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/fgm/prevalence.htm.
clitoris as necessary to the fulfillment of female sexual desire, criticized by Africanist scholars (Abd el Habi, 2000; Abusharaf, & Halim, 2000; Ahmadi, 2000).

The issue of female genital cutting continues to cause much controversy among activists, academics and concerned citizens. While the negative medical consequences are unanimously acknowledged and condemned, the meanings of the practice and the means to deal with it are still contested. The issue gains new pertinence with African immigrants continuing the practice in the West. It is important to note, however, that while today female genital cutting is almost unanimously rejected in the West as an incomprehensible and mutilating ritual, public discourses remain silent about West’s history of genital cutting. Romans pierced the genitalia of female slaves with pins of fibula, hence the term “infibulation” (Walley, 1997). In Victorian Europe, female genital cutting was commonly used as a treatment for masturbation, but also for psychological conditions, such as hysteria, or epilepsy (Bell, 2005; Sheehan, 1997).

In the Western media, the issue with its controversial nature drew much attention throughout the 1990s. According to Walley (1997), however, the issue has mostly been discussed in binary terms that falsely suggest “an insurmountable chasm between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (p. 407). The two newspapers analyzed in this study perpetuate the tradition in terms of ample attention accorded to the issue, which is especially true of the NYT. There are 59 stories about female genital cutting in the NYT, which constitutes 25% of its overall coverage on African women, and 19 stories in Le Monde, which is 10% of its overall coverage. The controversial nature of the issue in and of itself accounts for abundance of the coverage. A more novel issue of genital cutting performed by immigrants in the U.S. and even more so in France adds new currency to the traditional debates.

Additionally, sexual titillation and a voyeuristic gaze surrounding the practice should not be underestimated. African women and their cut genitals are put on display for voyeuristic
gazing and debates that are often reminiscent of those of the early 20th century when African women’s genitals were proclaimed as abnormal by doctors and other European experts (Gilman, 1986). Thus, the issue lends itself well to the simplistic and shocking readings grounded in the well-established colonial logic of distancing ourselves from the “other.”

Summarizing all of this, Walley (1997) puts it in the following way: interest in the ritual in the Western world has stemmed not only from a “feminist or humanist concern, but also from desire to sensationalize, to titillate, and to call attention to differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in ways that reaffirms notions of Western cultural superiority” (p. 409).

Media concern with female genital cutting is not negative in and of itself. It is true that negative health consequences of the practice are not negligible, to say the least. Although statistics about injuries or even death as a result of genital cutting is very hard to gather and, thus, almost non-existent, the World Health Organization reports that immediate complications of genital cutting can include severe pain, shock, hemorrhaging, tetanus or sepsis, urine retention, and open sores. Long term consequences entail recurrent bladder and urinary tract infections, cysts, infertility and increased risk of complications at childbirth. However, even given these negative health consequences, the academic Gates (1994) is right to interrogate in his op-ed in the NYT the limits of liberalism: “Is it, after all, unreasonable to be suspicious of Westerners who are exercised over female circumcision, but whose eyes glaze over when the same women are merely facing starvation?” The disproportionate number of stories on female genital cutting in the NYT is even clearer when put in a comparative perspective: there are only 9 stories for the same period discussing domestic violence in the U.S., the issue that claims 5.3 million victims every year. Therefore, it is possible to

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conclude that such attention to female genital cutting has little to do with concerns about the universal women’s rights and are rather fuelled by some other historical and political factors.

Both newspapers’ coverage of the issue reveals many inherent complexities and controversies, including the divisions between Western and African perspectives, but also exposes some of the most resistant stereotypes about Africans, contributing to the colonial discourses-inspired understandings of the practice. I start with the analysis of the NYT’s narratives and then compare them to those of Le Monde.

Female Genital Cutting in the New York Times

The New York Times’ abundant coverage on genital cutting distinguishes itself by a variety of opinions coming from different sources that contribute to the discussions on the issue. In fact, it is the issue that is most extensively addressed in editorials, op-ed pieces, and especially, letters to the editor over the studied period. In a way, these narratives of female genital cutting in Africa constitute an example of a mediated public sphere; a variant of the original public sphere, envisioned by Habermas (1989) as an actual physical space, where issues of significant importance were publicly discussed by bourgeois members of society. Habermas was, however, criticized by feminist scholars because his original conception of the public sphere as the space for rational debates excluded important marginal groups, notably, women but also blue-collar workers (see Curran, 1991; Landes, 1998). In the NYT, however, women participate equally in the mediated public discussions about female genital cutting: for example, six out of ten letters to the editor are written by women.113

The following analysis is divided along the main thematic concepts and individual writers’ coverage.

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113 It is more difficult to make observations regarding the authors’ social status. While in some cases they are identified by their official functions (e.g., activists, academics etc.), at other times, the only references to social identity come from the content of a letter, as, for instance, the letter written by the self-identified “Muslim man” (Aug. 15, 2006).
The definition of female genital cutting. There are many descriptions of the practice in the New York Times articles, in which two distinct perspectives – the Western and the African one, are visible. Within the Western perspective that is constituted by journalists, but also human rights activists and average citizens, the definition of the practice in the majority of cases remains straightforwardly negative: e.g., a “bloody rite” (Dugger, Apr. 25, 1996), “butchery invented to control women” (Simons, Nov. 23, 1993); “excruciating and life-threatening procedure” (Dec. 30, 1997), or yet “female genital torture” (Rosenthal, Dec. 29, 1992). Many times, the horrors of the practice are articulated in vague statements with no possibility of verifying their accuracy and no statistics or medical records to back them up. For instance, in one of her multiple articles on the issue, Crossette suggests that “many girls bleed to death during or after the procedure” (Dec. 29, 1997). Rosenberg is also satisfied with an abstract qualifier “many” in the following frightening description of the ritual and its consequences: “Many infibulated women suffer constant infections and other health problems because urine and blood back up. Their husbands must bring a knife to their wedding night to cut them open” (Jul. 5, 2004). As mentioned, human rights organizations report that anywhere from 70 to 140 million girls and women have undergone the procedure.\footnote{For some number estimates, see the human rights organizations’ reports: \url{http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/fgm/index.html} (“between 100 and 140 million”); \url{http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_genitalmutilation.html} (“an estimated 70 million”); for information by countries: \url{http://www.unfpa.org/gender/practices1.htm}; \url{http://www.stopfgmc.org/client/sheet.aspx?root=168&sheet=2304&lang=en-US}.} It is also medically established that the practice has many serious negative effects (see e.g., Dirie, & Lindmark, 1992; McCaffrey, 1995). Thus, the writers are surely entitled and welcome to talk about these dangers. However, their tendency to generalize and utilize such abstractions as “many,” is dangerous in reproducing the long-term Western inclination to speak about all of African women or, in this instance, all genetically-cut African women, as a uniform mass. This is especially problematic since female genital cutting is practiced neither in all African
countries, nor in all the communities of a particular country. According to the WHO data, out of 28 African countries where genital cutting is practiced, the prevalence of practice ranges from 5 to 99% of female population. The countries with the prevalence rate over 70% are: Guinea (99%), Egypt (97%), Mali (92%), Northern Sudan (90%), Ethiopia (80%), and Mauritania (71%). Female genital cutting is not widely practiced in the southern part of the continent and the northern countries such as Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco. For some countries, no data are available. In spite of the great disparities between the countries, female genital cutting is often rendered into the common symbol of all African women’s suffering. In short, female genital cutting becomes Africa. To take the previous analogy with domestic violence – unlike female genital cutting, it never becomes the dominant image of American women and, even more, of the U.S., despite its widespread nature and negative medical and social consequences that it frequently entails.

Due to such an emphasis on the physical aspects of the practice, the first message sent to American audiences about genital cutting is that of its physically violent nature, invoking the colonial images of African “savageness.” The latter is further underscored by countless mentions of cutting being performed “without anesthesia”; the qualification that is branded in the Times coverage as the staple feature of the practice that implicitly juxtaposes Western modernity and its medical achievements to African backwardness, irrationality and women’s oppression. The physical descriptions of female genital cutting reach their apogee in the vivid articulations of what the equivalent of it would be when applied to men. For example, Rosenthal (Jun. 13, 1995) puts bluntly that “the male equivalent would be the removal of the penis.” Sandosham, who was at the time the Executive Director of Equality Now also suggests that “the male equivalent of even the less severe forms of FGM would be castration” (Dec.

28, 1995). By visualizing the bodily experiences of female genital cutting in relation to male bodies, the writers arguably succeed in appealing emotionally to both female and male audiences. At the same time, the comparison of female genital cutting to the imaginary male genital cutting further exposes the irrationality and absurdity of the practice from the Western point of view that is shared by journalists and human rights workers alike.

Another frequent common denominator of the Western descriptions of the practice is the focus on its oppressive nature. That is, it is most often concluded that it is meant to control women and their sexuality. For example, Rosenthal suggests that “it is a form of male control, perhaps the ultimate, except for murder” (Jun. 13, 1995), which is allegedly performed, adds Crossette, “in the name of destroying sexual sensation” (Dec. 10, 1995). Or as Judith Lorber concludes in her letter to the editor: “Female genital mutilation celebrates only male social power” (Dec. 6, 1993). This typically Western understanding of the practice with its exclusive focus on oppressive sexual hierarchies and female sexuality has been much criticized by Africanist scholars, who emphasize the ritual nature of genital cutting as well as women’s crucial roles in perpetuating it (Abd el Habi, 2000; Abusharaf, & Halim, 2000). Gruenbaum (2001) suggests that the perspective that genitally-cut African women are unable to experience sexual pleasure is at least partially ethnocentric (p. 133-57). African scholar Ahmadu (2000) powerfully exposes the limits of this Western claim by pointing out that this might also be said of many Western women with their clitorises intact. Finally, as far as the suggestion that the ritual is an “ultimate form of male control” is concerned, some anthropological literature points to the contrary. Goldschmidt (1986), for instance, claims that the ritual for Sebei women in Uganda was less about controlling their sexuality and more about giving them a source of collective strength as a counterweight to male dominance. In a similar vein, Boddy (1982) suggests that for Northern Sudanese women infibulations guaranteed their social status in society not as “the sexual partners of their husbands, nor … as
their servants, sexual or otherwise, but as the mothers of men” (p. 687). Although one might argue about whether women should be satisfied with achieving status through de-sexualization, “as the mothers of men,” as Body’s findings suggest, I give this and other examples to show that varying perspectives on female genital cutting exist. The discourses in the NYT, however, adamantly stick to the flawed Western-centric understandings of the practice that rely on the colonial imaginings of the “other’s” inferiority and backwardness.

While the patriarchal social order is portrayed as a necessary and given context for female genital cutting, other important factors, such as religion and Africaness, are also brought into attention. For example, Simons repeatedly emphasizes that female genital cutting is a “widely practiced African custom,” but also an “age-old Muslim ritual” (Jan. 13, 1993). In contrast, Neil MacFarquhar gravitates towards defining the practice as “more an African puberty rite than Islamic one” (Aug. 8, 1996). The scholarly research has demonstrated that genital cutting is neither exclusively African, nor only a Muslim practice (Abd el Habi, 2000; Abusharaf, & Halim, 2000; Gruenbaum, 2001). These important qualifications are somewhat lost in the NYT narratives, in which the primary emphasis remains first on African and, then, on Muslim, both of which function as effective means of “othering,” as the practice is portrayed as irreconcilable with Western values.

The conceptualization of genital cutting also entails the discussion as to what the right term to define the practice is. In a letter to the editor, the human rights advocate Sandosham takes a strong position on defining the practice as “female genital mutilation,” the term that is usually preferred by human right groups, who equate it with torture, but rejected by Africanist scholars, who opt for a more neutral term of genital cutting or circumcision\(^\text{116}\) (Abd el Hadi, 2000; Abusharaf & Halim, 2000). Reflecting Sandosham’s position, Berman, a political and

\(^{116}\) But the term circumcision is also a bit problematic because it invokes too easily the parallel with male circumcision (Abd el Hadi, 2000; Abusharaf, & Halim, 2000).
economic consultant, puts it in the following way in his letter to the editor: “female genital mutilation (a term more value-laden, but less misleading than “female circumcision”) is no less gruesome” (Nov. 30, 1993). In such a way, the audiences become aware that the choice of the term in and of itself is political, not accidental, and at least some of the writers contributing to the debates are familiar with the controversies of the definition. In contrast, the Times journalists who have written repeatedly on the issue do not seem to be aware of political connotations of the terms. Most of them (e.g., Perlez, Dugger, Crossette, Simons) use stronger and more neutral terms interchangeably and only rarely point to the political nature of the choice (e.g., Lacey, Jun.8, 2004). The only exception seems to be Rosenthal, who steadily employs the most powerful language of “torture” and “mutilation” in his series of articles that will be later discussed as an example of an individual journalist’s advocacy campaign.

Alternative voices that disrupt the chorus articulating the sheer horrors of the practice are, with rare exceptions, those of Africans themselves. While they usually do not condone the practice, they criticize Western approaches and misunderstanding regarding it. A lonely Western voice, Maynard Herwine, a history instructor, reacting to one of the NYT editorial writers’ pieces, presents an alternative perspective on the practice suggesting that “from the African viewpoint the practice can serve as an affirmation of the value of woman in traditional society” (Nov. 24, 1993). Nawal Nour, “a Sudanese-born, Harvard-trained” gynecologist explains that the practice is perpetuated “because of a deeply ingrained belief that they [parents] are protecting their daughters. This is not done to be hurtful, but out of love” (Dreifus, Jul. 11, 2000). An op-ed, titled “The West just doesn’t get it,” by two professional African women attack the “Western feminist tendency to see female genital

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117 It is interesting to note that Dreifus in her interview with Dr. Nour raises the question, whether the female genital cutting currently practiced in Africa is similar to that which occurred in the 19th century America (and Europe); she is the only writer to contextualize the female genital cutting in such a way.
mutilation as the gender oppression to end all oppressions.” According to them, “instead of
being an issue worthy of attention in itself, it has become a powerfully emotive lens through
which to view personal pain” (Dawit & Mekuria, Dec. 7, 1993). That is, while acknowledging
the importance of the issue and its negative consequences for women, the authors condemn
the display of female genital cutting in the West for a sort of voyeuristic gazing and
exclusively for provoking pity. Their arguments approach some third-world feminist scholars’
positions that criticize their Western counterparts’ tendencies to display the situation of
African women in terms of their oppression and suffering (read: their need to be saved) and
their lagging behind (read: their need to be civilized) (Mohanty, 1991; Oyewumi, 2003).

Dawit and Mekuria’s self-identification as African women renders them credible
witnesses and ultimate experts. And while they straightforwardly pronounce their opposition
to the practice, they warn that the West will not be able to stop it, unless African women
themselves are involved. By rejecting the colonial power dynamics of speaking and acting in
the name of someone, they conclude that “neither Alice Walker nor any of us can speak for
them [African women in Africa]; but if we have the power and the resources, we can create
the room for them to speak, and speak with us as well.” In another article a Sierra-Leonean
women’s rights advocate reminds American readers that Western efforts to eradicate female
genital cutting still carries risks of being seen as yet another act of cultural imperialism: “The
more you decide you are going to take something like this on, the more you are going to face
resistance. … We have to let them know that we are not coming to take something away from
them” (French, Feb. 2, 1997). A Somali activist Raakiya Omaar, the head of African Watch at
the time, further underscores the breach between the Western and African perspectives by
pointing out the previously invoked Western tendency to see the practice as the “means of
gratifying men and denying women [sexual] pleasure” (Jan. 15, 1990). She suggests that
“emphasis must be put on the medical aspects, not the sexual issues.” In short, these examples
expose both Western misconceptions about the practice and the fact that female genital cutting remains the discursive terrain on which Western influence over Africa, on the one hand, and African independence, on the other hand, is continuously reasserted.

The African perspective that emerges in the NYT unanimously emphasizes that the fight against the practice should be carried out by Africans themselves. In line with Dawit and Mekuria’s arguments (Dec. 7, 1993), Berhane Ras-Work, the President of Inter-African Committee, straightforwardly reproaches Westerns for their perhaps “genuine human concern about the ‘poor Africans,’” who do not, however, go so far as to inform “themselves about the efforts that Africans are making to deal with the problem” (Dec. 15, 1993). In other words, her critique articulates the underlying problem with the Western approach to female genital cutting: while consumed with the horrific and, thus, spectacular aspects of female suffering and sexuality, Westerners, engaged in a sort of voyeuristic gazing, get caught in their endless pity for African women. As a result, the other side of the issue – the changing practices, women or Africans’ in general efforts to stop the practice, etc. -- fades into the background. However, the Western media stops short of portraying in realistic and complex manner not only African but also Western women’s situations. For instance, while every 2 minutes, a woman is raped in the U.S.,118 the issue remains underreported, and raped women are, most often represented as objects of pity. The larger structural conditions that enable rape, such as patriarchy and misogyny, are rarely brought into the picture.

Several of the New York Times Western writers sporadically reiterate the importance of African leadership. For instance, Rosenthal suggests that “leadership against mutilation has to be built by Africans” (Apr. 12, 1996) or yet that already, “the main struggle against mutilation is being waged by African women” (Dec. 30, 1997). Several articles underscore the change that is on its way in their titles: “In Africa, girls fight a painful tradition” (Ramsey, 118 See: http://www.rainn.org/statistics
Jan. 3, 2004); “African women gather to denounce genital cutting” (Lacey, Feb. 6, 2003); “Genital cutting shows signs of losing favor in Africa” (Lacey, Jun. 8, 2004). The starkest examples of successes also come from Africans themselves. For example, Crossette reports on the Ugandan tribe that has succeeded in reducing genital cutting in their community by 36% in just one year (Jul. 16, 1998). She goes on to further explain that “the Sabiny Elders – after first converting themselves from proponents to opponents of female genital cutting – attracted attention of health and population experts by finding their own way to deal with a practice that is widely condemned.” In other words, she portrays the Sabiny Elders as experts and leaders, capable of coping with the issues on their own. Instead of “rescuing” Africans, the West is implicitly warned to stand aside, watch and learn.

The frame of “coming around” from supporting to condemning the practice reappears in Lacey’s article as well (Jun. 8, 2004). Here, he recounts the story of a former Kenyan circumciser who “turned from a cutter into an active opponent.” Lacey underscores that Ishino Shuriye renounced genital cutting only after the Muslim imams persuaded her that it in fact violated Islamic laws. The portrayal of the aftermath of conversion, thus, also carries religious undertones. Shuryie is shown repenting for her earlier sins, going from door to door to the women she has circumcised as children and asking for their forgiveness. “She cried each time, she said,” points out Lacey. Such a religiously embedded account of genital cutting brings forward its identification with Islam. However, framed as an intimate, personal story, the article also manages to expose certain complexities related to the practice. A humane portrayal of a former circumciser, a loss of her social status as a result of giving up genital cutting, and her seemingly sincere efforts to advocate against it, brings another dimension to the ritual that is in the Western discourses most often articulated as violent, horrible and unmistakably a sign of African backwardness.
A number of journalists discuss African governments’ bans of the practice. For example, Crossette reports that Senegal has banned genital cutting “responding to a campaign by Senegalese women,” which underscores African women’s agency and ability to bring about change (Jan. 18, 1998). In another article, Crossette discusses Egypt highest court’s decision to uphold the ban on the practice after it was overturned by conservative Muslims (Dec. 29, 1997; see also Dugger’s article on Jun. 26, 1997). In fact, the Egyptian case reveals that Africans themselves do not unanimously support the practice, and, thus, shatters the colonial logic approximating vision of irrational Africans uniformly upholding the harmful practice at all costs. Yet, many articles also rightly point out that legal bans, in place in many of African countries, are clearly not enough to stop what is first and foremost a cultural and social ritual\(^{119}\) (Lacey, Jun. 8, 2004; Rosenberg, Jul. 5, 2004; Oct 5, 1996).

Some of the NYT’s writers are particularly uncomfortable when dealing with stories in which African women emerge as perpetrators of genital cutting or more or less explicitly in favor of it. For instance, in one of his columns, Rosenthal condescendingly proclaims that “the specially sad thing was that the sufferers did not really grasp that they were the victims” (Sep. 6, 1996), implying that internalized oppression is at the heart of understanding women’s willing participation in the practice. In her front-page story, Dugger introduces the readers to a twelve-year-old girl from Ivory Coast, who, according to the writer, “wants more than anything to do what she believes stands between her and being grown up … to have her genitals cut off” (Oct. 5, 1996). In what looks like an attempt to rationalize the little girl’s incomprehensible desire, she then goes on to explain that after the ritual, the girls “are showered with gifts of money, jewelry and cloth.” Dugger who was in the same year consumed with writing about the case of the young Togolese woman, Kassindja, who fled her

\(^{119}\) Twenty-three African countries have currently ratified the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, which entails legal ban on harmful practices, including female genital cutting. See: http://www.equalitynow.org/english/campaigns/african-protocol/african-protocol_en.html
native country and asked for asylum in the U.S. on the grounds of avoiding genital cutting, is clearly uneasy about accepting the little girl’s desire at its face value. She is quick to remind us that even if Martha did not want to be genitally cut, the ultimate power allegedly lies in hands of her father, who is quoted as saying: “She has no choice. I decide. Her viewpoint is not important.”

After the intimate and personalized introduction that provides the twelve-year-old Martha’s point of view, Dugger turns to discussing the measures taken by local organizations and the government to stop the practice. Her narrative reveals at once the desperation of those who try to eradicate the practice and the incomprehensible irrationality on the part of those who perpetuate it. For instance, Dugger describes the efforts of local organizations through the following simile:

Like mosquitoes attacking elephant, the small, ill-financed groups are struggling within societies where men rule women’s lives, and old people, including old women, rule the young (Oct. 5, 1996). Such visually vivid imagery conveys at once the gravity of the situation and the futility of local efforts; at the same time, Dugger’s conclusion is a far cry from the earlier discussed example of local success. Her choice of metaphorical language reveals her own position, which is far from objective and neutral. In fact, her personal judgments pronouncing irrationality of the practice and people, who continue or undergo it seeps repeatedly through her narrative. For instance, she describes the exciser she interviewed as the “tall, sinewy woman [who] refused to show the ceremonial knife she uses, but brought out other accouterments of her calling” (note, the term calling, as if she was summoned to perform this terrible practice by someone and did so, despite the obvious harm she was causing because she is incapable of reasoning). The girls who have recently undergone the procedure are portrayed by Dugger either as having accepted it without any questioning: “it’s natural,” or as childish and naïve, only able to comment on what happened to them with a “giggle” (Oct. 5, 1996). In short, women, who are seen in the stories as more or less openly acquiescing to
female genital cutting, are concluded to be naïve and unable to comprehend the consequences of it, at best, and/or simply participating in their own oppression, at worst.

The *New York Times* general narratives of female genital cutting are underwritten by certain stereotypical Western misconceptions and misinterpretations of the practice. With rare exceptions, emphasis remains on its physically violent and oppressive nature and its alleged ultimate purpose of controlling women’s sexuality. While such accounts effectively bring attention to the negative consequences of the practice and are often bolstered by human rights advocates, they also foreground African irrationality and reiterate their need to be “saved.” The journalists seem especially uncomfortable when confronted with the fact that African women willingly participate in continuing the practice or at least do not reject it. However, this flawed Western perspective is effectively counterbalanced by the African one in which many contributors of African origins – as sources or writers– challenge Western misconceptions and add complexity to the narratives. Equally positive are examples of African leadership in fighting for eradication of the practice that overwrite the colonial rescue narrative of African women in need of saving by the West.

**Fauziya Kassindja and Celia Dugger.** The *New York Times* metro-area correspondent Celia Dugger’s articles in 1996 about the Togolese woman, Fauziya Kassindja, who fled her home country to escape forced marriage and genital cutting represents another example of individual writer’s advocacy campaign. Her engagement, however, lies primarily with an individual case rather than with a larger issue, as seen earlier with Kristof’s reporting on Darfurian rapes. Once in the U.S., Kassindja sought political asylum and eventually won after long months of detention and debates, as to whether she fulfilled the proper legal definition of a political refugee, i.e. whether or not she was persecuted due to her race, religion, nationality, politics or membership in a social group. Gender was not one of the categories included in the asylum law before Kassindja’s case; neither was female genital
cutting ever a basis for an asylum request. Kassindja’s case, then, was unique in setting a precedent in the asylum law and effectively encouraged public debates about important issues of female genital cutting and, even more so, the American asylum system. However, the visibility that it reached in the year of 1996 with 14 stories in all, half of which were written by Dugger, would have hardly been possible without the latter’s personal engagement with the case. Moreover, 4 out of 7 Dugger’s articles were first-page stories, which implies the level of visibility that was only rivaled in the NYT by one other African woman during the study period – the South African Winnie Mandela (8 front-page stories over a 6 year period). The happy ending of Kassindja’s case in light of Dugger’s writings could be seen as a successfully fulfilled “white (wo)man’s burden.”

It was the forced marriage of Kassindja by her aunt that brought about the necessity of genital cutting, which her own parents disapproved of. However, the forced marriage is always omitted, putting all of the emphasis on genital cutting, when articulating Kassindja’s asylum plea. Kassindja fled Togo to avoid: “genital mutilation” (May 3, 1996); “having a tribal elder ‘scrape my woman parts off’” (May 2, 1996) or yet “having her clitoris cut off” (Aug. 11, 1999). The primary attention in Dugger’s writings is, then, to Kassindja’s genitals, and how they may and should be saved from cutting. In other words, she becomes a perfect embodiment of the practice and, by extension, the suffering it might cause. In a tradition of patriarchal but also racist objectification of particularly black women that flourished in the colonial discourses, black Fauzyia is virtually reduced to her sexual parts, in the process reminiscent of Saartjie Baartman, Hottentots Venus’s, unfortunate destiny.120 That is, Westerners have long been obsessed with black women’s genitals, and have in the course of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century established the differences of sexual organs of

120 This young South African woman gained notoriety at the beginning of the 20th century, by exposing her body in the human circuses in European countries. Her genitals and, what was considered as, “protruding” buttocks were at the center of attention. After her premature death, her bodily organs, including genitals, were conserved and exposed at the Musee de l’Homme in Paris until the 1970s.
black women as the decisive (pseudo-scientific) proof of their difference and inferiority (Gilman, 1986). From this perspective, Kassindja’s rejection of the practice might in a way be seen as her claim to establish herself as the same, equal with Western women.

Kassindja’s “symbolic annihilation” (Tuchman, 1978) is further underscored by her unwillingness or inability to speak for herself. She repeatedly emerges as a silent victim rather than a vocal witness: she “sat quietly”; “Professor Musalo turned to her and told her that it was time to talk to reporters. ‘I’ll just put my head in your jacket,’ she whispered” (May 3, 1996); “Ms. Kasinga could not be reached for comment, but Ms. Musalo said her client was jubilant.” (Jun. 14, 1996). Kassindja seems to be unwilling to speak for herself either to authenticate her story or to advocate for the cause that her case has brought into the mainstream public discourses. After her lawyer, Ms. Musalo, “told her that National Public Radio wanted to do a segment for ‘millions of listeners,’ Miss Kassindja said, ‘Can I say no?’ ‘You can,’ her lawyer replied. ‘O.K., no,’ Miss Kasindja said (Sept. 11, 1996). The reason for this silence is perhaps the ordeal that she had to go through after leaving Togo, and especially, when detained in the U.S. prisons, where she has been kept with convicted felons, beaten, tear-gassed, strip-searched, shackled, and put in an isolation cell. Kassindja’s silence, a likely result of her outrageous treatment in the U.S., has a slightly negative effect of shifting the emphasis of the narrative from her personal story to the struggles of her lawyers to “save” her in what can be seen as an exemplary “white (wo)man’s burden.” In other words, Kassindja is not defined as a young African woman who dared to resist social norms and traditions, as she should be.

Although Kassindja herself does not readily become the advocate against female genital cutting, the NYT’s narrative about her is systematically interwoven by criticism against the practice, expressed by Dugger and other writers as well as a variety of sources that the articles draw on. Not unexpectedly, the practice is unilaterally defined as “abhorrent” (May 2,
1996), “harrowing” (Dugger, Sept. 11, 1996), “bloody rite” (Dugger, Apr. 25, 1996). Unlike the *Time*’s debates about genital cutting in general that are constituted by a variety of perspectives and voices, here, the horrors of the practice are unequivocally defined by Westerners, who are juxtaposed with Africans, notably, Kassindja’s family members, who support the practice, because “it has been the custom since antiquity” (Dugger, Sept. 11, 1996). Kassindja parents’ rejection of the practice, then, appears to be exceptional and is explained to the readers in terms of the family’s material success, which ended abruptly with the father’s death. The fact that the *NYT* resorts to this straightforward and simplistic perspective on genital cutting without any complexity that is found in other articles is perhaps best explained by the human rights undertones that are clearly visible in Dugger’s reporting on Kassindja. That is, female genital cutting needed to be presented at its most horrifying in order to establish Kassindja as a worthy victim. Also critical of Dugger’s reporting on Kassindja’s case, Africanist scholar Piot (2002) comes to a similar conclusion that utilization of colonial mythology and images of “Dark Africa” were in fact necessary for the successful consummation of the case. That is, in order for Kassindja to be admitted to the U.S. as a political refugee, she had to be represented both by her legal team and the media as a victimized African woman, coming from the land of darkness, savageness and oppression.

By the time the first article about Kassindja appeared in the *Times* on April 15th of 1996, she had been kept in detention facilities for almost two years. It was the women’s rights group *Equality Now* that had brought Kassindja’s case to Dugger’s attention. While clearly sympathetic and committed to Kassindja’s case, Dugger came to it with no previous knowledge of African issues. In other words, she approached Kassindja’s case as a concerned female citizen rather than a knowledgeable expert on Togolese or African matters. After Kassindja was granted asylum, Dugger went to Togo for the first time, and brought back a lengthy article, detailing Kassindja’s entire story, her family’s history and most current
developments (Sept. 11, 1996). It was after this visit that Dugger started spelling Kassindja’s name correctly. Before that and despite the ongoing contact with her, the woman was identified by the reporter as Kasinga, the variant of her name, misspelled by the authorities that first detained her.

While conducting her investigation in Kpalime, Kassindja’s local town, and the capital city of Lome, Dugger spoke neither French nor the local Tchamba (Piot, 2002). In other words, she embodied perfectly a figure of a white Western reporter, who has the power to speak about black Africans to large Western audiences from a privileged position that the NYT’s prestige grants her, but is a priori ignorant about the people or culture. As a result, her story is filled with colonial clichés. She paints a picture of Kassindja’s family, ruled by the ever-powerful “patriarch,” whom Kassindja’s mother must beg for forgiveness on her knees for having helped her daughter escape genital cutting and marriage as a fourth wife to a man almost three-times her age. Kassindja’s sister, who organized her escape, is also shown to be facing a dim future, as her husband did not approve her involvement in this family quarrel and has “since taken a second wife.” To this, add Kassindja’s illiterate aunt, who believes that “girls should [not] be too civilized” and educated, or yet the following explanation of cutting by the same family patriarch: “Girls who bleed modestly from their genital wounds are known to be virgins, he said, while those who bleed profusely are not.” In short, Dugger’s article is a testimony to the “darkness” of Africa par excellence: the omnipotent patriarchy, oppressed women, complicit in their own oppression, polygamy, and suffering caused by female genital cutting—all are essential elements in drawing a crystal clear division between “us” and the backwardness of Africa. This imaginary distance is made even more visible by the happy end of Kassindja’s ordeal, as now, “she lives – materially, at least – the cushy life of a well-to-do American student, in an apartment complex equipped with tennis courts and a swimming
pool.” That is, in what seems like a perfect example of a colonial rescue narrative, Kassindja is “saved” from darkness and suffering and has found a safe haven in the U.S.

Kassindja’s story, as recounted by Dugger, had the potential to become more than an example of a successful colonial rescue narrative - a black woman is saved by the whites from the “savageness” and “darkness” of her own people - by opening a space for debates about the flaws of the American asylum system. However, this potential while explored by the writer, was not developed in detail. In her very first article on Kassindja, Dugger (Apr. 15, 1996) paints the picture of “dark America” rather than “dark Africa.” She details the young woman’s ordeal in the detention centers, where she has been kept with convicted felons, beaten, tear-gassed, strip-searched, shackled, and put in an isolation cell. The gloomy picture of the U.S. as a terrain of abuse and despair is all the more visible because of the emphasis on Kassindja’s initial belief that America was “a country that ‘believed in justice.’” It is here that she thought to find the freedom and peace and be able to continue her education. The article reaches a climactic point in Dugger’s recounting of one of the Kassindja’s dreams. “She dreams she is back in Togo in her family’s big house with the flowers blooming in profusion at the front porch and green fish darting in the courtyard pond.” In a somewhat paradoxical twist, then, it is Africa that emerges as the land of dreams and peacefulness, while the U.S. is represented by its bare prisons and inhuman treatment of an innocent young woman.

Moreover, as Walley (1997) notes in her analysis of the article, it “suggests ironic parallels between the alleged fetters of ‘tribal customs’ [that Kassindja is fleeing] and actual fetters in a Pennsylvania prison … the irony emerges as Dugger challenges the assumption of ‘freedom’ in the United States by suggesting parallels with the (unquestioned ) oppression of ‘tradition’” (p. 421). Dugger’s article is followed by an editorial, no less critical of Kassindja’s detention, as well as three letters to the editor. In the letters, Kassindja’s treatment in the U.S. prisons is equated with xenophobia, racism or yet slavery. Dugger herself, however, stops short at
breaching the larger issues of immigration and treatment of immigrants in a more systematic fashion. Kassindja was released from a prison only nine days after the first article by Dugger. Her principal lawyer, Karen Musalo, has attributed this sudden release directly to the visibility that the NYT brought to the case and to the newspaper’s influence on public debates.121

As previously mentioned, Kassindja did not contribute much to the discussion about female genital cutting. In fact, in the NYT’s articles she does not go much beyond describing the practice as “having a tribal elder ‘scrape my woman parts off.’” (May 2, 1996). Thus, although her identity in the Western discourses will probably remain forever intertwined with female genital cutting, Kassindja is actually as much a stranger to the practice as the other Westerners talking about it. In her own book “Do they hear you when you cry” (1998), in which she finally chooses to give her own account, she describes the practice in the following manner:

I’ve heard that during the procedure, four women spread your legs wide apart and hold you down so that you can’t move. And then, the eldest woman takes a knife that is used to cut hair and scrapes your woman parts off. There are no painkillers, no anesthesia. The knife isn’t sterilized. Afterward, the women wrap your legs from your hips to your knees and you have to stay in bed for forty days so the wound can close (p. 3).

The excerpt underscores Kassindja’s outsider status – her testimony is only as credible as what she has heard, especially that the practice remains a taboo issue in many African societies where it is practiced, including among the Tchamba in Togo (Kassindja, p. 74). Allegedly, those women who have undergone the procedure cannot share their experiences with those who have not. Thus, Kassindja is not an expert on the issue able to provide a more authentic or more intricate account. This also explains the fact that her description bares such a resemblance to the mediated Western definitions that foreground the physically violent nature of the procedure as well as concerns with hygiene.

121 The viewpoint expressed during her public lecture “Gendered Injustice: Transcending the Male Paradigm in the U.S. and Beyond” at the Institute for Research on Woman, at Rutgers University on Oct. 19, 2005.
In general, her book, even though written as a more detailed and intimate account, follows closely the previously established frames of the story. Written with one of her lawyers, Layla Miller Bashir, and edited by two other American women, it is Kassindja’s story modified, with Western audiences in mind. In that sense, Kassindja herself participates in perpetuating certain Western discourses about African women. In other words, while she is conspicuously silent in the articles about her, with the silence intentionally emphasized, when she finally speaks, her account merely expands, but does not significantly challenge, the previous mediated narratives.

At the same time, Kassindja’s unwillingness to speak or advocate against female genital cutting seems understandable, given her ordeal after leaving Togo, and especially her outrageous treatment in the U.S prisons. Dugger’s reporting on the case, on the other hand, can be read as an example of advocacy-journalism, where the journalist gets personally involved in advocacy efforts and utilizes her writings as the means to achieve the desirable ends. However, her articles do not simply recycle the colonial rescue narrative, where a black woman, perhaps not necessarily helpless, but passive, is saved from suffering and savageness, but also sheds light on the flaws of the American legal system, although not in a systematic manner. In other words, the crucial fault of narratives is that Dugger is interested in American legal system’s flaws only as far as Kassindja is concerned, and does not breach the issue of systematic failures of the system in relation to immigrant detainees.

**Female genital cutting in the U.S.** The narratives on female genital cutting that appear in the NYT are no longer confined to Africa. Nineteen stories over the study period discuss the practice among African immigrants in the U.S. and other Western countries. Brought so close to home, female genital cutting is inevitably reconsidered in a different light. It can no longer simply attest to the “darkness” of Africa or to an unthinkable level of oppression of African women. Rather, if the practice continues in the U.S., then there is a
shadow of doubt cast on it as a land of democracy, human rights and opportunities; or alternatively, it might suggest the “incomplete” integration of the immigrant communities, which is quite visible in *Le Monde*’s stories about genital cutting among the French immigrants. As one African immigrant, who campaigns against female genital cutting in the immigrant communities in the U.S. put it: “For this to happen to a girl in the most civilized country in the world … I was enraged!” (Crossette, Dec. 10, 1995; emphasis mine). In short, the terms of debate do not really change, i.e. the “civilized” U.S. is confronting the “uncivilized” Africa, as embodied by female genital cutting, but the debate itself is brought so close back home that it can no longer be safely contained within the physical and discursive distance between the U.S. and Africa or between “us” and “them.” Extrapolating from the numbers of African immigrants from the countries where genital cutting is practiced (based on the 2000 Census), it is estimated that 228,000 women living in the U.S. has either undergone the procedure or are at risk. Yet these numbers are pure estimates, and hardly justify the high visibility of the issue in the *NYT* and, even more so, the way it is presented, especially given that other women’s issues, such as domestic violence or sexual assault that affect all American women, remain of little interest to the *NYT*.

Female genital cutting in immigration narratives retains all of its descriptions seen in other stories. In fact, female genital cutting is portrayed at its most irrational in the context of the potential conflict between U.S. laws and the African practice. In her front-page story, Dugger provides examples of African immigrants living in the U.S. who are determined to have their daughters cut at all costs. Both fathers and mothers are shown to be in favor of the practice. Here is an example of a Somali woman:

Mrs. Eidi still believes a milder form of the cutting she endured is necessary so that Rashaida [her daughter] does not later run off with boys and have babies before marriage. She was disappointed Medicaid refused to cover the procedure (Dec. 28, 1996).

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The quote pushes Mrs. Eidi’s alleged irrationality to its logical extreme, by invoking Medicaid – the social healthcare plan for the poorest that is intended to help them stay healthy; and which, from the American point of view, seems irreconcilable with genital cutting, detrimental from a medical perspective.

The issue of class or educational level in relation to female genital cutting is absent in the NYT’s general debates about the practice, but occupies a central position in immigration narratives. That is, writers underscore with surprise that even well-educated Africans who occupy relatively high social positions are likely to be in favor of the practice (Crossette, Dec. 10, 1995; Dugger, Dec. 28, 1996). In other words, Western audiences are confronted with narratives that fit uneasily into Western mentalities. Africans are shown as all too willing and ready to perpetuate the harmful (and “horrible”) practice, even though they are now “safe” in the “civilized and modern” U.S. Moreover, the attitudes towards the practice appear uncorrelated to one’s social status or education, which at once refutes the Western assumption of African savageness and irrationality and confirms it. That is, the African attachment to the practice emerges as beyond reasoning (because not “curable” by education) and is only explicable in terms of Africans’ desire not to be like Americans. For example, an African man is said to have cut her daughter in order to “avoid having her grow up into a ‘wild’ American” (Crossette, Dec. 10, 1995); a Somali woman similarly claims that genital cutting is necessary for her daughter in order to prevent her “from running wild” (Dugger, Dec. 28, 1996). At the same time, while these stories bring out the determination of individual Africans to perpetuate the practice, they also distort the simplified colonial logic that perpetuation of the practice happens as the result of African irrationality and lack of “civilization,” by emphasizing the cultural value of self-identification that many Africans attach to female genital cutting.
The discussion about female genital cutting and immigrants quickly becomes politicized, as U.S. politicians appear on the NYT’s stage, lobbying for the introduction of a law banning the practice in the U.S. In her first-page article, Dugger celebrates the passing of such a law in October 1996 (Oct. 12, 1996). She invokes the case of Fauziya Kassindja, as one of the factors that brought visibility and put genital cutting on the political agenda. Not surprisingly, the politicians, most actively advocating for the adoption of the law, emerge in the NYT’s narratives as the ones exploiting the reservoir of horrific images of genital cutting to the greatest possible extent in order to advance their cause. For instance, the representative Patricia Schroeder brings the issue back home with the following comparison: “You keep trying to explain that this is not circumcision … This is more like Lorena Bobbit.” The equation of female genital cutting with the notorious and widely publicized instance of the male castration simultaneously articulates the horror of the practice and its criminal nature.123

Senator Harry Reid similarly invokes the horrors of the practice by recounting that “‘they grab her and hold her down and rip out her genitalia with a razor blade’ … adding that he thought of his two young granddaughters at the time” (Dugger, Oct. 12, 1996). By invoking his granddaughters, he instantly succeeds in turning a political issue into a personal one. In short, politicians most invested in seeing the practice banned resort rather straightforwardly to emphasizing and exploiting the horrors of the practice at the expense of the complex discussions about its meanings for either Westerners or Africans. This is in line with the previous observations about Dugger’s reporting on Kassindja’s case, where genital cutting was also portrayed at its most horrifying in order to justify Kassindja’s claim to political asylum. The issue of American politicians lobbying on “behalf” of African women in

123 She does not, however, put this case in a much wider context of domestic violence whose victims are mostly women. The case of Lorena Bobbit was arguably so scandalous precisely because the victim was a man, and the perpetrator was a woman.
relation to female genital cutting is also problematic in light of political silence in relation to other immigrant issues.

For example, Chacon and Davis (2006) expose the U.S.’s hypocrisy in relation to the treatment of Mexican immigrant workers in their study of Mexican immigration. They argue that the increasing militarization of the U.S.-Mexican border, especially in the post-September 11 era, has failed to halt migration, because it disregards the structural processes at its origins, but has only “imposed deadly rules upon it” by forcing the “displaced migrants to cross the … border in more remote areas, where they are subject to extreme exposure and a host of other geographical dangers” (p. 205). According to Chacon and Davis, 4 people die every three days trying to cross the border, and the number of known deaths has exceeded 4000 since 1994 (p. 205). Put in such a comparative perspective, the attention to Kassindja’s case, while not negative in and of itself, seems to be exaggerated, and suggests that its newsworthiness is due to other factors than simply a sincere concern for an African woman immigrant’s destiny.

Kassindja’s legacy is well-preserved and perpetuated in other narratives about asylum. In one of the articles about a new case of asylum, Sachs reminds readers that Kassindja was a woman “who said her clitoris would be cut off if she were forced to return home to Togo” (Aug. 1, 1999). That is, she continues to be portrayed as the embodiment of the practice with a primary emphasis on her sexual organs rather than anything else. In another article, a female anthropologist points to a similar phenomenon and explains that one African woman “felt people were looking at her and talking to her as if all she was, was a big genital that had been mutilated” (Dugger, Dec. 28, 1996). A Somali model and the UN Special ambassador, Waris Dirie, who underwent female genital cutting at the age of five, and has written several books on her experience124 in her interview to the NYT also underscores that being known for her book about female genital cutting is both a reward and a curse. She expresses her doubts in

the following way: “How will people know me? As what? People are famous for whatever reason, whether they’re movie stars or activists. So for me, what a horrible way of being known” (Finnerty, May 9, 1999). In short, Ms. Dirie is wary of being reduced in the public discourses to her mutilated genitals.

The issue of reducing African women who have undergone the procedure to their sexual parts brings back the issue of voyeuristic gazing. The Western gaze, embodied in the *NYT* by a variety of actors, ranging from ordinary citizens to doctors, is always shocked and disturbed at the sight of cut genitals. The reaction of an average medical practitioner is expressed by the *NYT* in the following way: “Oh, my God, what happened to you? This is the worst thing I’ve ever seen” (Dreifus, Jul. 11, 2000) or yet: “Oh my gosh, what am I seeing?” (Dugger, Dec. 28, 1996). In other words, the cut genitals, in the eyes of Westerners, are unequivocally abnormal genitals, just like those of Saartie Baartman in the eyes of Europeans at the beginning of the 20th century. The voyeuristic gazing, thus, detached from human rights concerns, comes close to reproducing the colonial logic of designating normalcy, as that what is acceptable to the West, and deviance, as that what digresses from that norm. That is, from the Western perspective, the cut genitals are unequivocally abnormal genitals, the deviation from the norm. This understanding is in radical opposition to those, who perpetuate genital cutting believing that the uncut genitals are in fact ugly and that cutting them render girls more beautiful and feminine (e.g., Boddy, 1989; Gruenbaum, 2001). It is worth adding that while the majority of Westerners, including medics, are generally radically opposed to female genital cutting, medical practitioners in the West routinely make decisions about removing the sexual organs of infants born with both kinds of genitals. Zirin and Wolf (2009) report that one baby in every 1666 birth is born with ambiguous genitals in the U.S. alone, and are legally operated by surgeons who force traditional norms of genitalia on such “intersex”
newborns. This is arguably done in the name of the same normalcy that they see lacking in genitals of genitally-cut women.

It is also interesting to consider the case of a black South African athlete, Castor Semenya, who after winning a gold medal in women’s 800 m. in 2009, was found by observers to be too “manly.” The International Association of Athletics Federations promptly ordered gender tests and found that she had internal testicles. The scandalous treatment of the case by the media has outraged human rights activists. The discourses surrounding her case still attest to the Western discomfort with anything perceived as abnormal sexuality, especially when the latter comes in an uneasy package with black skin. Writing for the New African, professor Carina Ray (2009) compares Western scrutiny of Semenya’s body to that of the “Hottenton Venus” of the 20th century. She concludes that the case must be read in a wider historical context, because “if Semenya managed to outperform her Western competitors, who have the benefit of the best athletic training in the world, imagine what she and countless other Black South African could achieve if the playing field was level?” (p. 18). Standing in solidarity with the athlete, Zirin and Wolf (2009) provide a different conclusion regarding the case by simply suggesting that “if Semenya’s biology is not ‘normal,’ it’s worth asking, what world-class athlete does have a normal body?”

In short, the stories on African immigrants and female genital cutting shed different light on the subject. By portraying the practice, considered as irrational and backwards from the Western perspective, as continuing in “the most civilized country in the world,” the narratives cast a shadow of doubt onto the U.S. status as the land of justice, opportunities and human rights. It is for this reason that the debate is quickly politicized and American politicians emerge as important figures in these narratives. While they underscore the

incompatibility of the practice with American laws and spirit, they also trivialize the issue by either attempting to make it personal (“thought of his two young granddaughters”) or by implanting it within American popular culture discourses (the case of Lorena Bobbitt). Western opposition to the practice finally emerges as resting on the unanimous consensus that not only is female genital cutting abhorrent and, thus, must never occur in the U.S., but also that cut genitals are *abnormal* genitals, which is not the understanding of those who perpetuate it. In other words, the West asserts its supremacy by designating what is normal and what is not. Even the genitally cut African women who emerge as opposing the practice are often, perhaps unintended, reduced to the “mutilated” genitals, in the process that reinforces simultaneously the colonialist, but also simply patriarchal processes of female objectification and dismembering (e.g., Kilbourne, 2003).

**A.M. Rosenthal and his campaign against “female genital torture.”** Nowhere is the intersection of human rights concerns and journalistic practices more visible than in A. M. Rosenthal’s writings on female genital cutting. His opinion columns constitute another example of advocacy journalism, in which his personal engagement with the issue from the outset is obvious. Rosenthal, who worked for the *New York Times* his entire life, was a somewhat mythical figure. His unruly character, journalistic genius and his influence on the newspaper’s development have been documented in several books (e.g., Gelb, 2003; Goulden, 1988; Tifft, & Jones, 1999). He served as the *NYT* executive editor for seventeen years, and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1960 as the foreign correspondent in communist Poland. His column “On my mind” was his last project at the *Times*, which he wrote twice a week for thirteen years.\(^{127}\) All of the seven articles included in this study, written over a four-year period, are devoted to what he consistently calls “female genital torture” or “female genital mutilation,” which, given the political connotations of the terms, clearly defines his position on the issue.

In fact, he explicitly rejects the term “circumcision,” as an attempt to “prettify” the practice (Apr. 12, 1996).

Since Rosenthal started writing this column after his official retirement from the *NYT* at the age of 65, the themes that he discussed in it are arguably of personal interest and importance to him. The *Times* obituary describes the column “On my mind” in the following way:

…”The columns reflected his passions and what he saw as a personal relationship with readers. He addressed a range of foreign and domestic topics with a generally conservative point of view. But there were recurring themes — his support for Israel and its security, his outrage over human rights violations in China and elsewhere, his commitment to political and religious freedoms around the world, and his disgust at failures in America's war on drugs. (http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/11/nyregion/11rosenthal.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1).

In other words, Rosenthal chose to write on the issue repeatedly not necessarily because of its topicality at any given moment in time or its newsworthiness, but first and foremost because of his own interest and investment in the issue.

His first column is enmeshed with a journalistic self-reflection, as to how he came to write about the subject: “For almost a year I had been planning to write a column about it but kept putting aside in favor of something that struck my fancy as more ‘newsworthy’ or ‘important’ than the genital mutilation of tens of millions of people in dozens of countries” (Dec. 29, 1992). In this statement, he acknowledges his own culpability as the reporter, who “did know,” but reported only belatedly on the issue, and also sheds some light on the more general processes of journalistic selection. It is important to note, however, that whilst his attention to female genital cutting is laudable, its choice remains deeply personal and politically-biased. In his writings, he addresses primarily human rights violations abroad, but never turns to human rights abuses in the U.S. For instance, women’s rights in the U.S., including such issues as domestic violence or the right to abortion that was systematically restricted throughout the 1990s, do not seem to be of interest to Rosenthal. Thus, it is necessary to question his commitment to the universal rights of women.
Throughout his columns, Rosenthal systematically notes the relative invisibility of genital cutting in the media, perhaps in an attempt to justify his own devotion to the issue. For instance, he states that it “is only glancingly acknowledged by government information machineries, and journalism” (Dec. 29, 1992), and again, that it “has received so comparatively little journalistic or governmental attention” (Jul. 27, 1993). The fact that his critique is always addressed to the media-government tandem is perhaps indicative of his belief that the media can and should play an important role in shaping political agendas. In one of his columns, he underscores the absence of female genital cutting in the Human Rights Watch report on human rights violations around the world. This last omission is interpreted by Rosenthal as even more unforgivable than the failures to report on the issue by his own profession. Thus, he concludes that the report is “one of the most saddening documents of its kind” (Dec. 24, 1993).

His self-defined status as an advocate-journalist is further elicited through his attempts to educate about the practice as well as to encourage action against it. Every single column entails a textbook-like definition of what female genital cutting is. At times, this description is quite technical, e.g.: “the excision of the clitoris or all or part of the labia minora or part of the labia majora, sewing together of sides of the vulva, all without anesthetic” (Sep. 6, 1996; emphasis mine), and followed by a list of negative effects for health (e.g., Dec. 29, 1992; Apr. 12, 1996). At other times, however, the description becomes much more vivid and emotionally charged, e.g.: “The knife. Mutilations are carried out by female operators working with unsterilized knives and without anesthetic. Victims are tied or held down by relatives” (Dec. 29, 1992). Rosenthal was famous for his “stylish” way of writing that he clearly employs here to articulate the horror of the practice. Moreover, even seemingly neutral and technical descriptions of the practice are never spared the qualification “without

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anesthesia,” which, as previously discussed, becomes an almost necessary condition to speak about female genital cutting in the *NYT*.

Rosenthal’s goal is not only to educate, but also encourage action. Most of his columns end with specific suggestions about what governments, international organizations or individuals could do to help stop female genital cutting. Sometimes, he even provides the addresses of human rights organizations working on the issue. He surely applauds the efforts of such organizations, and sporadically relies on their views and reports to back his writings, which is in line with the general tendency for journalists to regard human rights organizations as preferred sources. Moreover, he gives credit both to the international and the U.S.-based organizations as well as local African organizations. In fact, he often emphasizes that the “two worlds” – African and Western, have both failed African women. In assigning the culpability equally to Africa and to the West, he implicitly suggests that it is not only “savage” and “backward” Africa, but also “civilized” West that has failed to act.

As a passionate journalistic-advocate, Rosenthal from the beginning unambiguously situates female genital cutting within human rights discourses. He repeatedly describes it as “the most widespread abuse of human rights and the human body” (Dec. 29, 1992; Dec. 24, 1993); or as “mass violation of humanity” (Jul. 27, 1993). For him, female genital cutting is undoubtedly a “torture” and a “crime,” “committed on women and girls” (Dec. 29, 1992). By extension, genitally cut women and girls are straightforwardly defined as “victims” (Dec. 29, 1992; Jul. 27, 1993; Sep. 6, 1994). To further explicate the situation, Rosenthal follows the generally accepted Western view that genital cutting is the expression of patriarchal oppression. Here is how he describes what he perceives as a “desired result” of the practice:

… Painful intercourse and loss of sexual pleasure for women. That is supposed to keep women virginal until marriage. Presumably it relieves men from any fear of not being able to satisfy women (Apr. 12, 1996).
In short, Rosenthal recycles both of the most-embedded Western misconceptions about the practice and its meanings; that is, Rosenthal’s focus is on sexual pleasure and men’s unrelenting desire to control women and curb their sexuality. In the quote above, he goes as far as invoking the man’s apprehension in relation to sexually satisfying a woman, a view that would hardly ever be articulated by Africans for whom the ritual always has complex symbolic meanings.

Given such underlying assumptions, Rosenthal seems to be rather comfortable with explaining why women themselves perpetuate the practice. His explanation is seemingly that of internalized oppression and worse – sheer stupidity. For example, he pronounces, in an over-generalizing manner, that the practice “is rooted in superstitious contempt of women so deep that its victims, their mothers and daughters pay homage to the knife that mutilates them” (Jul. 27, 1993). It is here that Rosenthal’s good intentions versus the achieved result become dubious. While he is clearly opposed to the practice and would like to see it eradicated, he does not seem to be concerned with the fact that bashing women, who undergo the ritual or assist in continuing it, will not help his cause. By articulating these women as incapable of comprehending the real situation, he ends up exposing himself as a condescending, arrogant, sexist outsider, commenting on the situation of the third-world women from his comfortable position of a white, upper-middle class, professional male. In short, the power dynamics underlining the situation reflects perfectly the colonial order of things. Moreover, once again, if he were truly interested in women’s sexual rights, he would have probably also reported on the loss of abortion rights experienced by his fellow women in the U.S.

Despite his Western-centric view, Rosenthal seems to acknowledge that it is Africans themselves who should lead the revolution against female genital cutting. In fact, in his articles, he designates two types of African women: those victimized women, who undergo
the procedure and continue to perpetuate it; and those “brave” African women who fight against it (Jun. 13, 1995). The latter image counterbalances the outright victimization of all African women and emerges as an implicit critique of Western inaction. African women, opposing the practice, are undoubtedly, in the eyes of Rosenthal, heroes:

They call themselves “grassroots” workers. They go into the villages and towns of their countries talking, talking with mothers and women trained to mutilate. Whenever they can, they talk with officials of their countries. They put themselves at risk physically and socially (Sep. 6, 1994).

Using his usual dramatic style of writing, he paints the heroic picture of African women, who are traversing their countries in their fight against female genital cutting. Rosenthal’s designation of them as heroes is similar to that of Kristof’s in relation to African rape survivors, who have agreed to recount their stories and testify in tribunals. The crucial difference between Kristof’s coverage of the Darfurian rapes, in which he also emerges as a journalist-advocate lobbying for Western intervention to stop the Darfurian “genocide,” is that Kristof reports from Darfur and his articles rely on the actual stories from the identified rape survivors and witnesses. In a stark contrast, genitally-cut women in Rosenthal’s articles exist only as a prototype; he does not interview a single African woman who has undergone the ritual in order to really understand these women he is writing about. Apparently, neither the authenticity nor the accurateness of the accounts is his primary concern.

Given that Rosenthal’s primary goal is to convince his audiences of horrors of female genital cutting, it is possible to conclude that he is in fact successful. At the same time, his failure to include any accounts of African women who have undergone genital cutting or any first-hand testimonies of people working against the practice renders his narratives simplistic and Western-centric. Rosenthal emerges as a condescending, arrogant, Western, white, upper-middle class observer whose social status allows commenting on African women’s situation and speaking about them and for them embodying perfectly the colonial power dynamics. And while Rosenthal would like to see female genital cutting eradicated, there is no proof of
any sort of action improving the situation either on his part or resulting from his writings. Given this, and in light of his lack of interest in domestic issues related to women’s rights, it is possible to conclude that Rosenthal in a way inscribes himself into a long tradition of Western hypocrisy in relation to championing third world women’s rights: where imperialists attacked and banned what they pronounced as barbaric practices oppressing women – genital cutting, polygamy etc. – but did little to really improve their situations. As Kumar (2008) suggests, imperialist ambitions never coincide with the goals of women’s liberation, but the rhetoric of liberating third world women has often served as a prop for imperial projects. For instance, the British Lord Cromer, who oversaw the British occupation of Egypt, argued for liberating Egyptian women from Islam, while fighting against the women’s suffrage back at home (p. 26-27).

**Female Genital Cutting in *Le Monde***

*Le Monde* has only 19 stories on female genital cutting compared to the *NYT*’s 59. Moreover, more than 60% of the stories are devoted to female genital cutting by immigrants (as opposed to 32% in the *NYT*), with the rest representing general stories about the practice. Most of the stories are written by staff writers. The lesser visibility of the issue in *Le Monde*, especially when compared to its American counterpart, can perhaps best be explained by the greater familiarity of large publics with the issue because of the colonial experience that has brought greater general awareness of African customs and ways of living. This awareness has further been increased by the significant numbers of African immigrants living in France.129 As the issue becomes more familiar and, thus, less shocking, it is also considered less newsworthy. There are several indications that prove this. For example, the practice is often contextualized by putting it along with other practices harmful to women; either specific to

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129 According to the estimates for the year 1999, there are about 13.5 million immigrants in France, 40% of which come from Africa. See: Tribalat (2004); also, Keaton (1999).
various African countries, such as early marriage and childbirth, tattoos, forced feeding etc., or universal, such as domestic violence (Aug. 22, 1996; Oct. 12, 1998); a praiseworthy contextualization that the NYT’s stories lack. In such a way, writers implicitly propose to counterbalance Western concerns about female genital cutting with other issues that are just as important. It is equally established throughout the articles that female genital cutting is not a Muslim issue, but is rather practiced among various communities, including Muslims, Christians and animists (e.g., Jun. 16, 1993; 12 Oct. 1998; Dec. 23, 2005). Moreover, various forms of genital cutting are systematically mentioned and defined in many of the stories. All of these distinctions are unambiguous and universally accepted, which is not always the case in the NYT. Finally, in the case of the NYT, writing about and against female genital cutting is frequently a matter of a cause that an individual writer chooses to advocate for (e.g., Rosenthal or Dugger). Le Monde’s writers remain more neutral in that respect and do not advocate for any positions or on behalf of any individuals. Stories about genital cutting cases in France however take on political overtones, as they breach the issue of immigrant integration, and seem to ultimately converge on the assumption that the practice is incompatible with the values of the French Republic.

In most cases, Le Monde’s writers opt for a neutral term “excision” (excision) to describe the practice in contrast to a more ambiguous and changing usage of various terms (cutting, mutilation, etc.) by the NYT’s writers. Only rarely is a stronger term “mutilation” employed (e.g., Jun. 16, 1993; Dec. 23, 2005). Chombeau, for instance, (Jun. 16, 1993) carefully explains the usage of the terms that reflects the evolution of the conception of the practice itself; and interestingly, does so not from Western, but from African perspectives. Reporting on African women, renouncing genital cutting, she explains: “Physical suffering, accepted yesterday in the name of normality, has become useless, unbearable suffering. Then, it has become mutilation.” That is, the terms utilized by African women themselves attest to
their changing attitudes towards the practice, which they no longer accept as “normal” or necessary. Equally noteworthy is the fact that the definition of normality/abnormality in the article is established by African women themselves rather than imposed by the writer, following the Western tradition of supremacy.

_Le Monde’s_ definitions of the practice, like those in the _NYT_, make visible its physical brutality, even though to a lesser extent than those in the American newspaper. For example, it is often emphasized that girls need to be held by force (Aug. 22, 1996; Oct 14, 1997), which attests not only to the violent nature of the act, but also to girls’ seeming unwillingness to be cut. The latter is corroborated in one of the articles by first-hand testimony: “I wanted to escape. I was terrorized. … There wasn’t one clean cut, but the cuts that lasted an eternity” (Chombeau, Jun. 16, 1993). However, rather than lingering on the description of the act itself, it is the negative effects of the practice that occupy a more important place in the narratives. Some of them are depicted very graphically. Consider, for instance, the following description by a Senegalese woman of the results of infibulation on what the writer terms her first “bloody night”: “If a man is experienced, he can open his wife himself, but in most cases, an exciser is needed again” (Paringaux, Oct. 14, 1997). In general, the focus in _Le Monde_ is more on the effects rather than on the means of carrying out the practice, with the general consensus that the former are no less horrible than the latter. In fact, the physically violent nature of the practice seems to underwrite the articles without being necessarily exposed, as writers take it as a granted starting point that does not need further reiteration.

Where _Le Monde’s_ writers most closely converge with their _NYT_ counterparts is in explaining the purposes of the practice. The explanations are underwritten by ideas of misogyny and patriarchy and focus on the alleged need to restrain and control female sexuality, which represents the reductionist Western approach to a complex African ritual (Abd el Habi, 2000; Abusharaf, & Halim, 2000, Ahmadu, 2002). Paringaux (Oct. 14, 1997)
deconstructs the practice for its readers in the following way: it is “a tradition that undressed from its mythological and ritual alibis has no other justification than a brutal willingness to control girls’ virginity and women’s sexuality by mutilating them.” Similar views are expressed by other writers as well (Jun. 16, 1993; Jun. 26, 1997).

This unanimous perspective seems to be unchallenged by the accounts of African women’s support for genital cutting or by examples of African men’s opposition to it. For example, Chombeau (Jun. 16, 1993) reports that “more and more men refuse to have their daughters cut and dare to resist their families by marrying women who have not been genitally cut.” Similarly, in Luneau’s (Oct. 5, 1998) article, an Egyptian man declares the practice an “act of barbarism,” and in Prolongeau’s (Dec. 23, 2005) article, it is male religious leaders who speak against it. To complete the picture, examples of women in favor of the practice are equally numerous. For instance, Chombeau (Jun. 16, 1993) gives an example of a nurse who had been married without having undergone the ritual and had two children, but after remarrying could not become pregnant again, and, thus, decided that the cause of her sterility was the fact that she had previously refused to be genitally cut. The writer concludes that the woman has convinced herself that she needed to be cut in order to avoid “bad destiny,” despite her past, education and experience. Sotinel (Oct. 12, 1998) gives an example of women in Ivory Coast refusing the interdiction of the practice, while Nau (Jun. 26, 1997) provides statistics suggesting that 8 out of 10 Egyptian women remain in favor of it. The fact that the explanations for the practice foregrounding male control of women’s sexuality remain so consistent in Le Monde suggests that neither the seemingly unsettling evidence against such a view (women as primary carriers; women in favor, men against), nor the greater familiarity with the issue has been able to eradicate one of the most rooted Western clichés about Africans. That is, Western beliefs about African women’s extreme oppression, but also
about deviant African sexual practices and abnormal genitals that have long been of concern to Western colonialists (Gilman, 1986; Morgan, 1997).

Not only do *Le Monde*’s writers seem to be unperplexed by the evidence challenging their explanations, but they are also not much invested in explaining why certain African women continue to favor the practice, besides the underlying assumption that the practice continues simply because it is an old tradition. This is in contrast to certain *NYT*’s writers, such as Rosenthal or Dugger, who went to great length to project African women continuing the practice either as participating in their own oppression or as naïve, incapable of comprehending the implications of their actions. *Le Monde*’s Chombeau (Jun. 16, 1993) goes a step further, inquiring how to fight against the “superstitions” that aid in perpetuating genital cutting. The answer comes from Burkinabe women themselves, who claim that “we [the older generation], we can’t refuse genital cutting, but our daughters will get there. Civilization will come to them.” The quote embodies perfectly colonial rhetoric, which claimed that the Europeans possessed the higher forms of civilization that they were bringing to Africans through colonizing them, except that here, it is articulated by African women themselves. The writer detects this colonial current as well, and seemingly feels a need to clarify: “Civilization? School, education at large.” In general, *Le Monde*’s writers in their stories on genital cutting rely to a great extent (and greater than in the *NYT*) on African women themselves to recount their experiences, explain and justify or renounce the practice. While it is a laudable technique, as it renders narratives more authentically African, it does not always absolve the writers from getting caught up in the Western biases and clichés, notably, when emphasizing the sexual nature of the practice and underwriting it in reductionist terms of the male omnipotence.

Not only are *Le Monde*’s narratives on genital cutting grounded in first-hand accounts of African women, but they also unanimously convey a sentiment that the practice in various
African countries is no longer universally accepted. While genital cutting is seen as continuing, the writers also present numerous opposing voices and many examples of African women organizing against it, followed by the world-wide efforts of international organizations. Paringaux (Oct. 14, 1997) gives an example of women from a Senegalese village, Malicounda, who dared to organize and speak out against the practice. Since then, what the author calls the “sermon of Malicounda” has spread “like fire in the bushes to the surrounding villages and the press of Dakar.” He concludes that what started like a local initiative, a simple “no” has become “a great movement.”130 Burkinabe or Egyptian women, fighting against the practice, reveal their determination and their resourcefulness: they organize meetings, sing, and create theater performances and films (Chombeau, Jun. 16, 1993; Prolongeau, Dec. 23, 2005). African women also emerge as challenging the Western belief that ideas and “superstitions” that sustain the practice are ineradicable. The Egyptian militants against genital cutting remind Le Monde’s readers that: “traditions are not immutable. … Simple comparisons are put forward: to cut ‘it’ to oblige girls to be pure, it’s like to cut an arm because it might be an instrument of theft” (Prolongeau, Dec. 23, 2005). The apogee of the opposition to the practice is its rejection by former excisers, which is a theme, notably, in Sotinel’s (Oct. 12, 1998) article; this frame of former excisers “coming around” is also visible in the NYT (e.g., Lacey, Jun. 8, 2004).

In Le Monde’s stories African women are unequivocally in the front line of leading changes against the practice. However, Western organizations are never far behind. Many articles note that local efforts and initiatives are sponsored or guided either by international organizations or different Western countries (Aug. 22, 1996; Oct. 14, 1997). In short, 130 In their book Half the Sky, Kristof and Wudunn also speak about the case of Malicounda by providing a slightly different perspective: “From the outside, it looked like a breakthrough, and it was hailed as such. Close up, it was a disaster. Other villagers excoriated the women who made the announcement as unfeminine and un-African and accused them of taking the money from white people to betray their Bambara ethnic group. The women were in tears for months… (p. 226).” Kristof, N., & Wudunn S. (2009). Half the Sky. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
although in a shadow, the West emerges as observing African efforts, and ready to intervene, if necessary. The image invokes the mode of surveillance that has always been an essential part of reinforcing and maintaining Western supremacy over the less powerful and capable “Others” (Spurr, 1993).

While in most cases, international and local initiatives are seen co-existing in perfect unison and working towards a common objective, diverging Western and African perspectives on the practice are also visible. The nationalistic undertones of the practice that have come to entail the distinctiveness of African identity in opposition to the West are best captured in Prolongeau’s (Dec. 23, 2005) article, by an Egyptian gynecologist in favor of genital cutting. His support of the practice is clearly expressed in patriotic terms: “The whole of Egypt relies on a family. To turn sexuality into what it is in the West is a plan to destroy it. Who wanted to ban the excision in 1997? Foreigners, primarily, Americans.” That is, Western opposition to the practice is straightforwardly read in terms of Western might and imperialism, and, as a result of this, genital cutting emerges as an effective means of resistance and re-establishing of Egyptian freedom. Chombeau’s (Jun. 16, 1993) piece opens with the Burkinabe Lucia Kabore’s anecdote that back in 1985, during the UN conference for women, she got so angry with European journalists who were absorbed by the issue of genital cutting that she shouted: “Stop searching in our panties.” The phrase that, according to her, remains famous in the Franco-African feminist world. The anecdote, however, speaks powerfully not only about the still tangible, even though somewhat hidden, Western and African schism regarding the practice that might easily degenerate into nationalist arguments and accusations of the West’s imperialist tendencies, but also about the Western media’s unrelenting interest in the issue that is clearly visible, particularly in the case of the NYT.

In general, Le Monde’s stories on genital cutting in various African countries attest to the continuation of the practice, but also emphasize that it is no longer uncontested by African
themselves. In stark contrast to certain NYTs’s writers, their French counterparts do not seem to cross the line between reporting and advocating. All of the analyzed stories are written by different writers, i.e. none of the journalists in question seems to be especially interested or invested in writing about this particular issue. Moreover, Le Monde’s journalists do not appear to express their own opinions and views on the practice either explicitly or implicitly. The overriding feeling that the practice should be eradicated emerges in their articles primarily from the accounts of Africans, notably, African women, themselves. Their systematic reliance on the first-hand sources also deviates from the certain New York Times’ articles, where genitally cut women exist only as a prototype, but are never summoned to testify and tell their stories (Rosenthal), or where the stories are built around a case of a single woman (Dugger’s reporting on Kassindja). On the other hand, female genital cutting is not an issue of debate to the same extent as it was seen in the NYT, where editorials, op-eds and letters to the editor constituted an important contribution to the overall discourses. Le Monde’s stories present the issue from various angles, but do not seem to incite the interest and debates to the same extent, perhaps, because of the previously mentioned greater familiarity with the practice.

Female genital cutting in France. The terms of debate change in stories about female genital cutting in France that focus primarily on a series of trials throughout the 1990s of excisers and parents who had their daughters cut. While the previously discussed general stories about the practice are, overall, positive, foregrounding changes and African women’s leadership in them, the narratives on female genital cutting in France tend to stereotype African women in question and emphasize that the practice is radically opposed to the values of the French Republic. Such a shift in terms of debate is not surprising; as already noted in the case of the NYT’s stories on genital cutting and immigration in the U.S., the issue brought so close home can no longer be retained and “sanitized” by geographical and imaginary distance between “us” and “them.” This is especially true in the French case, because
Africans constitute a large part of immigrants in France; estimates show that about 40% of immigrants are from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, primarily from former French colonies, including countries, such as Senegal, Mali or Ivory Coast, where genital cutting is practiced. At the same time, because of their pertinence to French society, the stories about the trials encourage wider public discussions. Here, the discourses are no longer limited to seemingly neutral journalistic reporting, but also include opinion pieces, notably, from academics. The majority of the stories are written by two reporters – Maurice Peyrot (1991-1993) and Acacio Pereira (from 1999). However, it is clear that they were simply assigned to cover these particular court proceedings and followed them throughout the years, and that they hardly constitute an example of a reporter’s individual engagement with the issue, as seen on several occasions in the New York Times.

In his articles, Peyrot unequivocally advances the idea that it is not so much the women who participated in genital cutting, but the practice itself that is on trial. This is how he explains the situation in one of his later articles: “Same questions, same responses are exchanged in the course of the same dialogue as if between the deaf in a strange debate, which does not appear to directly pertain to the accused. In this type of trial, the court [la cour d’assises] has lost its habitual references, because it is evident that it is not the woman who is judged, but the custom” (Jan. 19, 1993). The same position is later accepted by his successor, Pereira (see, e.g., Feb. 11, 1999). In other words, as Le Monde’s writers make it clear, the trials of these particular women are only a pretext to bring genital cutting out in the open, to reconsider it and to set an example, demonstrating publicly and with recourse to the legal realm the unacceptability of the practice in the modern French Republic. It is first and foremost a warning to immigrants.

131 For estimates about African immigrants in France and their countries of origin, see: Tribalat (2004).
Throughout the coverage of the trials, two distinct perspectives – a legal and an academic – emerge. The latter comes mostly from ethnologists and anthropologists, who serve as experts during the proceedings and are quoted in the articles or from op-ed pieces that are written by scholars. The most visible breach between the two perspectives relates to the legal nature of the trials, which were conducted by the highest French criminal court, Cour d’Assises, that deals with criminal cases of utmost gravity. An ethnologist Calame-Griaule in her op-ed (Feb. 10, 1999) summarizes well the general academic consensus by posing the following question: “Should an exciser be put in the same line with sexual perverts?”

However, while most of the academics are against the approach taken by the French state to try the accused in criminal court, they all unanimously speak against the practice, proposing other methods, particularly, educating African communities, in order to eradicate it on French soil (see, e.g., Bernard, Feb. 11, 1999).

Moreover, the academic perspective foregrounds traditional values attached to genital cutting, related to the perceptions of a woman’s beauty and her suitability to be a wife and a mother, and point out that the ritual is not meant to harm. For instance, an ethnologist Claude Meillassoux is reported to have explained to the court that “this deplorable rite is not ill-treatment. No one wants to do any harm” (Peyrot, Mar. 9, 1991). Calame-Griaule (Feb. 10, 1999) goes into detail explaining that the practice is of great importance in African cultures and pertains to a notion of self-identity, notably, enhancing girls’ femininity and defining their roles in the communities. In short, in contrast to the general stories about the practice, here, thanks to this clearly visible academic perspective, the focus is shifted away from the reductionist view of male power and the necessity of controlling women’s sexuality to more complex understandings of genital cutting.

The academic perspective, then, brings a much needed complexity to explaining the reasons for genital cutting. Nonetheless, throughout the trial coverage, it is ultimately the legal perspective that establishes itself as dominant. From the French legal point of view, genital cutting is defined as “mutilation” or “inhuman and degrading treatment” (Bernard, Jun. 14, 1996) and, thus, falls under criminal jurisdiction and has been illegal since 1984.\(^{133}\) Thus, while the legal parties involved acknowledge the presence of academic arguments and perspectives, their ultimate message conveyed in *Le Monde’s* articles is that of a simple legal logic: a crime necessitates a punishment. For example, a prosecuting attorney in one of the trials is reported to have responded to the scientific arguments evoking the “pressure of custom” in the following way: “You’re not ethnologists, you’re not anthropologists, you’re judges” (Peyrot, Mar. 11, 1991). Similarly, in another trial, a prosecuting attorney addresses the jury by reminding them that: “You are not judging either excision or the trial itself. You are not here to give examples or shed spotlight on the decision. You are here to judge Mrs. Diane” (Peyrot, Jan. 19, 1993). And although some of defense attorneys evoke arguments resembling the academic ones, putting forward the importance of the custom or hopes to one day go back to their countries of origins, where uncut girls would be “unfit for marriage” (Peyrot, Jan. 11, 1993), the general consensus is that “the judgment is necessary” (Peyrot, Jan. 19, 1993). One of the prosecuting attorneys who seems to be ambivalent regarding the trial, eventually concludes in the following way: “Punishment is a means of prevention. It’s necessary that the stick falls. It’s necessary that parents know that excision cannot be practiced without risks” (Peyrot, Jan. 11, 1993). In short, the virtue of these trials as examples meant to make others abandon the practice continuously underwrites the legal discourses on genital cutting in *Le Monde*, even though most of the actors involved seem to be sympathetic towards the accused.

\(^{133}\) For most recent debates, see: http://www.ump.assemblee-nationale.fr/article_texte.php3?id_article=7395
Somewhat paradoxically, various arguments made in defense of the accused, either from the legal or academic perspective, often end up casting African women in question in a less than favorable light. First, in most cases, African women are portrayed as in a way innocent, because they are not fully capable of comprehending the situation and the accusations against them. For instance, Mrs. Jahate, sued for having her daughters cut, says that she has “never imagined that abiding to the ritual could lead her to prison” (Peyrot, Jan. 11, 1993). Similarly, in a somewhat condescending manner, Mrs. Diane, accused of the same crime, is said to not be familiar with the origins and consequences of genital cutting, presented to the court by a number of experts; in fact, she is said to “know one thing: her grandmother was excised, her mother was excised, she is excised and her daughter had to be excised” (Peyrot, Jan. 19, 1993). Both examples suggest an irrational compliance with and acceptance of the ritual, but also insinuate the poor intellectual abilities of the women. In another case, an exciser Hawa Greou responds to the prosecuting attorney’s question about whom she is ready to ask for forgiveness in the following manner: “It is you that I ask for forgiveness because I’m accused of something, and it is you who is accusing. … But from my point of view, I haven’t done any harm” (Pereira, Feb. 4, 1999). In the latter case, it is not only Greou’s implicit incomprehension, but also her tangible opposition to the Western reading of the practice that emerges.

Legal representatives of both sides directly add to this image of the African women in question as not able to fully comprehend the trials. In one instance, one of them declares that the “trial is of total incomprehension. She [the accused] doesn’t understand why here it’s bad, and there it’s good. The trial is impossible” (Peyrot, Jan. 15, 1993). Other examples are even cruder; a lawyer is reported to have raised the following question: “How can we demand that these illiterate people have a better understanding than the courts? How can we reproach them for not having known that they risked ending up in front of your jurisdiction? Even we didn’t
know that” (Peyrot, Mar. 11, 1991, emphasis mine). While the raised question refers to the questionable decision to try the exciser in the criminal court, it also reveals the bias inherent in the thinking of those who were legally entitled to oversee such trials. The sweeping categorization of presumably all Africans involved in genital cutting as illiterate has no other explanation than easy resorting to the stereotypes of Africans as being less educated and simply stupid. This image is further enhanced by the mentions in various articles of judgments being translated into the native languages of the accused, which suggests they were not able to speak French. The latter is important because it accentuates the fact that the women in question are not French. In another instance, the prosecuting attorney is said to admit that the accused has simply “found herself imprisoned by the system. She is also a victim of this custom” (Peyrot, Jan. 11, 1993, emphasis mine). In all of the examples, African women emerge as not only incapable of comprehending the complex legal processes surrounding them, but also simply incapable of reasoning and, consequently, they accept and embrace the practice without the slightest reflection. This works effectively to cast doubt on their actual culpability, as most of the legal actors seem to be sympathetic towards the accused, in a legal sense of the term. However, it comes at a high cost to African women as a whole in terms of their image, which becomes that of uneducated, “dark” African women, incapable of reasoning and reflection. Ultimately, the trials and the attitudes of the legal representatives invoke the colonial conception of “half devil, half child,” which originally projected natives of occupied territories as childlike. Thus, action on their behalf was necessary. In a similar fashion, action is projected as necessary on behalf of these immigrant African women who are incapable of understanding the dangerousness of the ritual, their own culpability or the proceedings.

Resorting to stereotypes, rooted in colonial understandings of Africans, to minimize the image of African women as criminals is not limited to the legal actors. In fact, one of the
most shocking images is introduced by an ethnologist, who has visited the accused, and describes her way of life with fourteen children in the following way: “When we come in, it’s very clean. But it’s a camp. They have stayed in Africa” (Peyrot, Mar. 9, 1991). Here, he puts forward another set of stereotypical imaginings of Africa: hyperfertility (14 children), which is in the Western tradition often also explained by irrationality (Bledsoe, 1999; Kaller, 2003), their lagging behind, and their inability to adapt to modern ways of living. The term “camp” also invokes uneasily the image of refugee camps in Africa. While the testimony is meant to establish the connections of the accused to her African culture, and thus, legitimize her acceptance of genital cutting, it rather mobilizes some of the worst stereotypes about Africans and Africa. While the example is underwritten by low social status of the family in question, neither the academic, nor the journalist breaches the issues of immigrant poverty and social stigma attached to it. That is, the larger context and the important social problems related to immigration are ignored. In short, while trying to “save” African women from the plausible punishments, various actors involved in the trials end up adopting a condescending approach towards these women by portraying them as incapable of understanding the practice itself and the implications of their acts in France at best, and as simply stupid, incapable of reflection and progress, at worst.

The negative image of African women that emerges throughout the trial coverage makes the lack of their own voices conspicuously visible. That is, the debates surrounding the practice and the trials are almost exclusively carried by experts from various spheres, in sharp contrast to the general stories, where African voices are dominant. For example, Peyrot (Mar. 11, 1991) reflects on the role of the accused exciser in one of the trials in a following manner: “Mrs. Keita belonged to the cast of former slaves, whose members are often in charge of excision. This is all what we know about her and her fatal silence has certainly not helped our understanding of her role.” In another one of his articles, the accused is said to “whisper” her
justification that she did not perform the ritual “to be mean to her daughter” (Jan. 19, 1993). In other words, the accused African women are shown as voluntarily participating little in their own defense, which further adds to their image as incapable of reasoning, but also makes clear the power dynamics underlining the trials, which is that of the colonial order: Western experts get to speak about and on behalf of silent African women, who are ultimately cast as victims of their own irrationality and stupidity. It is also worth noting that neither of the two _Le Monde_’s writers, who reported on the trials, has interviewed any of the accused African women, thus, accepting their public silence as perfectly normal, and by extension, their possible authentic testimonies as of no interest to their readers.

One notable exception to this overall lack of African voices in the trials is the case of the exciser Hawa Greou. In stark contrast to all of the other cases, she emerges in Pereira’s (Feb. 4, 1999) story as more than willing to and capable of explaining herself and her acts. In fact, she seizes her trial as an opportunity to explicate the practice and its meaning in Mali, where she is from. Moreover, not only does she establish herself as an authentic expert on the subject, but she also proceeds to her public renunciation of genital cutting, but in France only: “I think that now we have to stop, but in Africa, it’s our duty to help.” In other words, Greou seems to have perfectly understood the logic of the trial and expectations cast on her. She in a way outsmarts the French by submitting to their desires and rejecting the practice in France, but not the practice as such. In such a fashion, she is capable of reasserting her beliefs in the righteousness of the ritual.

Greou’s trial is particularly interesting for another reason as well. It started as a result of a testimony of an eighteen-year-old French girl of Malian origin, who revealed to the judge that she and her sisters were genitally cut. As a result not only the exciser, but also her own mother was brought before the court and sentenced to two years of imprisonment. Pereira (Feb. 4, 1999) opens her story on the trial by praising the girl’s courage, without which,
according to her, the trial “without doubt wouldn’t have been able to take place.” However, despite her seeming admiration for her, Pereira does not interview Mariatou Koita in any of her two articles about the trial to learn more about whether the decision to reveal her excision to the judge was intentional or rather circumstantial, and if the former was the case, then, what her motives were. An anthropologist, Jacques Barou, also refers to the case while being interviewed about genital cutting (Bernard, Feb. 11, 1999). Like Pereira, he casts Koita as a heroine by claiming that “for the first time, a French girl, representing the second generation of immigrants, challenges her parents and the exciser before the law.” It is interesting to note that at this particular moment, he defines Koita as French, however, later in the interview, he refers to her as African, revealing a certain discomfort about the identity of France’s immigrants. But in this article, like in the previous one, Mariatou is only a symbol, whose act is interpreted in such a way as to best fit the expectations of the French republic and its rejection of genital cutting. It is her “Frenchness” (which should not be taken for granted) in the first place that is projected at the heart of her action, whose real motives remain completely obscure.

*Le Monde*’s stories on female genital cutting in France are different from its general stories about the practice, which are quite positive and complex. The trials of African immigrants are projected by the actors involved in them and *Le Monde*’s writers, who seem to follow and reproduce the official line, as an educative opportunity and warning to the country’s numerous African immigrants. There is less emphasis on brutality or “savageness” of the practice in itself, and more on the ritual’s incompatibility with the French Republican values. The strong legal opposition to the practice and willingness to try and punish those who continue it, despite the opposition to such methods by an academic community, unequivocally establishes France’s righteousness and does not leave any space to challenge its image as the

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134 See: Keaton (1999).
land of civilization and equality, as the immigrants are accepted, as long as they comply with the local rules. Finally, the actors involved in the trials are sympathetic towards accused women; however, in order to minimize their culpability, they end up casting them as naïve, unable to comprehend the negative implications of the practice and, with a single exception, unwilling to participate in public debates, which invokes the colonial conception of “half devil, half child.” These images find resemblance in certain NYT’s stories, where women who participate in genital cutting are also shown to be victims of their own irrationality (e.g., Dugger, Oct. 5, 1996; Rosenthal, Jul. 27, 1993). At the same time, this, in a way unintended, negative side effect of the trials attest to the already seen dilemma: the worst images and clichés are often mobilized to attain the larger objectives; be it, securing Kassindja’s admittance to the U.S. (thus, genital cutting portrayed at its worst) or securing less severe punishment for African immigrant women in France (thus, the images of their naivety or lack of intelligence).

**Conclusion**

In general, the discourses on female genital cutting are quite different in the New York Times and Le Monde. In the latter, as far as general stories about the practice are concerned, there is less ambiguity about the ritual and more systematic reliance on first-hand sources, namely, African women themselves who sustain, but also challenge female genital cutting. While the NYT also contains the African perspectives through African voices contributing to the debates, mostly in the editorial page, the staff articles do not always include those who actually practice the ritual as sources or witnesses, thus, projecting an especially Western-centric vision of it. Moreover, the NYT’s emphasis remains, to a large extent, on the brutality and physical violence of the practice, which also underwrite Le Monde’s stories, but much less explicitly. Instead, the latter focuses more on the negativity of the consequences and also insists more on positive changes, led primarily by African women themselves. This image of
leadership that challenges the colonial imaginings of “other’s” backwardness is not always so unambiguous in the NYT.

However, Le Monde’s coverage is not without its flaws; in fact, some Western stereotypes, primarily, the explanation of the practice in terms of sexual hierarchies and male omnipotence dominate in both newspapers. That is, American and French writers suggest that the ultimate goal of the practice is controlling and diminishing female sexual desire – the Western-centric perspective that projects the clitoris as a necessary element of female sexual fulfillment, but ignores the fact that many Western women with their clitorises intact also fail to achieve orgasms. Similarly, both American and French journalists sometimes attempt to explain the continuity of the practice in terms of African women’s irrationality, stupidity or internalized oppression. Moreover, both newspapers remain silent about the role of Western colonizers in establishing female genital cutting as a means of resistance to Western imperialism. The lack of a larger historical context is particularly conspicuous in the case of Le Monde’s narratives on immigration that ignore social problems related to immigration. Finally, both newspapers seem to favor genital cutting stories at the expense of other important stories related to women’s rights, such as, for instance, domestic violence locally – a significant default, especially conspicuous in the NYT.

Stories on female genital cutting practiced by African immigrants both in the U.S. and in France introduce new challenges. The habitual ways of recounting the practice - as a barbaric act practiced in the land of “darkness,” where women are hopeless victims and men have all the power - are brought into question. That is, the traditional explanations of the practice can no longer rely on the physical and imaginary distance between “them” (those who practice the ritual in a far away land) and “us” (who find the ritual abhorrent). The shift in discourse is especially visible in Le Monde. In contrast to its general stories on genital cutting, the ones that focus on by immigrants are permeated by negative stereotypes and
colonial clichés to a much greater extent: Africans emerge as naïve, irrational, unable to adapt to modern ways of living, incapable of speaking for themselves. The fact that the discursive change is more drastic must surely be attributed to the fact that Northern Africans comprise a great part of France’s immigrants, and their integration into the French society has been particularly complex and, at times, disruptive.

The last peculiar difference between the coverage of the two newspapers is the examples of advocacy journalism in the *NYT* that find no equivalent in *Le Monde*. In fact, the two individual *NYT*’s writers, who wrote repeatedly about genital cutting – Dugger and Rosenthal – partly account for the more abundant coverage on the issue in the American newspaper. Both writers reveal their individual engagement with the issue and the cause they are advocating for, whereas none of their French counterparts seems to be particularly invested in the issue.

The analysis of the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*’s stories about female genital cutting suggests several ways for achieving a more nuanced and contextually grounded coverage of the issue. First, female genital cutting should be presented within a proper historical context, both as a medical procedure practiced in the 19th century by European medics, and as a cultural ritual practiced in different parts of the world, not just in Africa, that acquired its meaning, in the case of the latter, as a form of resistance to European colonialism. The practice should also be embedded within a larger current political and socio-economic context, where it is appropriate, as was seen in *Le Monde*’s reporting on genital cutting trials in France, which clearly had to do as much with the issue of immigrant integration as with the practice of genital cutting. Second, the writings should rely to the greatest extent possible on the first-hand testimonies of those women who embrace, perpetuate or reject the practice. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the practice should cease to be read and understood as an abnormality, a proof of “other’s” savageness etc., which is an inherently Western-centric
perspective fully grounded in colonial mentalities. After all, some practices widely embraced by women in the West, such as, for example, breast enlargement surgeries might also raise similar questions of negative physical and psychological consequences as well as women’s willing subordination to unreasonable sexist standards of beauty.

Academic literature underscores that the spread of AIDS on the African continent has brought the colonial myth of the “Dark continent” back into the mainstream media with full force (Treichler, 1999; Spurr, 1993). Spurr (1993) concludes that in Western mainstream discourses Africa is established as the “machine of AIDS,” the imaginary that combines colonial clichés of deviant African sexuality, savageness, but also projects it as a threat to the civilized world. Sontag (1990) in her essays on Western metaphors regarding illnesses claims that AIDS has replaced cancer as the illness that stigmatizes, is “identified with evil, and attaches blame to its ‘victims’” (p. 104). Furthermore, she suggests that any disease that is not fully understood and curable, as is the case of AIDS, is “felt as morally, if not literally contagious” (p. 6), thus, reinforcing Spurr’s (1993) argument that the AIDS epidemic in Africa is somehow perceived as a threat to the Western world. To this one should also add the hypotheses that AIDS in fact originated in Africa, which in popular discourses is portrayed as the natural outcome for the continent that has long been conceived as the place of “dark, enclosed spaces, infestation, contamination, sexual and moral degradation” (Spurr, 1993, p. 90). Finally, in line with the Western tradition of generalizing in relation to African countries, Treichler (1999) notes that, not surprisingly, in the first series of articles about AIDS epidemic in Africa in 1990, entitled “A Continent’s Agony,” the NYT writers portrayed Africa as “an undifferentiated mass of disease” (p. 206).

Narratives about AIDS in Africa have played a crucial role in the Western world’s self-definition regarding the illness. Throughout the 1980s, the threat of AIDS was contained within the myth that it only affected homosexuals and marginal groups, such as drug users or hemophiliacs (see Treichler, 1999, p. 53). These misconceptions that AIDS was somehow a

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135 To expose the irony of these claims, it is worth noting that many African narratives about AIDS origins regard it as an American invention. That is, AIDS is either considered as caused by the strange Western sexual practices or, invoking the anti-imperialist sentiments and drawing on colonial histories, is projected as the deliberate means employed by the West for reducing African populations (Treichler, 1999).
“lifestyle” disease, caused, as Sontag (1990) puts it, by sexual excess and perversity, were so tenacious in the U.S., that, as she remarks ironically, “Africa did not exist” (p. 114). At the same time, the spread of AIDS into other parts of the world, and especially, Africa challenged the established AIDS discourses in the U.S.: notably, the assumptions that “AIDS is not likely to be transmitted through heterosexual intercourse” and “normal women do not get AIDS” (Treichler, 1999). It also provided Westerners with yet another means of discursively de-threatening the disease, and confining it to geographically distant countries that had already been established in the colonial discourses as the eternal land of crises, suffering, irrationality, laziness and hypersexuality. In short, if the face of AIDS in the 1980s was that of a male homosexual, a decade later, the face of AIDS became that of a black African, and more specifically, that of a black African woman.

In short, two sets of discourses inform the Western, especially the American, understandings and portrayals of AIDS in the developing world. First, as discussed above, there are colonial clichés that provide an easy short-cut to comprehending the AIDS epidemic in Africa. Second, the biomedical discourses about AIDS crafted in the U.S. since the 1980s also play an important role. What is of particular interest to this study is that, as Treichler (1999) carefully documents in her study of American media coverage of AIDS, the latter was from the outset positioned as the disease that does not affect women – the misconception that the mainstream media reinforced, and the feminist media failed to challenge (p. 43-98). She claims that those setting the AIDS agenda were little concerned with women in the first decades of the epidemic, except if they were prostitutes or mothers of infants with AIDS. Treichler demonstrates with a multitude of examples that AIDS was not regarded as an illness affecting women; or put differently, women who got AIDS were not considered as “normal women,” and the latter category included “‘prostitutes’, ‘drug abusers,’ minority and poor women, and women in the Third World” (p. 63). In other words, the U.S. media unilaterally
claimed that American women were safe from AIDS well into the 1990s, and these claims did not contradict the evidence coming from African countries, where AIDS has been mostly contracted through heterosexual sex and where the burden of disease has been since the beginning disproportionately born by women. This is precisely because African women, echoing the colonial discourses, did not meet the definition of “normal” women. While the writers studied in this chapter do emphasize the burden of AIDS on women in their stories, they are nevertheless not able to completely break away with either the early American misconceptions about AIDS (African women with AIDS are still most noticed in their capacities as mothers, prostitutes etc.) or the colonial clichés that attach themselves so easily to narratives about AIDS (sexual hyperactivity, exotic practices, abnormal bodies).

**AIDS in Africa**

Currently, there are about 24 million Africans living with AIDS (Adeyemi, 2007). According to the latest UNAIDS report on the global AIDS epidemic, sub-Saharan Africa alone accounted for 63% of global H.I.V. cases, and for 75% of AIDS-related deaths in 2007. Women account for half of people living with H.I.V. worldwide, and for almost 60% in sub-Saharan Africa. The primary route of transmission in this region is heterosexual intercourse.136

There are many reasons for the rapid spread of AIDS on the African continent, and the fact that women are particularly affected. Some of the explanations are related to the cultural norms regulating sexual behavior. Certain cultural practices entrenched in patriarchal societies render women particularly vulnerable to the spread of H.I.V. virus. For example, Thege (2009) in her study of black rural South African women’s vulnerability to the disease discusses what she calls the patriarchal code of respect and men’s sex-right that designates that no married woman can refuse her husband sex. She concludes that married women, whose husbands often have multiple sexual partners, thus, have less power in negotiating intimate matters and are

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more at risk of contracting H.I.V. than sexually active unmarried women. Another example is the sexual practice of “dry sex”, which entails drying a woman’s vagina with herbs before sex, practiced in some communities to ensure women’s cleanliness. The practice is often pointed to as facilitating the transmission of virus, even though no scientific proof exists (Treichler, 1999, p. 207). The economist Oster (2005) tried to explain the differences in H.I.V. prevalence rates in the U.S. and Africa by taking into account patterns of sexual behavior, and found that with the exception of higher condom usage rates in the U.S., “the United States and Africa look very similar on parameters of sexual behavior,” including behavior considered as risky, e.g. having multiple sexual partners (p. 486). This goes against the Western imaginary that AIDS is a disease of “sexual perversion,” and that “exotic” African sexual practices can account for the high transmission rates (Treichler, 1999). In another study, Oster (2009) suggests a relationship between the southern African migratory economic patterns and the spread of H.I.V. In her case study of Zimbabwe, she finds that the truck drivers and migrant workers are more likely to engage in high risk sexual behaviors and contract the virus and then infect their spouses when back at home.

Equally, if not more, important, then, are the economic factors. In fact, Africanist scholars and activists have consistently pointed to the role of the Western world in making Africans more vulnerable to the disease. The dependency on the World Bank and IMF loans has undermined African health structures by forcing indebted African governments to orient their economic priorities towards integration into the international market at the expense of social services. Conditions attached to these loans have forced health budget cuts and privatization of health services that destroyed entire health infrastructures in many countries. Oster (2005) notes that Africans die from AIDS much more often than Westerners because of untreated sexually transmitted diseases; according to her, 11.9% of Africans (versus 1.9%
Americans and 2% Western Europeans) are estimated to have untreated bacterial genital infections that facilitate transmission of the virus (p. 480). She gives food for thought to Western powers concerned with eradication of AIDS in Africa and the costs it implies: the cost per year per life saved from AIDS would be only about $3.67, if resources were directed towards treating sexually transmitted diseases versus $365 per person per year for antiretroviral therapy with generic drugs (p. 470). Moreover, lack of health services does not allow for easy testing; for instance, in Zimbabwe, where 24.6% of the population is estimated to be living with H.I.V., approximately 90% of those infected are not aware of their status, which increases the possibilities for the spread of the virus (Mathole, Lindmark, & Ahlberg, 2006).

IMF and World Bank loans also drew many Africans even further into poverty (Colgan, 2002; Medact and the World Development Movement, 1999; Turshen, 1999). While AIDS is not caused by poverty, people struggling for survival are more susceptible to contracting the virus through a combination of factors: lack of access to healthcare, poor nutrition levels, increased likelihood of migration, reduced status of women. Women are particularly affected by poverty. For instance, Thege (2009) notes that AIDS cuts across class, but rural African women’s risk of infection seems to be particularly high. Moreover, poor women are more likely to be sexually abused and have to resort to prostitution as the means of survival. The UNAIDS data show that decline among young women is more likely in urban areas or in rural areas where easy access to healthcare structures exists. To sum up, Eozenu (2008) terms the impact of neoliberalism in Africa in relation to poverty and spread of H.I.V. as a crime of globalization. The cancellation of debts, according to many Africanist scholars

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and activists, would be the first effective step in fighting poverty and AIDS in Africa (Colgan, 2002; Eozenu, 2008; Turshen, 1999).

In 2005, G8 countries pledged to ensure “universal access” to antiretroviral drugs by 2010. In 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted a declaration on “Universal Access to Prevention, Treatment, Care and Support.” However, despite the fact that the cost of the AIDS drugs have gone down, if AIDS patients in Africa continue getting them at a current pace, only 1 in 2 will be receiving the treatment by 2010 (Adeyemi, 2007). Initially, Western pharmaceutical companies, unwilling to compromise their profits, have significantly halted access to antiretroviral drugs for developing countries. For instance, numerous Western pharmaceutical companies took South Africa to court at the beginning of 2001 over language in the Medicines Act that would have allowed for generic production of affordable AIDS drugs. The international non-governmental organization Oxfam has attacked the world’s biggest drug company GlaxoSmithKline for selling Lamivudine used in AIDS treatment for a 20% higher price in Africa than in industrial countries. The U.S. has repeatedly blocked the international agreement under World Trade Organization to waive certain patents to allow cheap drugs to be produced in developing countries (Fleck, 2003). The controversy over the production of generic drugs continues; the UNAIDS head Sidibe has claimed in 2009 that it is necessary that Africa produces its own generic drugs if the pandemic is to be contained. The new target date set in the UNAIDS 2008 report is 2015; in fact, the report concludes that the

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141 The case was later dropped following the international pressure from non-governmental organizations and public outrage, see: http://www.globalissues.org/article/90/aids-in-africa#WesternPharmaceuticalCompaniesReactiontoAIDSinAfrica
objectives that were set for 2010 would not be achieved, and that a significant strengthening of efforts and resources is necessary in order to contain the epidemic by 2015.144

Over the study period, the New York Times included 18 stories (8% of overall coverage) that focus on African women and AIDS, Le Monde – 17 (9% of overall coverage). The narratives in the two newspapers share many common trends (feminization of epidemics, focus on sexual practices, suggestions of irrationality etc.). The NYT’s coverage nevertheless distinguishes itself by a greater focus on medical debates and Western-led trials and treatments, while Le Monde spends more time discussing AIDS in individual African countries.

African Women and AIDS in the New York Times

There are only three articles in the NYT on AIDS and African woman at the beginning of the 1990s; the rest of the coverage is clustered at the end of the decade and peaks in 2003-2005. Such inconsistent coverage of the issue, which has been of significant importance in many African countries throughout the 1990s, might correlate with political attention to it. At the beginning of the 21st century, AIDS in Africa has been placed high on the international political agenda. The Bush administration in the U.S. made Africa, including AIDS, one of its foreign policy priorities.145 Various international donors and organizations, such as, e.g. W. J. Clinton146 or Bill and Melinda Gates’ Foundation,147 have made promises of funding and action to prevent what the world media has unilaterally been calling “the AIDS pandemic” on the continent.

A considerable number of stories involving AIDS and women are concerned with medical research and drug trials, all conducted and sponsored by the international organizations, such as the UN or the UNICEF. The rest focuses on AIDS as a human tragedy

145 See: http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/africa/.
147 See: http://www.gatesfoundation.org/GlobalHealth/Pri_Diseases/HIVAIDS.
that is presented through the stories of those affected. It is in the first type of stories that African women are most likely to become the objects of Western scrutiny with no faces, voices, or power of decision. The human-interest stories on African women and AIDS are, however, also tainted by colonial logic: they are punctuated by the themes of “feminization of epidemics” as well as the implicit images of dangerous motherhood that inevitably bring back the “overpopulation” discourses.

“Feminization” of the epidemic. From the beginning of the 1990s, NYT coverage articulates AIDS as affecting African women to a much greater extent than African men. However, the statistics showing that there are more women than men with AIDS in Africa are not available until 1999 (Altman, Nov. 24, 1999). Even when statistics from the reports of various international organizations is used, it remains intertwined with the dramatic statements that AIDS in Africa transformed itself from “an indiscriminate killer into a plague against women” or yet that there is “a growing feminization of this epidemic” (Jul. 20, 2004; Aug. 19, 2005). A UN official takes the image of AIDS as a “plague against women” to its logical extreme in his statement that in 20 years, “… portions of Africa … will be depopulated of women” (Jul. 20, 2004). The writer, Michael Wines, interprets such predictions by underscoring the negative impact in the following way: “It portends a collapse of African farming, much of it conducted by women. … It suggests that millions of AIDS orphans … will have no women to care for them.” By explicating the potential negative consequences of such a disproportionate loss of women due to AIDS, Wines paints the image of their vulnerability and desperation, but also emphasizes the importance of women in Africa as principal nurturers of children, agriculture, and, by extension, the whole continent. Although the NYT writers correctly emphasize the vulnerability of women, there are few, if any, distinctions made in regard to these women: their age, social status, education and place of living. Adopting a long-lasting tradition of unjustified generalizations, writers position all
African women as an “undifferentiated mass” dying from AIDS. As a comparison, breast cancer in the West is also an almost exclusively feminine disease, but breast cancer is never considered as affecting all Western women.

African women’s vulnerability vis-à-vis AIDS is explained by the NYT writers in terms of several factors. First, there is a straightforward biological explanation, which provides that during heterosexual intercourse, the transmission of the virus from male to female is much more probable due to physiological reasons\(^{148}\) (LaFraniere, Jun. 3, 2005; Wines, Jul. 20, 2004), which is an important step towards a more realistic understanding of the disease when compared with the earlier American misconception that women do not get AIDS. Treichler (1999) reports that in the Western media, at least in the first decades of the epidemic, AIDS in Africa was frequently attributed to the practices of “Other,” such as, e.g., anal intercourse, scarification, genital cutting, and excessive or exotic sexual practices (p. 254). In contrast, in the analyzed articles, the underlying assumption is that of transmission through heterosexual intercourse, which is in accordance with medical research (see, e.g., Quinn, Mann, Curran, & Piot, 1986) and realities on the ground. Yet, in line with Treichler’s observations, even this heterosexual intercourse, accepted as the “norm” in the West, is in fact qualified by markers that still render it somewhat deviant, when compared to the “exemplary” Western one. For instance, among the most frequently cited “abnormalities” are the age discrepancies between sexual partners, i.e. very young girls and older men, which imply a coercive nature of relationships (e.g., Altman, Feb. 29, 2004; LaFraniere, Jun. 3, 2004); or polygamy that invokes a long Western tradition of designating Africans as “deviant”\(^{149}\) (Perlez, Oct. 28, 1990; Mar. 2, 1991).


\(^{149}\) On Western interpretations of polygamy, see: Freccero (1994); Nussbaum (1994).
There are also the economically-driven explanations that articulate women’s vulnerability due to widespread poverty. Prostitution is elicited both as the ultimate negative consequence of poverty (“destitution that turns sex into currency,” Jul. 20, 2004; “girls are frequently forced into sex with older men in exchange for food for their families or money for school,” Mar. 1, 2003), and as a key factor in increasing the risk of transmission. If it is generally underscored that many African women have little say in sexual decision-making, prostitutes are depicted as virtually voiceless. Kristof provides an example of a Zambian prostitute, Mavis Sitwala, an orphan who is left to support her five siblings and a child. According to her, truck drivers pay $4 for sex without a condom, and only $1 for sex with it. Thus, she explains her actions in terms of pragmatic calculations: “At times, you need food or money to pay rent … and so even if he won’t use a condom, you agree” (Mar. 30, 2005). This example exposes the ultimate reasoning behind what could otherwise be regarded as a mere irrational behavior in the face of AIDS. The economic explanations of spread of AIDS are, however, void of any references to larger political and economic factors, notably the role of the World Bank and IMF along with the Western-designed and imposed neoliberal policies that have driven many African countries into poverty (Colgan, 2002; Eozenu, 2008; Turshen, 1999). And women have found themselves among those most affected by impoverishment.

Sexual practices of not only prostitutes, but also of black Africans in general take a central place when explaining the high rates of AIDS among African women, which resonates with the well-established Western interest in the colonized people’s sexual mores and practices that have always been regarded as somehow deviant (see, e.g. McClintock, 1995). That is, in line with colonial discourses, the “abnormalities” of African sexual life is unanimously pronounced as the essential reason for why women are more affected by AIDS (LaFraniere, Feb. 18, 2005; Martor, Mar. 1, 2003). This position is rejected by Africanists as ideologically tainted. The latter proclaim that, in sharp contrast to the colonial-myths
approximating propositions that African hypersexuality and lack of restraint as well as the inequality between the sexes is the key reason for the spread of AIDS in Africa, it is rather the destruction of health care systems, mostly because of the Western interventions and the Western pharmaceutical companies’ profit-seeking objectives, that Africa has been left so vulnerable to the disease (see Colgan, 2002; Null, G., & Feast, J., 2001; Turshen, 1999).

The newspaper’s concerns with African sexual practices are well summarized by Kati Martor, a member of the board of the International Women’s Health Coalition. In her op-ed, she responds to the question, why there is a discrepancy between the numbers of H.I.V.-infected men and women in the following way: “The answer is sexual coercion and violence against women, child marriage, polygamy and the widespread belief that having sex with a virgin will cure AIDS” (Mar. 1, 2003). The statement correctly notes the already-discussed vulnerability of women in sexual matters, both because of economic reasons and cultural norms. At the same time, the author also brings forward what are to be considered as the “savage” African practices, such as child marriage and polygamy – the reoccurring themes in explaining the AIDS endemic among women. Finally, she pronounces another verdict that complies with colonial logic – that of the African irrationality manifested through what the writer defines as “the widespread belief” that sex with a virgin could cure the disease. The irrationality of Africans emerges in other stories as well. For example, Perlez provides an example of an H.I.V.-positive women, who, despite the risks of transmission, which she is aware of, still decided to have a baby (Apr. 20, 1991); or yet of an African man who refused to get tested because he believed to be “impervious to the disease” (Mar. 2, 1991). In other words, the examples of certain African sexual practices as well as behavior of individual people (who are chosen by the writers) vis-à-vis the disease is frequently put into question; the ultimate overarching message produced in the process is that of African and incapability to reason and make appropriate choices in the face of pandemic. Yet, the writers never equate the
seemingly irrational convictions and misperceptions about AIDS in Africa with those in the U.S.: the wildly circulated formula in the U.S. that “women do not get AIDS” (Treichler, 1999) is neither more nor less rational than the above-quoted examples, but is rather a result of the historically embedded processes. Moreover, the real reasons for spread of AIDS, including among women, i.e., the role of the World Bank and IMF in destroying healthcare structures and advancing African impoverishment, are however, not part of the discourse.

The rare African voices that emerge also underscore the frequently restrained capabilities of women to participate in sexual decision-making on equal terms with men. The Ugandan Dr. Ankrah, for instance, suggests that “an unassailable facet of African culture – the customary and legal rights of males to unlimited numbers of partners … should now be questioned” (Perlez, Oct. 28, 1990). Babatunde Osotimehin, the chairman of the National Action Committee on AIDS in Nigeria, in his op-ed piece also acknowledges being “painfully aware that girls and women typically cannot negotiate, when, where or with whom they have sex” (Aug. 19, 2005). Yet, while Africans, as sources or as writers, confirm that cultural sexual practices coupled with the economic destitution frequently disfavor women, their tone remains much more matter-of-fact. At the same time, African voices on AIDS also prove capable of challenging their own cultural practices as well as the Western approach to assisting Africa in coping with AIDS. For instance, Osotimehin (Aug. 19, 2005) rejects any possibility of fruitful cooperation, if the West continues to “impose their ideological or political views as a condition of partnership.” In short, African voices in the New York Times’ represent the possibility of challenging Western understandings and approaches in relation to AIDS, but are too rare to disrupt the dominant discourses.

Despite the overall consensus in the Times that women are disproportionally affected by AIDS, in certain stories the images of African women themselves challenge this pessimistic point of view. For example, Perlez (Mar. 2, 1991) reports on a Ugandan woman,
who “… married to her husband for 10 years, mustered courage unusual for wives in African marriages. She made the ultimate threat. ‘I said I wouldn’t sleep with him unless he got a test.’” This example demonstrates that not all women are in fact voiceless in at least certain situations regarding sexual-decision making. However, the writer emphasizes throughout the story, that Mrs. Mutebi’s case is exceptional, which fits the overall tone of her article that paints Ugandan society as the apogee of patriarchal oppression: “… men have many sexual partners but expect their wives to be faithful. Thus, married women, submissive and powerless within marriages, are highly vulnerable to the virus.” There is nothing wrong with Perlez bringing up the patriarchal nature of the Ugandan society in and of itself. However, she would never make an equation between the sexism of “their” society and that of “ours”; the fact that “normal” – read: white, heterosexual, middle class – American women were long reassured not to be at danger of getting AIDS also exposes the underlining premises of sexist (as well as racist and class-bound) binary opposition between “good” and “bad” women.

In another instance, women’s agency and courage is exposed through their actions vis-à-vis the consequences of AIDS that affect societies at large. For example, LaFraniere (Jun. 3, 2005) presents a 14 year old girl, whose parents have died from AIDS and who is now in charge of taking care of her three siblings and a child. The girl herself sums up her situation in the following way: “‘There isn’t anyone to help,’ she said … ‘The responsibility is in my hands, so I have to do it.’” In other words, while AIDS is clearly shown as overburdening African women, it also reveals their courage and mobilizes the image of women as the fighters against the disease and the ultimate saviors of their countries.

Moreover, AIDS also emerges on several occasions as a potential vehicle of change. For example, in another of her articles, LaFraniere (May 11, 2005) reports extensively on the

150 Compare this to the 2009 “sex strike” by Kenyan women demanding that political infighting would end, see: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/8033695.stm.
practice of ritual widows’ cleansing that involves having sexual intercourse with a diseased husband’s relatives or yet a specially designated cleanser. While long tolerated by widows and endorsed by traditional leaders, now the tradition is severely challenged by AIDS. The writer proclaims that “political and tribal leaders are starting to speak out publicly against … sexual cleansing, condemning it as one reason H.I.V. has spread to 25 million sub-Saharan Africans.” The previously discussed example of African women exerting that their husbands would get tested for H.I.V. also attests to AIDS role as a factor instigating the revision of traditional ways of doing things.

A number of writers criticize what is by now widely regarded as the notorious Bush administration’s propositions that abstinence is the best policy of fighting AIDS in Africa (Kristof, Mar. 30, 2005; Martor, Mar. 1, 2003; Osotimehin, Aug. 19, 2005). In fact, their articles expose the complete irrationality of such suggestions in the African context. For instance, in what Mator calls the “mind-boggling alliance,” the U.S. is criticized for having voted against UN measures to support better sex education, along with the countries that the U.S. itself usually considers as “evil”: Iran, Libya, Sudan, Syria and Iraq (Mar. 1, 2003). The U.S.’s irrationality vis-à-vis AIDS in Africa is further crystallized through the discussions of international organizations’ studies that have demonstrated that the rate of AIDS in Africa is higher among young married women than among young, unmarried, but sexually active women (Altman, Feb. 29, 2004; Kristof, Mar. 30, 2005), which challenges the Western notions of what “good” women are considered to be. As Kristof puts it in his usual sharp and biting tone, “the stark reality is that what kills young women here is often not promiscuity, but marriage. Indeed, just about the deadliest thing a woman in southern Africa can do is get married” (Mar. 30, 2005). In other words, Bush administration’s propositions of being faithful or yet abstaining from sex until marriage emerge in these articles as just as irrational, as, for example, African men’s resistance to using condoms (Kristof, Mar. 30, 2005). At the same
time, the Catholic overtones of the U.S. political agenda in relation to AIDS in Africa revealed in these articles also challenge the imperial myth of the U.S. as the benefactor, ready and willing to save the world without any selfish interests.

The *New York Times* coverage on AIDS and women articulate the disproportionate burden of the disease for women mostly in terms of the patriarchal oppression. The consensus of African women being most vulnerable in the face of AIDS is supported not only by economic or cultural explanations, but also by the official statistics, and embraced by journalists and human rights workers alike. However, the articles remain inflected by many colonial stereotypes of African deviant sexual practices and irrationality.

**High fertility and AIDS.** The image of the “feminization of epidemics,” fully embraced by the *NYT*, is accompanied and strengthened by the image of a pregnant mother-to-be, sick of AIDS, who involuntarily endangers her infants. Treichler (1999) discussing the early biomedical discourses about AIDS in the U.S. also notes the importance of women as mothers, and the risk of vertical transmission in these discourses. According to her, mothers of infants with H.I.V., who are suspected of having known about their own status throughout pregnancy, acquire what she calls a “sinister agency” (p. 65). Lawrence Altman, the *NYT*’s medical reporter, wrote repeatedly about the results of various Western studies on the mother-fetus transmission or yet transmission of the virus through breastfeeding (Jun. 30, 1998; Jul. 8, 2000; Jul. 14, 2000). Naturally, pregnant African women with AIDS are the central focus of such discussions. Reminiscent of Saartie Bartmaan’s trials, these women are paraded before Western audiences, while their bodies, sexual habits and mothering practices are endlessly discussed by the echelons of Western experts. (The only African actor that visibly contributes to these debates is the South African government, whose position clashes considerably with that of the West).
At the same time, African women affected by AIDS, are conspicuously absent in these sanitized medical-political debates. They almost never appear as witnesses, survivors or experts (the pattern somewhat reminiscent of that found in the wartime rape coverage of the 1998, when the fate of the African rape survivors seemed to be debated and decided exclusively by the outsiders, most of them, Western). While in more human interest stories, women figure both as witnesses and sources, the articles that discuss various research reports single-handedly exclude those who are most concerned – the H.I.V. positive African women. The principal objective in such kind of articles, then, is to demonstrate Western medical expertise rather than to tell the story of African women with AIDS. The Western medical expertise might well be of crucial utility to halt the AIDS epidemic in Africa, if it is provided at a reasonable cost and with no political agenda behind it. However, the Western interest in H.I.V. patients in the developing world and pharmaceutical trials conducted in these countries are highly problematic from an ethical point of view. As Treichler (1999) explains, a majority of organizations involved in AIDS research have used Third World populations as their trial subjects. She explains the situation in the following way:

The reasoning is that testing such vaccines requires a critical mass of people who are (a) “pharmacologically virgin” and (b) continuing to get infected at high rates. Western people of color and intravenous drug users are … too pharmacologically promiscuous … gay men, in contrast, are seen too sophisticated to obey their masters’ voices … Only in the Third World, the logic continues, can sufficient numbers of subjects who meet these criteria be assembled for testing: too ignorant (or mired in “tradition”) to change their behavioral practices …, too poor and unsophisticated to seek alternative treatments, compliant and dependent enough to follow orders (p. 210).

Western interest in H.I.V. patients in Africa seems even more hypocritical in light of the Western pricing policies applied to AIDS treatments that have made them out of reach for many Africans who need them. Finally, the medical experts’ interest in African women with H.I.V. that is made obvious in the NYT stories is equally suspect, provided that American women with H.I.V. were for a long time of very little interest to these experts.

Moreover, no place is left in these debates for African experts and voices. Treichler’s (1999) insights are again useful. She notes that there has been a general tendency in the
Western discourses on AIDS in Africa to discount the knowledge of African medical experts as “clinical and experiential” (p. 114). The real problem, however, is that the images of modern hospitals and physicians do not fulfill our expectations of how the AIDS-affected Third World countries should look like. She gives an example of the story about AIDS in a Brazilian news magazine followed with pictures of modern medical equipment versus stories about AIDS in the Western media followed by pictures of skinny, passive Third World AIDS patients “waiting” to die (p. 105-107).

There are two principal questions raised in the *NYT*’s political-medical debates involving African women. First invokes an ethical issue, by asking whether it is ethical to prioritize infants at the expense of their mothers; and second, whether the treatment during pregnancy and labor is actually worth its cost if the transmission can still occur during breastfeeding. Most of the Western parties concerned seem to agree on the first question, claiming that the short-term AZT therapy administered exclusively to save newborns from being infected with H.I.V. is beneficial and should continue.\(^{151}\) While this therapy does not affect women with H.I.V. negatively, it does not do anything to better their situations either. Thus, it is far from unambiguous from the ethical point of view, and at the same time, exposes Western pragmatic calculations to help infants, but not their mothers. Africans themselves, thus, emerge as critical of this Western approach. In Altman’s (Jun. 30, 1998) article, an H.I.V. positive South African woman, who has lost her baby-daughter to AIDS, is quoted saying that “Women will move mountains to have a healthy baby … but … how do trials protect or prolong women’s lives?” (Jun. 30, 1998). It is important to note that the last statement constitutes a unique example of an African woman participating in what is

\[^{151}\text{Rare objections to this consensus come from the less mainstream human rights organizations, such as, e.g. Actup-Paris. It has repeatedly attacked the AZT therapy that reduces the likelihood of mothers transmitting H.I.V. to their infants, but does not foresee any treatment for the mothers themselves as unethical (Altman, Jun. 30, 1998).}\]
otherwise an exclusively Western/expert debate on how to help the H.I.V.-positive African women, who are, thus, in the process, rendered into voiceless treatment subjects.

Another reaction against the Western approach comes from the South Africa, the country with one of the greatest H.I.V-AIDS rates in Africa. The South African government is reported to have rejected the “common treatment used to reduce the transmission of the AIDS virus by pregnant women to their babies, recommending instead a more complicated drug regimen that many experts say will reach fewer women” (LaFraniere, Jul. 14, 2004).

Although the issue of the accessibility to drugs invoked in the quote is certainly problematic, South Africa’s attempt at more complex treatment involving both women and their babies nevertheless is definitely worth consideration. Yet, the South African position is only briefly explicated, and the rest of the article focuses on various Western experts that strongly criticize such a decision. South Africa is accused of sending “a totally wrong message,” moving “slowly to fight the disease” or yet “sowing confusion over AIDS.” In short, instead of engaging with South Africa about the long-term effects of the short and cheap treatment favored by the West and its ethicality, the West single-handedly dismisses the South African perspective, in what can only be seen as the statement of the former’s power. Perhaps South African position is indeed faulty, but the fact that the newspaper simply dismisses it by imposing the Western point of view gives an impression of disregard towards a different perspective. It is also important to note that no article invokes a possibility of selling AIDS drugs, which are central to the debates about medical trials, to African countries at a reasonable price or, even better, donating them. This solution to the AIDS pandemic in Africa is not a part of the newspaper’s discourse, most likely, because of the previously discussed role of Western pharmaceutical companies that have prioritized profits over helping Africans.

with AIDS and, which, in the case of the U.S., maintained a friendly relationship with the Clinton administration.\textsuperscript{153}

The second question discussed in the \textit{New York Times} pertains to transmission of H.I.V. through breastfeeding. The image of motherhood often serves as the ultimate device of establishing and maintaining a woman’s victimhood (as seen in other stories as well; see, e.g., Fair, 1996). Here, however, the image of innocent or yet victimized mother becomes transformed, as the breastfeeding women with AIDS are designated as responsible for transmitting the disease to their infants and, thus, acquire what Treichler (1999) calls the “sinister agency” and are turned into “culpable agents” (p. 65), the fate that was also reserved for pregnant women with H.I.V. in the U.S. For example, Altman (Jul. 14, 2000) unscrupulously reports that “mothers continued to infect their babies,” positioning the blame entirely on their shoulders. Moreover, he repeatedly underscores that African women breastfeed for what, from the Western point of view, could be regarded as abnormally long period of time, up to two years (Jul. 8, 2000; Jul. 14, 2000). What is made less visible in the articles is that breastfeeding often is the only option for many African mothers, taking into consideration economic conditions (Altman, Jul. 8, 2000). It is worth noting that Westerners have always been amused with differing African mothering practices (Morgan, 1997).

Moreover, the issue of breastfeeding concentrates attention on women’s breasts, even though indirectly, which invokes the colonial staple - the fetish of nude African women’s breasts - that were interpreted as a sign of physical abnormality, monstrosity, sexual attractiveness and hyperfertility (McClintock, 1995; Morgan, 1997). The image of breasts, then, not only cements the image of a (plausibly deviant) motherhood, but also remains subtly intertwined with overpopulation rhetoric.

\textsuperscript{153} On the critique of Clinton administration’s policies towards AIDS drugs and pharmaceutical companies, see, e.g., Watson, D. (1999). \textit{US pharmaceutical companies reap huge profits from AIDS drugs}. At: http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/aids-j05.shtml
Tamene and Fantahun (2007), in their study of Ethiopian women, provide a different perspective on H.I.V.-positive women and their desire to have children. In fact, they demonstrate that the desire to have children among these women does not differ greatly from the estimations for the general population in the country. In other words, their study suggests that being H.I.V.-positive is not a decisive factor in making decisions about having children. The researchers conclude that “a large portion of the H.I.V.-positive individuals … were sexually active, desired to have children, and wanted to use family planning” (p. 226). The image of Ethiopian H.I.V.-positive women that emerges from this study is that of women who desire to lead ordinary lives. The primary objective, then, is providing such women with adequate medical and educational resources so that they could do so instead of focusing on their “sinister agency” for wanting to have children.

The real issue is not the African women’s “sinister agency,” but Western uneasiness regarding “high” fertility rates of Africans. High fertility rates in Africa have been frequently conceptualized by the West as the key problem in explaining poverty and other issues in many African countries (Momsen, & Townsend, 1987). Thus, unsurprisingly, the current mediated discourses on AIDS in Africa are inevitably framed within the discussions about not only sexual, but also reproductive practices of Africans. The counterargument is the following: while the health infrastructures in many African countries have been destroyed by neoliberalism, and there is a lack of even basic health services, which is a huge obstacle for stopping the spread of AIDS, international organizations and the U.S. have been overly concerned with fertility regulation, in line with the early colonizing agendas (Bledsoe, 1999; Kaller, 2003; Turshen, 1999). Not surprisingly, then, Treichler (1999) suggests that in sub-Saharan Africa, the idea that AIDS is the latest effort to control the reproduction of African people is not uncommon (p. 221).
The Western perspective of the African “overpopulation threat” seems to be fully embraced in Perlez’s articles on AIDS. For her, Africa remains, as established by colonial rhetoric, the land of the “soaring population” (Apr. 20, 1991) that faces “increasing population density” (Oct. 28, 1990). In the context of AIDS, high fertility is positioned by Perlez as the factor that increases women’s vulnerability to AIDS, but also discursively underscores Africans’ irrationality vis-à-vis the disease. To her credit, in one instance, Perlez tries to explain why Africans value having many children. Quoting her African sources, she reports that “womanhood is judged in terms of motherhood” (Oct. 28, 1990), which is a rather appropriate interpretation of African cultural norms (Guyer, & Belinga, 1995). In another article, however, she forgets about the previous argument, and proposes another explanation, apparently based more on a personal insight:

Many of the reasons that bring women … to want children despite the risks of AIDS have to do with urban poverty. For most women in Kigali, the sources of revenue are few … Women often choose to have a child, in the belief – most often mistaken – that the man who fathers the baby will then provide support for mother and child (Apr. 20, 1990).

Here, she claims that poverty is in fact the cause rather than the consequence of high fertility. While the latter proposition opens space for a more complex understanding of the situation, Perlez is quick to re-simplify it by suggesting that Rwandan women simply miscalculate, i.e. their attempts at reasoning fail. While in her articles poverty underwrites Africans problems, Perlez never questions the causes of poverty itself, which would bring us back to the role of the Western world, notably that of the World Bank and IMF in furthering African impoverishment and halting its development.

Perlez’s overall frame that articulates ongoing high fertility rates, which remain adamant, despite the spread of AIDS, as a threat to Africa and to the entire world, is somewhat disrupted by the story of the Rwandan Miss Syapata. Perlez recounts in detail her decision to have another child, in spite of being H.I.V.-positive, in her article *AIDS outweighed by the desire to have a child* (Apr. 20, 1991). She presents Syapata as a young smart woman, fully
aware of her condition, who “is well versed in the consequences” and “exudes confidence and a kind of street smartness unusual here.” Throughout the article, it is made clear that Syapata’s pregnancy was not accidental, even though Perlez seems to have a difficult time accepting her statements at their face value. For instance, she retells Syapata’s decision in the following fashion: “As Miss Syapata describes it, her decision to have her baby boy … was planned,” (emphasis mine) in such a way emphasizing that this version of the truth is only valid from Syapata’s point of view. While Perlez portrays the Rwandan woman in question as independent, smart and capable of reasoning, untainted by the slightest shadow of victimization or suffering that frequently goes hand in hand with portrayals of AIDS, the writer does not appreciate Syapata’s decision to lead a normal life and continue having children, despite the disease. She unilaterally pronounces that Syapata’s “rationale is the kind of bad news that family planning experts have been hearing for the last two decades.” In such a way, the seemingly positive portrayal of Syapata is re-situated by Perlez in her overall negative frame of “overpopulation” and AIDS. In other words, according to Perlez, not even AIDS has proved capable of curbing African “hyperfertility.”

Motherhood is established as the principal theme in the New York Times narratives on AIDS and women, as was the case in the AIDS agenda in the U.S. from early on, where women mostly mattered in their roles as mothers of infants with H.I.V. or as prostitutes. In these stories, however, the images of children do not serve as a narrative device to increase women’s suffering and victimization (as, e.g., in stories on Nigerian stoning cases), but, quite the opposite, seems to work to vilify women, who continue having children, despite H.I.V., and, in the process, endanger them. In such a way, the discussions of medical trials in relation to mother-fetus transmission or the spreading of virus through breastfeeding that vividly articulate the danger of AIDS become inextricably linked to Western understandings of high fertility as dangerous. The two phenomena are shown as reinforcing each other: sex leads to
more children and more AIDS; new pregnancies mean not only more children, but also likely
greater H.I.V. rates. Underlying all of this is the colonial myth of African “hypersexuality”
that is reinforced through images of Africans who continue having children, even when
infected with H.I.V., which from the Western perspective could only indicate their
uncontrollable sexual urges. And even when African women emerge as pragmatic and active
decision-makers in their reproductive lives, their reasoning processes are discredited and
pronounced as irrational, at best, and “bad news for the West,” at worst. In other words,
African women who choose to lead normal lives, despite horrendous conditions (poverty,
AIDS, etc.), instead of being recognized for their courage, are derided by the journalists. Thus,
from this viewpoint, the analyzed sample of articles seem to confirm Spurr’s (1993)
conclusion that in the Western media, Africa is depicted as the “machine of AIDS production”
or yet the “machine of sex and death” (p. 181). The NYT coverage is also problematic because
of its focus on medical trials, which brings forward Western medical expertise, but seemingly
implies that no such expertise exists in Africa. Moreover, medical interest in H.I.V.-positive
African women is highly questionable from an ethical point of view, and reveals the
underlying power dynamics between Western world and Africa.

**African Women and AIDS in Le Monde**

Stories on African women in *Le Monde* are more equally spread throughout the study
period. In fact, it is only in the last two years (2004 and 2005) that the stories on African
women and AIDS are absent, in contrast to the *New York Times*, where the coverage on the
issue peaked at this particular period in time. While some themes seen in the American
newspaper reemerge in *Le Monde* (feminization of epidemics, interest in sexual practices
etc.), the main focus in the latter is nevertheless shifted away from medical trials and debates
surrounding them to discussions of AIDS in various African countries. These discussions
include, to a greater extent than in the NYT, different African perspectives on the disease as well as their efforts to stop it.

*Le Monde*’s writers, like their American counterparts, unanimously emphasize that AIDS affects women to a greater extent than men, bringing in statistics from as early as 1993 to bolster their claims (Dec. 1, 1990; Aug. 4, 1993; Dec. 1, 1995; Sept. 14, 1999). Nau (Dec. 1, 1990) declares that after being considered as the disease of “marginals, be it homosexuals or drug users,” it has now started “devastating women and children” (the realistic observation that the French media seem to have come to grips with much earlier than the American media). Fottorino (Nov. 9, 1994), in his front-page story, explains that the perceived feminization of AIDS is not just a Western-imposed perspective, as in Nigeria, for example, AIDS translates in three vernacular languages as the “disease of women.” At the same time, however, the projected AIDS impact on women in the articles is not limited to African women only; in several instances, African women’s situation is discussed alongside that of French women (Nau, Dec. 1, 1990) or of women world-wide (Serge, Aug. 4, 1993). The latter is important in providing a wider context and avoiding creating the impression of AIDS as affecting uniquely African women. It is worth noting that such a contextualization would not have been possible at this stage in the U.S. media that held to the idea that AIDS only affected women who were not “normal.”

Writers are equally unanimous in relation to positioning heterosexual transmission as the primary vehicle of spreading the disease (Dec. 1, 1990; Dec. 15, 1995), which resembles the trend seen in the NYT. *Le Monde*’s reporters also mention on several occasions unsafe blood transfusion as a factor in the spread of the disease, which invokes the sad realities of the lack of qualitative medical services in many African countries (Aug. 10, 1993; Dec. 15, 1995). The writers, however, just as their American counterparts, stop short of discussing the
reasons for this lack of health services that were largely destroyed by Western created and imposed neoliberal policies.

The dominant explanations for why African women are particularly vulnerable in the face of AIDS, similar to the *NYT*, are related to sexual practices and women’s lack of decision-making power in this domain (Dec. 1, 1995; Jul. 13, 2000). These are underwritten by patriarchal oppression: girls marry and start sexual relationships early; often, there is a noteworthy age difference between a man and a woman; men rarely stay faithful, even if women are expected to (which is true for many African societies, even though differences in social status of women often plays a significant role in determining their place in society). Interestingly, polygamy is hardly ever mentioned, despite its already discussed discursive potential to signify African sexual practices as deviant (Freccero, 1994; Nussbaum, 1994); rather, the focus is on men’s multiple sexual relations that are projected as the norm (Dec. 1, 1995; Dec. 15, 1995), which is a rather realistic account of the realities in many African societies (see Oster, 2005). The usage of condoms is often an index of African women’s powerlessness in sexual decision-making (Dec. 1, 1990; Dec. 1, 1995; Jun. 29, 2000).

Narratives about AIDS in general and sexual practices in particular are not void of at least implicit suggestions about African ignorance and irrationality that effectively mobilize the image of AIDS as ineradicable on the African continent. For instance, Pompey (Sept. 14, 1999) explains that Africans understand the disease as “a punishment inflicted by malicious witches, angry ancestors, jealous or vindictive neighbors,” which is perfectly in line with colonial images of Africans as uncivilized and incapable of logical reasoning. Fottorino (Nov. 9, 1994) opens his front-page story, called “The curse of the black continent,” with the following image:

Africa is trembling in the eyes of AIDS. Stripped of exoticism and seduction, without attraction or fortune. With the epidemics, the repulsive vision of the worrying other resurges, the phantasm of a noxious continent where the cradle of humanity meets its grave. … A terrible short-cut that condemns
Africa to universal judgment. The land of mission and submission, the land of false messiahs, of Satyamalka and the pact of blood with the simian species.

In fact, the writer later goes on to discredit these stereotypical images and misinterpretations as well as the propositions of AIDS’ African origins. However, such a narrative technique of mobilizing the stereotypes clearly embedded in the colonial rhetoric, in order to later discredit them, remains questionable. The dramatic style of writing that opens the article forcefully establishes the image of “dark” Africa and AIDS as a natural consequence, which is already firmly anchored in the title. In fact, the latter strikingly invokes the racist explanations of the black people’s alleged inferiority that resort to the religious myth of the Curse of Ham (Fredrickson, 2002, p. 45). In short, despite the later return to the more neutral tone, the damage is nevertheless done.

Writers also challenge African sexual practices and their behavior in the face of the spread of AIDS, although examples that are chosen obviously remain very subjective and hardly represent a full picture. For instance, Nau (Oct. 24, 1990) reporting on medical research carried out with prostitutes in Congo reports that “more than 20% of prostitutes did not know anything about the usage of condoms and some believed that they needed to swallow it.” While this might reflect the sad realities on the ground, the writer neither inquires why prostitutes are ignorant on the issue nor goes into why these women have to prostitute themselves in the conditions of widespread AIDS in the first place. The response of African men to the disease is also shown to reveal the seemingly uneducated behavior: they refuse to get tested, continue having unprotected sexual intercourse with other women, and abandon their wives whom they most likely infected themselves (Cojean, Apr. 3, 2000; Serge, Aug. 4, 1993). Finally, the writers denounce the official powers, be it governments or kings, that are all-too-likely to ignore AIDS, for example, as in Ivory Coast, where the rates of AIDS are
considerable, but where official discourses, according to Nau, deny the existence of the “shameful disease” (Aug. 10, 1993; Nau, May 8, 1991). It is certainly true that many African countries and communities have faced challenges in grappling with the AIDS epidemic, and the responses to it both at the individual and at the government level have not always been the most appropriate or adequate. However, as Treichler (1999) reminds us, “we are talking, after all, about an epidemic disease with more than forty distinct clinical manifestations” (p. 124), i.e. a disease of enormous complexity that continues to puzzle even the Western medical researchers with the newest technologies and ample resources at their disposal. Once again, if African countries did have better health infrastructures and unhindered access to the affordable treatments, the response to the epidemic would likely be much more effective.

Prostitution emerges in *Le Monde*’s articles as an important constitutive part of the narratives about African women and AIDS. Prostitution is said to be widespread and is portrayed in a consistently negative light, especially when coupled with the images of AIDS. For instance, Nau (Aug. 10, 1993) suggests that Abidjan “no longer counts its thousands of prostitutes”; and, on another occasion, that “80% of prostitutes working in several of the biggest African cities are contaminated” (Dec. 15, 1995), the latter description resonates well with the Treichler’s (1999) observations that in U.S. biomedical discourses the main concern has been with women as infectors, not as infectees, thus, also a particular interest in sex workers (p. 53). Prostitutes in *Le Monde* also unequivocally emerge as either unable to impose safe sex practices on their clients (“women try to negotiate a protected intercourse, but renounce if they really need money,” Jun. 19, 2001) or ignorant of the means of protection (“the immense majority of women [prostitutes] have never seen or imagined of the existence of a condom,” Oct. 24, 1990).

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Such an emphasis on prostitution in the face of AIDS has several consequences. First, the focus is justified to an extent that prostitutes indeed constitute the most vulnerable category of women and rates of infection among them are higher than among other female populations. Yet, Treichler (1999) suggests that higher rates of infection among prostitutes in the U.S. might well be attributed to their higher use of intravenous drugs rather than increased sexual activity). Second, the narratives on prostitution effectively expose the economic vulnerability of sex workers and African women at large. It is underlined that for many girls and women prostitution is the only means of survival, even though the reasons of extreme impoverishment are not explicated (10 Aug. 1993; Jun. 29, 2001). The economic dimension of explaining women’s vulnerability vis-à-vis AIDS in general is not much developed, except for rare mentions, as in Pompey’s (Sept. 14, 1999) story, that “poverty kills these women as much as AIDS.” At the same time, the focus on prostitution has a less favorable effect of tapping uneasily into the Western imaginings of AIDS as the disease of marginals, associated with deviant sexual practices and behaviors. These are all the more effective, given the colonial rhetoric that proclaims African hypersexuality and loose sexual mores (McClintock, 1995). That is, images of prostitution, especially when coupled with those of men having multiple sexual partners, play into the reservoir of degrading Western images that establish African sexual practices as abnormal and, thus, by extension, also justify the myth of AIDS as a “natural curse” for the African continent. The main problem with the narratives about prostitutes is that writers remain largely silent about the reasons of poverty that push women into prostitution and lack of sex education, as this would require exposing Western culpability in impoverishing many African countries.

Pregnant women, as another category of women affected by AIDS, in contrast to the NYT, are only fleetingly brought up in Le Monde. In fact, Le Monde has only one op-ed by

Levy, the director of National Agency for AIDS research (Dec. 6, 1997) that elaborates on the question of medical trials and pregnant women. The aim of Levy’s article, however, is not to explain the benefits of Western provided treatments and their flaws, as was typical for the NYT’s stories. Instead, he raises a question whether it is ethical to conduct medical trials on pregnant African women by providing actual treatment to only half of them. As discussed earlier, medical trials in Africa conducted by Western researchers on African patients are highly questionable from the ethical point of view, and here Levy invokes one of many of these ethical dilemmas. His response, however, is that rather than being used as “guinea-pigs” for the West, African women, participating in the trials, in fact aid themselves and other African women. By explaining the differences between African and Northern women (e.g., the former breastfeed, do not have the same medical care throughout pregnancy and often give birth outside medical institutions), Levy claims that these trials benefit only African women and that those who argue against them do more harm than good. While the arguments presented in the article might be contested, such a perspective providing some sort of critical evaluation of Western perspectives towards the AIDS patients in Africa is a refreshing addition to the rest of the coverage.

By largely foregoing the discussions of Western-led and sponsored medical trials and treatments, Le Monde avoids vilifying H.I.V.-positive pregnant women either for having children, while knowing about their condition, or for other mothering-related choices, such as breastfeeding, as was the case in some of the NYT’s articles (Altman, Jul. 8, 2000; Jul. 14, 2000; Perlez, Oct. 28, 1990; Apr. 20, 1991). Western concerns with alleged African hyperfertility, which in the face of AIDS is seen even more irrational, are, thus, also almost invisible, with one exception. In his article, which is not exclusively focused on AIDS, but rather on increasing population rates in Africa, Paringaux (Mar. 27, 1990) suggests that contraception has not had the desired effects and the numbers remain “worrisome.” He, thus,
concludes that given the failures of contraception the only remaining hope to restrain population growth is the “grand unknown of AIDS.” He ends his article by explaining that “already some demographers take into account these devastations [caused by AIDS] and some leaders are asking themselves why all of this fuss surrounding family planning if AIDS must decimate the populations?” By articulating AIDS as a possible solution to what the West has for decades regarded as African hyperfertility threat (Momsen, & Townsend, 1987), Paringaux seems to overstep all ethical boundaries and project the AIDS pandemic on the continent not only as a merited “curse,” but as a positive phenomenon (from the Western point of view). In other words, nowhere is Western hypocrisy clearer revealed than in this article: the long-lasting Western concern with African hyperfertility and demographic explosion on the continent that finds its roots in colonial discourses and has no real substance or justification is positioned as more important than 6 thousand Africans who die from AIDS-related conditions daily.156

Le Monde, unlike the NYT, includes several favorable examples of H.I.V.-positive African women, who are given faces, are allowed to speak for themselves and are shown as primary fighters against AIDS. For instance, Cojean’s (Apr. 3, 2000) article, titled “Fighters against AIDS,” is based entirely on intimate narratives of three women affected by AIDS. While recounting their stories, the women in question reveal not only their suffering, but also their strength, courage, and their disgust with men’s irresponsible sexual behavior. Other articles present women’s organizations fighting against the disease, e.g., in Morocco (Apr. 7, 1993), Botswana (Jun. 29, 2001), Senegal (Jul. 13, 2000) or yet Ivory Coast (Sept. 14, 1999). These stories attest to African women’s agency and capabilities for social activism and political organizing.

156 On numbers of death, see: http://www.globalissues.org/article/90/aids-in-africa
Le Monde’s stories on AIDS also invoke on several occasions AIDS’ potential to change the status quo in relation to social and even religious mores. For example, women are said to increasingly exert their right to avoid the risk of getting infected by their unfaithful husbands by demanding that the latter get tested (Cojean, Apr. 3, 2003). Nau (Oct. 24, 1990) reports that the numbers of criminal cases of adultery have significantly decreased in Kinshasa, and the local experts explain it in terms of fear of AIDS and subsequent return to monogamy. Colonna (Apr. 7, 1993) reports that in Morocco, in 1992, the Ministry of Religious Affairs gave AIDS as a subject for sermons to all of the countries’ imams – an act unthinkable before the AIDS epidemics. In short, AIDS with its ensuing effects of disrupting traditional societal as well as economic structures emerges as having the potential to alter the traditional ways of thinking and living.

While African women’s organizing is unanimously applauded, several of Le Monde’s articles invoke criticism of Western approaches to dealing with AIDS in Africa. For instance, Kerouedan (Dec. 1, 1995) suggests that the Western approach to AIDS in Africa is inherently wrong and that the holistic solution to the problem lies in emancipating African women. She says that a question of AIDS is “a question of society and public health rather than a question of testing and research protocols.” While pointing in the right direction, Kerouedan still fails to bring the larger context and the role of the West in impoverishing Africa. At other times, the critique is directed at the French government and its belated response to the crisis (Nau, Aug. 10, 1993) or to the Western pharmaceutical company Wellman that is reprimanded for putting its profit-seeking objectives above humanitarian solidarity – the only time that this important issue is brought into the discourse (Nau, Oct. 24, 1990; Aug. 10, 1993).

In short, Le Monde’s coverage on AIDS and African women is equally split between the presentation of official studies and statistics, proving “feminization” of the epidemics, and more personalized accounts of those affected by the disease and/or fighting against it. African
women’s situation is also frequently contextualized – either by comparing it to that of women in other parts of the world or by providing a broader context of AIDS in a particular country. Sexual practices and women’s capabilities to negotiate their sexual lives are pointed out as the principal explanations for their vulnerability. Consequently, prostitutes are especially scrutinized. Pregnant women, on the other hand, are almost of no interest, as are the discussions of mother-fetus transmission and medical trials. Le Monde’s writers, however, are not able to completely avoid more or less explicit suggestions of African irrationality, be it in relation to their sexual behavior or in relation to their response vis-à-vis the disease. They are also guilty of omitting the larger economic and political context.

Conclusion

The coverage of AIDS in both newspapers is quite similar in many ways. Le Monde and the New York Times both put an emphasis on the “feminization” of epidemics and explain the reasons for African women’s vulnerability mostly in terms of sexual practices and women’s lack of decision-making power in this particular domain. However, while this emphasis on sexual cultures is partly justified, striking is the omission of both newspapers of any larger political and economic context that would explicate other important reasons for African women’s particular vulnerability to the disease. French and American writers alike remain largely silent about the role of the IMF and the World Bank in impoverishing Africans, halting many countries’ development and destroying health infrastructures. These issues are not breached even when the occasions seem obvious. For example, prostitutes are at the center of discussion about AIDS, yet, the reasons of poverty that push African women into prostitution are not brought up.

While the real reasons for the spread of AIDS remain unexplained, Africans are somehow conceptualized as irrational, incapable of dealing with the disease, and, thus, culpable themselves. Writers across the board underscore that heterosexual transmission is the
primary means of spreading the disease, which works, at least to an extent, to “normalize” the disease that has long been regarded in the West as the disease of “marginals.” However, despite this, the narratives are not void of colonial logic reproducing innuendos of African irrationality and lack of civilization: marriages at early age, polygamy (especially, in the NYT), men’s irresponsible sexual behavior and multiple partners, and inadequate behavior at multiple levels vis-à-vis the disease. In other words, AIDS is positioned as almost natural in Africa, as a consequence of African vices and hypersexuality.

Not surprisingly, what brings back colonial discourses with full force is the issue of hyperfertility. The latter is particularly well-developed in the NYT due to the writers’ focus on medical trials and treatments aimed at pregnant women. H.I.V.-positive African women who continue having children are cast as irrational, at best, and/or as villains, at worst. While hyperfertility is not an issue in the AIDS narratives of Le Monde to the same extent, the link between the two is shockingly established in Paringaux’s (Mar. 27, 1990) article, where he suggests that AIDS might be the “final solution” to the ever increasing African fertility rates.

The NYT’s coverage is also problematic because of its focus on medical trials in which African AIDS patients, including pregnant African women, play a crucial role. While Western medical expertise might prove invaluable to stopping the AIDS epidemic in African countries, provided that affordable treatments are made available, the writers never invoke ethical dilemmas surrounding this type of medical experimentation. They never expose the underlying power dynamics – i.e., powerful, modern, active West versus passive, helpless, backwards “Other.” Moreover, the coverage seems to suggest that the African expertise on AIDS is inexistent.

Le Monde contains more examples of African women’s activism and also relies on African women telling their own stories to a greater extent than the New York Times, which is representative of a larger trend already observed in Le Monde’s coverage of other issues.
French newspaper’s reporting also includes several critical remarks towards the Western approaches of addressing AIDS in Africa; be it against French government, Western pharmaceutical companies or Western attitudes in general. However, these remain only attempts at criticism; *Le Monde*, just as the *NYT*, fails to provide larger political and economic context and systematically expose and criticize the role of the West in impoverishing Africa and, thus, rendering them more susceptible to AIDS.
African Women outside Crises in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*

The last two chapters discuss more unconventional representations of African women. Chapter eight looks at the representations of African women outside of crises by discussing a range of articles about their daily lives, fashion, beauty and other women’s issues. Finally, the study ends with a chapter that looks at portrayals of powerful and well-known African women politicians and human rights activists, sportswomen and artists. It also discusses African women’s activism and involvement in politics.

The existing academic literature on Africa in the Western media is almost exclusively limited to analyses of representations of African wars and crises situations (famines, refugee crises etc.). And the scarce literature that focuses on African women falls within the same scope (e.g., Abdullahi, 1991; Ebo, 1992; Fair, 1992; 1996; Hawk, 1992; Ibelema, 1992). However, in contrast to the apparent current academic consensus, which seems to suggest that Africa only makes into the Western media at the times of wars, crises and disasters, the New York Times and Le Monde’s stories in the analyzed period do go beyond these conventional themes. In a number of stories, women are depicted going about their daily lives or yet concerned with fashion and beauty. In others, women’s conditions and gender-specific issues, such as abortion, prostitution and birth control are discussed.

Although less numerous than the stories pertaining to the “conventional themes of suffering,” discussed in the previous chapters, these articles, grouped under the category “African women outside of crises,” constitute a significant part of the New York Times and Le Monde’s coverage on African women by revealing the less familiar side of their lives and, thus, opening, at least in theory, a possibility of subverting colonial clichés and misunderstandings. In some of these stories suffering and misery are visible, nevertheless I still consider them different from the stories discussing the conventional “crisis” situations, as defined and understood by the Western media; the latter are usually temporary situations that are seen as newsworthy events intensively covered for a defined period of time. On the one hand, stories about African women’s ordinary lives contain a possibility of erasing the imaginary distance between “us” and “them,” by representing African women as preoccupied with the universal female issues and concerns. On the other hand, by focusing mostly on rural African women, whose lives are underwritten by patriarchal social structures and poverty, or by eliciting only issues affecting poor African women, these articles are not completely void
of images of harsh realities and suffering that are sometimes recounted through colonial stereotypes. Colonial clichés are particularly perceptible in the following cases: 1) when an issue is perceived and projected as an exclusively African matter; 2) when an issue acquires political currency, as in the discussions of African immigration in France; 3) when an individual writer recklessly recycles colonial imaginings (e.g., Perlez’s articles in the *NYT*).

The following table represents a number of stories in each of the three sub-categories in both newspapers.

**Table 2: Number of stories representing “African women outside crises”**

in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde* 1990-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The New York Times</th>
<th>Le Monde</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female issues</td>
<td>18 (8%)*</td>
<td>11 (6%)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s daily lives</td>
<td>18 (8%)</td>
<td>24 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty and fashion</td>
<td>6 (2%)</td>
<td>5 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>42 (18%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>40 (24%)</strong></td>
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*Indicates the percentage of the total number of stories about African women included in the study.

**African women, Female Issues and their Daily Lives**

Eighteen articles in the *New York Times* (8% of the total coverage) and 11 in *Le Monde* (6% of the total coverage) address what can be defined as “female issues,” such as, e.g., abortion, prostitution, reproductive health issues etc. in relation to African women. Moreover, 18 stories in the *NYT* (8% of the total coverage) and 24 in *Le Monde* (12% of the total coverage) fall under the thematic sub-category defined as “daily lives.” These articles
recount women’s daily existences with references to traditions, legal reforms and community relations. The stories under either of the two sub-categories clearly do not qualify as “breaking” news, but rather document mundane realities. In what follows, I discuss each of the sub-categories by directly comparing the coverage of the two newspapers.

**African women and female issues in the New York Times.** The *New York Times* contains 18 stories on what could be defined as “female issues.” A few stories discuss issues well familiar to American readers, e.g., abortion (Lorchi, Jun.4, 1995) or prostitution (Sengupta, Nov. 5, 2004). Despite the fact that these stories situate African women’s situations in a worldwide context (as abortion is a problem in Kenya as well as in the U.S.), they remain rare examples of narratives suggesting that African women share in universal women’s concerns rather than representing the “Other” to Western women. In fact, they are drowned out by stories about fistulas and hyperfertility that are *a priori* imagined as exclusively African issues, and thus, recounted in familiar terms resorting to colonial clichés and stereotypes. The following analysis focuses on the stories about fistulas and hyperfertility.

**Fistulas and hyperfertility.** Fistulas have been one of the biggest reproductive health problems for many rural African women who lack access to healthcare services, largely destroyed by Western designed and imposed neoliberal policies. The *NYT*’s interest in the issue is, however, surprisingly very recent. The earliest of the 4 analyzed articles dates back to 2002. Two of the articles are written by the editorial writer Kristof, one is a letter to the editor that comments on Kristof’s views and the last is written for the foreign desk by LaFraniere. While the coverage on fistulas is very scarce and does not allow any definite conclusions, it is still possible to suggest that it is mostly Kristof’s individual interest in the issue that brings it into the newspaper’s pages.

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157 To find out more about fistulas, see: http://www.endfistula.org/
In its definition as an exclusively African issue, the coverage on fistulas is reminiscent of that of another, in fact, much more notorious issue – female genital cutting. However, it retains a much lower profile in terms of attention accorded to it. Thus, it is in order to underscore its contrast to female genital cutting that I decided to discuss fistulas alongside the less conventional themes about African women. It at once elicits its relative unimportance from the Western point of view, and also exposes the NYT's complicity in contributing primarily to those debates that remain most “fashionable” and controversial (but also, clichéd) in the West, while foregoing others that are equally significant from African women’s perspectives.

The UNFPA campaign to end fistulas defines the “obstetric fistula [as] a hole in the birth canal caused by prolonged labour without prompt medical intervention … The woman is left with chronic incontinence and, in most cases, a stillborn baby.” 158 There are 2 million women in Africa, Asia and the Arab region living with fistulas, and some 50,000 to 100,000 new cases develop each year. The good news is that about 90% of fistulas are repairable, and it costs about $300 to repair it.159 The problem is that it remains extremely difficult for many African women suffering from fistulas to get treated because of the lack of proper healthcare facilities. The same problem explains why women get fistulas in the first place: it is because many of them do not have access to appropriate healthcare structures during the childbirth. In other words, especially in the case of Africa, fistulas are a lesser known side of the notorious maternal death rates. World Health Organization reports that the probability for a young woman to die in childbirth remains highest in Africa: 1 in 26 versus 1 in 7300 in the developed world. Of all African countries, the risk is highest in Niger: 1 in 7.160 And the rate of maternal morbidity is even higher. In short, the story of fistulas in Africa is one of poverty

159 Ibid.
and lack of access to healthcare structures; the role of the Western world in rendering African women more susceptible to getting fistulas is not negligible.

The *New York Times*’ readers are repeatedly reminded that fistulas are something intrinsically un-Western. They are defined as “the obstetric nightmare … *unknown in the West* for nearly a century” (LaFraniere, Sept. 28, 2005, emphasis mine); “a condition almost *unknown in the West*” (Kristof, May 16, 2003, emphasis mine). The comparison between the existence of fistulas in the West in the past and their current absence projects the idea of linear progress that has been well entrenched in colonial discourses. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from an article by Kristof: “New York’s hospital for fistula patients closed in 1895 because of the diminishing cases and now the condition is almost unknown in America” (Apr. 26, 2002). Such a historical flashback serves multiple functions: first, it emphasizes that fistulas are, in fact, not endemic to Africa (or developing world) and second, that they can be easily treated, which explains their current absence in the U.S. Yet, at the same time, it also designates Africa as lagging behind the West by at least a hundred years, which is in concordance with the colonial logic of Africa as doomed to perpetual backwardness. Kristof, however, does not bother to explain the reasons why fistulas do persist in African countries. This explanation would necessarily entail explicating Western neoliberal policies imposed on many African countries through the World Bank and IMF that have forced many African governments to cut healthcare and social service budgets drastically. This, as well as social unrest and violence in many African countries, have played a crucial role in destroying healthcare infrastructures (Turshen, 1999) and leaving many women with fistulas with no access to healthcare facilities.

The descriptions of fistulas are unanimously horrific in all of the articles. In Kristof’s stories, the horrors of fistulas are always anchored in and revealed through the authentic testimonies that are permeated by the images of “darkness” and suffering. For instance, Mrs.
Idris is said to have suffered a fistula after three days of labor: “the baby was born dead and Mrs. Idris had suffered a fistula: the tearing of her rectum, urethra and vagina, leaving her incontinent and causing bodily wastes to seep through her vagina canal and down her legs” (Apr. 26, 2002). Ms. Mohammed’s case is even more terrifying: she “crawled back to the village [after having delivered a dead baby and suffered a fistula], but the baby’s father was horrified by her smell. He confined her in a faraway hut and removed the door – so that hyenas, attracted by the odor, would tear her apart at night” (May 16, 2003). Kristof’s descriptions of women suffering from fistulas are crude and somewhat disturbing; for example, talking about the hospital in which fistulas are repaired, he proclaims that it is “a place where outcasts can be reborn” (May 16, 2003). While it is true that many women suffering from fistulas are shun by their families and communities, and, as a result, the term “outcasts” is technically appropriate, this focus on “strange” behavior only perpetuates colonial ways of othering. Moreover, although fistulas are indeed an unfortunate health condition both because of the physical and social consequences, Kristof’s lingering on horrific stories and details at the expense of explaining the reasons for fistulas’ persistence or the solutions to the problem seems somewhat exaggerated.

LaFraniere’s article, written for the foreign desk, does not deny the horrors of the condition. But the story also rightly contextualizes it, by pointing out that fistulas are in fact an indicator of larger issues, such as: “poverty and rudimentary health care” or yet “early marriage; maternal deaths; a lack of rights, independence and education; a generally low standing” (Sept. 28, 2005). This represents a welcome shift from overly emotional, shocking narratives to a more neutral description. Neither of the writers, however, goes into any greater detail discussing the essential cause behind fistulas – the lack of healthcare structures, most of which were destroyed because of the Western structural adjustment policies and civil unrest in countries where it occurred. The lack of medical services in many African countries explains
not only persisting cases of fistula, but also the earlier discussed fact that maternal death rates in sub-Saharan Africa are the highest in the world.

Despite the lack of a broader political and economic context, both Kristof and LaFraniere reveal their ambitions to bring attention to the issue that they consider of the utmost importance and to encourage African governments, Western countries, organizations and individuals to act on it. Moreover, both writers also praise Western and international organizations and individual doctors, who have sacrificed to the fight against fistulas, creating the narrative that perhaps unwillingly approximates that of the colonial rescue. In other words, the writers’ engagement with advancing African women’s rights, especially evident in Kristof’s case (and which is equally showcased in his other articles), justifies, to an extent, the horrible descriptions, and emphasis on suffering, victimization and helplessness. After all, it is not the writers, but those working on the ground and women themselves, who frequently have the last say: for instance, the Dutch doctor who has been helping women with fistulas in Nigeria for 22 years, concludes: “‘To be a woman in Africa,’ Dr. Waaldijk said as he stitched her last sutures, ‘is truly a terrible thing’” (Sept. 28, 2005). Dr. Waaldijk’s opinion, then, becomes as much a testimony of the often difficult realities of mostly poor, rural, uneducated African women vis-à-vis the lack of medical services, as it is the continuation of the discourses, originating in the colonial era and eliciting Africa as the “dark” place, where women need to be saved from savageness, irrationality and backwardness. However, these discourses are embedded in objective realities and arguably serve the ultimate goal of encouraging human rights activism.

Colonial clichés appear with an even greater force in the four articles dealing exclusively with the implementation of family planning programs in several African countries. Western-invented clichés of African hyperfertility, projected as an explanation to many problems on the continent and also as a threat to the West, sporadically and often
unjustifiably emerges in various articles that address a variety of issues, as seen in the previous chapters. The images of hyperfertility, however, most often serve the same function: to establish Africans as irrational and African women as helpless, with the image of multiple children working effectively to strengthen their desperation. Two of the stories discussing the issues of family planning are front-page (McKinley Jr., Feb. 21, 1996; Perlez, May 31, 1992), which suggests its newsworthiness in the eyes of the NYT and the West; (in contrast, none of the stories on fistulas, for instance, gain such a degree of visibility, even though the issue is considered of great importance by human rights workers).

All four articles are interwoven by warnings of the gravity of the situation and the possible disastrous implications for the entire world. For instance, Keller (Sep. 4, 1994) defines Africa as the “continent of inexorable fertility” (emphasis mine). McKinley Jr. (Feb. 21, 1996) in his front-page story paints a dramatic picture of uncontrollable fertility in a Rwandan refugee camp, where, according to him, “the refugees are giving birth to thousands of new babies a month,” the image that is not corroborated by any hard evidence (emphasis mine). Perlez (May 31, 1992), in her front-page story, in the very title proclaims the direct causality between Rwanda’s fertility rates and its misfortunes: “In Rwanda, births increase and the problems do, too” (May 31, 1992). She, however, unlike McKinley Jr.’s graphic image of “thousands of new babies” that is likely exaggerated, resorts to the World Bank reports to establish the high rates of fertility in Rwanda. But then, she concludes, seemingly adding her own insights, that if the rates do not slow down, “the world’s population will reach 12.5 billion by the middle of the next century, unless mass starvation, disease or war wipes out large numbers of people” (emphasis mine). Such a vilification of African reproductive behavior perpetuates the colonial stereotypes about African hypersexuality and lack of morality. It also suggests that Africans have themselves to blame for the problems that they are facing – the familiar images of wars and crises, in other words, are projected as a logical
consequence in the face of Africans’ unwillingness to reduce their fertility rates. In Perlez’s case, she does not hesitate to go as far as suggesting that only such crises could help the world avoid the possible disaster of overpopulation caused by Africans.

The articles focusing exclusively on hyperfertility also unanimously establish high fertility rates as an unmistaken sign of African irrationality, the trend visible in other narratives as well. McKinley Jr. (Feb. 21, 1996), for instance, repeatedly emphasizes that Rwandans continue having children, despite desperate poverty. He presents several new mothers, who claim that they do not have any idea of how to feed their newborns. These women are nevertheless able to explain their behavior: they claim to continue giving birth in order to replace those killed in the genocide, which sounds like a plausible rationale, but which is not given much credit by the writer. Perlez (My 31, 1992) demonstrates that irrationality with respect to the issue is pervasive not only at the level of individual women, who, she alleges, are always subservient to men, but also in the political sphere. By noting that the Rwandan president has “the customary eight children,” (emphasis mine) she seemingly suggests that little positive change can be expected any time soon. Keller’s (Sep. 4, 1994) article distinguishes itself from the rest by presenting Zimbabwe as an exceptional case of successful family planning. The story is the only one that suggests that Africans are, after all, able to adopt and use contraception to control their fertility, contradicting the general trend of portraying Africans as irrational and plainly stupid.

The coverage of fistulas and hyperfertility, defined as intrinsically African issues, end up by positioning African women (and Africans in general) as lagging behind the modern West and hardly capable of progress. Even the journalists writing on fistulas, who seem to be sympathetic to the cause and ready to advocate for it, largely ignore the larger picture that would allow fully comprehending the cause of this “reproductive nightmare.” Even worse, in the stories on family planning programs, the frame that is unanimously employed is that of the
Western-invented African hyperfertility threat that is unquestionably accepted as valid, thus, enabling and justifying the portrayals of Africans as sexual beasts.

**African women and female issues in Le Monde.** *Le Monde*’s coverage of the “female issues” is even more limited in its range than that of the *NYT*. It includes several stories on rape, such as, for example, a rape of a nine-month old girl in South Africa (Pompey, Nov. 9, 2001) or a story of a sixteen-year old from Ivory Coast, who, married by force, beaten and raped, ended up killing her husband (Sotinel, Nov. 20, 1996). Sotinel (Nov. 20, 1996), for instance, concludes, as a moral to the young women’s telling story, that “forced marriages of very young girls are current in multiple communities. Rarely acknowledged in civil law, they do not have any legal value and often go hand in hand with polygamy, which Ivorian law does not recognize.” That is, these customary ways of doing are suggested as confounding women’s situation and making them even more vulnerable to sexual violence. Prostitution is also discussed in similar terms, and often comes up in the context of AIDS. For instance, Pompey’s (Dec. 2, 2005) article on prostitution in South Africa dissects the phenomenon from an economic perspective claiming that because of widespread poverty and unemployment “hundreds of women sell themselves for three times nothing.” Unlike in the *NYT*, there are no stories on abortion, perhaps because the issue is not as politicized in France as it is in the U.S., even though women’s rights advocates bring attention to the fact that access to abortion is not always easily obtainable.\footnote{See, e.g.: http://www.vie-publique.fr/politiques-publiques/evaluation/ivg-contraception-acces-toujours-difficile.html; http://www.medicms.be/aprint.php?article=920.} The greatest part of *Le Monde*’s attention, similarly to the trend seen in the *NYT*, is directed to the issues of fistula and, even more so, family planning programs and fertility rates in Africa, which, in the French case, no longer represent just an abstract danger, as was seen in the *NYT*, but are conceptualized as a tangible “threat” of immigration.
Le Monde’s coverage on fistulas with its two stories on the issue carries some similarities to the patterns seen in the NYT. While the visibility of the issue in Le Monde is even lesser than that in the NYT, it is important to note that the first story dates back to 1993 (unlike the NYT’s one, which is much more recent - 2002). That is, Le Monde establishes the issue’s existence at the beginning of the 1990s, even though it does not seem to consider it newsworthy enough to devote any more coverage until 2004, when the other article appears.

Both articles provide some general understanding about fistulas and expose the direness of the condition. Subtil (May 26, 1993) presents fistulas to readers through a local nurse’s account, who explains that when childbirth is difficult “a midwife tears off everything; it might even happen that she sits on a woman’s belly.” Such horrific testimonies not only expose women’s suffering, but also invoke an uneasy image of African savageness and brutality. The life after the tragic birth with fistula is painted as equally terrifying: a child is stillborn, women are abandoned because of their incontinence and smell, they become, in the writer’s words, “outcasts,” “partners of misfortune” (the vocabulary that greatly resembles that of the NYT Kristof’s and, thus, is equally problematic, given the history of colonial imagining of Africans as “Others”).

Similar to the trend seen in the NYT, Subtil (May 26, 1993) also establishes fistulas as something that inevitably differentiates Africa from the West: “Current, if not banal, in Africa … obstetric fistula is virtually unknown in Europe.” This perspective, however, is counteracted by an op-ed piece by Toubon (Mar. 7, 2004), a director of a non-governmental organization Balance and Populations. He suggests that the stories of African women with fistulas “summarizes the misfortune, which was, not long ago, also that of European women, until they started gradually benefiting … from qualified help during childbirth” (emphasis mine). In other words, instead of presenting fistulas as something inherently African, Toubon sets the record straight by explaining that they were also an issue in the West and were
eradicated only as the access to healthcare structures has become universalized. Both stories underscore that reasons for fistulas are multiple: Subtil (May 26, 1993) brings forward poverty, malnourishment as well as abidance to traditions, such as early marriages and birth, and female genital cutting. She concludes by claiming that a common denominator among women with fistulas is their illiteracy, which finishes her overall picture of somewhat “dark” Africa, where the hard-working French doctor emerges as an unequivocal hero and a savior of desperate African women (the central focus of the article). Toubon (Mar. 7, 2004), on the other hand, while not foregoing the African traditions and economic conditions, focuses more on lack of medical infrastructures, which is largely responsible, according to him, not only for fistulas, but also for the fact that “every minute in the world, a woman dies from her pregnancy.” That is, his narrative is anchored in a wider context of reproductive health issues and lack of medical services that could solve many African women’s problems, including what he terms “the scandal of fistulas.” In short, Toubon presents fistula as an unfortunate, but easily fixable medical condition. The two articles, then, present two diverging perspectives on the issue written from the two differing platforms (by a staff writer and by a human rights worker), both of which find their place in the newspaper. Moreover, the articles provide a fuller picture of the issue than the one found in the NYT, despite the scarceness of the coverage. Because of the latter, no other systematic observations are possible about the newspaper’s discourses on the issue.

Narratives on reproductive health and family planning that inevitably invoke the ultimate colonial cliché of African hyperfertility occupy by far the most important place in Le Monde, which contains five such articles, including a front-page story. In line with the colonial logic and the trend seen in the NYT, Le Monde’s stories conceptualize high fertility rates in Africa as threatening and dangerous. For instance, in a single article, Paringaux (Mar. 27, 1990) repeatedly describes the situation in the following ways: “worrying numbers”;
“numbers that give vertigo”; “demographic bomb.” In the French case, however, this “dangerous” African hyperfertility, unlike in the NYT, acquires a different and very concrete form – that of an immigration “threat.” Due to France’s territorial colonization of large parts of the Northern and Western Africa, Africans from former colonies have indeed for long constituted a major part of its immigrants.162 And high fertility rates are suggested as an explanation for this constant flux of immigrants. Herzlich (Mar. 15, 1991) opens his front-page story in the following manner:

Should we be scarred of the Maghreb? Often, North Africa with its high fertility rates appears as a threat, a “zone of demographic pressure” vis-à-vis declining Europe. We imagine increasing crowds of potential immigrants stamping behind the closed doors ready to infiltrate through the slightest holes in the fence (emphasis mine).

The language utilized to establish high fertility rates in Northern Africa as an immigration threat is straightforward and without embellishments. The graphic description of “crowds” of possible immigrants paints Northern Africans, “infiltrating” France, as animalistic, savage mass (“stamping,” “fence”). And in this confrontation between Maghreb and France, the high fertility rates of the former are their primary weapon. Interestingly, later in the article Herzlich attempts to deconstruct the opening image as exaggerated, by providing statistics to show that fertility rates in Maghreb countries are on decline. However, despite this more reasonable intercept, his last sentence seems to logically close his principal reference frame of Northern Africans as savages desiring to overtake France: “The sweeping influx of Barbarians is perhaps not for tomorrow” (emphasis mine). Even if the plausible threat of immigration is warded off, at least for now, the image of Africans as savage barbarians is left unchallenged and does not seem to be regarded as problematic by the journalist.

Another story by the same Herzlich (Nov. 6, 1992) reinforces the link between African hyperfertility and immigration issues in France. Here, drawing on a statistical study, he discusses fertility rates among immigrant women in France and compares them to those in

their home countries. Although women of various nationalities, including, e.g., Italian, Portuguese, Turkish etc., are discussed, Africans are of central concern. Herzlich underlines that their fertility rates are lower than those in their home countries, but still maintains that women from black francophone Africa and, especially, Maghreb are “responsible for” significantly higher fertility rates and greater numbers of births every year when compared to those of the French. His designation of women as “responsible for” births seemingly carries a negative connotation and insinuates that their behavior remains somehow deviant.

While high fertility rates are unequivocally established as detrimental to France in very tangible ways, they also remain projected, not unlike in the *NYT*, as a cause of various misfortunes in Africa itself. For example, Paringaux (Mar. 27, 1990) unscrupulously presents high fertility rates as a cause and a further vehicle for *all* Kenyan problems: “chronic starvation,” “overexploitation of land,” “destruction of agricultural heritage,” “rural exodus,” “anarchistic urbanization.” He concludes that the “human pressure is such that population nibbles on empty lands of wildlife reserves.” Similarly, Kempf (Apr. 10, 2004) draws a dim picture of Niger, where, he says, “the fight for survival is not just a figure of style.” Moreover (as seems almost inevitable in that sort of narratives), he emphasizes that despite the widespread poverty and starvation, “in all the bushes of the country, demography is *exuberant,*” (emphasis mine) thus, positioning the latter as a logical explanation for the dire situation. By suggesting, at least implicitly, that Africans have themselves to blame for these misfortunes, the writers in both cases effectively insinuate their irrationality and lack of reasoning that is, as discussed before, one of the most consistent results of Western images of African hyperfertility. For example, in another story, Niger women, who are being taught about contraception are portrayed as an illiterate, naïve mass, “as they don’t have TV and never see books, newspapers or publicity stands” (Apr. 10, 2004), all of which represent the Western criteria of modernity *par excellence.*
Finally, portrayals of Africans as irrational often also effectively mobilize the colonial stereotypes of African hypersexuality and loose sexual mores that are seen as an explanation for their ample reproductive behavior, despite, all odds (poverty, difficult living conditions etc.). The previously discussed NYT Perlez’s (implicit) suggestion that only starvations and wars can halter African fertility and reduce population rates (May 31, 1992) is not without its equivalent in Le Monde. Here, it is the staff writer Parringaux (Mar. 27, 1990), who finishes his article by suggesting that the Western “fuss” about overpopulation in Africa might be all, but unnecessary, as “AIDS must decimate the populations.” In both cases, the journalists carry the idea of high and presumably uncontrollable African fertility rates, occurring as a result of African irrationality, to its logical extreme by proposing that they can only be halted by such radical events as wars, crises or AIDS epidemic.

In spite of the overall negative tone about African fertility rates, all of Le Monde’s articles note the progress that is being made in various countries to lower them. Herzlich (Sept. 15, 1995) even announces a “silent demographic revolution,” as he observes the lowering fertility rates in the south of sub-Saharan Africa. In general, successes and failures of regulating fertility are attributed to political action. Paringaux (Mar. 27, 1990), for instance, applauds the fact that “big institutions, indifferent for a long time, now feel concerned and three-quarters of African governments have formally adopted family planning.” Herzlich (Mar. 15, 1990) provides a concrete example of how politics might impinge on the objective of lowering fertility rates by invoking a threat of Islamists in Algeria, who could, according to him, “put family planning asleep and stop education of girls.” In other words, family planning and fertility control is unequivocally presented primarily as a political, not a private decision. This is particularly worrisome, given the conspicuous absence of African women themselves in these narratives. The invisibility and voicelessness of African women in these Le Monde’s discussions that directly pertain to them and their bodies is somewhat reminiscent of the
NYT’s coverage of AIDS in relation to African women, analyzed in the previous chapter. There, they also became mere silent objects of scrutiny and debates by Western experts. Moreover, it seems that this trend becomes more visible, if the issue is perceived as having political currency, as with the immigration issue in France. In short, Le Monde’s narratives on hyperfertility seemingly suggest that African women have no control over their body, as this right is confiscated from them either by men (who are allegedly the ones to make reproductive decisions) or by governments (both local and foreign through family planning programs), leaving African women silenced and without choices, as decisions are made about and for them.

In fact, only two of Le Monde’s articles fleetingly include African women’s accounts. For example, Paringaux’s (Mar. 27, 1990) article opens with a personal account of a Kenyan woman, Mary, a patient at Narobi’s family planning clinic. Her portrayal is sketched by providing such biographical details as her age (33), a number of her children (5), her age when she first married (15), and her polygamous family background. Although from the Western point of view, her frequentation of the family planning clinic seems to be more than sufficiently justified by the characteristics that the writer chooses to define her by, Mary herself insists that if she thinks that it is enough for the moment, “it’s not because she doesn’t want more, but because of the money.” In fact, African women’s usage of frequently Western-sponsored contraception programs to space the births rather than eliminating them emerges in Le Monde, but also in the NYT, whenever African women get to speak for themselves about the issue (e.g., Kempf, Apr. 10, 2004; Perlez, May 28, 1991). This peculiar approach to contraception by African women has been noted by Africanist scholars and is in line with their findings that children are highly valued in Africa (Guyer, & Belinga, 1995). In other words, African women accept the often Western-imposed usage of contraception, but use it not exactly the way that the West had expected and hoped for.
Kempf’s (Apr. 10, 2004) story is another exception among *Le Monde*’s narratives in that it presents several Niger women’s views on contraception. Particularly interesting is opinion expressed by Adama Alhassane, who, as the writer emphasizes, is not so much concerned with a number of children she might want to have, but is rather “more preoccupied with the scarcity of water and long hours of waiting at wells.” In this single sentence, Kempf, relying on an authentic account of an African woman, captures very well the discrepancy between the Western obsession with African fertility rates and the issues that Africans themselves project as far more important. In general, the absence of African women’s accounts in *Le Monde*’s Western-led debates on how to control “dangerous” African hyperfertility is conspicuous and, thus, the Western perspective is unequivocally established as dominant and correct; in the process, African women are reduced into objects of Western scrutiny, threatening “Others,” capable only of irrational and savage reproduction.

Because of the political context, most of *Le Monde*’s attention is devoted to the issue of reproductive behavior in African countries with few stories on other female issues. Unlike in the *NYT*, where African hyperfertility is projected as an abstract threat, *Le Monde*’s stories clearly establish it as a real, tangible “threat of immigration.” Not surprisingly, the colonial clichés of African irrationality, hypersexuality and inferiority are recycled in these stories to an even greater extent than in the American newspaper.

**Conclusion.** The potential of stories about female issues to erase the imaginary distance between “us” and “them” and establish African women as sharing in universal women’s concerns is merely touched upon in either of the newspapers. The *NYT* has several stories on African women in relation to issues that are of concern to women world-wide, but these remain little developed and, moreover, differ greatly from the coverage of issues that are perceived as exclusively *African*—fistulas or African reproductive behavior, where colonial clichés reemerge. Even more so, *Le Monde*, for obvious political and economic reasons, is
primarily preoccupied with the issue of African hyperfertility that leaves little space for anything else. While both newspapers, in line with the colonial discourses, project high fertility rates in Africa as “dangerous” and resulting from African irrationality and hypersexuality, the coverage in the French newspaper takes a more political turn by projecting this hypersexuality as a real and tangible immigration “threat.” As a result of this uneasy convergence of colonial imaginings about African hyperfertility and issues of immigration, colonial discourses reemerge with full force, and African women are virtually silenced and mostly figure in the narratives as objects of Western scrutiny and concern.

A look at a scarce coverage of fistulas brings to light inherent Western media biases with regard to Africa. First, the issue of fistulas remains largely underreported when compared to some other issues, notably female genital cutting. This is despite the fact that human rights activists project fistula as a major medical problem for many rural African women, which lies at the heart of an even larger problem – lack or inexistence of medical services - that also accounts for some of the highest maternal death rates in the world. While a few articles in both newspapers acknowledge the horrible nature of the condition, their focus remains mostly on individual women’s dramatic accounts, and the larger political and economic context is only fleetingly, if at all, brought up. Thus, instead of drawing attention to the lack of health infrastructures that were, in many African countries, at least partially, destroyed by the Western-imposed structural adjustment policies, the articles on fistulas mainly content with explaining the existence of fistulas by Africa’s lagging behind the modern West (with an exception of an op-ed in Le Monde written by a human rights activist). Such an omission on journalists’ part is even more conspicuous, given their passionate attention to family planning and reproductive behavior of Africans, including the access and distribution of contraceptives; the issues that also ultimately deal with access to medical services. In the latter case, however, political and economic stakes for the U.S. and even more
so, for France are obvious. In other words, provision of contraceptives and control of African hyperfertility are established as political goals, worthy of resources, while women suffering from fistulas remain of concern only to human rights organizations.

**African women and their daily lives in the New York Times.** I defined eighteen stories in the *New York Times* as discussing “daily lives” of African women. Several of these articles focus on legal and political issues as well as traditions that exclusively affect women. The remaining majority of stories documents the mundane realities of African women and is written by a single writer, Jane Perlez, at the beginning of the 1990s. Perlez was stationed in Nairobi as the East Africa correspondent from 1988 to 1993, covering all of the East African countries from Somalia and Ethiopia down to Mozambique.¹⁶³ Perlez’s stories on African women cover a more limited geographical area with most of them focused on Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Thus, most of the following analysis centers on Perlez’s articles. Somewhat surprisingly and unfortunately, even though talking about mundane realities outside of crises, the writer ends up recycling many of the colonial clichés and ways of speaking about the inferior “Other.”

Several of the *NYT* articles discuss legal and political issues that African women face in various countries in a sort of matter-of-fact manner. Representative of this trend, for instance, are two articles taken from the news wires AP and Reuters respectively that describe the developments of women’s situation in Morocco and bring forward women’s activism, thus, mitigating the image of helpless and passive African women. The first article details the movements against and in favor of the proposed reforms to expand women’s rights in 2000 (Mar. 13, 2000); the second article designates the victory for Moroccan women, as the country reforms its family laws to considerably widen women’s status (Oct. 11, 2003). The fact that the stories are taken from the news wires and provide a minimal amount of

¹⁶³ Personal correspondence.
information suggests their relative un-newsworthiness in the eyes of the NYT. Moreover, the newspaper only addresses women’s movement and legal reforms in a single African country – Morocco, even though African women’s movements have been actively fighting against the restraining and discriminatory legal environments in a multitude African countries.\textsuperscript{164}

One particular theme related to legal questions that reoccurs in the newspaper is the situation of African widows whose material possessions are often seized by their families in law after a husband’s demise. The 2004 editorial, for example, calls attention to this precarious situation of widows in many African countries by eliciting the unfortunate paradox of African women’s situation: “Women feed Africa. They grow 80 percent of the continent’s food, yet the land that they cultivate is not theirs. … Tradition says that when a man dies, his property passes to his adult sons or brothers” (Jun. 16, 2004). In other words, women here, somewhat unexpectedly, are designated not as victims, but as the most important contributors to their societies and countries’ well-being; yet they nevertheless remain deprived of property rights, the discrimination that, according to the writer, needs urgent attention. The practice of “inheriting African wives” and confiscating their property is also condemned in Lacey’s (Mar. 5, 2003) article that draws heavily on the Human Rights Watch report on the issue.\textsuperscript{165} While attention to African widows’ situation is laudable, the writers do not develop the issue any further by invoking a more general problem of women’s access to land in various African countries, which is recognized by academics and activists alike as one of the principal problems for many rural African women. In short, these types of articles that bring into light oppressive traditions and legal conditions of African women remain very rare and these important issues profit only from sporadic and random rather than systematic attention by the NYT’s writers.

\textsuperscript{164} For a good overview in many African countries, see: CTA. (2001). \textit{The economic role of women in agricultural and rural development: revisiting the legal environment}. At: http://www.cta.int/pubs/women/

The New York Time’s Jane Perlez on African women’s daily lives. At the beginning of the decade, Jane Perlez wrote eleven human-interest stories about the lives of women in countries like Kenya, Uganda or Tanzania. All of her stories are bylined from the locations and include plenty of local sources. With rare exceptions, Perlez’s articles do not appear to have been triggered by any crises or important events; rather, in her stories, she documents with great precision African women’s everyday realities. Her approach to reporting Africa and African women, then, clearly counteracts the academic consensus that Africa makes it into the Western media only at the times of crises. However, somewhat paradoxically, the narratives of African women’s daily lives constructed by Perlez do not present a novel perspective on Africa, but rather remain thoroughly embedded in the colonial clichés.

The extreme patriarchal oppression is a necessary background for Perlez’s stories. African women are a priori designated by the writer as extremely oppressed and continually suffering, as attested to, for instance, by the following headlines: “For the oppressed sex, brave words to live by”; “Uganda’s women: children, drudgery and pain”; “Woman’s work is never done (not by Masai men)” (emphasis mine). Africa is, according to her, without any qualifications or exceptions, a “male-dominated Africa” (May 28, 1991). She underscores unequal division of labor in several African communities she is reporting from: Masai men are said to “typically spend their days drinking alcohol or playing bao” (Dec. 2, 1991); or yet, in a generalizing manner, positioned as merchants, rather than producers: “The male responsibility is generally to sell the food the women produce” (Feb. 24, 1991). In short, women are portrayed as overworked and abused. In several articles Perlez mentions the Ugandan Women’s Lawyers Association, whose principal goal, according to the NYT writer, is to fight against the widespread belief among Ugandan women that beating is “a sign of love” (Jun. 6, 1990; Feb 24, 1991). By equating love with violence that is allegedly accepted
by African women, Perlez at once designates the “savageness” of African gender relationships and irrationality of women, who participate in their own oppression. She does not, however, bring up the fact that women are also often abused by their husbands and partners in domestic situations in the Western world, thus, African gender relations are not an exception, but rather a rule of world-wide discrimination and domestic violence against women.

These indicators of inequalities between men and women are further buttressed by Perlez through the display of various cliché African practices that she considers as oppressive to women. For instance, rarely does she go without invoking polygamy. In one of her articles she concludes, in a sweepingly generalizing fashion, that Africa is “a continent where polygamy is common” (Oct. 28, 1990). And she does not stop at simply positioning polygamy as a background of African women’s daily realities. She exploits the image of a polygamous marriage, and along the way, invokes some of the most horrendous Western misconceptions about black Africans. Consider, for example, the following opening of one of her articles:

Parimitoro Ole Kasiaro, a 35-year-old elder of the Masai tribe, recently married his third wife. Waiting in the wings is a fourth, a 10-year-old girl paid for with cattle by his father to her father before she was born (Dec. 2, 1991).

The preceding image of polygamy is all the more powerful, as it is articulated alongside the other African practices, long considered as “abnormal” by the West: arranged marriages, bride price, and the young age of brides. The two sentences reveal polygamy at its most horrifying and also set the tone for the entire story, in which women are a priori assumed to be oppressed and voiceless. It is certainly true that many African women activists themselves oppose practices elicited by Perlez; however, her consistent and systematic emphasis on only these practices (as opposed to speaking about African women activists fighting against polygamy, for instance) presents a picture of African women doomed for tragic destinies with no possibilities for change.
In another instance, Perlez frames polygamy within the familiar Western popular culture image of the female cat-fight by concluding with what could again only be regarded as an unjustified generalization that “often the wives in a polygamous marriage are hostile towards each other” (Feb. 24, 1991). In this way, the writer not only trivializes the issue, but also demonstrates her complete ignorance about polygamy that would never be read in these terms from the African perspective. Perlez maintains her position, despite the counterevidence that she explains in pragmatic terms: “perhaps as survival instinct, Mrs. Kawude and Mrs. Kasoga [the two wives of the same man] are friendly, taking turns with Mrs. Naigaga [the third wife] to cook” (Feb. 24, 1991). In short, Perlez apparently feels the necessity to speak on behalf of these three African women in order to explain their “irrational” friendliness towards each other that she presents as beyond Western comprehension. By doing this, she assumes the power granted to the West by the colonialist logic, entitling one to speak about and on behalf of the uncivilized and suffering “Other.” The task is relatively easy, because, as scholars have suggested, polygamy is one of the most effective techniques of drawing imaginary boundaries between “us” and “them.” Polygamous African women represent the ultimate “Other”: they are “other” not only to Western women and men, to their own men, but also to the women, who share their marital bed (Nussbaum, 1994).

The story of polygamy goes hand in hand with Perlez’s concern with African hyperfertility. Her concern with the issue is not limited to the previously discussed front-page story, which focuses exclusively on high fertility in Rwanda (May 31, 1992). Instead, hyperfertility reemerges systematically in many of her articles on African women’s daily lives. Continuing the tradition of the mainstream Western thought that Africa’s high fertility rates are the reason for the widespread poverty, represent a danger to the entire world, and thus, must be restrained at all cost, Perlez repeatedly underscores the scale and the looming consequences. For instance, Ugandan women are said to have to care for a “multitude of
children” (Jun. 6, 1990); sub-Saharan Africa reportedly cannot curb its “soaring populations” (Apr. 20, 1991); and the readers are reminded of the demographic experts’ “dire warning about the threat of overpopulation” (May 31, 1992).

The primary explanation presented for this “incontrollable” fertility is unsurprisingly that of the patriarchal oppression. Perlez emphasizes that it is men, not women, who take decisions about the number of offspring. Thus, reporting on the success of Western-funded family planning programs in Zimbabwe, she explains it by the workers’ decision to reach out to men, rather than women, as the former, according to the writer, “have power over submissive women” (May 28, 1991) (emphasis mine). African women’s disempowerment, as seen by Perlez, reaches its apogee in their lack of control over the reproductive rights - the cornerstone concern that has defined the history of struggle in women’s rights movements in the West (see, e.g., Gerhard, 2001), and thus, is apparently considered as an adequate frame for understanding gender relations in Africa as well.

While patriarchal oppression is positioned as a necessary and central condition explaining high birth rates, Perlez also considers the roles of women themselves, even though somewhat at a glance. Taking an approach more in line with African realities and many scholars’ views (see, e.g., Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997; Guyer, & Belinga, 1995), the writer mentions at least on two occasions that children have been traditionally highly valued as the labor force in rural Africa and as a guarantee of protection at the old age (Oct 28, 1990; Feb 24, 1991). In other words, having a number of children in a family represents a well-thought out decision that can help acquire economic comfort and social mobility. That the decision to have several children is indeed a rational one from certain African families’ point of view is further proven by the Western research on African women’s use of contraception (Kaller, 2003). As Perlez recounts in one of her articles, “young Zimbabwean women use the pill as a way of spacing children rather than limiting family size” (May 28, 1991). In other words, the
long-lasting Western campaigns to introduce family planning and contraceptives in Africa in order to restrain the birth rates have had an unexpected effect. African women now knowledgeable about contraceptives and their options have put their use to their own best interests by rejecting the objectives imposed by the West. Yet, Perlez attempts to challenge the view of African women’s agency and rationality in the reproductive decision-making process. Consider, for example, the following depiction of a Ugandan woman:

Mrs. Kawuda said she wanted one more child ... After that, she said, she would use an injectible form of contraceptive. It is a method popular among African rural women because it can be used without their husbands’ knowledge. But in reality, contraception was an abstraction to Mrs. Kawuda since she had no idea where to get it. She had never heard of condoms (Feb. 24, 1991) (emphasis mine).

As discussed before, the writer again positions herself in opposition to an African woman – she claims the position of an expert, the one, who is capable of explaining the “reality,” which, as Perlez makes clear, is not quite the same as that articulated by Mrs. Kawuda. In other words, Perlez repeatedly undertakes the task of explaining the “irrational” behavior of African women or explicating their accounts, in the course of which she is most likely either to discredit them or to undermine their status as able to tell their own stories. This obviously carries power dynamics. In fact, the pattern is identical to that which has permeated the colonial discourses of superior Westerners talking about and for the irrational, savage and inferior “Other.”

Perlez seems to be writing about African women and their daily lives out of interest in them – the stories are not initiated by any particular events, but chosen by the writer, to the extent that the news selection practices permit it. However, as if overtaken by the difficulties of rural African women’s lives, which are indeed, frequent and various (see, e.g., Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997), Perlez sinks into the colonial clichés and ultimately ends up against African women. Polygamy, hyperfertily, and demanding physical work – all of these become symbolic of extreme patriarchal oppression. The reoccurring images of irrationality and backwardness clearly establish African women as lagging behind their Western counterparts –
the trend so harshly criticized by the third-world feminists (Mohanty, 1991; Oyewumi, 2003). Even when Perlez addresses seemingly optimistic topics, such as, for example, the elite Kenyan women who, educated, active and independent, reject the universal patriarchal model of gender relations – marriage, her interpretation remains pessimistic (Mar. 3, 1991). Instead of presenting the story as a look at another social category of African women – urban and upper social class, or as a proof that there are exceptions to the “universal” oppression of African women, Perlez quickly resituates the narrative within the framework of Africa as the “dark” place, at least, for women. She proclaims that “such unorthodox attitudes toward marriage are a revolutionary departure for African women, far more dramatic for them than for their American and European counterparts, who crystallized similar thoughts two decades ago” (Mar. 3, 1991). In short, according to Perlez, even the most educated and progressive African women are at least two decades behind the Westerners.

Such a strategy of subjectively qualifying any narrative elements that do not fit the overarching framework of African women’s oppression and suffering reemerges in other stories. The signs of African women’s strength or agency are reinterpreted and contained the moment they appear by Perlez’s designation of them as atypical. For instance, a Ugandan woman, who refused to care for her husband dying of AIDS, while he insisted on continuing having sexual relations, is described as having argued “with a boldness rare on a continent” (Oct. 28, 1990); another Ugandan woman who similarly stood up to her husband and demanded he gets tested for AIDS before they continue having sexual relationships is portrayed as having argued “mustered courage unusual for wives in African marriages” (Mar. 2, 1991); finally, an H.I.V. positive young woman who has decided to have another child is depicted as exuding “confidence and street smartness unusual here” (Apr. 20, 1991) (emphasis mine). These examples disrupt Perlez’s grand narrative about African women’s desperation, and especially so, because they pertain to sexual matters, the domain in which
she proclaims African women to be virtually voiceless. However, the evident conflict between the realities and Perlez’s interpretation is solved by her constant emphasis that the signs of African women’s agency and decision-making are an exception rather than the rule.

Perlez rewrites African women’s daily realities in accordance with the colonial logic of savageness, irrationality, suffering and backwardness by situating herself in the position of the expert, the one, who is able to read in between the lines of African women’s testimonies and reinterpret them in agreement with Western stereotypes. As a result, according to Perlez, any signs of optimism are to be read as either exceptional or, even if signifying the progress, as only a far cry, when compared to the situation of Western women. Even when she acknowledges African women’s importance in their communities and countries, as when citing the World Bank’s findings that 70% of the continent’s food is produced by women (Feb. 24, 1991; Dec. 2, 1991), it is only to underscore the physical demands placed on women and, thus, their dire situation, or to strengthen the image of backwardness: “They produce, without tractors, oxen or even plows, more than 70 percent of the continent’s food” (Feb. 24, 1991) (emphasis mine).

In short, even if arguably with good intentions to document difficult lives of rural African women in mind, Perlez eventually establishes herself as against those African women. The thematic range of her stories is laudable, as she writes about everyday realities rather than African women in the course of crises. At the same time, Perlez’s reporting demonstrates that it is the individual writing style as well as the *a priori* assumptions that a journalist brings with herself that ultimately shape the stories. From the Africanist perspective, Perlez’s everyday life stories are in many ways more worthy of the critique than the stories about African women in crisis situations that were examined in the previous chapters. It is her self-assigned position of an expert and her obviously subjective reinterpretation of the stories so as to fit her grand narrative of suffering and oppression that
merits criticism the most. And Perlez’s recycling of colonial clichés and ways of narrating cannot be justified by advocacy objectives. That is, even though writing repeatedly about African women, she does not make any claims to be an advocate for those women. Unlike some of the previously encountered NYT’s writers (e.g., Kristof, Rosenthal or Dugger), who clearly exhibit their agendas as journalist-advocates, it is impossible to discern the same commitment in Perlez’s case. Therefore, her tendency to recycle the colonial clichés is to be attributed either to her personal ignorance or the power of colonial discourses that continue to permeate Western thinking, but are not justifiable by her human rights concerns.

**African women and their daily lives in Le Monde.** There are 24 articles in *Le Monde* that were grouped under the sub-category of “daily lives.” These include a range of stories similar to that in the NYT: about women’s daily activities and burdens, their various forms of participation in subsistence and cash economy as well as their rights and changing legal situations and traditions pertaining particularly to women. It is interesting to note that although articles discuss women’s situations in a number of different African countries, the primary focus remains on francophone countries and former French colonies, e.g. Senegal, Mali or Madagascar. However, equally worthy of notice is a virtual absence of such type of stories with regard to the Northern African countries (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco) that have played a particularly important role in the French colonial endeavors and that continue attracting a lot of attention from the French media. For instance, as seen in the previous chapter, numerous stories in *Le Monde* discuss the Maghreb women’s fight against Islamism. However, while their suffering is well-documented, no stories attempt to establish the ordinariness of their lives in the way that the stories under this sub-category do about women in other African countries.

The first underlying theme in *Le Monde*’s stories about African women’s daily lives, similarly to the NYT, is the patriarchal social order. Writers systematically emphasize unequal
labor division as a principal expression of this patriarchal oppression. For instance, an article about the fabric dyers in Bamako (Sept. 23, 2004) paints a visual picture of women at work, while men are said to be “on the opposite, in retreat.” In Aulagnon’s article (Jun. 6, 1997), the Guinean Minister of Social Affairs and Promotion of Women and Children establishes at the political level that “here, men work much less than women … They limit themselves to being present during harvest and then go on holidays. Women work all year round.” Finally, Bernard (Oct. 20, 1998) opens his story on Senegal with the following statement: “in the face of men’s unwillingness to cultivate lands, food security relies on the courage of women.” The stereotype of Africans being lazy has its roots in colonial discourses, and was utilized to justify the European exploitation of African labor. Here, however, this familiar image of African laziness is only applied to men and is meant to underscore women’s burdens that are enabled and sustained by patriarchal social structures. In other words, Le Monde unequivocally suggests that African men continue exploiting African women’s labor.

In her historical overview of African women peasants’ lives, Coquery-Vidrovitch (1997) concludes that because of the patriarchal social structures that restricted women’s lives by reducing them to sexual commodities and subsistence workers, and “although it might vary greatly from society to society, the fate of the African peasant woman was not an enviable one” (p. 15). Thus, it seems that Le Monde’s writers’ emphasis on persevering patriarchal divisions of labor that disadvantage women are justified. At the same time, most African feminist groups proclaim that they primarily aim at resolving structural problems rather than dealing with individual men and their unwillingness to alter gender roles. For instance, the South African feminist network claims that their principal goals entail fighting poverty, feminization of AIDS and violence against women.166 In other words, Le Monde writers’

overemphasis on individual men and their unwillingness to help women in performing physical tasks might miss the bigger picture and the larger issues arising from the patriarchal social order (and this conclusion equally applies to the NYT Perlez’s writings).

Unlike in the NYT Perlez’s stories, the images of polygamy in Le Monde are not used as a means of underscoring the deviance of African gender relations and emphasizing the patriarchal grip on African women’s lives, even though it fleetingly comes into picture on several occasions (e.g., Sept. 23, 2004; Oct. 20, 1998). In fact, in Bernard’s (Oct. 20, 1998) article that reiterates the framework of unequal labor divisions, polygamy is cast in a positive light, as the writer explains that women in polygamous households have fewer physical tasks, as they are shared among co-wives. The explanation is in line with the academic views (e.g., Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997), but remains virtually absent in Western discourses, which rather prefer vilifying polygamy by presenting it as an abnormal form of gender relations and as an extreme form of women’s oppression.

The consistent emphasis on unequal labor divisions as a necessary contextual variable in comprehending rural African women’s lives leads to another persistent image in Le Monde’s stories – that of African women as hard workers (in contrast to African men). That is, on the one hand, the numerous examples of African women performing unending physical tasks underscore the difficulty of their daily routines. At the same times, they establish African women not simply as overworked and overburdened, but also as primary breadwinners. The images of African women at work abound in the articles. For example, Josephine (Feb. 15, 2002), a widow with five children, manages a small family farm and does embroidery to “make ends meet.” Pompey (Jul. 27, 2004) paints a visual picture of “hundreds of [Malian] women leaning over their sewing machines,” while Bamako dyers are also portrayed in action: “all around, women are in movement” (Sept. 23, 2004). Bernard (Oct. 20,
1998) provides the following list of tasks as constituting a normal day of a rural African woman:

Get up at 6 o’clock, prepare rice porridge for 10 family members, then, collect water from the river in five roundtrips with a bowl on a head and eventually a baby on the back, collect firewood for kitchen, shell, crush and wash sorghum, work in the fields … prepare meal at noon, wash dishes and then laundry in the river, and return to the fields until the evening meal, until the night falls.

In fact, throughout the articles, there is only one image of Malian women at leisure; they are said to gather in the evening to watch TV and chat (Sotinel, Nov. 28, 1996). However, this is only possible due to the machine that these women bought from a Swiss entrepreneur, which allows them performing various tasks (beating butter, grilling flour etc.) that they previously did manually much quicker and more efficiently. In other words, this machine, which, according to the writer, is far from a “technological miracle,” is shown to be changing their lives for the better, in accordance with the Western idea of technological progress and modernization. However, the story also underscores how much these African women lag behind the modernized and technologically advanced West.

The images of African women as workers in Le Monde’s articles are not limited to their participation in subsistence economy. There are also examples of them entering into cash economy. Several stories rightly note that industrialization and the development of certain industries have not always happened on favorable terms for women. Simon’s (Sept. 27, 1994) first-page article on “Botswana’s success story” notes that many women remain excluded from the benefits of development: “if a few among them have managed to achieve, with a force of fist, high positions in administration, the immense majority remains at the very bottom of the social ladder. The discriminatory legal arsenal does not allow them, for instance, to have access to bank loans without a green light from their husbands.” Similarly, in his article about the cotton industry in Africa, Tuquoi (Jan. 27, 1994) notes that economic advances have hardly improved women’s situation, as they “haven’t obtained the right to cultivate their own parcels of cotton … The modernization of the countryside has been, for
them, most often, synonymous with extra work.” Finally, Pompey’s (Jul. 27, 2004) article on the textile industry in Lesotho shows hundreds of women workers being exploited by Western producers in a by now all too familiar narrative of globalization that exposes the continuing exploitation of the Third world labor by Western capitalists. Various researchers have noted that the introduction of cash economy in African countries by Western colonizers have from the outset favored men and devalued women’s roles as subsistence workers (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997; Rodney, 1974). Le Monde’s articles expose further such difficulties – women’s abilities to profit from the progressing industrialization are often restrained by the archaic legal conditions that hinder women’s participation on equal terms and as independent individuals and reflect deeply rooted patriarchal social norms.

While the need to introduce legal conditions that would allow women to participate in cash economy on equal terms with men and without the latter’s permission, emerge as essential from the previous articles, the three articles that discuss specifically women’s rights in several African countries do not breach the issue. Rather, legal environments affecting African women are sketched through the familiar clichés: Kremer (Mar. 8, 2002) discusses the official initiatives of francophone African countries to ban forced marriages; Bertrand (Jul. 11, 2003) introduces the African Union’s Protocol on Women’s Rights by focusing primarily on the cliché issues of sexual mutilations and polygamy; Towhill (Feb. 25, 2005) discusses the disappointing results of the family code reform in Morocco by suggesting that results have been particularly unsatisfying in relation to underage marriages, divorce and polygamy. In other words, writers use these familiar issues (that surely affect African women negatively, but are far from being the only ones and are not necessarily the most significant ones) as shortcuts to demonstrate that their legal situations remain in need of a fix. However, they do not bother going beyond these stereotypical imaginings associated with African women to invoke other issues that are perhaps less shocking and titillating, but equally
important for the real progress of African women (such as, for example, previously mentioned right of access to land etc.).

Within this context of patriarchal social structures that, on the one hand, delegate most of physical subsistence tasks to women and, on the other hand, sustain legal conditions that restrict women’s ability to benefit from the cash economy, *Le Monde*’s writers frequently draw attention to women’s organizing in order to confront these obstacles (Nov. 28, 1996; Jun. 6, 1997; Jul. 16, 1997). Micro-credits and novel banking structures designed for the poorest represent the most significant initiatives that economically empower rural African women. In *Le Monde*’s stories, however, African women are shown not only benefiting, but often running these initiatives. The following example from Aulagnon’s (Jun. 6, 1997) article is representative of a positive image of African rural women as capable of organizing, responsible and easily profiting from the banking system adapted to their needs:

In Senegal, in a little town of Fandane Wolof, surrounded by bamboos, 90km from Dakar, Aminata, 21 years old, can brag about never failing to reimburse her loan. Married at 14 and today a mother of two, her life has changed since the village has gotten wells and a mill. Forty-eight women have organized out of economic interest and are selling their production. Aminata has money, “not much, but I have never thought to have any one day” … Her husband would like the women of the GIE to lend him some money. “But it’s out of question,” exults Aminata. “Our fund is our pride. Now, I don’t ask anything from anyone to dress up my children and send them to school.”

The preceding example is ever more striking in that it invokes some usual clichés used to underscore African women’s daily desperation: young marriage age, children, no financial autonomy etc. However, these Senegalese rural women subvert the stereotypes by proving their ability to organize and succeed beyond the private sphere and their roles as subsistence workers, by asserting their position within the cash economy and even gaining some negotiating power *vis-à-vis* men.

The final important frame in *Le Monde*’s stories about African women’s daily lives, closely related to their image as hard workers, is the systematic acknowledgement on the writers’ part of African women’s essential roles in developments of their communities,

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167 For more information on micro-credits in Africa, see: http://www.microcreditinafrica.org/
countries, and the continent as the whole. For example, in her article, titled “Women, the future of Africa,” Aulagnon (Jun. 6, 1997) quotes the local UN worker who asserts that the sometimes somber daily realities of women cannot completely erase the “other reality”: “There isn’t only Africa of wars and crises… There’s Africa that lives and works, and it often relies on women.” Writers unanimously emphasize that women are primary contributors to the fight against poverty; Bernard (Oct. 20, 1998) goes as far as naming his story “Women feed Africa.” Women’s importance is not limited to the fight against poverty; for instance, Simon (Feb. 2, 2000) quotes a Malian radio host, who suggests that “in the area of health and many other things, women are the principal contributors.” In other words, African women are unequivocally designated as essential force in African development and their positive roles brought forward by Le Monde’s writers are also by now well acknowledged by the international community at large.168

While overall, the discussed stories, despite their strong emphasis on oppressive patriarchal order, provide a positive image of rural African women, capable of hard work, organizing and successful participation in cash economy when the conditions are favorable, the two stories on traditions affecting women (Broussard, Sept. 10, 2001; Sotinel, Nov. 15, 1997) provide a picture of the “dark” Africa par excellence. Both articles present the villages of women outcasts, “the village of witches” (in Ghana) and “the village of soul eaters” (in Burkina Faso); the women, who have been rejected by their families and communities for the deeds that they had allegedly committed and are destined to the life of poverty and hardship. Broussard (Sept. 10, 2001) explains the custom in the following terms, foregrounding its ridiculousness and invoking the stereotypical African irrationality: “Babies die? Witches! The truck falls off the road? Witches! Problems with money? Love? Bad harvest? Witches!

Witches! Witches!” The villages, drawing on McClintock’s (1993) observations in relation to colonial ways of narrating, are presented as frozen in time and anachronistic in terms of space, i.e. portrayed as atavistic, irrational, incapable of progress, “inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity” (p. 40). For example, Broussard defines the village in Ghana as a “funny place, far from everything and outside of time.” While the journalists paint the context of “dark” Africa in their stories, the authentic accounts by “witches” themselves in fact appear much more rational and realistic, and most often invoke the patriarchal social norms as the principal reason for their plight. For instance, a Ghanaian woman explains: imagine that “a woman who had a bit of money saved lends it to a man who is not able to repay his debt. And well, he’ll come in front of her house in the middle of the night and will start shouting: ‘She’s a witch! She’s a witch! She’s killing me.’” Through such authentic accounts, both articles underscore that women are frequently abused by men (and possibly other women) with the help of the custom. In other words, it is malicious individuals all too keen on perpetuating this misogynistic tradition for their own purposes rather than Africans’ flaws, established by the colonial narratives (irrationality, incapability of progress etc.), that are to be blamed for these women’s dire situations.

In short, Le Monde’s stories on rural African women’s daily lives expose the oppressive patriarchal structures and substantial physical burdens, but go beyond simply victimizing African women and portraying them as locked in eternal oppression and desperation. On the contrary, as a result of their daily challenges, African women emerge as hard workers, responsible financial managers, resourceful economic participants and important contributors to their communities and countries’ well-being. Even though some of the stories, especially those on legal conditions and traditions, still invoke the “darkness” of Africa and get somewhat caught up in colonial clichés and stereotypes, the overall picture of
African women daily lives in *Le Monde* is that of women capable of resisting and fighting against harsh realities.

**Conclusion.** The common denominator in the stories about African women’s daily lives in both newspapers is the patriarchal social structures severely affecting women’s daily lives and restricting the possibilities for their advancement, which is a rather adequate reflection of the situation in many rural areas in Africa. For instance, writers across the board emphasize the unequal labor division as one of the most visible expressions of this order. The *NYT*’s Perlez, however, goes much further than that in exposing African patriarchy by resorting primarily to the colonial clichés of polygamy and hyperfertility that automatically invoke a number of Western misconceptions about “abnormal” African gender relations, African irrationality etc. Moreover, in *Le Monde*, the focus on patriarchal order does not seem to be a goal in itself, but is rather instrumental in constructing the ensuing images of rural African women as hard workers and resourceful contributors to their communities and countries. The French narratives are also more complex in that they discuss African women’s challenges integrating into the cash economy, whereas Perlez’s stories are limited to portrayals of women as reproductive actors and subsistence workers only.

It is important to note that articles that focus most on patriarchal oppression only consider one particular group of African women – rural women. In general, the stories about African women’s daily lives, with rare exceptions, recount the lives of rural, not urban women, and the trend is equally pronounced in both newspapers. While such attention is laudable in itself, there is a risk that these stories might be read as stories of *all* African women, when in fact they only apply to a particular social category of women.

The fact that *Le Monde*’s articles are written by a number of journalists as opposed to the single writer in the *NYT* clearly allows for more varied and complex perspectives. More than that, it is Perlez’s particular style of writing and her approach towards African women
that she writes about that renders her articles worthy of the critique. Her starting point is her self-assigned position as an expert, capable of explaining African women’s accounts in Western terms and through Western misconceptions. Coming from such an \textit{a priori} flawed assumption, she is almost inevitably destined to get caught up in colonial discourses. None of \textit{Le Monde}’s writers approximate Perlez’s approach to reporting on African women.

Both the \textit{NYT} and \textit{Le Monde}’s stories on legal conditions and traditions remain limited in the range of issues discussed as well as how the chosen issues are presented. The restrictive conditions and/or failures of reforms are often measured by their impact on the cliché issues: marriage, divorce, female genital cutting. These issues are emphasized at the expense of some other vital problems, such as, e.g., access to land that is especially important for women in the context of economic development and industrialization. In general, attention to such issues remains rare and limited, as is the emphasis on African women fighting against discriminatory legal environments. Here again, \textit{Le Monde} seems to be more willing to expose women’s agency through successful examples of their local organizing and participation in cash economy that is seen as a potential stepping point to loosening legal norms than its American counterpart.

\textbf{African Women, Fashion and Beauty in the New York Times and Le Monde}

The last sub-category groups the stories about African women, beauty and fashion (6 stories in the \textit{NYT} and 5 in \textit{Le Monde}). In these stories, African women, just like any other women, emerge as interested in and knowledgeable about such “frivolous” matters as beauty and fashion. Such stories are a perceptible deviation from the most usual depictions of African women in the Western media as suffering, oppressed, helpless etc. Moreover, these representations are also interesting in light of feminist perspectives on fashion. Some third-wave feminists have argued that fashion and beauty constitute an exclusively feminine sphere, through which their expertise and individual identities are asserted (Scott, 2005; Taylor,
2003). This perspective of fashion as a tool of empowerment is in opposition to the second-wave views that considered fashion as just another instrument of the patriarchal subjugation, employed to objectify the female body that was perceived as always on display for the male gaze (Beckingham, 2005; Scott, 2005). Following the more recent scholarship on fashion, then, African women’s interest in beauty, as seen in the newspapers, is at once a declaration of their agency and a negation of their extreme oppression. Furthermore, once again, such stories have the potential of erasing the imaginary difference between “us” and “them,” by underscoring the shared “interests” of all women. In other words, in the articles that deal with fashion, beauty, skin problems, weight and gait, African women emerge most like “us,” and sometimes, as exceptional, but in a positive manner.

**African women, beauty and fashion in the New York Times.** The issues of beauty and fashion are presented in the *NYT* as universal, and African women are seen participating in this universal feminine culture on equal terms with other women. At the same time, however, the underlying theme of the articles is the distinctions between the Western and African conceptions of beauty. For instance, Lacey (Jun. 15, 2000) reports on a Nigerian cosmetologist Irene Njoroge, who has been working not only to make Nigerian women more beautiful, but also to convince them that lighter skin is not more beautiful. Ms. Njoroge explains her fight in multiple terms – she is at once opposing businesses that produce skin-lightening creams, and cultural norms that designate lighter as more beautiful and unequivocally invoke the colonial inheritance. Lacey explicates the latter point by underscoring the reality of lightness or whiteness as a historical and social construct:\(^{169}\) “To social critics on this continent, skin lighteners are merely another negative legacy of white colonialism. After all, to be white was long an essential passport to power and wealth.” The article provides an interesting angle for reconsidering the colonial legacies by detailing issues.

faced uniquely by black African women and mapping their abilities to renegotiate the concepts of beauty that have emerged as the result of colonial histories and the rule of whites.

Similar trends of resistance towards Western beauty standards reemerges in the two articles that discuss international beauty pageants and African women’s status vis-à-vis them. Fisher’s (May 22, 2001) article provides a look at the Ugandan beauty scene. A local fashion designer and the founder of the first Ugandan modeling agency is presented as facing a dilemma: whether she should renounce the local beauty standards in order to get her country represented successfully in the international beauty contests, which call for tall and extremely thin, by the Ugandan standards, women. As Owori explains in her own words: “‘The average Ugandan wants something they can relate to’… ‘Plus if you are skinny people might think you have AIDS.’” In other words, the extreme thinness, so fashionable in the West, but also much contested by scholars and large publics alike (e.g., Hendriks, 2002; Kilbourne, 2003), is rejected in Uganda not only as the West-imposed, but also as simply unnatural and unhealthy.

The consensus that the extreme thinness is outside African conceptions of beauty is reflected in Onishi’s article on beauty pageants in Nigeria (Oct. 3, 2002). The collision of African and Western beauty standards here is embodied by the Nigerian Agbani Darego, Miss World 2001, “the first African winner in the contest’s 51-year history.” As the writer explains, using conspicuously Western terms of reference:

In a culture where the Coca-Cola bottle voluptuousness is celebrated and ample backside and bosoms are considered ideals of female beauty, the new Miss World shared none of those attributes. She was 6 feet tall, stately, and so, so skinny. She was, some said uncharitably, a white girl in black skin. The perverse reality was that most Nigerians … did not find the new Miss World particularly beautiful (emphasis mine).

The contrast between the Western and Nigerian beauty ideals is articulated primarily around the question of weight and thinness. In his somewhat crude description of the Nigerian beauty, Onishi invokes some of the long-held Western stereotypes in relation to the black African women’s physique, notably, “ample backside and bottoms.” The infamous South
African Hottentot Venus, who was paraded in the European circuses at the beginning of the 20th century was of interest to Europeans primarily because of her “protruding” buttocks and “deviant” genitalia – the physical traits proclaimed as “abnormal” by the medical profession of the time (Gilman, 1986). The quote also invokes the complex historical and political relationships between the West and Africa – the Nigerian Miss Universe is said to have been rejected by Nigerians for exactly what she came to embody – Western beauty standards, thus, her description as “the white girl in black skin.” Yet, this, in the words of Onishi, “perverse reality” of the collision of the local and Western beauty standards seems to be changing. Thanks to Ms. Darego, thinness is starting to be regarded more positively, especially by younger generations. A Nigerian fashion designer explains these changes in the following way: “Before, if you were thin, people thought you were sick, like an AIDS patient. Now if you have a skinny member in your family, you don’t have to be ashamed.” The equation of thinness with AIDS in this, just as in the previous article, underscores the socially constructed nature of beauty ideals (just as that of color), which are embedded and interpreted in line with particular socio-political realities of different communities, countries, regions. At the same time, altering Nigerian beauty standards that are being gradually replaced by Western ones can also be regarded as yet another form of modern Western imperialism.

The implicit clash between Western and African ideas about fashion, beauty and women’s role in society that they suggest can also be discerned in the Cowell’s article about Islam and fashion (Jul. 11, 1990). He reports on an Egyptian woman who opened a boutique specializing in Muslim dress in Cairo. Cowell describes its success in the following way: “business has grown fivefold and other boutiques like hers, specializing in the headdress called the hegab and other apparel sometimes called Islamic chic, have blossomed across town.” As seen in the previous chapter, the Muslim dress has come to stand in the West for
the extreme oppression of Muslim women. In the original colonial discourses, the veil signified the forbidden sexual desires and remained the symbolic terrain unattainable for the Western colonizers, thus, the myths surrounding the veil and the long-lasting determination to unveil Muslim women (Alloula, 1986; Wallach Scott, 2007). These clichés are often recycled in the NYT’s articles about Muslim African women. This article, however, presents an alternative view on the Islamic dress. The popularity of the latter, even though discussed within the broader rise of Islam in Egypt (the title: “With Islam in vogue, boutiques for pious”), is not interpreted in condescending terms. Rather, it is framed as the realm of fashion, in which it is seemingly women who have the last say. It is interesting to note that this article also presents the sole instance over the fifteen year period of the NYT’s usage of the term “hegab” (more common equivalent, “hijab”) to designate the headscarves worn by Muslim women. In all other cases, the inaccurate term “veil” is used. In short, the article presents the Islamic dress as one fashion choice among many others – the view hardly ever expressed in mainstream Western discourses.

Lastly, African women’s uniqueness is reasserted in the narratives about African women’s posture and gait that are permeated by colonial discourses resonating the language of “discovery.” The first article (May 30, 1995) reports on the Western researchers’ interest in African women, who carry heavy loads on their heads and have, according to the researchers, “mastered a walking technique that conserves energy.” At this point, African women are designated as exceptional; however, the researchers are unable to explain their special gait. In fact, it is not until 2002 that Pohl (Mar. 12) in his article resolves the mystery of certain African women’s gait and proclaims that the European researchers have finally discovered “African women’s secret kinetic weapon.” The language of “discovery” and “secret weapon” is somewhat reminiscent of the colonial language that framed Western endeavors as the
campaigns of discovering and conquering “virgin” lands, where locals were projected as exotic and dangerous (thus, the “secretness” of their weapons). This recent Western research also adds to the history of the Western efforts to possess African knowledge and to decipher African ways of living and being. The innate curiosity in regard to African women’s way of walking and the need to scientifically explain it is somewhat equivalent to the West’s untiring campaigns to unveil Muslim, including Northern African, women. That is, neither the former nor the latter are allowed to have any more “secrets” – everything succumbs to the omnipresent Western gaze, embodied by the science that has long been one of the central pillars in the West’s pit for superiority vis-à-vis other peoples. On the other hand, African women with their special way of walking remain superior, even after the Europeans have scientifically explained their “secret.” The article repeatedly emphasizes that African women modify their gait unconsciously and effortlessly. In order for others to be able to do the same, however, “a sophisticated training program” is necessary. In short, African women emerge as experts and holders of invaluable knowledge that is, at least for now, unattainable to Westerners.

In short, despite the fact that articles project African women sharing in universal women’s concerns of beauty and fashion, the principal underlining theme in the articles remains the differences between Western and African beauty concepts, as a result of which African women emerge as unique and exceptional. However, although African women emerge as different from Western women, they are not designated as inferior in any way. Rather, their exceptionality emerges as positive, whether it is their energy-conserving gait or healthier bodily images.

**African women, fashion and beauty in Le Monde.** *Le Monde*’s stories on fashion and beauty invoke topics also discussed in the *NYT*, such as the problem of skin lighteners or
the election of the first black African as Miss World. In contrast to the American newspaper, however, Le Monde’s writers put more emphasis on fashion as industry and how it can help the advancement of individual African creators and economic development at large. The principal reoccurring theme throughout the articles is that of fashion as an instrument for empowering African women and establishing a unique African identity.

Articles about the developing fashion industry in various African countries underline Africans’ creativity and entrepreneurship. The success of African designers is, however, measured by whether they have been able to make it in Paris, which is unsurprisingly designated as the fashion capital of the world (Benaim, Dec. 4, 1995; Breuillac, & Faujas, Jun. 26, 2001). And while African creators do not always succeed in conquering the French market, it is as a result of these failures that the Africaness of their creations is reasserted, and fashion is reaffirmed as an instrument for celebrating African identity. For instance, a designer from Burkina Faso explains why he is no longer willing to present his works in Paris: “In Paris, at the prêt-a-porter fair, they put us at the very end, level three. The stand is paid for by the ministry of cooperation. People touch, look. Say: ‘It’s African, it’s beautiful’… And they leave” (Benaim, Dec. 4, 1995). In this short account, the designer insinuates the familiar “exotic flair” associated with Africa and Africans since the earliest colonial endeavors. At the same time, as the quote attests, the French, while acknowledging the aesthetic value of African dress, reject it as unsuitable for them, in such a way underscoring the importance of fashion as identity. Le Monde’s articles also reveal the tendency of Africans to go back to their African roots as far as choices of their dress are concerned. For instance, Benaim (Dec. 4, 1995), discussing a chic fashion event in Benin, draws attention to “gala’s public in boubous” and concludes that African fabrics attest to the cult of Africaness. In other words, fashion is clearly established as the means of reaffirming African identity in an opposition to Western dress codes.
Le Monde’s writers also celebrate black skin as an intrinsic part of African identity. Just as in the NYT, Amar (Jul. 25, 1997) discusses the issue of skin lightening, similarly suggesting that the historically constructed concept of social status related to skin shades is at the core of the problem, even though the African woman quoted in the article claims to be using the lightening cream “out of the simple aesthetic concern” (which is juxtaposed with tanning). He also notes that most of the skin lightening products are produced by Europeans, thus, exposing their economic interests in maintaining the colonial rhetoric of “lighter=more beautiful” skin. A story on the first black Miss World, written by the staff writer Kouamouo (Nov. 28, 2001), but which draws heavily on the Ivorian newspaper’s coverage of the event, celebrates the election “of a Negro woman, Agbani Darego, as a homage to the black skin of African woman.” According to Le Monde’s account, the local reporter finishes his story by claiming that: “By choosing a Negro woman of a good shade among numerous white, yellow etc. girls, they certainly wanted to say to all African women: stop lightening your skin, your black color is a precious gift from the sky.” In other words, the article enthusiastically reasserts the idea of “black as beautiful.” The approach taken to report on the pageant by Le Monde’s writer differs radically from that in the NYT. The latter carefully details how the chosen Miss World deviated from local beauty standards, by going as far as designating the winner as “the black girl in the white skin.” Le Monde does not invoke this problematic, but rather seizes the election as an opportunity to reassert black skin’s aesthetic value and its allegedly world-wide recognition.

In short, Le Monde’s narratives on African women and fashion resembles those of the NYT in underscoring fashion’s capabilities of empowering African women, be it through economic developments of African fashion industry, where they participate as creators, models or consumers, or through fashion choices that reassert unique African identity. At the same time, Le Monde does not overemphasize the differences between African and Western
conceptions of beauty that are made so explicit in the American newspaper, but rather celebrates the universal role of fashion to establish unique identities.

**Conclusion.** The NYT and Le Monde’s articles about beauty and fashion represent yet another type of article that is not normally associated with African women either in the academic literature or in the mainstream Western discourses, broadly speaking. However, while by no means very numerous, they do exist and add an important, if lighter, dimension to the images of African women, whom Westerners are allegedly so used to seeing starving, dying and overworked. In other words, these articles do not constitute “serious” news, but perhaps it is this “infotainment”\(^{170}\) aspect that is, in fact, most missing or overlooked in reporting on Africa and African women and, thus, represents the sharpest points of departure with the colonial clichés.\(^{171}\)

The thematic range of stories in both newspapers, however, remains fairly predictable. For instance, both newspapers discuss beauty pageants, especially, the election of the first black Miss World, which qualifies as a newsworthy event. They also touch on the issue of skin lightening that easily invokes colonial inheritance and is unequivocally read as the continuation of the “white” supremacy. However, writers rarely deem it worthy talking to women using such products to reconstruct their motivations (as they assume that there is only one motivation). A brief authentic account in Le Monde’s article (Amar, Jul. 25, 1997), however, seems to suggest that skin lightening might simply be an equivalent of tanning (which, some would argue, is equally deleterious to skin). The NYT’s stories on African women’s gait seem to be of interest to Americans because the energy-conserving gait would be useful in military training, and Le Monde’s stories on African fashion industry clearly expose economic ties with France. In short, the stories about African women, beauty and


\(^{171}\) A similar argument is expressed in Harding’s (2003) article.
fashion that have made it into the newspapers are either universally acknowledged as newsworthy or of particular interest to each country’s audiences.

The stories on beauty and fashion somewhat negate the conventional distancing of African women and their positioning as “them,” as intrinsically different from “us” in exclusively negative terms (as “they” are necessarily inferior, lagging behind “us” etc.). Here, African women approximate “us,” as they are seen as participating in the universal feminine cultures of beauty and fashion, but also as excelling at them in their own unique ways – “healthier” beauty standards, energy-conserving gait, African fashion that asserts unique African identity etc. Fashion is also projected as empowering, as when, e.g., African women reject skin lightening products as means to become more beautiful and by doing so, dismiss the construct of “white skin,” originating from the colonial order of things, as a marker of beauty and social standing.

The clash of Western and African views and ideals of beauty is a principal frame in the NYT’s articles, which invoke political realities and the world power dynamics, raising, notably, the question of cultural imperialism.172 The latter warns that the third-world, including Africa, is being re-colonized by the West through the imposition of the latter’s cultural products and values, including beauty standards. Le Monde’s emphasis, however, remains more thoroughly embedded in realities of African fashion world, without much explicit comparison to its Western counterpart. As a result, its approach is more sustained by economic analysis of fashion industry.

Conclusion

This chapter constitutes a novel look at the Western media’s representations of African women by focusing on those stories that have been systematically overlooked by scholarly

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research. However, although these stories go beyond conventional themes of African women in crises, the colonial clichés sporadically rear their ugly heads. The reappearance of the colonial clichés seems to be a result of one of the following factors: 1) the issue discussed and its perception as African in nature (e.g., fistulas); 2) the stakes of the West in a particular issue (e.g., hyperfertility and immigration “threat” in the French case); 3) individual writer’s attitudes and writing style (e.g., the NYT’s Perlez). The imaginary distance between “us” and “them” also remains perceptible, although the definition of “them” is sometimes no longer straightforwardly negative, as in stories about beauty and fashion, where African women’s unique identities and skills are brought forward.

Articles also attest to Western media’s biases in relation to Africa in terms of the thematic range of stories. For instance, both Le Monde and the New York Times passionately discuss the issues of reproduction and family planning, with a number of front-page stories. Fistulas, on the other hand, recognized as an important reproductive health issue for many rural African women, lacking access to healthcare structures, is only fleetingly brought up in the newspapers. In a similar way, in discussions of legal environments and traditions, the central focus remains on the clichéd issues: polygamy, forced marriage etc., while other, less controversial, but not less significant issues, e.g., access to land, are brushed aside. One final criticism of the newspapers’ coverage is a lack of a wider context and more complex explanations. For instance, both newspapers largely omit the explanations for the real causes of fistulas – lack of health infrastructures, mostly destroyed by neoliberal Western policies. Moreover, stories about daily lives of African women are exclusively focused on rural women; while this is not a flaw in itself, the narratives run a risk of being read as representative of all African women, when in fact, only one social category of African women is concerned. That is, while analyzed stories in themselves constitute a novel thematic category in relation to African women in the Western media (as opposed to the familiar
category of African women in crises), the journalistic choices within this category are not completely void of the same biases that apply to Western media coverage of Africa at large.

Overall, *Le Monde’s* coverage is more positive than that of the *New York Times’s*, especially in relation to stories about daily lives. The French writers do not ignore the difficulties ensuing from patriarchal social structures and poverty, but also do not get caught up in these, as seems to be the case of the *NYT’s* Perlez. Rather, in *Le Monde’s* stories, difficult realities are seen as interwoven by possibilities for African women’s organizing and resourcefulness. They emerge as hard workers, important contributors to their societies’ well-being and resourceful economic agents, all of which is missing in the *NYT*. In Perlez’s stories African women seem to be *a priori* designated as oppressed, submissive, and voiceless. And where the evidence suggests on the contrary, Perlez is quick to resituate it within her grand narrative of African women’s desperation by underscoring that such cases represent rare exceptions. In short, Perlez, assuming the position of an expert, granted to her by the colonial power dynamics, reinterprets African women’s realities in concordance with the colonial logic and creates her own reality of African women’s daily lives.

*Le Monde’s* coverage, however, is not without its flaws either, notably, in relation to the issue of hyperfertility, which quickly becomes politicized and is framed as a tangible threat of immigration. It is here that *Le Monde’s* writers most often resort to colonial discourses and vilify African women for their “irrational” and “irresponsible” reproductive behavior. Just like with the stories on female genital cutting trials in France, analyzed in the previous chapter, here, the political nature of the issue seems to largely determine its portrayal within the clichéd colonial frames.
Powerful African Women and Women’s Activism

There are no existing studies that look at portrayals of individual African women in the Western media. Similarly, academic research has never investigated the representations of African women’s activism and their contributions to political processes in their countries. In the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*, however, a few African women are extensively discussed over the study period and certain themes around women’s activism emerge. The visibility that each of these women achieve, though for various reasons, is in itself proof of their power and extraordinariness, which sharply depart with the established colonial imaginings of victimized and suffering African women and/or hypersexual savage beasts.

Colonial narratives conceived of and established African women as helpless and desperate (and, thus, in need of rescue by Europeans) by subjecting them to a double subjugation (“other” to Europeans, but also to their own men). Colonialists, including the British and the French, resorted to men to implement their indirect rule in the colonies, and capitalist economies imposed on the colonized African countries clearly favored men’s entrance into the cash economy, while women’s roles in reproduction and subsistence economy were devalued (Rodney, 1974). Research shows that patriarchal norms were either newly imposed or strengthened by colonization (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997). In other words, in a majority of cases, colonialists contributed to worsening rather than improving African women’s situations. Coquery-Vidrovitch (1997) in her history of African women, notes that before the 20th century, “matrilineality was very widespread and, at times, valued” (p. 3; see also Amadiume, 1987; Mengara, 2001b). She gives various examples of oral traditions recalling African heroines, like Queen Nzinga of Angola, Queen Amina of the Zaria Hausa, Beatrice of the Congo, the priestess Nongqause in southern Africa and others (p. 3; 40-44). Esherick (2005), in her study of African women in the 20th century, also provides numerous examples of what she calls the remarkable African women who have played important roles
in public lives of their countries (p. 79-87). In other words, powerful African women have always been a part of the story, but not the one that has dominated the Western media discourses that have largely reproduced the colonial stereotypes and imaginings.

The individualized narratives of activism, passion and success that the NYT and Le Monde recount in relation to certain powerful African women, need to be situated not only within a general framework of Western colonial mentalities, but also in relation to the concepts of social status and class divisions. While the representations of these women disrupt the colonial discourses, this shift is to an extent neutralized and contained by the Times and Le Monde through their reliance on the familiar categories of “Western” and “un-Western” and/or the social status divisions. That is, powerfulness or success might be projected as exceptional, by eliciting women’s belonging to the elite, rather than representing African women at large. Alternatively, the success might be explained, as is the case of the NYT, as a result of individual achievements, within the frame that I call “American-dream-come true,” so familiar to American media consumers. African women that appear in Le Monde are also similarly defined by their success – usually measured by the acceptance of the French audiences (a lot of articles in the French newspaper are dedicated to the women artists, whereas its American counterpart pays more attention to sportswomen). However, even if the latter drawbacks are taken into account, these articles constitute a remarkable alternative to the traditional images of African women, by demonstrating another side of African women’s lives – the one of more urban Africa, its politics, and successes.

The following table presents a number of stories in each of the sub-categories discussed in this chapter for both newspapers.
Table 3: Number of stories representing individual women or women’s activism in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde* 1990-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The New York Times</th>
<th>Le Monde</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winnie Mandela</td>
<td>38 (16%)*</td>
<td>16 (9%)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wangari Maathai</td>
<td>6 (2%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sportswomen</td>
<td>20 (8%)</td>
<td>3 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women artists</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td>18 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s activism</td>
<td>7 (3%)</td>
<td>17 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>77 (32%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>56 (33%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates the percentage of the total number of stories about African women included in the study.

**Winnie Madikizela-Mandela in the New York Times**

South African Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is the most visible black African woman featured in the *NYT* over the fifteen-year period with 38 articles about her, including eight front-page stories. By comparison, Kenyan professor and environmentalist Wangari Maathai who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, i.e. internationally acknowledged and acclaimed, has only one front-page story devoted to her that year; and few other African women have made it into the front page over the study period. While these stories cannot be defined as unanimously positive portrayals of Winnie, they all discuss extensively her involvement in politics, her relationship with Nelson Mandela, her character, and her allegedly illegitimate maneuvers in the post-apartheid South Africa. The flair of controversy that constantly surrounded Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s political career perhaps best accounts for her visibility in American media discourses; as media are always on the lookout
for scandalous, human interest stories (e.g., Lull, & Hinerman, 1997) - the tendency that not even the *New York Times*, commonly considered as a prestigious publication, is able to completely reject.

The voluminous coverage can also be explained by the fact that South Africa in general is one of a few African countries that is frequently of interest to the West (Donck, 1996; El Zein, & Cooper, 1992; Pratt, 1980; Terrell, 1989); one of the four *NYT*s African bureaus is in Johannesburg. Equally important is the fact that the end of the apartheid system in the early 1990s represented one of the most important political events in that decade in Africa with clear ramifications for the rest of the world. Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was at the center of these important changes; the continuous narrative about her that lasts from 1990 to 2003 is the story of her perpetual rise and fall; from “Mama Nation” and “dutiful wife” of Nelson Mandela to an “estranged wife” and “Mama Comeback” to her final resignation from the public life in 2003. In the course of this narrative, she emerges as a powerful black African woman, straightforwardly contradicting the colonial discourses of female victimization, helplessness and oppression.

What is interesting about the *NYT*s narratives regarding Winnie Mandela is that she, as opposed to some other prominent African women, does not easily fit into a category of “us,” Westerners, in contrast to “them” (the latter being poor, suffering, uneducated, voiceless and helpless African women). If anything, in the course of the *NYT*s narrative about her, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s “Africaness” is clearly crystallized and brought forward. All of the following factors are suggested to contribute to her “un-Westerness”: her unruly character, and flamboyance, her populist and even violent methods of governing, and later, her criticism directed at her former husband’s government for allegedly favoring the compromise with whites at the disadvantage of blacks. This serves to undermine her credibility as a political figure. Moreover, it is frequently emphasized that Winnie’s supporters are lower-class and
primarily black South Africans. For instance, in a somewhat demeaning fashion, Keller, at the
time, the newspaper’s Johannesburg bureau chief, locates her support base “among the
millions who know her only as the one who cares enough to show up” (Mar. 3, 1995). In this
single statement, Keller attempts to discredit Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and trivialize her
supporters by framing them as poor and irrational masses.

Eventually, Winnie comes to stand for all that is problematic with Africa and Africans
from the Western perspective. Her “political savageness” comes into sharp contrast with the
world-acclaimed diplomacy and peacefulness of her former husband. The same Keller
concludes that “Nelson stands for tolerance, the free market, democracy – the dream of South
Africa as a liberal, Western-style nation. Winnie stands in his way” (May 14, 1995). In other
words, following the colonial logic, underlined by Ibelema (1992) in relation to Western
reporting of African wars, Nelson Mandela qualifies as the “good guy,” because his needs and
desires are Western, while Winnie is the “bad guy,” because she remains thoroughly African.
Keller is not the first one to invoke this division and to maintain that Winnie has become a
liability rather than a worthy contributor to South African politics (see also, e.g., Lewis, May
17, 1991), but he maintains it throughout his writings in a very systematic fashion, which
culminates in the article straightforwardly titled “Mandela against Mandela” (Mar. 29, 1995).

The categorization of Winnie as “un-Western” and opposed to Nelson Mandela is
more than enough to justify and maintain her vilification, despite her influence on the South
African politics and the fact that she remained a democratically elected official in several
governing bodies throughout the 1990s. The negative undertones of Winnie’s “political

173 It is interesting to note that before working in South Africa, Keller was the *NYT* Moscow’s bureau chief, and
has won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the Soviet Union. Therefore, his conclusions about Winnie vs.
Nelson are perhaps reminiscent of reporting the world along the Cold War divisions. The Cold War frame was
frequently used during the war when reporting on Africa as the latter was divided according the lines of the
Soviet and American influence in what constitutes one of the starkest examples of modern imperialism
savageness” that, following the colonial logic, is African par excellence, fit uneasily with her representations as a powerful woman who is simply invincible. She is unequivocally portrayed as a fighter; in the beginning, as the “first lady of liberation” (Jan. 28, 1993), the woman who has fought tirelessly against apartheid; later, as a controversial political figure who fights to hold her political posts and influence and cast off what she and her supporters call the efforts to discredit her. The ultimate metaphor of Winnie as a fighter is her image as a dominatrix that emerges after she is accused of having participated in the beating of several young men in 1990. She is said to have “hit them with her fist and a whip” (May 12, 1991). The image of Winnie with a whip in her hand is recycled again and again when recounting the incident.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is described as a “leading black nationalist figure” (Sept. 19, 1990); a “flamboyant champion of South Africa black majority” (Wren, May 5, 1992); “the headstrong, street-savvy militant” (Keller, Jan. 28, 1993); or yet a “patron of the downtrodden” (Keller, Mar. 2, 1995). After her divorce with Nelson Mandela, she began to identify herself by her maiden name as Madikizela-Mandela to underscore that her separation was as much political as it was personal. Over the years, the NYT has announced her political “death” (e.g., “Winnie Mandela’s sad fall,” May 15, 1991; “Today’s action signals an end to the political career of Mrs. Mandela” Apr. 16, 1992; “Winnie Mandela stops trying to rekindle political career,” Dec. 18, 1997) just as many times as her “resurrection” (e.g., “Winnie Mandela’s separation from her husband, Nelson, and her forced resignation … have failed to dampen her voice or remove her from South Africa’s political scene,” May 5, 1992; “Winnie Mandela regains post in women’s group,” Noble, Dec. 9, 1993; “Winnie Mandela back in South Africa’s spotlight,” Apr. 11, 1999). Her perpetual rise and fall in a way feminizes her authority by embodying simultaneously fragility and her untiring militancy and efforts to
retain power. Her image as a phoenix, then, becomes symbolic of the resurrection of the post-apartheid South Africa itself.

While her politics and actions are controversial, and perhaps even illegal, and the tone of the stories varies slightly depending on a writer, she is, however, during the mid-1990s cast as the only one who is capable of politically challenging Nelson Mandela. Bill Keller pronounces in his article: “President Winnie Mandela? It is white South Africa’s ultimate nightmare” (Mar. 29, 1995); “His South Africa or hers?” he asks again in May, 1995. Yet, he is not the only one to entertain the possibility. In an op-ed piece following Keller’s article, Gevissier, the South African correspondent for The Nation, takes a more positive stance towards this possibility:

Could she even succeed Nelson Mandela as the next President, as some suggest? She is shrewd, charismatic and above all beloved by determined followers. True, she faces new accusations of fraud, but even a conviction of kidnapping in 1990 only buttressed her support among some followers, who maintain that she is the victim of an elaborate smear campaign. … A second President Mandela is certainly possible (Mar. 30, 1995).

In short, while Winnie’s juxtaposition with Nelson Mandela assigns her to a position of “them,” i.e. bad guys, it at the same time works to elicit her powerfulness. It is the black woman, who has made her way up not by being educated or wealthy, but rather by being street-savvy, flamboyant and militant, who emerges as the strongest opposition to Nelson Mandela, adulated by the West. The narrative of her general struggles, therefore, also becomes anchored in a more concrete challenge against patriarchal social order.

In short, throughout the study period, Winnie Mandela’s actions during the apartheid era, even though questionable from a moral stance, are accepted as a legitimate battle against the unjust and racially discriminating system. Yet, only rarely are her political endeavors after apartheid seen that way. In the speech made by Winnie to the Xhosa elite, reported by Keller, she emphasizes that while she has won her fight against apartheid, the battle against white rule and privilege is not yet finished. She invokes the colonialist past as a reason not only for
the current misfortunes of the South Africa but also as an explanation for her criticism
directed towards Nelson Mandela and his government:

She likens the British to Nazis and wonders why to this day there has been neither compensation nor
apology. It is a shrewd and rattling speech, with a sting in the tail. For where was President Mandela on
the very day Mrs. Mandela first delivered this indictment of British authorities? He … was lavishly
entertaining the white queen, Elizabeth of Britain, on her royal visit to South Africa (May 14, 1995).

Although direct references to colonialism are not frequent, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela with
what the NYT clearly projects as her un-Western stance and values, becomes an embodiment
of the African opposition to the West, with its history of colonization and exploitation of
Africa, including the South Africa. In her political battle against the moderate black political
elite and in her personal fight against Nelson Mandela, she displays, then, her multiple
burdens: she is a fighter against apartheid, white privilege and patriarchal social order.

Despite her personal trials and undulations that consumed the Times for over more than a
decade, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela emerges as a powerful black African woman, who
challenges injustices of colonialism, apartheid and patriarchy as well as the well-entrenched
media discourses that feed on the earlier colonial imaginings of victimized, helpless, and
savage African woman. It is true that Winnie’s portrayal in the NYT is far from being
unequivocally positive; rather, she is sometimes one-dimensionally classified as a “bad guy”
and a “political savage,” with savageness being a powerful colonial trope, rendering Africans
dangerous and in need of control. At the same time, however, in spite of being conceptualized
as a threat to South Africa as a liberal “Western-style” nation, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela
remains strong and invincible, until she herself announces her resignation from the public life,
rather than being defeated and pushed aside.

Wangari Maathai in the New York Times

If Winnie Madikizela-Mandela remains thoroughly embedded in her “Africaness” and
vilified for her opposition to Western ideas and values, Wangari Maathai is set as an example
not only for Africa, but also for the West. After being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her
environmental efforts to fight deforestation and depletion of natural resources in Kenya in 2004, she is established in the NYT as a heroine. It is emphasized that Wangari is the first woman in East Africa to have earned a doctorate degree in 1971 (Lacey, Oct. 9, 2004) and that she is the first African woman to have won the Nobel Peace Prize (Tyler, Oct. 9, 2004). Moreover, with the selection of Wangari Maathai, the Nobel committee is said to have redefined the concept of the peace prize to include environmental advocacy.174 Interestingly, although it is underscored in the articles that Wangari has been active since the 1970s, there is not a single article that would talk about her substantially before 2004 throughout the period studied. In other words, it literally took a Nobel Prize to make her newsworthy, even though her visibility is still a far cry from that of Winnie Mandela – only 6 stories over the study period.

Wangari Maathai is presented as no less of a fighter than Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. Her image as a heroine is elicited not only through the narratives recounting her work as a founder of a Green Belt Movement or yet as an advocate for women’s rights, but also as someone, who withstood the oppressive opposition and violence from the former Kenyan government. Lacey opens his story on Maathai with the following vivid imagery:

The Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai has been clubbed in the head by riot police officers. She has been denounced as a subversive. Her efforts to advocate for women’s rights in a country where men run the show have long been considered quixotic at best. But Dr. Maathai, who won the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday for her decades of advocacy work, has stood firm through all of that. Some people, in fact, have likened her to a tree, perhaps one of the ficus trees or elms she has planted throughout Kenya – solid and unbowed (Oct. 9, 2004).

Her unequivocal image as a survivor who worked hard to advance her cause reappears in other articles; sometimes, in the excerpts from the Nobel committee statement that is clearly accepted as a trustworthy and unbiased source. The image of an invincible fighter reemerges in her own speech: “No matter how much we fail, we must recognize that there is hope. …

The sun will rise, and we continue to hope that we can overcome our suffering” (Tyler, Oct. 9, 2004).

Wangari Maathai also appears as carrying several burdens simultaneously. She is primarily concerned with the environment, but her efforts to preserve it are closely related to the advancement of women’s rights. Furthermore, she speaks out as an expert on class issues by rejecting the common view that it is poor people who should be blamed for the environmental devastation. In short, Wangari Maathai is a world-acknowledged activist and expert, who fights for sustainable development, reforestation, empowerment of women, and against poverty. All of these are accepted by the Times as valid, laudable, even exemplary; unlike Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s, the values of Wangari Maathai are projected as unequivocally complying with Western ideals.

The only time when Wangari’s authority as a role model for the West is questioned is when her controversial remarks about the West’s relation to the spread of AIDS in Africa surface. She is said to have allegedly claimed that white people have introduced AIDS to Africa in order to kill black Africans (Gibbs, Dec. 10, 2004; Tyler, Oct. 9, 2004). But this disruptive narrative pattern is neutralized almost the moment it appears by Wangari’s explanation that the remarks were “taken out of context” and that she “neither says nor believes that the virus was developed by white people … to destroy the African people” (Gibbs, Dec. 10, 2004). In other words, the discursive threat of this conspiracy theory that elicits racial power divisions is safely contained and does not undermine Wangari’s credibility as a Western-like heroine.

While Wangari’s personality as a strong fighter and her work to advance the universally acceptable cause positions her as “us,” as almost Western (especially considering that she received part of her education in the West), her dress remains an important reminder of her identity. Her attire is frequently called into attention, e.g., she is described as “wearing
a bright green and yellow dress” (Tyler, Oct. 9, 2004) or yet “in a brilliantly colored traditional dress, with a bow on her headpiece that resembled a butterfly ready to take flight” (Mar. 27, 2005). As some third-wave feminists have suggested (Scott, 2005; Taylor, 2003), fashion is to be considered as an important vehicle of female self-identification and empowerment. Here, Wangari Maathai is rendered so Western through the way the NYT recounts her story to its readers that, if it were not for the strong imagery of the colorful traditional African clothing, coupled with rare mentions of race, Wangari Maathai’s “Africaness” would be almost invisible.

It is true that Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s dress is also frequently noted in The Times, although it is not, like in the case of Maathai, the primary means of underscoring her “Africaness.” The following excerpt from Wren’s article on her court proceedings is indicative of the trend:

Mrs. Mandela’s manner of dress has mirrored her fortunes in court. Under pressure on witness stand, she wore sober tailored suits. As her prospects looked brighter, she reverted to the turbans and flowing African robes that have become her trademark. On Friday, she arrived in a caftan in the yellow, green and black colors of the African National Congress (May 12, 1991).

Here, her attire is not only a matter of personal choice and self-identification, but also acquires political meaning. In her controversial political career, Winnie has supported and never parted with the ANC, even though she criticized its many decisions.175

Another visible difference between reporting on Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Wangari Maathai is that the former, while generating a lot of talk about her, rarely gets to or is willing to speak herself, as opposed to Maathai. For instance, out of nine stories devoted to her in 1991, only in three of them is Winnie Madikizela-Mandela quoted directly; in other

175 It is important to note that fashion enters into the picture in relation to the Western female politicians as well. For example, Hillary Clinton’s image and dress has always been a part of the political equation. Here, however, the considerations of fashion serve to underscore the gender and femininity, not ethnic or racial identity. For the representative examples of the New York Times take on the issue, see: Dowd, M. Hillary Rodham Clinton Strikes a New Pose And Multiplies Her Images, (Dec. 12, 1993); Aspan, M. Hillary Clinton as the Fashion Police: My Polka-Dot Dress Should Be Arrested, (Feb. 11, 2008).
articles her personality, behavior and actions are discussed by a range of actors, while she herself remains silent, or worse, is “silenced” by journalists who are not interested in getting her point of view. This is somewhat reminiscent of the colonial power dynamics, in which the West spoke about the colonized that was made to remain silent.

Wangari Maathai, on the other hand, is quoted more often and therefore allowed to represent herself. One of the articles is in fact her own speech. In this op-ed piece (Dec. 10, 2004), Wangari Maathai gives her own account of her struggles and efforts to save the environment. This article is a rare example of how an African woman is capable of completely disrupting the colonial discourses projecting them as silent, victimized, and powerless. Here, she speaks as an African woman activist but also as a world-wide accepted expert on environmental issues. Rarely have African women been considered as any sort of experts, except perhaps for domestic and sexual services that they were entitled to give to colonizers or slave owners; even more seldom have African women been given a platform to speak about themselves vis-à-vis large Western audiences. Thus, Wangari Maathai’s Nobel Peace Prize and the NYT coverage surrounding it are exceptional and laudable in that respect. She speaks and speaks very loudly, backed up by an international recognition, which is clearly not attainable for a majority of African women.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Wangari Maathai are both noted for their activism, even though differently evaluated from the Western vantage point, espoused by the NYT. Both of their stories, however, are not void of a class dimension. Both of them are considered as the elite women. This advantageous place is elicited through the contrast – Winnie is projected as a patron of the poor black masses of Johannesburg, whereas Wangari is the savior of poor Kenyan women. In other words, narratives of Winnie and Wangari are far removed from the realities of many other African women -- rural, poor, uneducated, unable to inherit property, dying of AIDS or forced to resort to prostitution to support themselves. In a way, their
representations allow Western readers to identify with them; they become “us,” as opposed to “them,” i.e. other African women, even though, in the case of Madikizela-Mandela, this discursive transposition is harder to consummate because of a continual emphasis on her “un-Westerness.” In short, the discursive challenge that the Times’ portrayals of Winnie and Wangari as powerful African women pose to the colonial imaginations are presented to readers as exceptional, and, thus, by extension, as safe and unthreatening.

**Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Wangari Maathai in Le Monde**

Both Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Wangari Maathai are also visible in *Le Monde*, although the coverage is less voluminous than in the American newspaper – there are 16 stories about Winnie, including one front-page article, and only two articles about Wangari, one in the year 2004, when she received the Nobel Prize, and an interview with her in the following year. There are many commonalities between the two newspapers in the coverage of the two women, especially in the case of Winnie Mandela. *Le Monde*’s portrayals of Winnie, however, are more enmeshed with the analysis of complex political processes of the post-apartheid South Africa, in the background of which Winnie is just a small, but, as already seen in the NYT, always a “controversial” player. Moreover, no confrontation is staged between Winnie and Nelson Mandela, as is seen so clearly in the NYT, even though *Le Monde* reports on the gradually worsening relationship between the two. As far as Wangari Maathai is concerned, the scarceness of coverage hardly allows any conclusions; however, there is no visible contrast between the two women, as was true for the American newspaper, where Winnie came to stand for African political “savageness” and Wangari embodied a Westernized heroine *par excellence*. Instead, *Le Monde*’s sketch of Wangari Maathai also sheds some light on certain of her values and beliefs that clash with Western ideals.
**Winnie Madikizela-Mandela.** The well-established image in the *New York Times* of Winnie Mandela as a fighter and as a political phoenix also finds its equivalent in *Le Monde.* Moreover, from the early coverage, the portrayal of her contributions to the fight against apartheid is enmeshed with the emphasis on her strong and not always well-controlled character. As a result, *Le Monde’s* representations of Winnie continuously make references to her glorious past as well as her more dubious present. She is repeatedly called the “mother of the nation,” “uncompromising fighter,” “invincible rebel,” but also an “impetuous,” “provocative” woman. *Le Monde’s* writers seem to unequivocally suggest that it is Winnie’s unruly character that is at the root of her post-apartheid decline. For example, Bole (Feb. 14, 1990) suggests that the long sought victory and release of Nelson Mandela along with her own public acclaim “has got into her head”; similarly, Barrin (Sept. 20, 1990) inquires if her notoriety “has turned her head,” and responds that “perhaps a little.” Later coverage is permeated by images of Winnie as a “real diva” with “(uncontrollable) behavior of the star,” “taste for luxury,” and “extravagant lifestyle.” In other words, *Le Monde’s* conclusion of Winnie’s becoming a “fallen idol” rests on both: her political faux pas and her trial at the end of which she is found guilty, and on her flamboyance and personal excesses that were inevitably transformed into populist discourses in the political arena.

Similarly as in the *NYT,* the unruliness and power of Winnie’s character reaches its visual climax in the image of a dominatrix, originating from the accusations in her trial for having beaten a young man with a whip. In the story whose headline announces that “Two witnesses overwhelm ‘the lady with a whip,’” Fritscher gives a following account of one of the victims: “Mrs. Mandela whistled in the air and danced to the rhythm. She had a large whip in her hand and suddenly restarted hitting me.” (Mar. 8, 1991). And even though this image is only recounted in one article, it seems to reappear in other portrayals of Winnie. For instance,
after the verdict was pronounced, she is said to have appeared in front of her supporters “in a coat of black leather with her fist raised” (May 16, 1991).

Although eventually *Le Monde*’s writers come to qualify Winnie as the “bad conscience of South Africa” (Jan. 29, 1998), there is a continuous emphasis on her popularity and political vivacity. And in the midst of the images of her controversial political behavior (the climax of which is her talk about “fire necklaces,” mentioned in two stories), more positive pieces of Winnie’s character are also noted. For instance, she is said to be “always elegant and never short of ideas” (Nov. 9, 1997); or yet “impressive for her intelligence and masterful control of adversity” (Jan. 29, 1998). Moreover, Winnie’s controversial political career is firmly enmeshed in the discussions of terribly complicated political background of the newly born post-apartheid Africa. For example, *Le Monde*’s writers conclude that Winnie Mandela’s trial was as much about her and what she has allegedly done as about proving that no one, even the “mother of nation,” was above the law. In a similar way, her abusive firing from the Nelson Mandela’s government, that she quickly appealed, raised, according to Georges (Apr. 14, 1995), the unexplored questions of “job security within government and the acknowledgment of rights of its members vis-à-vis the authoritarianism of the state leader.” In other words, the controversial, but ingenious Winnie appears as a crucial player in the post-apartheid South Africa, raising difficult, but necessary questions, and drawing the limits of the new political and legal system.

At the same time, Winnie’s image as well as her political moves also rest firmly anchored in racial tensions. The front-page story after her guilty verdict was pronounced reminds readers that Winnie “wasn’t the type to let her belittlers, and even less so, the tribunal presided by a white man, to throw her off” (May 16, 1991). Her continuing political career is also summed up in her critique against black political leaders whom she accuses of wanting “to sleep in the silk sheets of white power” (Mar. 24, 1993). In other words, in her populist
political discourses, she remains strongly attached to her identity as a black woman, and as a fighter against the apartheid system that denied blacks their essential rights. Her identification with black and poor youth that formed the basis of her support, however, clashes with her image as the rich, upper-class woman. For instance, she is said to be always “dressed in fashions of biggest designers” (Jan. 29, 1998). Or a different example: during the trial, it is emphasized that Mrs. Mandela “was the only one to explain herself, addressing the judge directly in English and respecting the legal jargon” (Feb. 13, 1991). In other words, Winnie’s image as a powerful black woman has its roots not only in her political activism and contribution to the fight against apartheid, but also in her privileged social position that distances her from many other African women.

Le Monde’s writers also accentuate Winnie’s privileged status by continuously referring to her relationship with Nelson Mandela. More so than in the NYT, Winnie is repeatedly defined by her relationship to her former husband: “political widow,” “wife of the most famous political prisoner,” “wife of the vice-president of the ANC” etc., and the trend continues even after the divorce. Her controversial and sometimes questionable political moves are attributed to the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and, thus, the lack of guidance he could have otherwise provided for his wife. For instance, Bole (Feb. 14, 1990) inquires if the liberation of Nelson Mandela, “the guide, the director of conscience” of Winnie, will be able to get her back on track. Such an emphasis on Winnie’s relationship with what they name her “prestigious” husband has a negative effect of insinuating that her real identity and value is inseparable from Nelson Mandela. As the previous quote shows, Winnie is regarded as somewhat incapable of functioning properly without his support and surveillance. Their divorce is straightforwardly attributed to Winnie’s affair with her lawyer, i.e. explained in terms of personal rather than political factors. In the article devoted to their separation, Fritscher (Apr. 15, 1992) reports that Nelson claimed that despite their official separation,
“his love for her remains untouched.” Winnie is not quoted in the article. The final conclusion, then, is that Nelson was able to forgive Winnie’s political misdemeanors, but not her extra-marital affair. Moreover, by reporting on his pronouncement of eternal love for Winnie, he is established as a selfless hero, while “the mother of the nation” is condemned for breaking the marital bond.

While Winnie is not given a chance to speak for herself in the article regarding their divorce with Nelson, in general, she speaks for herself more often in *Le Monde* than she does in the *NYT*. This is important because being able to speak for oneself indicates power dynamics within the colonial discourses, where the colonized were doomed as incapable of doing this and denied this right. Moreover, it also attests to the journalistic objectives of having a more balanced story, in which different sides are heard. In such a way, *Le Monde*’s readers are exposed to various Winnie’s remarks regarding the trial and her determined claims that she “hasn’t assaulted anyone” (Feb. 13, 1991; May 15, 1991). Or yet her own take on the end of her marriage, which foregrounds her everlasting image as the fighter: “I fought for him, for his image of the leader as well as father” (Jan. 29, 1998). In general, throughout the trial coverage, which constitutes the core of reporting on Winnie, *Le Monde*’s writers pay a lot of attention to the versions of various sides, including that of Winnie herself, but also of victims (Mar. 8, 1991) or yet of the defense that utilized the fear of the spread of homosexuality as one of their principal arguments (Mar. 9, 1991).

In short, *Le Monde*’s narratives of Winnie Mandela resemble closely those of the *NYT*’s by portraying her as a controversial political figure and a flamboyant woman, whose political ideas and governing methods are sometimes of dubious value. However, despite the fact that Winnie emerges in the French newspaper, just as in the American one, as somewhat “savage” and uncontrollable in terms of her character and her political moves, *Le Monde* does not juxtapose her with the unequivocally positive image of Nelson Mandela in order to
underscore her flaws and her un-Westerness. In the NYT, Nelson became the embodiment of Western values and objectives; he was projected as the leader guiding South Africa towards democratization, and Winnie became the obstacle in his way with her political “savageness” defined as exclusively African. Here, on the other hand, by foregrounding complex realities of the newly born post-apartheid country, even questionable maneuvers of Winnie are seen as contributing to setting and testing the limits of the new political and legal order.

**Wangari Maathai.** The two articles on Wangari Maathai, a lengthy piece in 2004, and an interview in 2005, present a rather complex portrait of the Kenyan political and ecological activist. Her “official” image, well-developed in the NYT, and unequivocally accepted and praised by the West, is briefly summed up at the beginning of Remy’s story (Oct. 10, 2004). She is said to be a determined fighter who was not scarred off by the government violence; the first Kenyan woman to get a Ph.D. and get hired at the University of Nairobi (alongside with her British colleagues paid by Britain in its capacity as a former colonizer); an activist fighting for environment as well as the cause of women, and finally a founder of the Green Belt organization whose activities eventually made her Nobel Prize worthy. However, the writer does not limit himself to the sort of “official” descriptions; using poetic and colorful language, he gives insight into Mathaai’s character and recounts pieces of her personal life. For instance, talking about her divorce with her husband he recounts an anecdote that in the court Wangari Maathai jokingly admitted being unfaithful and explained that “since her husband was never able to satisfy her sexually, she had no choice but to find a lover.”

As far as her political career is concerned, the writer goes beyond her environmental activism, well-familiar to the Western readers. For instance, he tells about her unsuccessful run in the 1997 presidential elections, where she ran by playing the ethnic card of her Kikuyu tribe and racially attacking the Kenyan community originating from the Indian subcontinent, advocating for their expulsion. It is also noteworthy that her discourses regarding the
environment, as retold in the article, are quite violent, e.g., she straightforwardly suggests that fight for the protection of forests and distribution of land might result in a civil war. Finally, Wangari is also shown to be for female genital cutting and to support even forceful implementation of the practice within the Kikuyu tribe, because, as she explains, “excision is at the heart of Kikuyu identity. All of our values are centered around this practice.” In short, Remy’s portrayal of Wangari is not, like in the NYT, limited to the characteristics and values unambiguously accepted as praiseworthy by the West. Here, she is not so much a Western-like heroine, but a colorful personality, an African woman with a strong tribal identity that embraces ideas and practices that might be seen as controversial in the West.

The interview with her is mostly centered on her environmental activism, but even here, Wangari reasserts her African perspectives that depart with the Western understandings (Jan. 30, 2005). For instance, she claims that the preservation of biodiversity for Africans often come at the expense of their immediate survival. As if reproaching the West for what they have done to Africa, she suggests the following: “the preservation of diversity is first and foremost a question of development. For example, debt. How to get rid of it without the population continuing to pay it by destroying the biological diversity?” In other words, Wangari insinuates that the West could do wonders for the preservation of environment by cancelling the IMF and World Bank debts that many African countries have accumulated due to the Western-centered neoliberal policies.

In sum, while the coverage is scarce, a sketch of Wangari Maathai in Le Monde is quite different from that seen in the NYT. In the French newspaper, she emerges as a determined fighter and activist, but not as an exemplary Western-like heroine. Rather, the complexity of her political career is also shown to entail some controversies, reminiscent of those of Winnie Mandela. Moreover, Wangari Maathai remains in Le Monde’s coverage as thoroughly African, with a strong tribal identity that is at a core of her political activism. She
also embraces perspectives and values that are valid from the African point of view, but controversial, to say the least, from the Western point of view (e.g. female genital cutting, cancellation of African debt). In short, in two articles Le Monde manages to provide a fuller picture of Wangari Maathai than the NYT in six, as the latter is primarily concerned with establishing her as a Westernized heroine.

**African sportswomen in the New York Times**

Sportswomen constitute another group of African women, along with activists and political figures, who maintain a continuous presence in the NYT throughout the study period with twenty stories in total. Most of the stories are written by the sports desk, notably by Jere Longman, who at that time had been a Time’s sports writer for more than a decade. Given that most of the stories are quite straightforward reports from various sports’ competitions, it is somewhat surprising that they are heavily enmeshed with accounts of African cultural and political realities, and, more specifically, women’s roles in society. That is, African sportswomen are portrayed not as simply achieving great results, but achieving them, despite all odds.

Most sportswomen are said to have come from very moderate, often rural families. In other words, there is a sharp contrast between the prominent elite women activists and sportswomen, whose families and childhoods often paint a picture of rural Africa and hardships traditionally associated with such a life. The following stories of childhoods of two Kenyan and an Ethiopian runner are representative of a general pattern:

The sixth of nine children, Tulu herded cattle outside the village of Bekoji (Longman, Jul. 3, 1996).

The daughter of a peasant farmer, Roba ran or walked six miles to school until she was 12 (Longman, Jul. 29, 1996).

Tegla had also been born in a maize field, her mother going into labor as she worked the land. … By the time Tegla was 5, she was hauling water and firewood and infant children on her back. It is this

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ability to withstand great hardships, Loroupe believes, that makes athletes from developing nations into the best distance runners (Longman, Aug. 13, 2000).

The later world-wide achievements of these women are, then, articulated within what could be called the “American-dream-come-true” frame. Having come from poor rural families, the majority of prominent sportswomen are now seen living and training abroad and enjoying abundant material wealth that they share with their own families and girls and women of their countries. Foregrounding the ultimate American value of individualism, these sportswomen are portrayed as having achieved a better life, thanks to their own capabilities to withstand hardships, and their strong-will, and despite the numerous obstacles that they encountered.

Not only sportswomen come from moderate families and childhoods filled with physical chores rather than child-like pleasures, but they also appear as greatly determined to practice the sport of their choosing. All of them are portrayed as having had to break through the patriarchal barriers that leave little liberty for women to decide for themselves as to what their role in society is to be. The exceptional courage and determination of sportswomen is emphasized against the background of such generalized descriptions of the countries they come from: “the women of Ethiopia are often relegated to subsistent, subservient lives” (Jul. 29, 1996); “where girls are routinely married off by the age of 12” (Jun. 23, 1996); “where, like the other women of the Pokot ethnic group, she was expected to live a life of domestic servitude.” (Longman, Oct. 27, 1998). Their first great victory is, then, to have won the permission to become athletes from their own fathers.

Stories of African sportswomen further articulate the challenges to patriarchal social orders in their respective countries that their achievements pose by underlining that African women are greatly undervalued in comparison to the male athletes, whose fame preceded that of women. That is, with little training resources and encouragement, African sportswomen are on their own. After having achieved several world-wide victories and being acclaimed first by
the West and eventually by her own country, Loroupe explains the situation in the following way: ‘‘Women in Kenya have talent also’ … ‘They try to discourage women. But I wanted to show them.’ … In a country where only men are encouraged … ‘you have to encourage yourself.’’’ (Thomas, Nov. 7, 1994). The theme of competition between men and women athletes sporadically enters the debate throughout the study period. In fact, the ultimate victory for an African woman is defined as that against her fellow countrymen. For example, the debut of Tulu’s career is said to be built on a legend that “while competing in an intramural school competition, she defeated a boy” (Longman, Jul. 3, 1996); Loroupe also allegedly has “unnerving effects on Kenyan men, who risk losing to her if they are not in top form” (Longman, Oct. 27, 1998). In short, the narratives of African sportswomen’s struggles and achievements are recounted not only as physical records, but rather as victories that acquire important cultural meanings.

Nowhere is the cultural value of sports victories more visible than in the case of Algerian runner Hassiba Boulmerka. She is given an additional burden to carry – not only did she have to face the scarceness of resources and patriarchal societal norms to become a professional athlete, but she was also confronted with the strict Muslim religious conventions. The impact of Boulmerka and her victories on her country’s political debates, especially in relation to women’s roles, in the first half of the 1990s, then, cannot be underestimated. Thomas calls her a “one-woman cultural revolution” and recalls that “her 1991 world championship in Tokyo and the resulting slogan, ‘Hassiba Boulmerka did not need her father’s procuration to win the gold medal,’ has been credited with gaining full voting rights for Algerian women” (Feb. 3, 1994). Boulmerka’s current dress code, both when competing (shorts, which display nude legs) and during interviews (Western clothes and jewelry), contrasts with the early image of her competing in “head scarves, ankle-length leggings and sleeves down to her elbows” (Thomas, Feb. 3, 1994). In other words, the clothes and
accessories, such as veil, traditionally associated with Muslim women and often seen by the West as oppressive, is replaced by Boulmerka by Western clothing, as she “liberates” herself from social and religious confines of her country. This is somewhat reminiscent of colonial processes, especially in Northern Africa, where the Western attire came to stand for modernity and also for the allegedly successful colonizers’ efforts to “civilize” Africans (Alloula, 1986; De la Gueriviere, 2001; Wallach Scott, 2007).

The unequivocal NYT’s narrative of Boulmerka as the woman who has managed to free herself up from her restrictive culture and has become a “revolutionary” and a “symbol,” is somewhat undermined by her patriotism. When speaking to journalists, she seems to attempt to challenge the well-established Western tendency to vilify Muslim countries, including Algeria. Consider, for instance, the following excerpt: “What people should understand … is that not everyone is extremist in Algeria, that for every critic denouncing her appearance in shorts, there are friends and family urging her to continue” (Longman, Feb. 2, 1995). After having won a gold medal in 1992 Olympics, she is quoted to have dedicated it to “courageous Algeria,” (Bondy, Aug. 2, 1992). In short, while Algeria emerges in the Time’s story of Boulmerka as the country of patriarchal restrictions, religious fundamentalism and violence, Boulmerka herself readily challenges this negative image that draws in part on the early colonial discourses of “Dark Africa” and in part, on more recent equations of Islam with terrorism. Boulmerka is shown to live her “American dream,” but she does not for a moment give up her Algerian one – to work for more peaceful future and to fight for more Algerian women to be able to participate in sports. At the same time, given that nationalist discourses usually are of a gendered nature and tend to associate nation with masculinity (e.g., Strassler, 2004), Boulmerka’s ultimate challenge to patriarchal social order in Muslim Algeria is, then, her own self-identification with her country in the international sports arena.
Boulmerka as well as other prominent sportswomen are proclaimed to have a huge impact on their respective countries and women’s condition there. The solidarity of women is frequently emphasized even in the titles of the stories, e.g. “Ethiopia’s Tulu runs for herself and millions of sisters” (Longman, Jul. 3, 1996) or “When Loroupe runs, the women of Kenya run along with her” (Longman, Oct. 30, 1996). At the same time, athletes are positioned as successful examples to be emulated. Their positive influence is affirmed through their own accounts. After winning the New York City marathon, Loroupe tells that “The women in her Pokot tribe … thanked her for the gift she had given them: self-assertiveness. ‘You did a good job,’ Loroupe said they told her. ‘You showed that we are like the men, we can do things. We are not useless’” (Longman, Nov. 8, 1995). Similarly, Tulu is pronounced to have gone “from shepherdess to feminist” and become “a beacon for a new generation of African girls, kids, who will, if they’re lucky, find their way to a TV this summer and watch as their hero competes” (Jun. 23, 1996). In short, the sportswomen are presented as positive role models for girls and women in their countries, who have not only won great sports victories in the international arena, but have also confronted and challenged restrictive cultural and religious norms in their countries.

Africa that looms in the background of the NYT stories about African sportswomen victories, both physical and cultural, is still, following the colonial traditions, somewhat “dark.” Readers are confronted with the harsh realities of women’s lives: hard physical work, little liberty in decision-making, strong patriarchal grip that renders women into eternal minors and limiting religious conventions, even if exerted only by extremists. Yet, the individual portraits of these women challenge roles assigned to women in colonial discourses. They emerge as powerful, talented and determined, able to face and resist multiple burdens simultaneously. And while their victories with ensuing success and material wealth have relocated many of them to the West, they remain loyal and committed to their own countries.
Women artists in *Le Monde*

African women artists constitute a major category in *Le Monde*’s reporting on African women, unlike in the *New York Times*, where the same is true of sportswomen. There are 18 stories in total, about half of which are devoted to African women writers, and the rest talking about musicians and dancers. *Le Monde*’s attention to African women artists might be explained by several factors. First, because of the territorial colonization of North and West Africa, France has kept more physical ties with the African continent. African artists come to perform in France, where their audiences certainly include numerous African immigrants. In fact, most of the artists discussed in the newspaper come from the countries, formerly colonized by France, e.g. Mali, Tunisia, Morocco. Similarly, many African writers often find receptive audiences in France, especially, if they write in French.

Attention to artists, then, is not surprising. What is more interesting is an almost absolute lack of spotlight on sportswomen so extensively discussed in the American newspaper. *Le Monde* has three rather short articles about African sportswomen, two of which are about the Algerian Boulmerka and one about the first victory of the Ethiopian Tulu. Although narratives are quite limited, some of the ideas seen in the *NYT* - about difficulties in practicing sports, patriarchy, and grip of religious norms – are also briefly invoked. Such discrepancies between the two newspapers might perhaps be explained by a look at the colonial discourses crafted by France when it carried out the territorial colonization of Africa. As Spurr (1993) suggests, for the French, even back then, the idea of French culture was central to their endeavors and constituted a “rhetorical equivalent of the ideas of British character and American enterprise” (p.121). In other words, for the French, the “civilizing” process of the colonized inevitably came through their offerings of their superior culture, with
the French language being one of its most important pillars (see also Dallal, 2000). Today, cultural exchanges between France and African countries signify France’s acceptance of those cultures as equally valid and perhaps constitute an attempt at remedying past injustices. Americans, on the other hand, always more concerned with “American enterprise,” material success and individualism, remain more interested in African sportswomen, who, as concluded before, come to embody the capitalist ideology of “American dream come true.”

The first commonality among the African visual artists discussed in *Le Monde* is their international acclaim, reminiscent of that of sportswomen seen in the *NYT*. That is, a single most important criterion that renders all of these women newsworthy is their international success. Moreover, African singers mostly make it into *Le Monde*’s pages on the occasions of their performances in France, attesting to the established value of their work vis-à-vis the French audiences. The second common trend is that all of the artists discussed conceive of their music as political activism. For instance, Labess opens his story about the Malian singer Oumou Sangare not by discussing her music, but by projecting her as an untiring advocate for African women’s rights:

> She applauded the good news of the summer laughing: African Union has just signed the text in favor of women’s rights. It’s because Oumou Sangare, one of the most powerful and entrancing voices of Mali, has never stopped denouncing the injustices done to women in Africa (Sept. 27, 2003).

He concludes that her singing is a form of political activism, even rebellion. Another example is the Rwandan singer, Florida Uwera, who, as Mortaigne (Dec. 12, 1995) puts it in her headline, “Sings Rwanda before and after the horror.” The writer concludes that on the stage in Paris she “works in her own manner towards the national reconciliation” in the country torn-apart by the genocide of 1994. The Benin Angelique Kidjo is also described as composing songs “open to the world,” e.g. about women fighting against forced marriages or Africans resisting the apartheid. She is quoted to say that she believes “music can bring to Africa as much as cacao” (Mortaigne, Dec. 23, 1990). In short, what unites these artists is
their conception of music as political activism, in which advocating for women’s rights takes a central place. The political engagement that these cultural forms take seems to be particularly appreciated by *Le Monde*’s writers and audiences.

Stories about women artists also raise various identity questions and report on France’s relationship to Africans. For example, Kacimi’s story (May 2, 1992) about the international colloquium of women writers in Morocco points to the well known dilemma of the North African writers: “for Maghreb writers … the divergences primarily concern the problems of bilingualism”; the dilemma made even more conspicuous by the absence of francophone writers at the colloquium. Questions of history and identity are also particularly visible in several stories about a Tunisian singer, Amina, who immigrated to France when she was a teenager. *Le Monde*’s writers project Amina as the “girl of fusion”; e.g. Mortaigne (Nov. 30, 1990) describes her as a “Tunisian singer, Parisian woman.” In other words, Amina comes to represent an ideal example of acceptance of her Tunisian culture in France through her music that remains linked to her North African origins and concerned with the sort of Africans (as, for instance, in one her singles, where she talks about the issues of African immigrants). In another article, Mortaigne (Oct. 20, 1992) concludes that Amina “offers a positive image of cultural crossing, a mirage of possible integration” (note, however, that the journalist speaks only about possible, not consummated integration; emphasis mine). Symbolic of Amina’s place in the French society is her participation in the Eurovision song competition, where she was the first North African singer to represent France.

*Le Monde*’s writers see Amina not only as an example of successful cultural exchanges that speak about France’s changing attitudes towards their former colonies, but also as a symbol of “Arab success.” The latter, however, is defined not only as her success on stage, but also as her victory from oppressive religious norms. Writers determinedly
emphasize her religious Muslim identity, which seems to be *a priori* considered as repressive to women. Amina, thus, is projected as liberated from this oppressive religious grip and is called an “emancipated Arab woman,” embodiment of “Arabic success,” “well in her skin, not bothered by Islam or exile.” The narrative of religious liberation is particularly familiar to the French because of the ongoing political debates about the place of Islam in the secular French Republic, and the latter’s uneasiness regarding the veil that is seen as a conspicuous religious symbol. Two of the stories about Amina recount that she comes from a family of strong women; her grandmother, for instance, unsurprisingly, is said to have thrown out her veil as soon as the possibility arose (Feb. 5, 2003; Nov. 11, 1990). That is, the cliché of veil is used as a symbol of rebellion and as a proof of women’s liberation -- perfectly in line with the French colonial discourses, where unveiling African Muslim women was a priority on their civilizing agenda.

*Le Monde*’s articles about women writers also emphasize that writing for them is inevitably a form of reflection as well as a form of activism. For example, in her article about a Ugandan writer who is also a founder of the publishing house focused on women writers, Goretti Kyomuhendo, Bedarida (Mar. 18, 200) explains that “the theme of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, that a few African writers have approached yet, imposed itself on her.” Zimbabwean Yvonne Vera similarly explains that she writes novels “because fiction helps her to express her ideas about identity, nation, politics” (Bedarida, Mar. 11, 1998). The climactic example of such engaged literature is certainly seen by *Le Monde*’s writers in the figure of the South-African Nadine Gordimer, who received a Nobel Prize for her works in 1991.

Reflecting on this attribution, *Le Monde* quickly concludes that the Prize is as much for her literary achievements as it is for her contribution to the fight against apartheid in her country. In fact, the South African correspondent, Fritscher, opens his article (Oct. 5, 1991) by
criticizing the television news coverage of the event for omitting to “evoke political aspects of her work as well as her personal engagement in the fight against apartheid.” He goes on to qualify Gordimer as the “novelist activist.” Another article, written a year before her reception of the Nobel Prize, however, is a bit critical of her activism. Le Monde’s literary critic, Biancotti, concludes that:

Nadine Gordimer, up until now, knew to keep a delicate balance between the novelistic life and ideology, her characters and their ideas were inseparable. We felt the engagement without flaws, but never any sermons or news reviews. Here, we’d say she came to know too much, that she wanted to record everything that happened in South Africa in thirty years. … Characters lack life, suffocated by the accumulation of simple historical inquiries (Feb. 16, 1990).

In other words, Gordimer’s political engagement is seen as overwhelming her literary endeavors. Another article also, while not negating her contribution to the fight against the apartheid, emphasizes that it “would be unjust to reduce her works to this political engagement” (Zand, & Wauthier, Oct. 5, 1991). In short, Gordimer’s works allow Le Monde’s writers to contemplate the limits of the engaged literature.

The NYT also has two stories about Gordimer in the year of the Nobel Prize reception. Here, however, the angle is a bit different. While her worth as an outspoken activist against racism is acknowledged as is her literary achievements, she is portrayed as a rather controversial figure in South African public life. For instance, in Wren’s article (Oct. 6, 1991), she is described as a “white African,” “at odds with the establishment,” but also inaccessible to those who read in Afrikaans, either loved or hated in her own country “there are no in betweens.” The fact that she writes in English also does not go unnoticed by Le Monde that points out that the “unfortunate competitor of Nadine Gordimer in the race for Nobel” was Andre Brink who writes in Afrikaans (Fritscher, Oct. 5, 1991). In short, the choice of the language is clearly shown as political, embedded in complex colonial histories and post-colonial realities and not without consequences for the perception of a writer. The last article in the NYT dates from 1998 and is written by Gordimer herself after her
appointment as a Goodwill Ambassador for the UN Development Program. In the article, she
announces her new calling – fight against the worldwide poverty. Staying true to her identity
as a writer, she proclaims that illiteracy is one form of poverty, a “crime against humanity.”
With this article, where she outlines her new activist goals and agenda, her image as a
political activist is further crystallized and the flair of controversy that surrounded her in the
earlier articles is suppressed by her image as an activist concerned with the issues of
worldwide significance.

In short, articles about women artists in *Le Monde* attest to the vivid cultural
exchanges between France and African countries, including its former colonies. That is,
cultures of their former “others” are now unequivocally accepted as valuable, internationally
acclaimed, worth exploring. What also seems particularly worthy in the eyes of the French
newspaper is artists’ political engagement, the conception of their works as political activism,
with the starkest example being Nadine Gordimer, whose works, however, also raise
questions of the limits of the “engaged literature.” Such a focus on their political engagement
has positive consequences for portrayals of individual women artists. They emerge as
knowledgeable, concerned, engaged, hard working - with music or writing as their tools to
denounce injustices done to women or blacks, as powerful representatives of their countries
and people. Also interesting is *Le Monde*’s focus on women artists at the expense of the
coverage of African sportswomen, extensively discussed in the *NYT*. Both African
sportswomen in the *NYT* and African women artists in *Le Monde* represent stories of success
and international acclaim. The first, however, are narrated within the capitalist ideology of
“American-dream-come true” so familiar to American audiences. The latter are recounted
within the typically French perspective on culture as a powerful vehicle for progress.
African Women’s Activism in the New York Times and Le Monde

African women emerge in the articles, analyzed throughout the study period, unlike what the more conventional thought would suggest, in multiple roles – as eminent political figures and accomplished sportswomen and artists; main nurturers of the continent; hard-working laborers; fighters against Islamism, poverty, and AIDS; survivors of female genital cutting and wartime rape. African women’s agency and their abilities to mobilize have never been systematically examined and brought into attention. Thus, I would like to finish this chapter by a look at African women’s roles in politics and their organizing at various levels, as it provides yet another dimension for evaluating the newspapers’ representations of African women, and offers some insight into the complicity between news narratives and human rights discourses.

African women’s organizations in the New York Times and Le Monde. There are numerous organizations established and led by African women that come into picture in the analyzed stories of both newspapers over the study period. In fact, there are at least 37 such organizations mentioned in the NYT, and more than 50 in Le Monde. Some examples include: Ivoirian Association for the Defense of Women’s Rights; National Female Genital Mutilation Task Force in Egypt; Rape Crisis Cape Town Trust; The Barakabaho Association for rape survivors in Rwanda; The Cry of Women in Algeria, Women’s Voice in Malawi; Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development; Association “Femwrite” in Uganda; “Feminine solidarity” in Morocco etc. The visibility of such local organizations in the newspapers is significant because it effectively denies the frequently alleged helplessness and desperation of African women and demonstrates that, despite the multifarious difficulties many African women encounter, they are, in fact, capable of coping with them themselves and helping each other rather than relying exclusively on the benevolent West (even though,
some of organizations might be getting support from the West). As is well summarized in *Le Monde*’s article that discusses examples of active African women:

> Low levels of education, heavy load of domestic charges and often inequality of rights with regard to men constitute serious obstacles to have an activity that brings revenues in countries where poverty is widespread. But women on the black continent do not let the obstacles overwhelm them (Jul. 5, 2005)

The visibility of women’s organizations exposes African women’s capabilities to mobilize, but also sets some common grounds between African women and women activists around the world, including the West. In fact, on a number of occasions, local African women are seen working against the same issues as international human rights organizations concerned with them at a more global level. In such a way, the distance between African and Western women is sharply reduced, as the former just as the latter are seen fighting for equality and fairness, even though, at times, against different forms of discrimination and injustice. In fact, some of the African organizations’ names sound deeply familiar to a Western ear, e.g. *Girls’ Power Initiative* of Nigeria. In short, through mentions of various African women’s organizations, African women of different social status, education level and experiences emerge as leaders, who actively work to build different futures for themselves and their children.

Mentions of local women’s organizations serve several functions in the newspapers’ narratives. First, primarily in the *NYT*, they are frequently convoked as local sources to get the most accurate and authentic accounts of a situation (see, e.g., Perlez, Aug. 4, 1994; MacFarquhar, Aug. 8, 1996). A general trend of the *NYT* writers to rely on human rights workers has already been noted; the latter seem to be universally accepted as trustworthy sources, even though their bias, i.e. their interest in protecting civilians and advancing their particular causes, is obvious.¹⁷⁷ In other words, incorporation of human rights workers, whether international or local, into narratives as witnesses and sources, reveals writers’ complicity with their cause. That is, by quoting human rights workers, journalists at once

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grant the exposure to their cause, and also legitimize their work by acknowledging the latter as worthy both of human rights workers’ efforts and of the media attention. It is important to note, however, that the local African organizations are rarely seen to have produced any kind of written reports in contrast to the international human rights organizations, whose reports are often mentioned and sometimes serve as the basis for entire articles. That is, a lack of any documented trail of the problems they are trying to address and their efforts attest to the relative powerlessness of local organizations vis-à-vis the international ones.

_Le Monde_, on the other hand, draws much less on human rights organizations’ documentation for its articles, and women’s organizations are only rarely used as sources. Rather, in the French newspaper, they emerge as a part of a background of a given story. In other words, brief mentions of women’s activism and organizing are seen by _Le Monde_’s writers as not necessitating larger explanations, but presented simply as a natural part of daily life in African countries. For instance, in stories about women’s underrepresentation in politics, there is always a mention of feminist activists working to improve the situation (Sept. 25, 2002; Feb. 25, 2005); women are also seen as united against AIDS (Apr. 7, 1993; Sept. 14, 1999) or female genital cutting (Dec. 23, 2005). Bedarida (Jun. 16, 1993; Sept. 1, 1998) in her story about writers gathered to write about the Rwandan genocide brings up the women’s federation “Pro-Femmes” that unites 37 different organizations of victims. Even though brief and not directly related to the main plot, such an attention to women’s organizing attests to African women’s agency and capabilities to work together, and it negates the colonial mentality-inspired images of Africa caught up in a perpetual state of crisis.

In both newspapers, local organizations sometimes are an exclusive focus of a story. For example, in the _NYT_, Lacey’s article on beauty standards in Kenya (Jan. 15, 2002) focuses largely on Ms. Irene Njoroge and her established organization _Beauty without Danger_. Another example in the _NYT_ is the story about a group of former Malian circumcisers
(Rosenberg, Jul. 5, 2004), who are now leading a campaign against the practice. A French example of the latter trend is, for instance, Bedarida’s (Mar. 18, 2000) story about a group of Ugandan women writers who united to establish a publishing house “Femwrite.” Or yet an article about women’s movement against female genital cutting, the “sermon of Malicounda” in Senegal that is said to have “spread like fire,” attesting to the power of women’s grassroots efforts (Paringaux, Oct. 14, 1997)

The latter stories approximate those articles that focus not on particular women’s organizations, but discuss their mobilization and action in general. One such example is the NYT article on Nigerian women who have shut down the ChevronTexas oil plant in Nigeria in what could be seen as an act of resistance to global capitalism (Jul. 14, 2002). The article documents how a hundred fifty local village women succeeded in shutting down “most of the multinational oil company’s operations in Nigeria for almost a week” through peaceful protest. The protest leader explicates meticulously how the women occupied the plant and took workers as hostages, displaying their excellent organization and flawless communication skills. In other words, the story provides a clear-cut example of local African women’s capabilities to mobilize, act and achieve their ends. This example is all the more note worthy, as it concerns rural, not urban, educated, elite African women, as it is the first that most easily fall into the colonial clichés of helplessness, suffering and desperation. Another example of a similar kind is a story on African women participating in the peacemaking processes both in their own countries as well as across Africa, which insists on the need of even greater incorporation of women in deciding the questions of war, peace and rebuilding of communities (Crossette, May 28, 2000). In Le Monde, women are also seen as actively participating in economic or political processes (Fay, Jul. 16, 1997; Simon, Apr. 18, 1995).

The fact that the NYT spends more time on discussing in detail various organizations rather than portraying them as a part of natural order does not always have positive
consequences. For example, *The Uganda Association of Women Lawyers*, the organization working to educate rural Ugandan women about their rights, is brought up in several of Perlez’s stories (Jun. 6, 1990; Feb. 24, 1991). The descriptions of its activity do not only testify about women’s activism, but also work effectively to establish the extent of the patriarchal oppression, as for example, through their depicted efforts to convince the Ugandan women that “wife-battering is not a sign of man’s love” (Feb. 24, 1991). This is how Perlez describes one of their education sessions:

Under the shade of an ancient mango tree, Sarah Bahalaaliwo, the chairwoman of the Uganda Association of Women Lawyers, spoke about inheritance rights, property rights, and divorce law. Don’t be fooled, she told the crowd of women seated on the grass. Women can own property. … A husband, she said, may try to take all the household possessions during a divorce or separation. “He might beat you up, but don’t give in,” Mrs. Bahalaaliwo said … “Fight back.” To this, the women laughed in approval. Sitting on a bench at the edge of the crowd, a group of men who had been invited to sit in smiled nervously (Jun. 6, 1990).

The patriarchal oppression is revealed at its clearest with women being educated about their basic rights (e.g., the right to keep possessions, not to be beaten etc.) under a suspicious gaze of local men. Moreover, Ms. Bahalaaliwo’s speech is said to invoke laughter rather than being accepted seriously by participating women, which in a way designates the latter as naïve, childish and perhaps unable to fully comprehend their own plight. The settings of the educational session precisely detailed by Perlez further works to somewhat undermine the credibility of the organization and the hopes for its success; the meeting is said to take place “under the shade of an ancient mango tree,” its participants are shown to sit “on the grass.” These descriptions of the surroundings help visualize the countryside, with all the ensuing clichés applied to rural African women (they are overworked, oppressed, not well educated, poor etc.), but also demonstrate the limited resources of the organization (as they, e.g., cannot provide chairs to the attending women). The writer’s overly attention to seemingly unimportant details (tree, grass, laughter, nervous smiling etc.) suggests a bit of ridicule on the author’s part and can be taken to imply her somewhat demeaning stance towards the organization.
The same pattern is visible in the NYT Dugger’s take on local organizations fighting against female genital cutting (Oct. 5, 1996). Here, she concludes that the efforts of such “small, ill-financed” groups amount to mosquitoes attacking an elephant. In other words, Dugger’s verdict for local organizations is that of absolute inefficiency and worthlessness. Once again, however, this pattern of trivializing local grassroots mobilizing and work should not be seen as representative of the NYT’s overall position, but is rather to be attributed to the Perlez and Dugger’s individual writings.

In fact, a more general stance of the NYT towards local women’s organizations is much different from the above examples. For instance, when discussing many significant events and changes concerning women in different African countries, the contribution of local women is frequently acknowledged: “responding to growing pressure from women’s organizations” Algeria has allowed abortions to rape victims (Ibrahim, Apr. 14, 1998, emphasis mine), while Senegal, “responding to a campaign by Senegalese women” has prohibited female genital cutting (Crossette, Jan. 18, 1999, emphasis mine). In both cases, the positive changes are attributed directly to local women’s efforts (such brief invoking of women’s activism bears resemblance to the trend seen in Le Monde). Rosenthal, the journalist campaigning against female genital cutting, also underscores that the most active fight is led by local women, “grassroots workers,” as he calls them, who campaign against the ritual with determination, despite the difficulties they face (Jul. 27, 1993; Sept. 6, 1994; Jun. 13, 1995). In fact, Rosenthal goes as far as critiquing Americans for not contributing sufficiently to the African women’s efforts. He puts it in the following way: “I do not understand why more Americans, especially women, and African-Americans do not raise absolute hell about it [female genital cutting] with the U.S. and African governments” (Dec. 24, 1993). On another
occasion, he also points out that the Western organizations working against the issue are “small and underfunded” (Sept. 6, 1994), just like the African ones.\(^{178}\)

The NYT’s Kristof, similarly to Rosenthal, positions local African efforts to fight against fistulas as an example to be followed by the West. His critique is addressed more specifically to Western women’s organizations (not to Americans in general, as in Rosenthal’s case), but expresses the incomprehension that he shares with Rosenthal: “I don’t understand why most feminist organizations in the West have never shown interest in these women [suffering from fistulas]” (May 16, 2003). He, then, attempts to answer his question in the following manner: “Perhaps it’s because Westerners can’t conceive of the horror of obstetric fistulas … Or perhaps the issue doesn’t galvanize women’s groups because fistulas relate to traditional child-bearing role.” Here, his critique towards the Western women’s organizations extends beyond their failure to act vis-à-vis fistulas, by touching upon a more ideological issue: the Western feminists’ obsession with patriarchy, gender equality, sexual objectification (which would include female genital cutting) at the expense of other issues, such as fistulas, that have more to do with poverty and lack of health services rather than being a straightforward expression and proof of the patriarchal expression. It is important to note, however, that the NYT also pays ample attention to the cliché issue of female genital cutting as opposed to a few lonely stories about fistulas, most of them written by Kristof. On another note, what Kristof and Rosenthal’s narratives put forward is a juxtaposition of local African grassroots mobilizing with Western activism, the result of which is not always in favor of the latter. In such a way, not only are local African women’s organizations’ efforts

\(^{178}\) This statement can be contested, because female genital cutting, as discussed before, has been one of the issues most frequently invoked, debated and fought against by Western feminists; and today, there are a number of large international organizations that continue to work on eradicating the practice. Some of the largest international organizations fighting, among other things, against the practice are: the WHO (http://www.who.int/topics/female_genital_mutilation/en/); Amnesty International (http://www.amnesty.org/); the UN (http://www.un.org/); Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org); the UNFPA (http://www.unfpa.org/about/); Equality Now (www.equalitynow.org).
acknowledged, but the failures of international human rights’ organizations and Westerners at large are made visible.

In short, the incorporation of the examples of local African women’s organizations and activism in the newspapers’ narratives is significant because it attests to a sharp rupture with colonial imaginings and clichés about African women’s irrationality, helplessness and suffering. African women are seen as actively mobilizing, organizing and fighting for their cause, even though with differing degrees of success. When African women’s organizations are explicitly or implicitly compared to the international human rights organizations, the result is not always negative. In fact, fighting for the common cause works to effectively erase the imaginary distance between “them” and “us.” To conclude, African women’s organizing is a significant unit of analysis that reveals an important dimension of the stories about African women that otherwise could have been missed.

African women and politics in *Le Monde*. Whilst the *NYT* spends more time discussing African women’s organizations in its various articles, the French *Le Monde* has a number of stories (17) that are focused on political situations in various African countries and that underline the roles of women in politics. Most of these articles either sketch in general terms the representation of women in the political arena and their participation in democratic processes or speak about individual African women occupying political posts of significance.179 While the first type of stories leave a rather negative impression emphasizing the underrepresentation of women, the others shed more positive light on changes that are taking place in many African countries.

The first type of stories is primarily concerned with women’s underrepresentation in the political arena, and African women’s difficulties regarding their participation in democratic processes. Representative of this type of stories is Georges’ (Dec. 19, 1991) article

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179 Stories on Winnie Mandela or Wangari Mathaai are not included in this category.
about the parliamentary elections in Algeria, where, at the time of reporting, only 1% of candidates were women. The writer rightly concludes that these numbers attest to the general “social marginalization that women suffer from.” Another example is a story about Morocco, where the quota system is implemented to guarantee that 10% of seats in the parliament are occupied by women; the system which “has driven Morocco from the last to the first place in the Arab world in terms of women’s representation in Parliament” (Sept. 25, 2002). Talking about political situation in Morocco at the beginning of the 1990s, a Moroccan sociologist Mernissi (1991) notes the discrepancy between numbers of women who dare to run for political positions and those who get elected (e.g., out of 307 women who ran for municipal elections in 1983, only 36 were elected, even though a half million of women voters went to polls, p. 2). However, she warns that to interpret this relationship between massive participation of women and the small number of women elected as “as sign of stagnation and backwardness would be in accordance with the usual stereotypes” (p. 2), well established in colonial discourses. Rather, she suggests that it would be more appropriate to regard these processes as a “reflection of changing times and the intensity of the conflicts between the aspirations of women … and the resistance of men, who imagine, despite the laws in force, that power is necessarily male” (p. 2). And the changes in Morocco throughout the 1990s (increasing representation, change of the Family code etc.) seem to give support to Mernissi’s insights that women’s aspirations are gradually gaining ground.

Subtil’s (May 17, 1993) article about the Nigerian election discusses problems that women encounter in relation to participation in politics. He goes into detail explaining that many women do not have a chance to vote, and even when they do, they vote the same way as their husbands. He recounts the following story of a forty-year old woman who will vote for the first time: “She doesn’t have an identity card, but the party representatives … will identify her and she’ll be able to put a ballot of the color indicated by her husband into the ballot box.
‘I’m affiliated to my husband,’- she explains in Hausa.” By emphasizing the fact that the woman does not even have an identity card, the writer in a way suggests that she does not even exist in a public sphere, as a citizen, but only in a private sphere, defined exclusively by her relationship to her husband. Her voting is equally defined as worthless from a democratic point of view, as she is shown as not being able to make any decisions on her own. Invoking Islam as the primary reason for women absenteeism, he also vividly portrays a voting scene where a woman is portrayed as incapable of casting her vote, and needs to be given “a second chance.” In other words, by focusing on women’s incapability to participate in the elections (for religious reasons) and their inability to make decisions and cast their ballots in the right way (for reasons of inexperience), Subtil paints a bleak picture of Nigerian women, stuck in the private sphere, unable to assume their rights as citizens, and, thus, lacking in modernity and sophistication.

While women’s underrepresentation is an important issue, Le Monde’s articles for the most part fail to put situations in African countries in a larger context. There is only one instance where the Moroccan situation is compared to that in France. Beuve-Mery (Sept. 25, 2001) suggests that just as in France, a number of women representatives is lowest in the parliamentary assembly. In fact, women remain underrepresented in political arenas of many countries worldwide. The 2009 data shows that the average representation of women in parliaments in sub-Saharan Africa is 18.3%, the same as in Asia, and only 1% lower than in the European countries (excluding Nordic countries), where the average is 19.3%. The writers also fail to invoke the colonial legacies – the colonizers favored men’s entrance into cash economy and employed men for administrative positions to upkeep colonial apparatuses, while no such possibilities were provided to African women, thus, imposing and/or

180 In fact, there were only 10, 9% of women in the French parliament in 1997, and 12, 3% in 2003. See: http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/connaissance/fiches_synthese/fiche_11.asp.
strengthening the patriarchal mentalities in the public sphere (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997; Rodney, 1974). Finally, as Mernissi (1991) suggests, low representation rates are interpreted only as a sign of backwardness, and hundreds of women who dare to run for political offices, even though not elected in the end are not considered. However, these women’s political potential and activism should be regarded as a guarantee that in the future the male domination in the political arena will surely be undermined. In short, underrepresentation of women combined with voting issues and illiteracy put African women in a negative light by positioning them as behind their modern, Western counterparts. However, writers fail to provide the larger picture of historical realities as well as women’s current underrepresentation in politics worldwide, and to demonstrate that not only in Africa, but in many countries around the world, women’s participation in political decision making leaves much to be desired.

The positive touch in these articles is the mention of women’s activism to improve the current situation (but these mentions constitute only a background of the stories, as previously explained). For instance, Moroccan feminists are said to call the 10% of seats reserved to women only as a “consolation prize” (Sept. 25, 2002). Algerian feminist activists, objecting to a common practice of men accompanying women to the voting booth, are said to suggest the opening of voting bureaus reserved exclusively for women, but their calls have not been heard yet (Dec. 19, 1991). These mentions, though brief, are important as they negate the impression of stasis, and provide more positive representations of African women in these countries.

The second type of stories about women occupying various political positions of importance provides a much different picture from that seen in the previous stories. That is, the former stories emphasize the “darkness” of African women: they are seen as illiterate, unable to identify themselves in other terms than in relationship to their husbands, incapable
of voting etc. – with all of this leading to a conclusion of African women lagging behind their modern and educated Western counterparts (in line with the colonial discourses that always portrayed the colonized “other” in such a fashion). The stories in the second category, on the opposite, attest to women’s capabilities to occupy posts of significance, proving that African countries are undergoing important changes in terms of women’s roles in the public sphere.

*Le Monde* portrays a number of better or lesser known African women participating in politics of their own countries. For instance, Burundi is reported to have chosen the first woman prime minister, which is even more important, given that she represents the ethnic minority of Tutsis in her country (Jul. 10, 1993). A Moroccan academic is sent to represent her country in the EU and build relationships with the European countries (Sept. 25, 2001). Such a choice is said to have been a part of a well-thought strategy, as “by appointing a woman to the post of strategic importance … Mohammed IV hopes to reinforce the image of modernity in its country.” For similar strategic reasons, the Zimbabwean president Mugabe is said to have chosen a woman vice-president hoping to “get the support of the women’s league, particularly active during election periods.” These examples clearly come into contrast with the previous stories, where women are seen as completely eradicated from political processes and portrayed as of no interest to politicians. Here, on the other hand, women are shown as important political figures that are inevitable, for instance, for reinforcing the image of modernity of African countries in the international arena or for helping politicians stay in power by obtaining support of women (who are, thus, implied to be active participants in political decision making).

The most widely acclaimed and in the highest possible position is without doubt the Liberian Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, elected the first woman president on the African continent in 2005. She has two stories devoted to her: the first is in 1997 when she first ran against Charles
Taylor and got only 25% of votes, and the second is in 2005 when she won the presidential election. Sirleaf Johnson is defined as Monrovia’s “iron lady” and is unequivocally projected as a Westernized figure, “formed by Harvard and the World Bank,” and seeing no necessity to “excuse herself for being pro-Occidental” (Nov. 12, 2005). On the other hand, the two articles also do not try to undermine her controversial political moves, such as her support for Charles Taylor’s regime in 1990. The issue of gender and politics comes into the picture, as when her supporters are said to chant “Ellen is the man that we need” (Jul. 21, 1997). Her predecessor, Perry, who was the Head of the Council of the State of Liberia National Transitional Government in 1996, is also compared to men. Her male supporters are said to be convinced that “in any case, Mme Perry couldn’t do worse than her masculine predecessors who all failed to control the chiefs of factions” (Sotinel, Aug. 24, 1996). In other words, their authority as public figures is partly defined by their supporters in relation to the failures of male politicians; their victory is undermined, as if by suggesting that these women are only good because there are no better men.

The patriarchal beliefs that women are not apt to participate in politics (or are able to do it as long as no better men are available, as seen above) rear their ugly heads in other stories as well. For instance, an article about the Kenyan Charity Kaluki Ngilu who ran for presidency in 1997 emphasizes that throughout her campaign she did not “forget to show that she is also a housewife. She happily confessed that her favorite free time activity is to cook for her husband and their three children” (Jean, Dec. 29, 1997). Putting forward her role in the private sphere along with her recognition as a public figure is said to be a strategic choice, aimed at attracting the conservative electorate. Ngilu did not win the election but came in 5th among fifteen candidates, including Wangari Maathai who was 13th. Although the

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182 See: http://www.Afrik.com/article9024.htm
183 See: http://www.africanelection.com
patriarchal social order is projected in the articles as hindering the progress of African women’s involvement in politics, examples of women taking their chances and getting elected attest to their power to challenge and defy the restrictive norms and drive their countries towards more equitable representation of women in the political arena.

In short, although *Le Monde*’s stories about African women participating in politics are not unequivocally positive, they bring attention to women’s agency and capabilities to challenge the masculine power. They also speak about changing situation in many African countries, where women were excluded from political sphere at least since the colonization of African countries by Europeans, who favored men to run their colonial bureaucracies. And if African women emerge in certain stories as uneducated, incapable of participating in politics, and, thus, lagging in modernity in relation to their Western counterparts, it is also because *Le Monde*’s writers fail to put African women’s situations in a larger context of women’s underrepresentation worldwide.

**Conclusion**

African women seen in this chapter challenge the colonial imaginings about them; they refute the ideas of helplessness and inability to mobilize or achieve success. Some of the African women discussed in this chapter are famous worldwide for varying reasons. For instance, despite the controversies that followed Winnie Mandela throughout the 1990s, she is considered by both newspapers as a crucial political figure in post-apartheid South Africa. Kenyan Wangari Maathai preceded the former U.S. vice-president Al Gore in receiving the Nobel Prize for her environmental activism. African sportswomen are presented in the *NYT* as triumphing in the international arenas and challenging their respective countries’ understandings of women’s roles in sports and society at large. African women artists in *Le Monde* are seen as reaffirming their cultures as valuable *vis-à-vis* its former colonizer that had
previously imposed its own culture as superior. Finally, other, lesser known, African women emerge as actively participating in their countries’ political and economic processes.

It is true that in some stories, difficult realities of African women are present and rightly so. For instance, in *Le Monde*’s stories about women’s participation in politics, where women remain largely underrepresented for various reasons – poverty, illiteracy, religious norms, patriarchal mentalities etc. Yet, the issue of women’s underrepresentation is not limited to Africa, even though the writers fail to bring this larger context into their stories. Difficult situations of African women are also visible in the *NYT*’s articles about African sportswomen who most often come from rural background. These initial obstacles, however, emerge as not capable of hindering their success, this way attesting to their determination, strong-will and powerfulness to achieve their ends. In other words, African women emerge as active agents in changing their own lives as well as those of others by challenging their countries’ patriarchal structures in multiple ways and succeeding despite all of the obstacles.

Women’s organizations emerge as an important unit of analysis in this chapter. Their visibility plays a crucial role in changing the colonial discourses-inspired Western imaginings about African women. Although the *NYT* goes into more detail speaking about women’s organizations and relies to a greater extent on them as sources for their stories, *Le Monde* pays tribute to women’s activism in a different manner. For instance, by integrating women’s organizations into stories’ background or acknowledging women artists not only for their artistic endeavors, but also for their activism. In short, through emphasis on women’s organizing, African women are shown to be autonomous, capable of mobilizing and fighting for their rights on their own rather than relying on Western aid, as the colonial logic would want. In other words, through their activism and participation in political processes, African women are redefined as public, not just private figures, relegated to the private sphere, as the colonial order tended to do.
In terms of differences between the coverage of the two newspapers in relation to the themes analyzed in this chapter, it is worth pointing out to the contrast between Winnie Mandela and her former husband Nelson Mandela that the *NYT*’s coverage foregrounds. That is, Nelson is projected as a Westernized figure, as an unequivocal hero, leading South Africa towards the democratization, and Winnie is seen as a political “savage” with her savageness conceived of as thoroughly African (the image firmly anchored in the colonial mentalities).

Moreover, a similar contrast is staged between Winnie Mandela and Wangari Maathai, who is unambiguously portrayed as the Western-like heroine fighting for environment. In *Le Monde*, on the other hand, there is no such juxtaposition; Winnie’s character is still seen as quite unruly, but her flaws are not exposed in comparison to Nelson Mandela. Similarly, Wangari Maathai avoids the straightforward classification as the Westernized heroine, and is rather portrayed as a complex Kenyan public figure with some of her ideas visibly clashing with Western values. In short, *Le Monde* does not rely on simplistic binary oppositions to portray the two women that the *NYT* seems to be satisfied with.

Also interesting is the *NYT*’s attention to African sportswomen at the expense of African women artists, as is the case for *Le Monde*. All of these women have international success in common. However, while the sportswomen’s achievements are recounted within the capitalist ideology of “American-dream-come true,” African women artists are depicted within the specifically French perspective of importance of culture and cultural exchanges.
Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to examine the representations of African women in the Western media in the aftermath of the Cold War to determine when and why they are deemed newsworthy. The study analyzed four hundred forty four articles about African women in the New York Times and Le Monde. In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of women since 1990, I included all the stories about African women over the time period from 1990 to 2005. By doing so I was able to examine both conventional themes and less usual representations of African women.

Africa has been subject to Western misinterpretations and misrepresentations since the earliest ventures of Europeans into the continent. The colonial cliché of Africa as the “Dark continent,” established to justify various forms of exploitation, has been one of the most powerful colonial tropes. Colonial logic projected black Africans as uncivilized, incapable of governing themselves, lazy, and overly licentious. African women were often portrayed as victimized by the savageness of their men or cultural mores, having abnormal bodies, and being hypersexual and hyperfertile (Brantlinger, 1986; McClintock, 1995; Morgan, 1997; Pratt, 1992). Black skin color was established as the ultimate “scientific” proof of degeneracy following the pseudo-scientific theories of the 19th century (Gilman, 1985a; McClintock, 1995; Pick, 1989; Stepan, 1985). Northern Africans, on the other hand, were subject to religious “othering” (the rhetoric of which was reinforced by the 21st century’s “War on terrorism” (Abu-Lughod, 2006; Kumar, 2010)). They were imagined as part of the “Mysterious East”: the place of ruthless religion, exoticism and sexually submissive women in harems (Allaloua, 1995; De la Gueriviere, 2001; Said, 1994). Most existing studies of the Western media’s representations of Africans suggest that the media most often turn to covering Africa in times of crises, and that they continue recycling these colonial stereotypes, thus reinforcing the image of Africa as doomed to perpetual misery and suffering (Abdullahi,
After the initial analysis, stories were grouped under two major thematic categories: articles that covered conventional themes, as indicated in the existing literature and colonial discourses (chapters 4, 5, 6, 7), and articles that covered less expected topics (chapters 8 and 9). In fact, somewhat contradicting the existing literature on the Western media representations of Africa, only about half of the entire coverage (50% for the *New York Times*, 43% for *Le Monde*) turned out to be stories about wars, crises and other unfavorable conditions. These stories were grouped under the first category of “Conventional themes of suffering.” The rest of the articles, which portrayed African women in more mundane matters and which contained more unconventional images, were discussed in the chapters: “African women and their daily lives” and “Powerful African women.”

In the stories within the category of “African women outside crises,” African women are represented, among other things, as interested in fashion, participating in politics, succeeding as sportswomen and human rights activists. African women’s lives and situations that are revealed in these types of stories are not always positive and easy. However, they do not represent short-term crisis situations, as these are understood by the Western media, which often limit themselves to sporadic attention to the biggest events on the continent, such as wars, famines, or outbreaks of epidemic, that are given intense coverage over a short period of time. The harshness of conditions of African women’s lives (e.g., poverty and patriarchal norms are recurring themes) that frequently underwrite these stories more or less adequately reflect the realities on the grounds for many rural African women. However, the tendency of both analyzed newspapers to focus on rural African women going about their daily lives (as opposed to urban, educated, upper social class women) runs a risk of being read as an over-generalized representation of *all* African women. This focus also adds to the stereotypical
image of African women as poor and suffering that are to some extent neutralized by the stories about successful and prominent African women (Winnie Mandela, Wangaari Maathai, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, sportswomen and artists) or African women’s organizing.

Stories that covered issues of great importance to African women, e.g. reproductive health, but which rarely draw the Western media’s attention, were also included in the second category. Articles about fistulas are the best example. When a handful of stories about this serious reproductive health condition in both newspapers is compared to the abundant coverage of female genital cutting (stories about genital cutting represent the largest thematic category in the New York Times), which was considered to represent “a conventional theme of suffering,” it becomes clear that the latter comes at the expense of the former, and with no apparently good justification. Consequences of fistulas, both medical and social, are often much graver than those of genital cutting, yet attention to the issue remains scarce and there is little outcry comparable to the heated discussions about female genital cutting. Genital cutting has been a staple issue in Western confrontations with African ways of living and a confirmed means of “othering” African women. Western uneasiness with the persistence of the practice (especially visible in the New York Times), which is in fact condemned by many African women’s organizations and individual women, attests to the power of colonial discourses and clichés because it is there that female genital cutting was established as the ultimate deviation from the “norm.” The practice also continues to cause titillation and controversy, as it is now no longer confined to geographically distant locations, but is rather practiced by African immigrants living in the U.S. and in France. These countries, thus, must redefine their stance toward the practice by finding ways to re-affirm their superiority, as is visible in Le Monde’s stories about genital cutting trials.

In short, there are several major themes that fall outside of the typical crisis coverage: rural African women and their resourcefulness surviving in conditions of poverty and
patriarchy; reproductive health and inadequate health care facilities; African women as political agents; successful African women (sportswomen, artists etc.); African women’s organizing.

**Similarities in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde* coverage**

A common thread running through the coverage of both newspapers is the omission of a larger political and historical context that would better contextualize situations and events in Africa and, more specifically, would expose France and America’s role in African events. For instance, in stories about AIDS, the negative effects of the World Bank and IMF policies in Africa and the role these have played in destroying health care structures is never a part of the discourse in either of the newspapers. Surely, AIDS is not directly caused by poverty, but studies show that people struggling for survival are more susceptible to contracting the virus through a combination of factors: lack of access to healthcare, poor nutrition levels, increased likelihood of migration, reduced status of women. Eozenu (2008) terms the impact of neo-liberalism in Africa in relation to poverty and the spread of H.I.V. as a crime of globalization. The *New York Times* and *Le Monde* nevertheless completely forego this side of the story, thus, remaining complicit with Western political and economic elites. This type of bias is representative of what Hafez (2007) calls the macro-level distortions arising from the mutual interactions of politics and the media.

Another example of such an omission is the absolute silence regarding the role that Western countries and the U.S. in particular have played in bringing Islamist forces in Northern Africa into power, mostly through the political and military maneuvering in the Cold War era. Thus, while African Muslim women’s suffering is displayed in detail, especially in the *New York Times*, the part played by the West in bringing this suffering upon these women is never exposed. A final example of a slightly different nature is the above-mentioned unceasing outcry about female genital cutting that is regarded as a barbaric
practice. It is, however, never put into perspective by reminding readers that in 19th century Europe and America genital cutting was prescribed as a treatment for “hysterical” women. In an editorial in the *British Medical Journal*, Ronan Conroy (2006) suggests that before criticizing traditional practices elsewhere, Western countries should first deal with the ethical implications of various “cosmetic” genital surgeries performed in rich Western countries. Additionally, such a scrutiny of sexual gender relations in Africa creates a false impression that only “other” women suffer from sexist oppression, whereas Western women are liberated. This, however, is far from being true: a French woman is killed by an intimate partner every four days,184 and, even worse, on average three American women are murdered by their intimate partners every day.185

Apart from frequent omissions of crucial socio-political, economic or historical context that are common in both newspapers, American and French representations of African women differ in substantive and interesting ways that have to do with the preoccupations and histories of the two countries and demographic makeup of the audiences each newspaper addresses. As expected from the outset, as a result of its experiences with territorial colonization, geographical proximity and significant numbers of African immigrants from their former colonies, *Le Monde*’s coverage is overall somewhat more subtle and sophisticated in breaking away from the colonial ways of narrating and in presenting a more accurate picture than that of the *New York Times*. In what follows, I first discuss the unconventional images of African women in both newspapers and then look in more detail at the differences in the coverage of the two newspapers. I finish up by providing some tentative guidelines for improving reporting on African women.

Unconventional images

In conventional thought about the Western media’s images, African women are rarely thought of as active leaders, contributors to their countries’ progress, successful politicians and businesswomen. However, as the study demonstrates, such images are in reality not so rare. Stories that were grouped under the categories other than the “Conventional themes of suffering” amount to 50% in the New York Times, and 61% in Le Monde. Even when the articles covering the gloomiest issues, notably fistulas, are subtracted out of these stories, a solid 36% for the New York Times, and 42% for Le Monde stories remain, and the latter can be qualified as stories containing, if not unequivocally optimistic and positive, then at least more complex representations of African women. These types of stories nevertheless do not measure up to the conventional images of suffering in terms of their dramatic and titillating effect, and this can perhaps at least partially explain their lesser relative visibility both in mainstream discourses and in academic inquiries.

In both newspapers, many articles, dealing with both crisis and daily life situations, are underwritten by harsh patriarchal conditions and poverty that constitute the background of stories about mainly rural African women. This in many instances reflects quite well the realities on the ground. Moreover, these conditions do not necessarily cast African women in an unfavorable light. Quite the opposite, both newspapers acknowledge African women’s importance in and contributions to their countries’ development. African women emerge, especially persistently in Le Monde, as hard workers, primary breadwinners and successful participants in a cash economy due to novel and adapted banking structures. In short, African women are shown as active agents contributing to their countries’ economies despite multiple obstacles in their way.

Another example of African women’s independence and agency is stories about prominent African women and ordinary women’s organizing. Winnie Mandela is the most
visible black African woman in both newspapers (38 articles in the *New York Times*, 8 front-page stories; 16 articles in *Le Monde*, 1 front-page story). Her remarkable visibility is certainly due to an important role that she played in South-Africa’s post-apartheid politics, but even more so due to her controversial personality and political maneuvering. In the *New York Times* especially, Winnie Mandela gradually becomes cast as a “political savage” in opposition to her Western-oriented-and-adulated former husband, although such an opposition is never projected in *Le Monde*. Despite the controversies surrounding Winnie Mandela, she clearly represents an unconventional image of a black African woman as an untiring fighter with a spectacular political career. The stories of Wangaari Maathai, a Kenyan ecologist and fighter for women’s rights as well as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, or Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, the president of Liberia, also add to these unconventional images of strong and powerful African women who have achieved world-wide recognition and success.

If the previous examples of success and notoriety can be regarded as exceptional and explicable by the upper social status of women in question, there are other types of stories containing similar ideas of success of women who come from more modest backgrounds. For example, *Le Monde* has a handful of stories about various ordinary women participating in political decision-making through voting or running for political offices. The *New York Times* devotes quite a bit of attention to African sportswomen, whose careers are portrayed through what I have called the framework of “American dream come true.” That is, with little exception, African sportswomen are shown to have come from moderate backgrounds and childhoods filled with physical chores and limited expectations for their future roles in society. Consequently, their successes in international sports arenas are so much more spectacular: i.e., these women are portrayed as succeeding in spite of all the odds. And their efforts and victories bring them material wealth and recognition, in line with the rhetoric of the American dream.
Le Monde, on the other hand, pays little attention to sportswomen, concentrating instead on African women artists, many of whom perform regularly in France. These women are often presented as both artists and activists, defending various causes through their music or writings. Ultimately, for Le Monde, these artists seem to represent examples of successful reconciliation between the French culture and the cultures of the “other” that had long been thought of as inferior. For the French carrying out territorial colonization of Africa, the idea of French culture and language as gifts to the inferior “others” was vital, as was the idea of enterprise for Americans (Spurr, 1993, p. 121). Therefore, today, cultural exchanges between France and African countries signify France’s acceptance of those cultures as equally valid and perhaps constitute an attempt at remedying past injustices. Americans, on the other hand, always more concerned with “American enterprise,” material success and individualism, remain more interested in African sportswomen, who, as concluded before, come to embody the capitalist ideology of the “American dream come true.”

Another interesting dimension in analyzing African women’s representations is their ability to mobilize, which has never been systematically examined before. Contrary to the conventional wisdom about African women’s helplessness and suffering, their organizing is in fact quite visible in both newspapers. There are at least 37 such African women’s organizations mentioned in the New York Times and more than 50 in Le Monde. Sometimes, African women’s organizations are the subject of the story. At other times, they simply constitute the background of the story (a pattern particularly manifest in Le Monde). Finally, they are also sometimes summoned as sources of information, even though they can only rarely compete with more powerful and better recognized Western-based human rights organizations in that respect. As a result of greater resources, the latter produce more written reports that the New York Times seems to rely on to a particularly great extent. African women’s organizations and their activism is nevertheless a significant unit of analysis that
brings forward images that attest to a sharp rupture with colonial imaginings and clichés about African women’s irrationality, helplessness and suffering. African women are seen as actively mobilizing, organizing and fighting for their cause, even though with differing degrees of success.

A final example that adds to the repertoire of less unconventional images of African women is stories about beauty and fashion. These articles, even if not very numerous, add an important, if lighter, dimension to the images of African women, whom Westerners are allegedly so used to seeing starving, dying and overworked. First, these stories project African women sharing in universal women’s concerns of beauty and fashion, thus erasing the imaginary distance between “us” and “them”; even though the principal underlining theme in the articles remains the differences between Western and African beauty concepts, and this is especially true for the New York Times. In Le Monde, on the other hand, these types of stories rather underscore fashion’s capabilities of empowering African women, be it through economic development of the African fashion industry, where they participate as creators, models or consumers, or through fashion choices that reassert a unique African identity.

In short, at least half of the articles analyzed in the study contained images that can be considered as unconventional when evaluated against the colonial clichés and stereotypes as well as the existing literature that seems to believe in the continuity of these misrepresentations. Moreover, even stories that discussed subjects of “suffering” often included references to women’s courage (e.g., rape survivors in the New York Times), women’s organizing (e.g., fight against AIDS or genital cutting) or, in a more general fashion, to the changing situations of African countries that are improving women’s lives (economic development, changing legal frameworks etc.). To conclude, African women’s images and representations are not limited to times of crises. And when a greater thematic range of stories
is considered, African women’s representations prove to be more varied and include images of their agency and success, alongside with more conventional and gloomy representations.

**African women in Le Monde**

A comparison of the two newspapers’ coverage reveals that *Le Monde*’s discourses about African women are somewhat more subtle and sophisticated than those of the *New York Times*. Clearly, historical experiences of territorial colonization, geographical proximity and significant numbers of African immigrants living in France must account for these differences, which is not surprising. After all, a lot of *Le Monde*’s stories focus on its former colonies, notably on the Northern African countries that played a particularly important role in French colonial endeavors. The findings also show, however, that this more sophisticated coverage, including the attempts at dismantling colonial clichés, quickly deteriorates when the issues discussed are perceived as having political currency within France. I will first discuss some positive patterns in *Le Monde*’s reporting, and then turn to its drawbacks.

The greater familiarity of its readers with African history and politics might explain the greater complexity in at least some of *Le Monde*’s stories. First, the newspapers’ journalists use various terms with greater precision. For instance, in abundant references and discussions of the headscarf, *Le Monde* distinguishes between its numerous variants: *hijab*, *haik*, *voile*, whereas in the *New York Times*, the headscarf is always reduced to the singular veil. *Le Monde*’s writers also note the politicization of the headscarf in the hands of Islamists versus its adoption as a matter of personal choice. Even more importantly, *Le Monde* distinguishes between Islam the religion and Islamism as a political movement, and uses systematically the term “Islamists” to discuss the political uprisings in African Muslim countries. The *New York Times*’ failure to do so causes confusion and adds to the vilification of Islam *per se*. 
Moreover, while the opposition to Islamism is a core thread in *Le Monde*’s articles about the situation in Algeria throughout the 1990s, the stories gain in complexity by explicating the situation and roles of Algerian women with recourse not only to religious, but also to political and economic factors. Furthermore, in contrast to the images of suffering Algerian women in the *New York Times*, the dominant image of Algerian women throughout *Le Monde*’s narratives is that of fighters. The latter image is substantiated through references to the historical experiences of Algerian women’s participation in the Independence War against the French. In short, *Le Monde*’s articles about the Algerian War detail the complex situations of Algerian women, whose rights are being restricted by Islamists and by the general situation of political and social instability and violence. Writers reject a simplistic vilification of Islam, which emerges as the main explanation for Algerian women’s plight in the *New York Times*, and rather resort to more intricate and realistic explanations in nationalist, patriarchal and political terms. It is clear, however, that such a complexity is almost mandatory, given the importance of France’s historical and political ties with Algeria.

Another example of *Le Monde*’s diverging perspective, when compared to that in the *New York Times* and the one that is less directly influenced by its historical experiences, is the coverage of Nigerian stoning cases. In the *New York Times*, the cases of two women sentenced to death by stoning under *Sharia* law are interpreted and projected as examples of the ruthlessness and barbarism of Islam. In *Le Monde*, on the other hand, the focus is away from suffering and on questions such as whether such treatment is constitutional in Nigeria’s secular state. In other words, it represents an interesting alternative way of interpreting the issue and an attempt at dismantling the negative Western stereotypes related to Islam and Muslim people.

*Le Monde*’s coverage of African women includes several instances of criticism toward Western countries’ attitudes and actions directed at Africa, even though these are neither
numerous nor systematic. For example, Stephen Smith, at the time *Le Monde*’s Africa editor, who wrote several stories about the Nigerian stoning cases warns his readers in a front-page story that solidarity and support from Western countries for the two Nigerian women is far from sincere and unconditional, and is rather influenced by strategic political interests. His skepticism is resonated in two op-ed pieces on the subject. The writers expose Western hypocrisy by suggesting that Saudi-Arabian women or handicapped Palestinian children are just as worthy of support and help as the two Nigerian women in question. *Le Monde* also contains a unique example of a critique towards the Western pharmaceutical companies’ politics of selling AIDS drugs to Africa in the 1990s. Neither of the newspapers, however, dares to further explore this controversial issue that has had a huge negative impact on the spread of the AIDS epidemic on the continent. Such critical stances are laudable, but rare and sporadic, attesting to the fact that in the majority of cases, *Le Monde* remains complicit in providing a story about African women compatible with the one created by the French (and by extension, Western) elites.

*Le Monde*’s stories are written by a variety of staff writers and op-ed contributors. The latter include many scholars and representatives of non-governmental organizations, who often bring more academically-grounded and better-contextualized perspectives on issues. Another outstanding feature of the newspapers’ stories is the fact that many African voices are heard in the articles through direct quotations of African women themselves. The latter is significant for two reasons. First, it constitutes a first-hand testimony that is as credible and as authentic as it can possibly be. Second, from a colonial discourse perspective, it tips the power dynamics in favor of African women, who are granted the ability to speak for themselves rather than being spoken about and on behalf of. *Le Monde*’s stories also

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186 Stephen Smith currently teaches African studies, Cultural anthropology and Public policy at Duke University, NC. See: http://africanarguments.org/author/smiths/
strengthen the impression of African women’s agency through frequent concrete examples of African women’s organizing and actions on the ground.

Despite the aforementioned positive features of *Le Monde*’s writings of African women, the coverage rapidly deteriorates when the issues discussed are perceived as having political stakes for the French. For instance, while the overall reporting about female genital cutting is quite subtle and balanced, the tone quickly changes in the stories about female genital cutting trials in France. In these stories, the practice is unequivocally projected as incompatible with the values of the French Republic. Excisors or parents at trial are, in turn, presented as incapable of civilization and progress, in line with the “darkest” colonial clichés.

Similarly, when high fertility rates in certain African countries come into the picture (hyperferility as somehow dangerous and in need of control being a pure colonial construct), these are unambiguously projected as a potential threat of immigration: “increasing crowds of potential immigrants stamping behind the closed doors” (Herzlich, Mar. 15, 1991). Consequently, African women are portrayed as incapable of controlling their fertility. Moreover, in sharp contrast to the rest of the newspapers’ stories, African women are conspicuously silent in articles that deal with their fertility. Staff writer Rolland-Pierre Parringaux concludes that given that contraception has not been able to sufficiently restrict the birth rates in Africa, the final solution of AIDS remains: “Why all of this fuss surrounding family planning if AIDS must decimate the populations?” (Mar. 27, 1990). This proposition not only draws on colonial misconceptions, but also seemingly crosses any ethical boundaries of journalistic writing.

Such failures on *Le Monde*’s part to maintain more sophisticated and nuanced reporting in matters that France has direct stakes in might be explained by the traditional proximity of the French journalistic field to politics. The fact that its reporting remains quite political in nature is also attested to by some important thematic omissions. For instance, the
conspicuous invisibility of Rwandan rapes, which are extensively discussed in the *New York Times*, seems to be best explained by France’s controversial role in the Rwandan genocide. Moreover, the above cited examples of writings that seem to overstep ethical boundaries are perhaps to be attributed to the nature of French journalism that has been defined as “journalism of interpretation” more than “journalism of observation,” and where there is less formal separation between facts and values, and thus, more liberty to express opinions, and judgment (Albert, 2008).

**African women in the *New York Times***

The *New York Times* coverage of African women is not without flaws either. The newspaper’s stories are often more simplistic than those of *Le Monde* and rely on clichéd images and binary oppositions borrowed from colonial imaginings. The *New York Times*’ writers often use unscrupulously politically-charged terms and African women are less frequently included as sources of information. Another conspicuous feature of the *New York Times* narratives is their ego-centric perspective that is not discernible in *Le Monde*. American expertise is projected as of great value, and often as the only knowledge worthy of attention. For example, a majority of stories about AIDS concentrate on medical research and drug trials with the U.S. as a leading expert in the matter. In these stories, African women, as a result, become the objects of Western scrutiny with no faces, voices, or power of decision. Pregnant women with H.I.V./AIDS are particularly subjected to “expert” judgment because of the mother-fetus transmission. Reminiscent of Saartie Bartmaan’s trials, these women are paraded before audiences, while their bodies, sexual habits and mothering practices are endlessly discussed by the echelons of American (and Western) experts. Absolutely no place is left for African voices, opinions or expertise, which, as a result, is implicitly suggested to be nonexistent.
Somewhat similar in that respect are stories about Rwandan rape survivors and Americans who contributed to the proceedings of the Arusha tribunal and to getting wartime rape recognized as a war crime in its own right. While the efforts of these individuals are laudable, a focus on them and an exultation over their heroism comes at the expense of representing the experiences and opinions of the African women in question. In fact, Rwandan rape survivors are very rarely seen as witnesses in the tribunal that decided the fate of the war criminals, although it is obvious that their role was crucial in the decision-making process. In other words, by eliciting American contributions to achieving justice in Rwanda, the New York Times seems to suggest that it is only the West that is able to find a solution to the Rwandan genocide and help the Rwandan “rape victims.”

In its coverage of various subjects, The New York Times relies systematically on reports of international human rights organizations. These are evidently regarded as credible and trustworthy sources. Moreover, it is clear that in certain circumstances, such as in wars or humanitarian crises, access to the locations and populations is severely restricted, and human rights workers can be the only source of information on the ground. However, the writers never question the agendas of these organizations and the plausible impact these agendas might have on the information and discourses produced. Moreover, the New York Times writers seem to resort to international human rights organizations without giving much thought to whether African organizations could be summoned instead. For instance, when reporting on Nigerian stoning cases, the newspaper resorts primarily to Human Rights Watch for facts on the cases. Yet, it never attempts to include Nigerian sources, even if they are readily available. The Nigerian feminist human rights organization BAOBAB has been relentlessly fighting for women’s rights and has written about the stoning cases of Husseini and Lawal, but its expertise does not seem to be of interest to either the New York Times or Le Monde. In such a way, by systematically relying on international human rights organizations
rather than African sources, the New York Times especially strengthens the impression of its ego/Western-centric approach, and reaffirms the power dynamics established within colonial discourses.

Another feature of the New York Times narratives is its scrutinizing gaze towards African women’s bodies that finds its equivalent in colonial endeavors. In its myriad of stories about female genital cutting, the definition of the practice and cut genitals are always graphic and intended to shock. Even doctors are reported to react in the following ways: “Oh, my God, what happened to you? This is the worst thing I’ve ever seen” (Dreifus, Jul. 11, 2000) or yet: “Oh my gosh, what am I seeing?” (Dugger, Dec. 28, 1996). African women who have undergone the procedure are paraded and discussed by American “experts” who more or less unanimously proclaim the savageness of the ritual. This type of voyeuristic gazing quite detached from human rights concerns, comes close to reproducing the colonial logic of designating normalcy as that which is acceptable to the West, and deviance as that which digresses from that norm. And the cut genitals are unequivocally abnormal genitals, the deviation from the norm. Similarly, in stories about AIDS, women’s bodies are also the focus of attention, including their breasts, as African women are repeatedly shown to breastfeed for unusually (for the Western world) long periods of time. AIDS in Africa is in itself conceptualized as a disease of “sexual perversion,” which in turn brings forward clichéd images of the abnormality of African sexual relations: polygamy, young marriage age, the practice of drying the vagina etc. In other words, just as early European colonizers, the New York Times writers, and by extension, the newspaper’s readers, seem to continue being fascinated by African bodies, often designated as deviant, and by their sexual practices, regarded as exotic and abnormal.

Finally, the New York Times’ coverage is distinguished by several conspicuous examples of advocacy journalism that does not find its equivalent in Le Monde. Advocacy
journalism in this instance is defined as an individual writer’s more or less explicitly 
proclaimed engagement with a particular issue that she advocates for and writes about for a 
prolonged period of time. This type of advocacy journalism mostly manifests itself in the 
editorial pages, e.g., Nicolas Kristof’s stories about rapes in Darfur or Andrew Rosenthal’s 
columns about female genital cutting are the cases in point. However, Cecilia Dugger’s 
campaign on behalf of the Togolese Fauziya Kassindja in the newspaper’s metro section is 
also representative of this advocacy trend. The intentions of this type of advocacy journalism 
are always benevolent: to draw attention to the plight of raped women, to condemn the 
negative consequences of genital cutting or to advocate for granting political asylum to a 
woman who has escaped from genital cutting. However, the implications for the discourses 
produced are more ambiguous and difficult to evaluate.

In order to achieve the sought-after result of alerting readers to the gravity of a given 
situation and, in the best case scenario, to have them act, writers utilize the emotional and 
visual appeal of images by pushing them to their extremes. Thus, Kristof’s reliance of detailed 
and personalized accounts of rape or Rosenthal’s insistence on graphic depictions of genital 
cutting that he consistently insists is carried out “without anesthesia.” As a result, Africa and 
African women most often emerge at their worst: suffering, helpless, desperate, and doomed 
to a miserable existence in the “dark” continent. Whether the means always justify the ends is 
difficult to determine, although, as discussed in the chapter on female genital cutting, the 
favorable resolution of Kassindja’s asylum plea is sometimes attributed to media 
campaigning.

Kristof’s stories differ greatly from those of Rosenthal. Kristof’s on-the-ground-
reporting is characterized by personal and authentic accounts, and his attempt to include 
African women who are being reported about through quoting them. Rosenthal, on the other 
hand, in his columns about female genital cutting never quotes a single African woman who
has undergone the procedure. In other words, in his stories, these women exist only as prototypes embedded in the reality created exclusively by the writer, whose privileged position vis-à-vis his subjects is more than evident. Consequently, the issue of speaking on behalf of the “inferior” “other,” firmly established in colonial discourses, emerges with full force. Another example subject to a similar concern is Dugger’s stories about Kassindja that rarely include the young woman’s own accounts. In short, by taking a certain cause on, but excluding those concerned by this cause most directly, the journalists/advocates run the risk of perpetuating the colonial order of things through speaking about and on behalf of the “silenced other.” In order to be most effective, then, advocacy journalism should be practiced in cooperation with African women and their organizations.

Furthermore, there is a fine line between advocacy journalism and a writer’s getting caught up in colonial clichés. This is demonstrated by instances where writers reinterpret facts on the ground and/or African women’s own voices and opinions to fit the “grand narratives” that they aim to produce. For example, Rosenthal seems puzzled by the fact that despite its horrific nature, genital cutting is perpetuated. His explanation for this is that of internalized oppression and worse – sheer stupidity. He pronounces, in an over-generalizing manner, that the practice “is rooted in superstitious contempt of women so deep that its victims, their mothers and daughters pay homage to the knife that mutilates them” (Jul. 27, 1993). Dugger also describes the girls who have recently undergone the procedure either as having accepted it without any questioning: “it’s natural,” or as childish and naïve, only able to comment on what happened to them with a “giggle” (Oct. 5, 1996). In other words, writers aim to reinterpret and rationalize the facts on the ground in such a way that it does not contradict their own perspectives. In short, as Said (1997) suggests in his study of *Covering Islam*, the Western media have systematically failed to report about people from other cultures in their
own voices. Instead, reporting is filtered through ethnocentric biases, and Rosenthal’s reporting on genital cutting is a case in point.

Some of the worst examples of this type of reinterpretation can be found in Jane Perlez’s writings. The New York Times African correspondent at the time of the study, Perlez wrote a number of stories about African women, primarily about women’s daily lives. However, despite her laudable focus on African women outside crisis situations, Perlez’s writings are ridden with colonial clichés and stereotypes. When she comes upon examples of African women’s agency and courage that seems to contradict her ethnocentric perspective of their helplessness, suffering and patriarchal oppression, she does not hesitate to reinterpret facts and African women’s statements. For example, in one of her stories, Perlez frames polygamy within the familiar Western popular culture image of the female cat-fight by concluding with an unjustified generalization that “often the wives in a polygamous marriage are hostile towards each other” (Feb. 24, 1991). She maintains her position, despite the counterevidence that she explains in pragmatic terms: “perhaps as survival instinct, Mrs. Kawude and Mrs. Kasoga [the two wives of the same man] are friendly, taking turns with Mrs. Naigaga [the third wife] to cook” (Feb. 24, 1991). In short, Perlez apparently feels the necessity to speak on behalf of these African women in order to explain their “irrational” friendliness towards each other that she presents as beyond Western comprehension.

In another article (Apr. 20, 1991), Perlez tells the story of a young Rwandan woman who has decided to have a child despite having AIDS. Throughout the article, it is made clear that Syapata’s pregnancy was not accidental, even though Perlez seems to have a difficult time accepting her statements at their face value. For instance, she retells Syapata’s decision in the following fashion: “As Miss Syapata describes it, her decision to have her baby boy … was planned,” in such a way emphasizing that this version of the truth is only valid from Syapata’s point of view. While Perlez portrays the Rwandan woman in question as
independent, smart and capable of reasoning, untainted by the slightest shadow of victimization or suffering that frequently goes hand in hand with portrayals of AIDS, the writer does not appreciate Syapata’s decision to lead a normal life and continue having children. She unilaterally pronounces that Syapata’s “rationale is the kind of bad news that family planning experts have been hearing for the last two decades.” In such a way, the seemingly positive portrayal of Syapata is re-situated by Perlez in her overall ethnocentric frame of “overpopulation” and AIDS. By systematically reinterpreting African women’s agency and attitudes to fit her own understandings of the situations, Perlez unassumingly takes on the position of a privileged observer and speaker on behalf of the “inferior” “other” granted to her by colonial logic. And in the course of doing so, she discredits African women’s voices and stories.

In short, advocacy journalism sheds needed light on selected issues. Moreover, through the engagement with certain issues, writers can be expected to become experts on them. The consequences nevertheless remain dubious, especially from the point of view of perpetuating colonial discourses. Graphic reporting aimed at eliciting emotional responses often casts African women in a less than favorable light: as suffering, helpless, irrational etc. Even more serious are the consequences of “silencing” African women and taking a position of speaking on their behalf by reinterpreting their actions or opinions to fit the ethnocentric narratives that writers try to construct. These types of biases in the coverage best exemplify what Hafez (2007) calls micro-level distortions. Certain Le Monde stories are also subject to such micro-level distortions arising from individual writers’ assumptions and biases, as noted before. However, with the exception of several op-ed pieces that call for solidarity with Algerian women, there are no articles that exemplify advocacy journalism.
How to improve coverage on African women

There is a worrisome trend toward a less permanent presence of the Western media in foreign locations. Mostly due to financial considerations, media outlets cut foreign bureaus and correspondents and rely instead on “parachuting” journalists into various locations at the moment of breaking news (Halimi, Vidal & Maler, 2006; Shanor, 2003; Sparrow, 1999). In such circumstances, reporting about any country is extremely difficult, and reporting in a knowledgeable and accurate way about African countries and people becomes almost impossible. First, the sheer size and variety of countries and populations, with complex webs of local and international politics, makes the task challenging. Second, Western histories of involvement with Africa that have resulted in derogatory colonial discourses and patterns of imagining and representing African people are difficult to break away from. In short, often, the easiest way of recounting complex situations to French or American audiences in a limited space and time is through colonial clichés and stereotypes (Hawk, 1992). Said (1997) concludes in his study of the American media’s coverage of Iran that as a result of limited means and a small number media outlets that report from the ground abroad, “Americans have scant opportunities to view the Islamic world except reductively, coercively, oppositionally” (p. 55). The same conclusion can be applied to reporting about African countries as well.

As the study confirms, these stereotypes are alive, especially in the New York Times. Their reappearance and persistence seems to be conditioned by several factors. First, there are the macro-level distortions (Hafez, 2007) prompted by interactions between politics and the media. These macro-level distortions in both newspapers are manifest as omissions of crucial historical and political contexts, which lead to simplistic and reductionist narratives. Le Monde’s reporting seems also, at times, particularly susceptible to the strategic political implications of the issues discussed in which case the newspaper seems to adopt and follow the official government line. Second, the dwindling resources for foreign reporting, which
means journalists are often ill-prepared to report on Africa, also play a role. Finally, there are also micro-level distortions occurring due to individual writers’ biases. These biases can be different in nature, but they seem to systematically point out to the persistence of the ethnocentric lens through which events and people in Africa are filtered through before being presented to Western readers.

In order to improve the coverage about African women and African countries in general, the Western media should, first of all, continue, to the greatest extent possible, providing stories about Africa outside of times of crisis and breaking news events. This in itself can significantly improve the conventional thinking about African people and break away from clichéd images of suffering and desperation. Second, there is an obvious need for more contextualization in terms of world power dynamics and historic circumstances and for a more critical approach towards the role of Western countries in African events. Moreover, journalists should work in close cooperation with the African women they report on and grant them opportunities to speak for themselves to the greatest extent possible. Writers should also favor African organizations and people as their sources whenever possible instead of readily opting for international organizations. This could guide journalists in their selection of stories, and presumably drive them away from clichéd topics, such as genital cutting, that have been so over-reported when compared to other important issues. It would also help them avoid reporting stories from ethnocentric perspectives. This should also be facilitated if journalists report about the issues from the ground, and not from their offices in Western countries. Yet, even if all of these conditions are met, this might not guarantee that colonial stereotypes and clichés do not enter into the picture, if journalists do not take into account African countries’ histories, and political and economic developments.
References


Curriculum Vitae

DOVILE RUGINYTE

EDUCATION

09/2004-01/2011 Ph.D., School of Communication, Information and Library Sciences, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA.


09/2001-06/2003 BA cum Laude in Political Science and International Relations, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

09/2009- Lecturer at the Ecole Supérieure du Commerce Extérieur, Paris, France

09/2004-01/2008 Lecturer at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

11/2004-12/2006 Tutor at the Writing Center, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Collaborative projects:

Worked as a research assistant to Dr. Julia Rubin at the Edward Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University on the project on corporate social responsibility and social venture funds.

Worked as a member of a research team led by Dr. Greene at the Shool of Communication & Information at Rutgers University on projects related to media consumption and risky behavior. The following publications were produced as a result:


ACADEMIC AWARDS

Rutgers University Teaching Assistantship, 2004-2007

Central European University Fellowship and Outstanding Academic Achievement Award, 2004
Open Society Institute Award for Study Abroad, 2002

President Brazauskas’ Award for the Top Student at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University, 2000