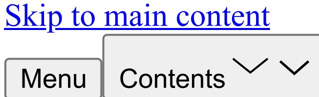

Ada 16: Framing the Other by Dorothy Atuhura

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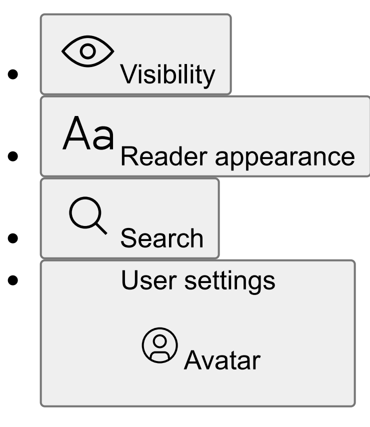

Options

Framing the Other: Rethinking Media Representations of Mursi Women's Display of Gendered Lip-Plated Bodies

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Abstract

With illustrations drawn from Ilja Kok and Willem Timmers's documentary *Framing the Other* (2012), this article rethinks media representation of the contact between Mursi lip-plated women of Ethiopia and Western tourists who come to sightsee and photograph their traditionally modified bodies. The film *Framing the Other* represents this contact as a destructive force that has not only enabled Mursi women's victimhood as objects of the tourist gaze, but one that has contributed negative cultural change and loss of tradition. In this article, I provide an alternative, if not oppositional, interpretation that only attends to the nuanced ways Mursi women negotiate cultural loss and change, and recognizes modalities of agential tactics they deploy to negotiate cultural exchange and perform identity work within a cross-cultural contact zone marred with significant inequalities that work to their (dis)advantage. I do not imply that my reading will provide a definitive reading; rather, I reexamine the vanishing tradition and victimhood narratives portrayed in *Framing the Other,* showing that its multiple layers of meaning in fact motivate an oppositional and alternative reading.

Keywords

Framing the Other, agency, performance, Mursi lip plates

Introduction

Netherlands-based independent filmmakers Ilja Kok and Willem Timmers produced the documentary *Framing the Other* (2012) as a teaching resource for classrooms in the West aimed at examining the complex relationship between the Western tourists who go to Mursi land to sightsee and the lip-plated Mursi women who are the subject of the tourists' interest. In real life, the Mursi are an agro-pastoralist people indigenous to the lower valley of the River Omo in southwestern Ethiopia. They are distinguishable from other groups that live in the Omo river valley by their gendered culture of wearing lip plates, which they prize as a marker of their "cultural identity and political autonomy" within the valley (Turton 2004, 5). Only the women of the tribe wear lip plates, which are a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood and a symbol of tribal identity and a woman's commitment to her community and to her husband (Turton 2004; LaTosky 2006). In *Framing the Other,* Nadonge, the female Mursi protagonist, explains the place of lip plates in their life:

> Wearing a lip plate is our tradition. It is part of our culture. And so it is a good thing. The cutting is very painful. Especially in the beginning it is very sore, and it hurts a lot. We cut the lip with a knife. Then we put a piece of wood into the hole, and we gradually make it bigger. Most girls get their lips cut at the age of fifteen by a female family member. We are supposed to wear a lip plate when we serve food to our husbands. But we also wear it to show off. I feel proud when I wear it … But when we have a ceremony I wear one as well. When men are holding a stick fight, for example, women wear their lip plates. The lip plates that we use for tourists are decorated, the ones for our ceremonies are not. So if there is no ceremony or we do not have guests, I do not wear anything in my lip. (Kok and Willem 2012)

Although in the twenty-first century fewer girls and women practice lip plating, this historical tradition still continues to attract global tourists, who do not necessarily recognize the collective traditional meaning of the practice to the Mursi but see it as a spectacle of difference and an object of their (tourist) gaze. The documentary frames the Mursi women's presentation of their traditionally modified bodies to appeal to tourists as an illustration of their victimhood, cultural destruction, and loss. Western tourists are framed as predators who come only to gaze at Mursi traditional bodies, take photographs of them, and leave immediately. Indeed, the opening subtitle of the documentary states that the Mursi cultural heritage and way of life are under threat, and that in particular Mursi "lives have changed dramatically due to the influx of tourists wanting to see and photograph them and their lip plates" (Kok and Willem 2012). Instead of doing their daily chores of survival, the Mursi are shown to spend most of their productive time waiting for tourists to come sightsee and photograph them in what Dean MacCannell in his book *The Tourist* (2013) has referred to as the "front" space—a "meeting place of hosts and guests and customers and service persons" (92). The documentary raises awareness on how global tourism commodifies the folk practices and bodies of indigenous Mursi communities, turning them into a commonplace spectacle for profit making in ways comparable to those presented in documentaries such as Dennis O'Rourke's *Cannibal Tours* (1987).

Besides the pedagogical reason for producing the documentary as a teaching resource, *Framing the Other* serves and achieves several other functions that are not directly intended nor foregrounded in its narrative. In particular, the documentary inadvertently highlights and illustrates the risk Western tourism engenders in achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[1] The documentary itself does not explicitly promote an understanding of the lip-plate tradition as a harmful traditional practice. However, it provides an exposé of the spectacle of "distant suffering" (Boltanski 1999) that Mursi women undergo; this pertains particularly to what global sustainable development elites have referred to as unhealthy "harmful traditional/cultural" practices, arguing that these infringe upon women's health and produce gendered violence and discrimination against women and girls (LaTosky 2015; Jeffreys 2014; Longman and Bradley 2015; Osarenren 2008; Kouyaté 2009). More so, scholars have contested and problematized the liberal individualistic human rights notion that frames African women's body practices such as lip plates as a "harmful practice" (e.g., LaTosky 2015; Longman and Bradley 2015); instead, they have argued that African women's bodies are inseparable from their communal cultural contexts and that the term "harmful traditional practice is counter productive" (le Roux, Bartelink, and Palm 2017).

Nevertheless, *Framing the Other* enters the conversation on harmful practices by showing how Western tourism has had the effect of endorsing, sustaining, and even enhancing the preservation of the Mursi lip-plate practice in

clear opposition to SDG 5, whose targets include both the elimination of harmful traditional practices and sustainable tourism (SDG 8.9); the latter is defined by the World Tourism Organization as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities." One key aspect of sustainable development is a commitment to preserving the positive aspects of the cultural heritage of host communities for the sake of the future. Thus, as a partner agent in catalyzing this development, global tourism should positively impact the host community, its environment, and its livelihood. Yet, as shown in *Framing the Other,* global tourism appears to have impacted the Mursi women of Ethiopia in more negative ways, not only by contributing to a disruption and loss of their culture but also by reproducing problematic historical ways of gazing at the Other. In the documentary's denunciation of global tourism's negative impact on the Mursi's land, traditions, and livelihood, and in foregrounding the Western tourists' nostalgia for a "harmful" tradition, the film makes an implicit commitment to global health, sustainable development, and humanitarian visualization of distant suffering.

I am cognizant of the fact that it is problematic for me as an educated female from Sub-Saharan Africa to claim absolute objectivity or privileged, indigenous knowledge of the Mursi women's lived reality. I do not claim a privileged "position of intimate affinity" to the Mursi as a "sister-insider" who knows everything about Mursi women's contact with Western tourists (Narayan 1993, 671). Nor do I position myself as a privileged "Third Eye" (Rony 1996) who speaks for and/or on behalf of the Mursi women. I am aware that my identity is "culturally tangled" in ways that complicate my insider/outsider standing (Narayan 1993, 673; Trinh 1991). Consequently, my aim is to destabilize the single story of Mursi women's victimhood and vanishing tradition with a purpose of uncovering the voices, knowledges, perspectives, and perceptions that have been silenced and/or glossed over by the overarching hegemonic narrative of vulnerability and vanishing tradition.

Donna Haraway, in her article "Situated Knowledges," has argued that achieving absolute objectivity is at most an "illusion, a god trick"—a "conquering," disembodied, omnipresent gaze that claims to faithfully and truthfully see all and know all is complex (Haraway 1988, 582). The dichotomy of insider/outsider is problematic, and the extent to which one can be called an authentic insider remains a complex issue because researchers slip in and out of insider/outsider informant positions, not least due to the "shifting identities" that define their "hybrid" beings (Narayan 1993, 682). Thus, I do not claim that my re-reading of Mursi victimhood and vanishing tradition is the only truth. However, my fluctuating insider/outsider positioning allows me the license to rethink and to interrogate the transgressiveness of Mursi women's agency, and refuse to stay unsettled about their victimhood and how this forecloses other engagements and narrative understandings. Molly Andrews has cautioned us that "when for whatever reason our experiences do not match the master narratives with which we are familiar," we are or should be forced to rethink our stories (2002, 1).

Thus, in this article I open up an alternative, if not oppositional, reading of the dominant narrative of victimhood and vanishing tradition to tease out the nuanced ways that Mursi women negotiate these encounters with Western tourists, and what these practices reveal about changes to their culture. I seek to make intelligible and thinkable the agential tactics Mursi women deploy to perform identity and to be human in a cross-cultural tourist contact zone marred with multiple inequalities. I begin with a reading of the overarching narratives of victimhood and vanishing tradition as framed in the Kok and Timmers documentary, and a critical analysis of the victim frame. This provides a basis upon which I open up an alternative and oppositional reading that recognizes the agential tactics Mursi women deploy in the contact zone. Finally, I discuss the ways in which the Mursi women transcend the victim frame and how they actively meet the call of the tourist exchange as agents.

Framing Mursi Women's Victimhood

Transnational postcolonial feminist scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak have problematized the way Third World women are constructed by Western feminist scholars and representers. In her seminal essay "Under Western Eyes," Mohanty (2003b) investigates the strategies used by Western representers to speak about Third World women. Mohanty argues that Western representers uncritically construct Third World women as a homogeneous group of passive, agencyless victims of patriarchal cultures, with the effect of objectifying and Otherizing Third World women while assuming Western representers as agents. In her seminal work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak argues that under Western eyes the Third World woman

cannot speak; she is spoken for and about. In failing to account for their privileged positionality, voice, and "truth claims," the Western producers, or "non representors," unwittingly reinscribe neocolonial relations in their representations of the Third World Other as only victims (Spivak 1988).

Taking cues from Mohanty and Spivak, I will show that the Mursi lip-plated women are discursively produced in *Framing the Other* as a singular archetype of powerless victims who passively receive and accommodate Western tourists' influences. The heterogeneity of their personal experience with the Western tourists is reduced to a monolithic melodrama of victimhood and culture loss. The complexities and performances that constitute their historically constituted material reality are inadvertently colonized—made unthinkable and unintelligible via representations of a "composite, singular 'Third World woman'" (Mohanty 2003a, 19). The film produces these women as objects of the Western tourists' gaze—and thus as victims rather than as individuals negotiating such relationships in agentic ways.

Framing the Other lacks awareness of how transnational films construct knowledge about Third World women (Mohanty 2003a, 23), and it fails to acknowledge indebtedness to hidden historical and spatial power relations (Spivak 1988). Altogether these practices produce a representation of Mursi lip-plated women as powerless victims and as universal dependents of the West—Western tourists, Western film producers, and a Western film audience. As such, while it intended to support local cultural traditions and defy the colonial gaze, the film instead sustains subjugative relations, itself working to objectify and dehumanize the objects of representation (Alexander and Mohanty 2010, 28; Stone-Mediatore 2000, 121). The discursive construction of the Mursi women as victims who do not resist Western tourists' gazes and who are spoken for forecloses the nuanced ways in which these women negotiate contact; more importantly, it renders their agency unthinkable and unimaginable.

The performances Mursi women deploy to negotiate this contact are framed in the film as signifiers of cultural loss. The Western tourists meet the Mursi in a "contact zone"—to borrow Mary Louise Pratt's phrasing—an arena where "disparate cultures meet" and "grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt 2007, 7). The tourists *see* and take pictures while the Mursi are objects to be *seen* and photographed. Indeed, Shauna LaTosky (2014) observes that "those who still wear lip-plates—mainly adolescent girls and young married women—are more prone to be objectified by outsiders, especially tourists, journalists, and photographers" (182). In one picture-taking scene, the Dutch tourist Nell furiously bargains with the Mursi to reduce their price of taking a picture from 3 Ethiopian Birr (roughly 15 US cents) to 1 Birr (roughly 5 US cents). After persistent hard bargaining, Nell describes her success as "one picture, one Birr; one picture, one balloon," and she goes on to teach them to say "thank you" as she hands out balloons as a payment for the pictures taken (Kok and Willem 2012).

On the one hand, such payments position the Mursi as disadvantaged victims in this transactional exchange, referencing the broader historical and colonial dynamic of global north/south transactional exchange. The payment given to them for posing for the pictures is, in effect, evidence of the unevenness of looking relations within the contact zone: "gazed upon, they are denied the power of the gaze; spoken to, they are denied the power to speak freely" (Spurr 1993, 14). Yet the very act of haggling over their commodified bodies, insisting on determining their worth, suggests Mursi womens' agency; it signifies them as oppositional agents who enact the power to determine the value of their bodies and who do not simply accept the uneven power dynamic.

Nadonge, the Mursi woman protagonist, complains about the asymmetries in the picture taking and asserts, "I don't know what they are going to do with the photos. Maybe they show them on television or so, I don't know. I saw my face once on a photo. All the other photos taken by tourists never come back here. If they would bring me a copy of the photos then I would understand why they take them" (Kok and Willem 2012). This highlights Nadonge's awareness of the predatory nature of the Mursi encounter with the Western tourist. Nadonge is also concerned that the people who photograph them never disclose their origins nor do they inform them of the purpose to which the photographs will be put. She says, "I don't know what they are doing. Every day they come and take photos of us, and I don't know why. They just give us money, and then they leave again. They always come from that direction. We don't know the place they come from. We don't ask" (Kok and Willem 2012).

According to Nadonge's critique, foreign white photographers just show up, take pictures, and then leave. This reifies anthropologists' critiques of Mursi photographing transactions, naming them as "predatory" and an effect of "the unequal power relationship" and "pleasure of consumerism" (Turton 2004, 7). Although the film is, in fact, critical of this predatory practice and sympathetic of Mursi women's victimhood, the producers should have clearly revealed their own roles in the photographic exchange; such a disclosure would invite the viewer to reflect on the filmmaker's potential complicity (or not) in the power disparities. For example, the viewer of the documentary is not given the chance to get a sense of whether the film producers are part of the group that Nadonge laments—those who come, take pictures, and vanish. Additionally, an ordinary Mursi woman may not have easy access to viewing the film representing them. As such, the filmmakers and the film product are inadvertently caught up in the very vice they sought to counter: the visual exploitation of the Mursi in the picture-taking exchange. Mursi women thus remain vulnerable in several ways—they are gazed upon, spoken for, and their bodies are made available for discovery by the Western tourists and a Western viewing audience.

The documentary is commendable for creating consciousness about the risks engendered in global tourism and for giving the Mursi women the opportunity to speak in front of the camera about the victimhood enabled by contact with Western tourists. Nadonge, however, is positioned to speak as if representing a homogenous group of Mursi women victims; she is the only Mursi woman who tells the viewers where she lives, what she does, and how they are victimized by the white tourists. Consequently, through Nadonge, the film suggests we (now) know where the Mursi women live, how they live, and how they are victimized. Nadonge indeed narrates, "My name is Nadonge. I live in this village called Hinay, and I have four children. Two children live here with me, and two live in the cattle-grazing area. I don't know how old I am. We Mursi don't count the years. We just grow old and then we die."

Nadonge testifies to the inequalities and unfairness in the picture-taking process and how the Mursi as a whole are exploited by the tourists. For example, she indicates that sometimes the tourists refuse to pay for the photos or sometimes pay very little gratuity; so to force the tourists to pay, Nadonge admits, "We pinch the bodies of those tourists who stare and don't want to take a photo of us. So we make them give us money. Sometimes they don't give us enough and then there is a problem" (Kok and Willem 2012). That is, as they testify about their vulnerabilities in this exchange, Mursi women deploy tactics that provide them agency and power as actors. As the Western tourists haggle the cost of photographing them, the Mursi women deploy tactics to get the best outcome in the exchange. Nadonge, for example, explains that sometimes they are paid more if a baby is in the frame, and that mothers are sometimes forced to "move the baby from behind our backs into the frame … because if the baby remains hidden behind our back, tourists will not pay for the baby. And then we have an argument with the tourists" (Kok and Willem 2012). Nadonge here shows that the process of taking photos is a complex performance, involving various plays with power and agency, in which Mursi women often exploit the appearance of vulnerability as a capital resource to gain more from the exchange.

At times, the Mursi women unknowingly collude with visual representational practices that work against their interests and produce their victimhood. The filmmakers, for example, enlist the women to give indisputable personal testimony to the camera, encouraging them to construct themselves as victims, which works to undermine their agency. Their on-screen physical appearance and personal experience narratives become an ontological foundation inscribing their victimhood. In one scene Nadonge laments the failure of the only named tourist, Nell, to appreciate their culture and to reciprocate the kindness they have shown; in so doing, she testifies about their victimhood:

> When this woman came I went up to her and shook her hand. I greeted her and told her my name, but after she had finished going around the village she left without saying goodbye. Now I am not happy. I was expecting this woman to be good, but when it came down to the money she was not. She did not pay enough to me for the photos she took. She bought two lip plates for 10 Birr. Normally I sell them for 20 Birr. I think she did not learn anything. She was just moving around with the children arguing. If she had stayed here longer maybe she would have understood us better. But she just went round with the children and other people, and then she was gone. I don't know what they are going to do with the photos. (Kok and Willem 2012)

Additionally, both the filmmakers and subjects perform similar speech acts as 'all-knowing' subjects. Nadonge, who speaks as if on behalf of all women in her community, is no different from the visual media producer who visualizes and speaks about and on behalf of those very women. The film presents these women (though self-professing victims) as having the autonomy to speak out, to take personal responsibility in creating awareness about their oppression; as such, their speech act forecloses inquiry into the transnational visual representational processes that produce their victimhood. Moreover, it forecloses inquiry into the visible evidence of injustice, power differentials, and inequalities integral to their representation in the film. Such representational processes inadvertently reproduce traditional hierarchies and relations of power that enable Mursi women's victimhood. And in so doing the documentary ends up (re)producing "scattered hegemonies"—it sustains the very same inequalities that it seeks to dismantle in the first place (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Hegde 2011).

Reinventing Tradition for Tourism

Although *Framing the Other* represents Mursi lip-plated women as victims, these women are not simply docile recipients of global tourism influences. As Mary Louise Pratt has observed, people on the receiving end of cultural exchanges always have the power and agency to determine the extent to which "they absorb into their own" the influence transmitted to them, "how they use it," "what they make it mean," and how they appropriate it to suit their needs (Pratt 2007, 7). The Mursi reinvent their tradition in ways that enable them to engage in the tourist exchange in agentic ways that oppose the victim frame. In so doing they disrupt the dominant narrative of victimhood that the documentary foregrounds.

This disruption can be understood through Saba Mahmood's understanding of agency within structures of subordination and vulnerability. Mahmood argues that "when women's actions seem to re-inscribe what appear to be 'instruments of their own oppression'" the focus should instead be turned to instances that disrupt and articulate opposition to the dominant norms—"moments that are located either in the interstices of a woman's consciousness or in the objective effects of women's actions, however unintended they may be" (Mahmood 2011, 8). The agency of Mursi lip-plated women, who suffer what seems to be deplorable vulnerability at the hands of the Western tourists, should be understood as their capacity to realize their "own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles" (Mahmood 2011, 8). Indeed, as Mahmood has argued, "what may be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment" (Mahmood 2011, 15). In its narrative, *Framing the Other* carries evidence that reveals multiple layers of meaning that substantiate an oppositional and alternative reading of Mursi women, troubling the film's victim frame.

Framing the Other represents Mursi encounters with white tourists and their cameras through a series of medium and close-up shots of Nadonge—the Mursi women protagonist. Nadonge is juxtaposed with the white tourists, represented through the Dutch tourist Nell and her entry into Mursi land. She hails the notion of a "modern" tourist in search of an ideal authentic tradition (MacCannell 2013), exuding power over what is authentic and what is fake. In one particular scene, Nell breaks into the frame as she enters the Mursi village to sightsee and take photographs of Mursi women's body modifications, insisting on seeing the "authentic" lip-plated women. She refuses to gaze at and to photograph what she calls "fake" lip lore. In one scene, Nell encounters a Mursi woman with a small lip lobe that cannot fit the large lip plate she holds on top of her cut lower lip. Nell forces this woman to wear her lip plate but when the Mursi woman hand-signals back that her lip lobe is too small to carry the lip plate, Nell quickly calls her "fake." Nell exerts power over her and quickly disregards her performance as "fake" (Kok and Willem 2012). Nell insists, "This is fake! Put it in! Why not? You cannot? You are fake!" (Kok and Willem 2012). Nell first offers to pay her very little money, then later changes her mind, refuses to take her photograph, and walks away without paying her. As the scene transitions, Nell's voice is heard fading away as she continues to call this woman "fake" multiple times.

Nell's accusation that the Mursi women are fake illustrates the varied ways in which Mursi women perform their bodylore and transform themselves to meet the demands of the moment. For example, on the surface of a Mursi woman's body is inscribed her relations with the traditional culture of her environment as well as her relations with the tourists. Yet as the Mursi women slip in and out of these relations, they variably choose to be "fake" or

traditional (e.g., during a men’s stick fight or during a marriage ceremony) depending on the relations they seek to enact. A Mursi woman who wants to be a lucrative material object of tourist attraction might choose to perform a certain fakeness. In performing this fakeness, the women hyperexoticize their bodies through fake decorations to earn more gratuity from Western tourists. The Mursi women transcend the “authentic” traditional self by becoming the “fake” that the tourist desires to see and photograph.

In lucratively performing identity in the contact zone, Mursi women’s bodies do not remain “honest” to their cultural traditions. However, this does not imply that the tradition is lost in the fake performance. The fake material present is not sealed off from the past but rather illustrates a hybrid subject, blending past and present realities of contact between white tourists and indigenous Mursi. Fakeness signifies a unified object (comprising the past and present) and/or its progress from victimhood (patriarchal and passive object of the gaze) to an autonomous being—one that appropriates vulnerability into an agential opportunity. Despite unity and progress, these fake Mursi bodies remain unstable and elude authenticity, which is in fact an illusion. As Foucault has argued, “the body is molded by a great many distinct regimes … Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis of self-recognition or for understanding other men” (Foucault 1977, 153, cited in Grosz 1994, 148). It takes wit, calculated action, and shrewd performance on the part of the Mursi women to meet the expectations of the tourist exchange successfully.

What the Mursi women do in the encounter with Western tourists is different from what they do during traditional ceremonies like the men’s stick fight or marriage ceremony. Nadonge notes in her personal experience narrative that some of the decorations do not have specific meanings because they have simply been invented for the purpose of showing the tourists:

> When the tourists are coming we make ourselves as beautiful as we can. Some women pull out their eyelashes, others don’t … A long time ago we only had a few decorations like these. But now that the tourists have become important we have many ways of dressing up. Some decorations have no specific meaning. We have simply invented them. These horns are just for show for the tourists. We take the horns from a dead cow and put them on our head so tourists will take a photo. If we don’t wear all this stuff the tourists will not take our photo. They want to see lip plates and other decorations. I don’t care if it’s fake on my face. I don’t care if I wear something fake. (Kok and Willem 2012)

Mursi women craft new ways of performing the self-imposed body modification designed for tourists: they pluck off their eyelashes to look more exotic and strange, they overdecorate their bodies, and they even add cow horns and other “scary” objects to their bodies. The documentary frames this as victimhood, suggesting that the Mursi risk losing their culture in presenting themselves as objects for the Western tourist gaze. The fake performances might indeed be seen as distortions that produce a binary between the gazing Western women and the gazed upon Third World women. However, the exoticization of Mursi bodies also suggests they are exercising agency to exploit the tourist opportunity, and they are acting of their own accord rather than according to the postulates of cultural tradition or any coercion.

Mursi lip-plated women craft ways of inhabiting their economically and socially threatened world. The commodification of their bodies is not an inherent element of their everyday social practice. Rather, it is one of their agential ways of inhabiting their threatened world while preserving and protecting their cultural heritage. Yet these agentic and creative manipulations of the Mursi body remain hidden and elusive, and thus unintelligible to the tourists who ironically continue to see the authentic Mursi performances.

Interpretative control of their fakeness remains a preserve of the Mursi community. The way Mursi women “work” their bodies to meet the expectations of a successful tourism environment illustrates a contradiction between their traditionally modified bodies (signified as victimhood in global health and development terms) and the agential capacities they deploy to benefit in the exchanges with tourists. Through their “faked” actions, Mursi women exhibit a disjuncture between the (subversive and agentic) self and the ideologically marked body. In the passage of the traditionally modified body’s authenticity, their fakeness counters the orthodoxy of a vulnerable victim. The body’s actions become transarticulations opposed to the traditionally modified self—they surpass and overshadow the symbolic canvas of the tribal identity they embody.

The colonial framing of the material marks inscribed on their bodies is contested by the actions of the women who signify their selves as agents. In this way the tribal body becomes a site from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and the other (Grosz 1994, 20). The fakeness of their bodies signifies, for example, more than just a failure of a lip lobe to hold a decorative lip plate, as Nell the tourist insists. Their fakeness is their creative performance. It is their agential tactic.

The film reads the material bodily marks on the women to signify their victimhood; yet the material gratuity (demonstrated in real-life contacts with Global North tourists) accrues from the women’s creative remodeling of their bodies and the agency enacted. Through the visible material marks, Mursi lip-plated women craft their agency and strategize their resistance within the conditions of coercion that seem inevitable. Whereas their bodies are made visible as objects of foreign tourists’ desire, they simultaneously become a site for agency in a “contact zone” (Pratt, 2007) marred with multiple layers of social, economic, and political asymmetries. The labor that goes into reinventing their tradition signifies a complex hybrid of victimhood and the enactment of agency. It is thus critical to reconstitute the subjectivity of these women by dismantling the value of the material marks on their bodies and carefully reading their actions, their tactics, and how they work available opportunities to succeed in a setting where their culture, identity, and lifeworld are at risk.

Performing Fakeness

The performance of fakeness is enabled by a repetitive and creative imitation of traditional codes, which produces varied (agentic) subjectivities. The “fake” Mursi body as represented in the film is evidence of how cultural body transformations can take place in marginal environments such as that illustrated in *Framing the Other*. Performances of Mursi fake bodies when in contact with foreign tourists reveal a stylized repetition of bodily acts that are consequently productive of ever-emerging identities. Performing fakeness produces new meanings and values, new purposes and practices that simultaneously reinscribe and transgress cultural relations of power. And, because behavior that is rewarded is always repeated, new experiences and values are always emerging and created through these performative repetitions.

Mursi women’s creative and repeated performances enable additional ways of understanding agency in performativity, particularly within the context of exploitative tourism. Taking a cue from Judith Butler’s exploration of the formation of gendered identity, we understand identity to be performatively constituted through a stylized repetition of acts (Butler 2006). The reenactment of cultural norms produces identity. As well, a failure to conform signals a possibility for variation of “the rules that govern the intelligible invocation of identity” because the same “rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility” (Butler 2006, 145). As such, Mursi women *do* their bodily performances in different “fake” ways, and this should be read as their agentic manner of doing identity work and of inhabiting their changing world.

The women’s performative abilities are put to use to satiate the tourist gaze on their own terms and in ways best suited to their tradition. In their fake performances, these women’s labor becomes productive of an autonomous identity that even eludes the film producers’ recognition. The repeated bodily performances of the Mursi when in contact with the tourists are practices of adapting to the new forces threatening their tradition. These performances are productive of hybrid identities that are always emerging, thus illustrating that the totality of Mursi body modification includes not only its materiality and significances but also the communally prescribed and repeated traditional performances that animate it. As the Mursi women maintain respect for their tradition they also simultaneously transgress its power as they craft new agentic identities that give them power to exploit the tourists. The women maintain their tradition because it is not only an important signifier of tribal identity and belonging but also marks out coherence to communally prescribed gender roles within the family and the society.

Repeated performances of fakeness produce hybrids—an “interstitial space” (Bhabha 1994, 3) or “borderlands” (Anzaldúa 2012, 6)—where cultures that are seen as opposites and antagonists overlap to negotiate new identities and meanings. In this hybrid body, the Mursi cultural past and the present are mutually exclusive, and the Mursi slide in and out of either the traditional past or the present. The fakeness of Mursi bodies represents

"that space in which antithetical elements mix, neither to obliterate each other nor to be subsumed by a larger whole, but rather combine in unique and unexpected ways" (Anzaldúa 2012, 6). Because of the repeated performance of fakeness, Mursi women's bodies become a site where agency mediates the possibilities of subjectivities transforming into hybrids. Mursi women enact fluid identities that are ever emerging when they come in contact with Western tourists. In their fakeness, Mursi hybrids play out multiple subjectivities, which enable them to submit to vulnerability while also subverting it.

Mursi women's hybridity takes an "assimilationist" form in the way it adopts and mimics the tourist imagination of the authentic Other (Pieterse 1994, 172). This assimilationist hybridity is foregrounded in the documentary as a destructive influence because of the way it seems to endorse the inequalities resident in the tourist contact and exchange that produce Mursi cultural loss. When in contact with the tourists, the Mursi take on characteristics of the exotic Other—an identity hailed by a tourist exchange in a contact zone marred with multiple asymmetries. They change and integrate foreign stimuli into their bodies. Consequently, in their assimilationist hybrid form, the Mursi display multiple fluid identities. On the one hand, they acquiesce to be seen, gazed upon, and reduced to exoticized bodies to satiate the Western tourist's quest for an authentic Other. On the other hand, the same fakeness can be read as another form of hybrid that destabilizes and resists assimilated subjectivity.

The hybrid subverts, transgresses, and resists Western tourist influences and imagination, producing what Jan Nederveen Pieterse has called "destabilizing hybridity" (1994, 172); it enables Mursi women to transcend their positioning as victims in the film, into a hybrid that is both traditional and post-traditional, ancient and modern, victim and resistor. The resisting hybrid is a veil that keeps the Western tourist from gaining access into the "real" tradition of the Mursi. As a consequence, the fake body that ends up in real contact with the Western tourist transgresses the past and its patriarchal traditional boundaries; it becomes a refashioning of the "authentic" tradition in which Mursi women acquire new agency and power.

The Mursi, in their fake body, slide from being vulnerable victims of the Western gaze to active agents who take control of how they present themselves before the tourists. They are not simply hybrids who passively assimilate, adapt, integrate, and mix into their traditions the Western tourist influences; rather, they are hybrids who simultaneously destabilize, subvert, and resist foreign cultural influences and their assumed victimhood.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to illustrate that framing Mursi lip lore as vanishing is a significant misrepresentation because it forecloses the cultural changes and linkages in Mursi culture enabled by the unique styles of (re)production, imitation, and tactics employed in the tourist encounter. The article refuses the film's simplistic foregrounding of the foundation of tourism as a search for authenticity—a pure, genuine, and unchanging traditional culture that tourists seek to sightsee and consequently destroy in their act of photographic capture. The compulsion to decry the vanishing tradition fetishizes Mursi bodies into a static, fixed, unchanging culture. In constructing the Mursi culture as threatened, the film both constructs nostalgia for the "ancient fixed" traditional body practices (presented as threatened) and denies the possibility of cultural transformation enacted by the Mursi women's negotiation of the tourist dynamic. More so, framing fakeness as a cultural loss diminishes the strategies of agency that Mursi women deploy to claim their humanness in a cross-cultural tourist contact zone of power disparities that (dis)advantage them.

Framing the Other emphatically frames Mursi culture as threatened and vanishing, and the Mursi as docile recipients of destructive tourist influences. In this vanishing tradition narrative, the film fails to recognize the agency integral to the Mursi's culturally transformative acts—most especially what this agency achieves for them amid the tourism system pressuring their already threatened world. Resisting exploitation is not a universalized practice and nor is claiming agency—the ability of the Mursi women to realize their autonomy should not be restricted to resisting exploitative tourist influences and oppressive traditions but rather in the various ways they challenge and/or inhabit their tradition, the marginal environment, and the exploitative tourist relationships. The agency of Mursi women should be understood not only through resistance but also through the everyday tactics they deploy in order to realize their "own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles" (Mahmood 2011, 8).

The pseudoalteration of their bodies to satiate the intruding Western tourists is an act of exercising their agency. Mursi women do this as a strategy for extraversion, subversion, and resistance against external cultural influences. It is their way of drawing from their cultural and bodily codes to deflect any external influences on their cultural identity; crucially, they stage their performances for the outsiders, and once the outsiders are out of their world, they go back to their own ways. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that this is a strategy of inhabiting their world and for surviving in a world where the transnational and the local coalesce in politically uneven ways. Therefore, we should not only see Mursi women's fakeness presented in the documentary as an act that procures only victimhood, done simply to satiate the tourist gaze. This narrow reading of performances of fakeness forecloses its complexity and fails to recognize the agency enacted by the Mursi women. We must attend to the dynamics that compel the women's participation as "visible evidence" for the tourists and the strategies they deploy to pull this exchange off. This will enable us then to see and recognize the complex modalities of agency that supplant the narratives reducing Mursi women's engagements with tourists to mere evidence of vanishing tradition and victimhood.

It is crucial to engage in complex alternative interrogations that consider innovative body transformations as praxis, to seek out how subjects *enact* agency when performing as objects of invasive touristic gazes. These performances in fact make visible the elusive ways Mursi women manipulate their position in the touristic gaze, on their terms and to their advantage. Mursi women's agency or lack thereof should not just be about overtly resisting the gaze; neither should it only be seen as a cumulative counter reaction to the forces contending with their cultural authenticity. Rather, it should be considered as something inherent in their everyday bodily negotiation of inhabiting a contact zone marred with multiple inequalities and (dis)advantage.

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1. In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a substantive agenda aiming at sustainable development in 2030 (https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org). It consists of seventeen sustainable development goals (SDGs), 169 associated targets, and over 300 indicators. This post-2015 development agenda can be seen as an extension of earlier initiatives aimed at sustainable development, historically defined in the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development report *Our Common Future* as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." ↩

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