

**“ARRESTING GADDAFI WILL BE THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO STOP THESE RAPES”.<sup>1</sup>  
SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE WESTERN MEDIA’S COVERAGE OF THE WAR IN LIBYA<sup>2</sup>**

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**Abstract:** The aim of the present article is to tackle the way in which CNN and BBC – as leading examples of hegemonic Western media – represented the cases of sexual violence that were being denounced during the war in Libya. Looking into the coverage of this war may be useful to analyze the very concept of wartime rape and enquire to which extent rape narratives are framed by social constructs of sexuality, gender, and race, as well as by political agendas. I argue that the Western media tended to pay more attention to rape stories that were politically beneficial to NATO’s war effort in support of the opposition, and showed less interest in accusations that did not involve Gaddafi’s henchmen. I finally discuss the culturalization of sexual violence, by addressing the strategies of othering implied in the media explanations and contextualization of the rapes.

**Keywords:** sexual violence, Libyan war, CNN, BBC.

The coverage of the war in Libya reported extensively on rape. One of the most publicized moments of the war took place on March 26, 2011, when Iman al-Obeidi,<sup>3</sup> a woman from Benghazi, burst into a hotel in Tripoli and told foreign journalists that men from the dictator’s forces had kidnapped her at a road block, beaten and gang-raped her for two days. In the weeks and months that followed, a flurry of claims was raised about a coordinated campaign of mass rapes by government troops to punish and frighten

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<sup>1</sup> International Criminal Court (ICC) chief prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo speaking in the CNN, June 16, 2011, about claims that Libyan troops were using rape as a weapon. Cf. <http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2011/06/16/ctw.rajpal.icc.libya.rape.reaction.cnn?iref=allsearch>

<sup>2</sup> Research funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, Centro de Estudos Sociais/Universidade de Coimbra. The origins of the present text go back to a short position paper that I presented at a workshop organized by the International Research Group “Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict” (SVAC) (<http://www.warandgender.net/>) about “Constellations&Dinamics of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict” (Science Po/Paris, July 6-7, 2012). I thank the members of this network for the stimulating discussions and important insights. My work on the representation of sexual violence has benefited immensely from the discussions held in the meetings of the group. I would also like to thank Mihaela Mihai, Tatiana Moura, Maria José Canelo and Fabrice Schurmans for their comments and revisions.

<sup>3</sup> Also written Eman al-Obeidy.

civilians and about Gaddafi's troops being supplied with Viagra to encourage sexual abuses. Stories of cell-phone videos showing rapes, and widespread coverage of the efforts by the ICC to gather information on a possible systematic use of rape as a weapon of war in this conflict were circulated widely.

At first sight, the media attention seems to signal a salutary moment of increased awareness to the plight of victims of sexual violence in war. Such a moment could be seen as part of international efforts to tackle the problem of wartime rape, in line with the famous UN Resolution 1820 (2008) and the last decades' attempts to bring to justice perpetrators of sexual violence in times of conflict.<sup>4</sup> However, the wording and argumentation employed in much of the Western coverage of the events in Libya should prevent us, feminists concerned with the problem of wartime rape, from being too enthusiastic: as I will argue in this paper, some of the Western discourses on Libya seem to point to a perpetuation of traditional perceptions of wartime sexual violence.

Before I begin, a caveat: I am not an expert on Libya or on the Arab world. This text will not propose explanations of the reasons that led to the occurrence of sexual violence during the war in Libya, nor will it speculate on the nature, forms, and extent of this crime in this conflict. My purpose here is not to discuss NATO's involvement, or the outcome of the war. I am also not going to explore the situation of Libyan women before and after the fall of the dictator. My aim is to tackle the way in which the hegemonic Western media represented the cases of sexual violence that were being denounced during the war. Looking into the coverage of this war may be a useful way to analyze the very concept of wartime rape and enquire to which extent rape narratives are framed by social constructs of sexuality, gender, and race, as well as by political agendas. On a broader level, this paper connects inevitably with studies on discourse analysis focused on the reproduction of ideology through the media (i.e. Teun van Dijk), with well-known works on the manipulation of the media in the context of "humanitarian interventions" and "just wars",<sup>5</sup> as well as with studies on orientalism (Edward Said's famous work and approaches like Etienne Balibar's understanding of "the new racism").<sup>6</sup> The problems addressed in these studies surely resonate in the present paper. However, the focus here is not actually the very concepts of manipulation, racism and orientalism, but the discursive configuration of rape stories. The paper hence addresses questions such as: which metaphors are

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<sup>4</sup> I'm referring here to the efforts to persecute crimes of sexual violence in the International Tribunals created for the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Liberia. The Foča-trial (2000) in The Hague is often referred as a breakthrough for prosecuting wartime rape, since it involved "only" crimes of rape and sexual slavery.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, by Noam Chomsky (e.g. *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, 1997; *Rogue States: The Rule of Force in World Affairs*, 2001), Ignacio Ramonet (e.g. *La Tyrannie de la Communication*, 1999; *Propagandes silencieuses*, 2000), and Serge Halimi/Dominique Vidal (e.g. "*L'opinion, ça se travaille...*" *Les médias & les "guerres justes": Kosovo, Afganistan, Irak*, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, "Y a-t-il un 'néo-racisme'?" (1997); "Difference, Otherness, Exclusion. Anthropological Categories in the Analysis of Racism" (2005).

privileged in the process of reporting? How is sexual violence mediated and “domesticated” to the public? Which is ultimately the hegemonic syntax of wartime rape in the mainstream media? Can we perceive certain “scripts” in the process of mediating wartime rape? Such an analysis departs from Sabine Sielke's definition of the *rhetoric of rape*: to “talk about rape does not necessarily denote rape [...]. Instead, transposed into discourse, rape turns into a rhetorical device, an insistent figure for other social, political, and economic concerns and conflicts.” It assumes that every discourse of rape “has its history, its ideology, and its dominant narratives” (Sielke, 2002: 2) and that experiences of rape are given meaning and are shaped by a multitude of motives, constraints and interests that frame the process of mediation.

My analysis of the media coverage of the sexual violence during the war in Libya will be punctuated by questions such as: does the reporting on rape in this conflict mark a welcomed improvement signaling a greater public awareness of women's rights? Can we witness processes of silencing and of ideological instrumentalization that point to continuities with some traditional discourses on wartime rape? How far is the coverage of wartime sexual violence in Libya embedded in xenophobic stereotypes and traditional gender constructions? For the purpose of tackling those questions, I will start by referring to the findings of the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Human Rights Watch (HRW) concerning sexual violence during the war in Libya. The selection of these organizations as sources of information is not based on the assumption that they provide the “absolute truth”, although I do believe that they have a privileged capacity to obtain data on the ground. The choice was motivated by the fact that they can reach the broader public: the mainstream press usually refers to their reports on highly covered conflicts, as it was the case of the war in Libya. Therefore looking into their work may be quite helpful in identifying which facts on the ground the hegemonic media focused on and amplified, and which ones it disregarded or silenced.

Since the purpose of this text is an analysis of the way the cases of sexual violence were addressed in the mainstream media, due to time and space restrictions, I narrowed my analysis to two of the most influential international broadcasters: CNN and BBC.<sup>7</sup> I will structure my argumentation around two topics. Firstly, I address the political framing of narratives of wartime rape. Here I will stress that the Western media tended to pay more attention to rape stories that were politically beneficial to NATO's war effort in support of the opposition. The coverage showed less interest in accusations of sexual violence that did not involve Gaddafi's henchmen. Secondly, I will discuss the culturalization of sexual

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<sup>7</sup> The texts, interviews and video reports analyzed in this paper were collected from the sites of CNN and BBC in English and date mainly from September to October 2012. Due to time and space constraints I will not take in consideration the comments of the readers.

violence, by addressing the strategies of othering implied in the media explanations and contextualization of the rapes. Since the coverage reinforced perceptions of Islam as a religion/culture that is bad for women, and since it echoed stereotypes about “backwardness” and “savagery”, I will question in how far the reporting of the rapes had orientalist and xenophobic undertones.

#### **FINDINGS BY THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH**

On February 15, 2011, anti-governments protests and confrontations broke out in the Eastern Libyan city of Benghazi, which soon turned into a widespread rebellion across the country. On February 26 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1970 condemning the violent repression by the government and imposing several international sanctions on the regime. As the government forces were preparing an attack in Benghazi, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1973 (March 18) demanding an immediate ceasefire and authorizing the international community to establish a no-fly zone to protect civilians and to use “all necessary measures” to enforce it. This marked the beginning of the NATO bombardments that were decisive for the end of Gaddafi's regime. Tripoli fell on August 28, and the dictator was killed by rebels on October 20, 2011.

As we can infer from this brief chronology of the war, from the very beginning human rights abuses were essential in the UN decisions that led to the military intervention in support of the opposition. On February 25, the United Nations Human Rights Council called for the creation of a commission of inquiry to investigate the allegations of human rights violations. The ICC got jurisdiction over war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Libya after February 15. A few months later, on June 1, 2011, the HRC made public a first report, which contained a few pages on sexual violence (HRC, 2011: 71-74). Some claims of rape by the government forces seem to point to a strategy of obtaining information, punishing opponents, and instilling fear: for example, a father said that his daughter from Misrata had been raped for two days by government forces while in a separate room others were trying to extract information about the rebels from her brother. The victims were mostly Libyan women and minors (the exception being a journalist from the *New York Times* who endured groping in detention,<sup>8</sup> and rumors about Government forces raping Sudanese women and minors in Ajdabiya). Apart from the Sudanese migrants, the victims were perceived by their attackers as disloyal to the regime, whether because they came from “rebel areas” like Benghazi and Misrata or because they worked for a “hostile” press. The perpetrators were reported to be forces of the regime and “alleged mercenaries and unidentified armed men”. The report also

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<sup>8</sup> This case is dealt with in the section Freedom of Expression (IV.E), which lists severe abuses against journalists (HRC, 2011: 52-53).

mentioned media reports that it could not verify, such as the existence of video recordings of rapes in Misrata and what it called “more speculative information” regarding claims that the government troops had been given instructions to engage in rape and had been supplied with condoms and Viagra pills for that purpose.

The report also listed cases of rape by opposition armed forces during house raids or by civilians in areas controlled by the rebels. Out of the four cases referred to, three involved foreign victims: an Iraqi, a Syrian and a Chadian. The description by a Chadian eyewitness of the gang-rape of the latter in Benghazi suggests a strategy of using rape to frighten and expel an ethnic group:

It was midnight and they [*eight armed civilians*] entered in the compound, beaten the people with machetes and threaten people with their arms, asking them to leave the country and robbing their belongings. That night they entered into the room of his neighbor, a Chadian woman, 28 years old [...], took her by force, took her clothes away and raped her, one after the other. (HRC, 2011: 73-4)

On March 8, 2012, the HRC made public a final report on Libya,<sup>9</sup> which, though accusing both sides of war crimes and human rights violations, differentiated the nature, the targets and the extend of the abuses. The attacks by Gaddafi's forces are presented as systematic and there is a suspicion of abuses committed in order to control society. The violations of the rebels targeted specific communities, such as the people from Tawergha, thus hinting at possible ethnic and regional rivalries behind the violence. The summary refers to rape only with regards to the regime's forces, thus signaling a perception that there were higher levels of sexual violence at the hands of Gaddafi's loyalists (the data presented in the section on sexual violence corroborates it, HRC, 2012 a: 135-143; HRC, 2012b: 14-15). The Commission interviewed more than 20 male and female victims of sexual violence, 30 witnesses, 5 perpetrators<sup>10</sup> and reviewed NGOs reports. Regarding Gaddafi's forces, the Commission identified two patterns of sexual violence. The first pattern (seven victims interviewed) refers to women “beaten and raped by armed men in their homes, or abducted and beaten and raped elsewhere, sometimes for days. Some victims were targeted because of their allegiance to the *thumar*<sup>11</sup> and

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<sup>9</sup> There are two versions of this report: the main one – *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Libya* (HRC, 2012b, 25 pages) – and a longer one – “Full Report of the International Commission of Inquiry to investigate all alleged violations of international law in Libya” (HRC, 2012a), which is an Annex to the main document (Annex I, 175 pages) and contains more detailed data to corroborate the conclusions of the shorter version.

<sup>10</sup> The Commission notes that it received one interview that was reliable, but suspects that the others might have been obtained through torture.

<sup>11</sup> Anti-Gaddafi forces.

others were assaulted for no known reason. Of those targeted, rape appeared to be used as a means to punish, terrorize, and send a message to those who supported the revolution” (HRC, 2012b: 14). The “Full report”, which contains a detailed description of some of these cases, reveals how some rapes occurred within a chain of verbal insults, beatings and torture. It also differentiates the victims: one is actually a 10 years old boy who was kidnapped and raped by two young men after him taking part with his father in an anti-government demonstration in February (HRC, 2012a: 141). It also notes that some of the rapes committed by Gaddafi's men may actually be “opportunistic” rapes, i.e. acts of sexual violence not directly framed by political reprisal.<sup>12</sup> The suffering and hardships experienced by the victims after the attacks (e.g. sexual transmitted diseases, pregnancy, social ostracism) are also reported.

The second pattern of sexual violence perpetrated by Gaddafi's forces (15 victims interviewed) “was of sexual violence and torture of males and females in detention centres who were *thumar* or supportive of the *thumar*, to extract information, humiliate and punish.” The claims “included vaginal rape, sodomy and penetration with an instrument, as well as electrocution and burning of the genitals” (HRC, 2012b: 14). The Commission received limited evidence of sexual violence committed by the rebels, and interviewed only two victims, two female Gaddafi loyalists (one from the Revolutionary Guard and the other a volunteer from the Popular Guard), who had been sexually tortured in detention. Out of the 17 victims of sexual violence in detention centers 12 were male and 5 were female. Both male and female victims of rape mentioned the psychological trauma that they suffered as a result of the attacks (HRC, 2012a: 145-6).

Other sections of the “Full Report” are also important to access the forms of sexual violence in the war. The testimonies quoted in the section “Unlawful Killing” (*ibidem*: 61-2) suggest the fear of rape experienced by male detainees in an ad hoc detention center in Al-Khum (controlled by the government). The section “Torture and other forms of ill-treatment” contains a page on sexual violence as torture (*ibidem*: 108) against male and female detainees.

The Commission could not corroborate the claims circulating in the media about Gaddafi forces being supplied with Viagra and condoms to stimulate mass rapes nor the allegations of mass rapes (*ibidem*: 143-5). On the issue of cell-phone videos, there was some sporadic evidence: one victim said her rape had been filmed; the Commission was allowed to watch three records of alleged rapes and sexual torture, but was told that “almost none [*of these videos*] had been saved in order to protect the victims” (*ibidem*: 144).

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<sup>12</sup> The concept of “opportunistic rape” does not necessarily exempt regimes and superiors from responsibility. Those in charge are supposed to prevent, investigate and punish such attacks.



According to the Commission, a variety of factors – lack of reliable statistics, the fact that some confessions of rape had been extracted under torture, the political sensibility of the issue – make sexual violence the most difficult issue to investigate in Libya. It states that both the law system of the country (see also HRW, 2006a) as well as the cultural background discourages female victims from denouncing rape:

Some female victims of rape have been ostracized, divorced, disowned, forced to flee the country, have committed suicide, and some have allegedly been killed by their relatives because of the shame and dishonour that rape brings to the family and even the tribe. The silence surrounding rape existed before the conflict as well. In several conservative areas of Libya, female victims have been pressured or threatened by their community to remain silent about rape, as it is considered shameful for the community not to have been able to protect its own women. (HRC, 2012a: 139-40)

Despite these constraints, the Commission gathered sufficient information to conclude that sexual violence “played a significant role in provoking fear in various communities” and that “sexual torture was used as a means to extract information from and to humiliate detainees” (HRC, 2012b: 15).

The American based Human Rights Watch (HRW) has a long experience in monitoring and denouncing human rights abuses in Libya. In the context of sexual violence, three reports written before this war are worth mentioning. In *Libya: A Threat to Society? Arbitrary Detention of Women and Girls for “Social Rehabilitation?”* (2006a) HRW denounces the confinement of women accused of extramarital sex (many had been sexually abused) in social rehabilitation facilities, and strongly criticizes Libyan legislation on rape. In *Libya: Stemming the Flow. Abuses Against Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees* (2006b) HRW denounces widespread racism, xenophobia and violence experienced in Libya by sub-Saharan Africans at the hands of traffickers, government forces, police, and also the broader society. The report stresses the particular problems faced by non-Muslim women from sub-Saharan Africa “because some Libyans assume them to be immoral, if not sex workers”. Several testimonies hint at the persistence of rapes of black women and at the reluctance of the victims to speak out. Teclu, an Eritrean migrant, recalls his detention 2003 in a naval base: “The guards would go there at night, and the women would scream [...] I can’t swear to it, I don’t know if any of them were raped. If they were, they wouldn’t say so for the shame.” (HRW, 2006b: 47). *Italy/Libya: Pushed Back, Pushed Around: Italy’s Forced Return of Boat Migrants and Asylum Seekers, Libya’s Mistreatment of Migrants and Asylum Seekers* (HRW, 2009) is a follow-

up of the previous report and is intended to criticize “The Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between the Italian Republic and Great Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya” (the “Friendship Pact”, signed on August 30, 2008), which promoted the cooperation between Italy and Libya regarding border control and enabled Italy to forcibly return migrants caught in the high sea. The report repeats the claims made in the previous one: the assumption that women were particularly vulnerable to sexual abuses by smugglers and policeman. An Ethiopian man told HRW:

Most of the problems happened to her [*his wife*]. She was held after each arrest for about two months. [...] She never said anything to me about how she was treated in prison. But I was also in detention. I know what happens to women. (HRW, 2009: 61)

HRW monitored the human rights abuses in Libya from the very beginning of the conflict. After February 16, there were press releases – sometimes on a daily basis – denouncing police brutality, the killing of demonstrators, and arrests, and also calling on the international community to take measures to stop the violence and hold accountable those who were responsible for the abuses.<sup>13</sup> HRW welcomed the HRC resolution requesting an investigation on the human rights abuses, the no-fly zone, as well as the ICC’s arrest warrants for three senior figures of the regime, Gaddafi included.

The first denunciation of sexual violence dates from March 28: “Libya: Immediately Release Woman Who Alleged Rape: Family and Journalists Should Confirm Eman al-‘Obeidi is Free and Safe”.<sup>14</sup> The text is based on information circulating in the media after al-Obeidi had denounced her gang-rape to foreign journalists in Tripoli two days earlier. Her mother’s statement to Aljazeera, claiming that she had broken a taboo by talking openly about rape in a country that casts shame on the victim, are corroborated by HRW. On April 6, HRW posted another press release on al-Obeidi: “Libya: Allow Eman al-‘Obeidi to Leave Tripoli: Woman who Alleged Rape Needs Protection, Access to Medical Care”.<sup>15</sup> The text accuses the Libyan authorities of trying to silence her and, recalling the previous report on rehabilitation centers for women, voices deep concerns over her safety. Later HRW criticized Qatar for deporting her<sup>16</sup> and posted “Help Obeidi out of Libya”,<sup>17</sup> an emotional plea by Bill Frelick (HRW) on CNN (June 5, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Apart from the above-mentioned reports, all other documents authored by HRW, as well as the news by CNN and BBC will not be listed individually in the final bibliography. To facilitate reading, the links will be listed in footnotes.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/28/libya-immediately-release-woman-who-alleged-rape>.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/04/06/libya-allow-eman-al-obeidi-leave-tripoli>.

<sup>16</sup> “Qatar/Libya: Forced Return of Rape Victim. Eman al-‘Obeidi Alleged Assault by Gaddafi Forces” (June 2, 2011), <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/02/qatarlibya-forced-return-rape-victim>.



In an interview for *The Mark* with Liesl Gertholtz, women's rights director at HRW, entitled "Women in the Crossfire. The wars in Libya and the Congo highlight the vexing problem of rape as a military weapon" (June 8, 2011),<sup>18</sup> Al-Obeidi's case is referred as potentially emblematic of the war. The fact that so far rape could not be documented sufficiently by independent agencies comes to Gertholtz as no surprise since rape victims are stigmatized there. The same difficulty in gathering information on the issue is expressed in a later press release by HRW: "Libya: Transitional Government Should Support Victims Promote Justice for Sexual Violence" (September 19, 2011).<sup>19</sup> The text calls on the National Transitional Council (NCT) to investigate allegations of sexual assault and to provide medical care and support for the victims. HRW could not confirm claims of mass or systematic rape by Gaddafi's forces, but signals that the stigma of rape, the fear of reprisal, and the lack of available services for victims may lead to underreporting. HRW documented 10 cases of gang-rape that took place between February and May 2011, nine by Gaddafi forces and one by unidentified perpetrators.<sup>20</sup> The rapes, involving seven female and three male victims, were accompanied by extreme violence (beatings, mutilation, and penetration with objects).

HRW blames foremost the government forces for the extent of human rights abuses in the war and links anti-government violence to the lack of respect for the rule of law in the previous decades. Nonetheless, HRW has also been relentlessly denouncing the severe human rights abuses committed by anti-Gaddafi forces during and after the war. The vulnerable situation of Sub-Saharan migrants became a matter of deep concern from the very beginning of the war. The first alert dates from March 3: "Libya: Stranded Foreign Workers Need Urgent Evacuation. Sub-Saharan Africans Appear at Greatest Risk".<sup>21</sup> HRW, recalling the persistence of racist attacks in prewar Libya, notes that the situation became even more dangerous due to Gaddafi's reported use of sub-Saharan African mercenaries to quash popular protests.<sup>22</sup> Information on the ground indicates widespread persecution of migrant black workers (physical aggression, plunder, expulsion).<sup>23</sup> Acts of

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/05/help-obeidy-out-libya>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/08/women-crossfire>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/19/libya-transitional-government-should-support-victims>.

<sup>20</sup> The same conclusions are presented in the section about Libya in the World Report 2012 (HRW, 2012: 597).

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/02/libya-stranded-foreign-workers-need-urgent-evacuation>.

<sup>22</sup> HRW acknowledges that Gaddafi did indeed recruit Sub-Saharan mercenaries to crush the rebellion. It notes, however, that those constituted a small number compared to the thousands of migrant workers and refugees who were already living in Libya before the war.

<sup>23</sup> See other HRW's efforts to call attention to this topic: In "Dying to leave Libya" (May 4, 2011), Judith Sunderland, senior researcher on Western Europe for HRW, advocates that the UN mandate to "protect civilians" in Libya should not neglect African migrants, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/04/dying-leave-libya>. This call on European countries to protect Sub-Saharan migrants fleeing Libya by boat is reiterated in the "Oral Statement – U.N. Follow Up Libya Special Session" (June 9, 2011), <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/09/oral-statement-un-follow-libya-special-session>. See also "Libya's forgotten civilians" (*The Huffington Post*, June 23, 2011) by Samer Muscati and Sidney Kwiram

revenge and abuse of Gaddafi loyalists and their relatives also became quite early a matter of concern for HRW, especially since this would steadily increase as the opposition gained control of the territory. The first alert is on June 5.<sup>24</sup> Several press releases from the last three months of the war call special attention to the situation of black Africans suspected of being mercenaries.<sup>25</sup> Of deep concern for HRW is also the persecution by militias from Misrata of the citizens of Tawergha.<sup>26</sup> The abuses indicate acts of revenge embedded in racism.<sup>27</sup> Some detainees bearing signs of torture claim that they heard from their abusers comments like “We will send you back to Africa” and “Monkey needs a banana.” A process of racializing sexual violence also emerges from some testimonies. Some acts of torture (in some cases leading to death) were done for the purpose of extracting confessions of rape. In fact, in Misrata, rape figures among the most frequent accusations against men from Tawergha.<sup>28</sup>

HRW documents the detention of women and children by militias and by the new Libyan authorities. Some of these women told that they had been tortured in prison,<sup>29</sup> but HRW does not discuss sexual violence targeting black female migrants and Libyan women suspected of supporting the regime. It heard from a black woman in Tripoli that “armed men frequently have raped women in the camp”, but did not interview any of the alleged victims. Should this absence of first-hand testimonies of rape by women suspected of aligning with the former regime mean that the rebel forces did not rape (or raped considerably less)? Or does the lack of evidence signal underreporting due to the social conditions that HRW referred to in order to justify the small number of first-hand testimonies of rape that it could gather? Rape quite often features among the forms of

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(<http://www.hrw.org/features/libyas-forgotten-civilians> and 12 photos by Muscati (<http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/23/libyas-forgotten-civilians>).

<sup>24</sup> “Libya: Opposition Arbitrarily Detaining Suspected Gaddafi Loyalists. Respect Due Process Rights”, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/05/libya-opposition-arbitrarily-detaining-suspected-gaddafi-loyalists>. See also: “Libya: Opposition Forces Should Protect Civilians and Hospitals. Looting, Arson, and Some Beatings in Captured Western Towns” (July 13, 2011), <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/07/13/libya-opposition-forces-should-protect-civilians-and-hospitals>; “Libya: Contact Group Should Press Rebels to Protect Civilians. Attacks on Government Supporters Raise Concerns” (July 15, 2011), <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/07/15/libya-contact-group-should-press-rebels-protect-civilians>

<sup>25</sup> For example: “Libya: All Sides Obligated to Protect Civilians. National Transitional Council Should Protect Vulnerable Sites and Groups, Not Seek Revenge” (August 22, 2011) <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/08/22/libya-all-sides-obligated-protect-civilians>.

<sup>26</sup> The inhabitants of Tawergha, black Libyans, who apparently descend from slaves, were regarded as loyal to the regime. The town was used as a center for military operations against Misrata and became a site of intense fighting. The population was expelled and abused by anti-Gaddafi militias. Today it is a ghost town and its former inhabitants are living in camps in other parts of the country.

<sup>27</sup> For example: “Libya: Militias Terrorizing Residents of ‘Loyalist’ Town. Beatings, Shootings, Deaths in Detention of Tawerghans” (October 30, 2011), <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/30/libya-militias-terrorizing-residents-loyalist-town>, “Libya: Bolster Security at Tawergha Camps. Survivors Describe Fatal Attack” (March 5, 2012) (<http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/05/libya-bolster-security-tawergha-camps>).

<sup>28</sup> The final report of the HRC corroborates the information collected by HRW: forced displacement and abuse of the inhabitants of Tawergha (accused of having raped women in Misrata), racist and derogatory nature of language reported during the abuses (HRC, 2012b: 11-12).

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance: “Libya: Cease Arbitrary Arrests, Abuse of Detainees. Thousands Arrested Without Review in Tripoli” (September 30, 2011) (<http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/30/libya-cease-arbitrary-arrests-abuse-detainees>).

violence that HRW described in the pattern of attacks against suspected pro-Gaddafi communities: looting, physical violence, torture, forced displacement, revenge, ethnicized enemy that is accused of rape, militia groups acting on their own without responding to a central official authority.<sup>30</sup> Insufficient data prevents any sort of conclusion on this issue at this stage of the research: are we facing an example of underreporting wartime rape or are we confronted with a pattern of political and ethnic persecution that did not include sexual violence?

### **“THE FACE OF THE ANTI-GADHAFI MOVEMENT”:<sup>31</sup> THE POLITICAL FRAMING OF RAPE NARRATIVES**

The victims of sexual violence referred in the documents authored by HRC and HRW cannot be understood as a homogeneous category: they are female or male, Libyan or foreign, minor or adult, politically close to one of the sides or not identified with any of the forces in combat. There is nonetheless a slightly ascendant pattern: adult, female, and part of the Libyan population that is suspected of not aligning with the regime. As we will see, this category tends to become exclusive in the hegemonic media: CNN is an emblematic example of emphasizing it while ignoring other types of victims.

Luc Boltanski's reflection on the politics of pity (Boltanski, 1993; 2000) are very helpful in understanding CNN's process of signifying al-Obeidi as *the* rape victim of the Libyan war and turning her into an emblem of the rebellion against Gaddafi. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's assumption that pity as a central political argument requires a “distinction between those who suffer and those who do not, between the unfortunate and the happy”, i.e. a spectator as a “happy person, not immediately concerned with, and at a distance from the one who suffers”, Boltanski claims that the sufferings “must be collected and represented, must become the object of a pathos, so as to make more fortunate people sensitive to the problem and to gather them around a cause” (Boltanski, 2000: 5-6). Representation becomes a key factor: “the sight of seeing is only legitimate when it leads to action” (*ibidem*: 6); the discourse must incorporate at the same time “the object of representation, i.e., the sufferings of the unfortunate, as well as the feelings of pity, indignation, revulsion, etc. felt by the one who is exposed to this representation” (*ibidem*: 7). According to Boltanski, the engagement between the parties involved in the suffering at a distance may occur through three topics: the topic of denunciation (i.e. the breeding of feelings of indignation regarding the suffering and, most important, concentrating on the persecutor and selecting him from various possible candidates), the topic of sentiment (a

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<sup>30</sup> Consider, for example, Bosnia, Eastern Congo, Gujarat in India, among many others.

<sup>31</sup> Kyle Almond on al-Obeini in “How one voice can tell the story of an entire movement” (CNN, April 1, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/04/01/arab.unrest.faces/index.html>.

topic that is related to the demand of urgency – some action must be taken to help the victim – but deals as well with “feelings of gratitude that the benefactor’s intervention inspires in the victim”, Boltanski, 2000: 10) and the topic of aesthetic order: “that of the artist capable of showing how the victim’s suffering possesses something sublime” (*ibidem*: 12). Influenced by Adam Smith, Boltanski stresses that the suffering at a distance relies heavily on imagination, i.e. on everything that gives us access to the inner life of those who suffer. Smith pointed to literary works, and Boltanski adds films, news reports, and television dramas (Boltanski, 1993: 80). In that sense, fiction becomes an important strategy to foster the suffering at the distance. We will see now how these various elements from Boltanski’s analysis emerge in CNN’s reporting on al-Obeidi.

Chance and individual agency may have played a major role in the configuration of al-Obeidi as *the* rape victim for CNN: if she had not decided to speak out and if she had not succeeded in getting to the foreign journalists, sexual violence might probably not have been an issue of major interest in the media coverage of the war.<sup>32</sup> Boltanski noted that a central problem in the politics of pity is “the problem of the excess of victims. There are too many of them, not just in the order of action, which requires the construction of a hierarchy and a setting of priorities, but also in the order of representation.” (Boltanski, 2000: 13). Al-Obeidi’s act gave a face to the victims of sexual violence and made it possible for the media to mediate rape as a crime deeply affecting a concrete person, whom the public could relate to (and not merely abstract statistics and medical descriptions of psychological and physical injuries). CNN made a heroine of her and put her at the center of the conflict, following her situation with the same eagerness it reported on the combats and the political developments. As *the* exemplary victim, she is the protagonist of a tele-event, in the sense given by Ramonet (1999): an event that would not have got the importance it did if the television had not seized it and reported on it daily during a given period of time. There were three peaks in the coverage of her case: between March 26 (marking her appearance in the hotel and subsequent arrest by forces of the regime) and April 12, news focused on her whereabouts and the dangers she might be facing in Tripoli. The second peak was in May, after her escape to Tunisia (May 8). After May 17, her case was mentioned as evidence in news about the ICC’s investigation on the possible use of rape as a weapon of war and on allegations of troops being supplied with Viagra to fuel gang-rapes. A third peak followed her deportation from Qatar (June 2) and stressed the dangers she faced back in Libya. Her case was also invoked in news about cell-phones recordings showing soldiers raping women (after June 16).

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<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Syria. In reporting the events there, the Western mainstream media appeared to be supportive of the opposition. In spite of the fact that agencies such as the HRW gathered credible accounts of wartime rape, by November 2012 these had not yet triggered an intense mediatic coverage. This marks a clear difference with the way in which the Lybian case had been reported.

Therefore, CNN's coverage of al-Obeidi's case reveals, on one hand, an emotional narrativization of her life (the aesthetic topic that Boltanski stressed), representing her as a heroine in need of rescue (the three peaks), and, on the other, an understanding of her case as emblematic, i.e., as evidence for broader allegations of sexual violence (ICC's investigation, Viagra claims, etc.).

The narrativization of her life portrayed her as a "woman in danger", with a plot (her rescue) and some key-actors (the heroine, her family, and the villains), i.e., the model-reporting on her adopts a structure that is characteristic of works of fiction. During the first peak, CNN reported on her situation on a daily basis, playing a pro-active role in monitoring her case,<sup>33</sup> and relentlessly denouncing contradictory efforts by the Libyan authorities to deal with the situation (whether by discrediting her – claiming she was mentally-ill, a prostitute, a traitor – or by alluring her to change her testimony). In "Government: Libyan woman who alleged rape to journalists released" (March 28, 2011),<sup>34</sup> the government's spokesman's attempt to depoliticize the case (presenting it as a "criminal case" under investigation) is openly challenged: "CNN's Nic Robertson [...] cautioned against taking Ibrahim's statements as fact, noting that "oftentimes what he says doesn't match reality."<sup>35</sup> Al-Saadi Gaddafi's (one of Gaddafi's sons) mediation to have her interviewed by CNN on April 6, and his positive comments on her may be seen as part of the government's efforts to "control damage" abroad. CNN stressed, however, that Al-Saadi acted "against the explicit wishes of the Libyan government" and that the transmission was delayed for 18 hours because of interference by the Libyan authorities. It also accused Al-Saadi of demanding to have al-Obeidi's support for the opposition removed from the interview. CNN framed the interview not to soften the image of the regime (certainly Al-Saadi's own intention) but, on the contrary, to stress its dictatorial nature. During this first peak, al-Obeidi is presented as a woman who needs urgent protection since the thugs who abused her continue to enjoy impunity and the regime is trying to silence her. It is not by chance that reports on her always include footage from the hotel in Tripoli: a woman in tears with unkempt hair surrounded by menacing men trying to hide her from the international press. In this "first chapter", al-Obeidi is the fragile heroine in danger, while Gaddafi and his forces appear as the menacing villains. The language is usually incisive, mostly short sentences, giving a sense of urgency and conveying graphic images of the brutalized victim, while affiliating her with the rebellion. Boltanski's topics of denunciation (indignation and identification of the persecutor) and

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, "Where is Eman Al-Obeidi?" (March 30, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2011/03/29/exp.ac.libya.eman.alobeidy.cnn>.

<sup>34</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/03/27/libya.beaten.woman/index.html>.

<sup>35</sup> See also "Libyan government denies rape allegations" (June 18, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/06/18/libya.rape/index.html?iref=allsearch>. The text is constructed to contradict the government, by pointing to the evidence of rape.

sentiment (sentiment of urgency) are clearly framing the mediation of her story, as we can see, for instance, in this example from March 27:

[...] a desperate Libyan woman burst into the building frantic to let the world know she had been raped and beaten by Moammar Gadhafi's militia. Her face was heavily bruised. So were her legs. She displayed blood on her right inner thigh. She said her name was Eman al-Obeidy. She was well-dressed and appeared to be a well-to-do middle-aged woman. She spoke in English and said she was from the rebel stronghold of Benghazi and had been picked up by Gadhafi's men at a checkpoint east of Tripoli. She sobbed and said she was held against her will for two days and raped by 15 men. "Look at what Gadhafi's brigades did to me," she said. "My honor was violated by them." [...] the journalists [...] had witnessed Gadhafi's firm and pervasive grip on Libyan society. A woman who dared to speak against him was quickly silenced. Journalists who dared to tell her story paid a price. It was one tale that perhaps went a long way in illuminating the need to protect Libya's people.<sup>36</sup>

This first peak coincides with the beginning of NATO bombardments.<sup>37</sup> The first targets of the Allied military intervention were precisely the armored units south of Benghazi (al-Obeidi's hometown) and the Libyan air-defense systems. Her testimony reminded the Western public of the dangers that the rebel town would face if Gaddafi was allowed to launch an attack. While she could be identified by the public with the people Resolution 1973 meant to protect (it was passed to prevent a blood bath in the city), the forces that were being bombed were associated with her attackers (armed forces fighting for the regime). The discourses on protecting her are interconnected with the broader picture of the protection of her hometown and hence with NATO's actions. Boltanski pointed to the importance of choosing the persecutor among different candidates: CNN openly challenges the regime's spokesman version (individuals acting independently of the regime) to pick al-Obeidi's words ("Gadhafi's brigades") and point directly at Gaddafi. This step is crucial since it enables the rape of al-Obeidi not to be regarded as a *fait-divers* (a civil case), but as a political event. And that is precisely the core of the politics of pity in our modern democratic societies: "[...] arguments from pity for the victims or for the

<sup>36</sup> "Libyan woman bursts into hotel to tell her story of rape" (March 27, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/03/26/libya.beaten.woman/index.html>.

<sup>37</sup> On March 25 NATO Allied Joint Force Command in Naples took command of the no-fly zone (French forces had started the attacks on March 19) and on March 28 President Obama addressed the American people in Libya. Al-Obeidi burst into the hotel in Tripoli on March 26.



sufferers are utilized mainly as political arguments to justify and legitimate government actions, whether domestic decisions or foreign interventions.” (Boltanski, 2000: 12).

By relentlessly associating al-Obeidi with the Libyan people, CNN helped to turn her face alongside the face of Gaddafi as the most well-known images of the war, with her standing for the opposition and he for the fierce dictatorship.<sup>38</sup> CNN coverage of her story communicates not only despair and helplessness, but also defiance against the dictator (another important element in the narrativization of her life embedded in emotions): “Alleged Libyan rape victim's mother would slap Gadhafi if she could” (March 29, 2011), “Accuser's mom would 'strangle' Gadhafi” (March 30, 2011), “I'm not afraid of Gadhafi” (March 30, 2011).<sup>39</sup> On the phone with CNN (“Al-Obeidi reconnects with mother”, April 6),<sup>40</sup> al-Obeidi calls the spokesman of the regime a liar and her mother, assuring her that the Arab States are with her, says “May God defeat you Gadhafi, you are an oppressor and may God not let you live”.

A process of gendering Libya can be observed through al-Obeidi: she, a fragile woman (not the armed opposition, nor the male demonstrators), stands for the people who defied the dictator. One can perceive here an ancient and widespread gender construction: the vulnerable woman and her masculine protector. As Gaby Zipfel notes (2012: 32), this pair not only serves the male self-image of heroism, which reduces the female person to the status of victim and object, but also serves the legitimization of violence. Through al-Obeidi, Libya becomes an entity in need of protection by the international community.<sup>41</sup> On May 9, al-Obeidi had just crossed the border to Tunisia with the help of Libyan officers, but Nic Robertson presents French diplomats as her real saviors:

Freedom never tasted so good. Outside the safe-house diplomats are helping secure her safety. [...] Since she arrived [*at the French embassy*] a diplomatic protection team is helping her and President Nicholas Sarkozy has taken an intimate interest in her every movement. The lady who came to symbolize the Libyan struggle is now getting for the first time the help she so long craved.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> She becomes a symbol of the opposition and is compared to the most emblematic figures of protests for democracy in the Middle East. See, for instance, “How one voice can tell the story of an entire movement” (Kyle Almond, CNN, April 1, 2011),

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/04/01/Arab.unrest.faces/index.html>.

<sup>39</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/03/29/libya.rape.case/index.html?iref=allsearch>,

<http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2011/03/30/sayah.libya.mother.rape.cnn>,

<http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2011/03/30/sayah.libya.eman.rape.cnn?iref=allsearch>.

<sup>40</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/04/21/libya.rape.case/index.html?iref=allsearch>.

<sup>41</sup> The gendering of conquered nations and territories is a widespread strategy. In the case of Africa as well as of the Orient, the metaphorization of the land as a woman to be seduced or to be protected is a commonplace in colonial and imperial discourses.

<sup>42</sup> “Alleged rape victim flees Libya” (May 9, 2011),

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/05/08/libya.rape.case/index.html>.

Though the word “alleged” is often used to refer to al-Obeidi as a rape victim, thus suggesting that CNN is adopting a “neutral” tone by indicating that her claims are not independently proven, the configuration and other forms of wording of the news are openly meant to stress the veracity of her claims. See, for instance, how Anderson Cooper introduces an interview with her on April 6: “we know her name and we can not turn away from her plight [...] we want you to hear her voice, she wants you to hear her voice, everything else has been taken away from this woman, the least we can give her is listen to her voice”.<sup>43</sup> The engaged approach by CNN relies heavily on the construction of an emotional response to her case by building proximity and making the public feel responsible for her. Once again, Boltanski’s theory is useful in stressing the importance of the imagination and of elements that can give access to the inner life of those who suffer at a distance and hence foster the engagement of the spectator.<sup>44</sup> The several interviews with her mother and especially the broadcasting of part of the conversation between mother and daughter on the phone play no informative role at all; they are merely a strategy of appealing to the public, creating intimacy and introducing in the narrative of the “woman in danger” a familiar element that the average public can relate to: “mom suffering for her child”. We hear al-Obeidi crying and the uncomfortable silences when she sobs, we hear her asking for help, denouncing Tripoli as a prison, saying she fears for her life and for her parents’ health, thanking CNN and the international response. Other details are also of key importance in fostering sympathy: photos of her as a happy child and as a pretty and successful student who dreams of going to France; footage of her family (her old supporting parents, the many children of the broader family), suggesting this is a respected conservative middle-class Muslim family.<sup>45</sup>

Her image as a “normal” well-educated Muslim girl could not be more distant from the configuration of the women of the “other side”. CNN hardly gives attention to the fact that there were women supporting and fighting for Gaddafi, but, on June 30, David McKenzie reports on a training center for women in Bani Walid.<sup>46</sup> These women project defiance and strength, they are corpulent, of a certain age (mothers and grandmothers, have jobs) and talk with confidence to the cameras about defending their country and liking guns. One woman dressed in a military outfit says “Do not underestimate any woman in Libya, whether old or young. The woman is still able to perform more than you think”. McKenzie

<sup>43</sup> “Al-Obeidy: Tripoli is a prison” (April 6, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2011/04/05/exp.ac.alobeidy.tripoli.prison.cnn?iref=allsearch>.

<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, titles such as “Al-Obeidy: Please don’t forget me” (April 12, 2011) <http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2011/04/11/ac.alobeidy.update.cnn>.

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, “Alleged rape victim’s family defiant” (April 1, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/international/2011/04/01/bs.sayah.libya.obeydy.cnn>.

<sup>46</sup> “Libya’s Gadhafi calls for volunteers, women answer” (David McKenzie, June 30, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/06/30/libya.unrest/index.html?iref=allsearch>.

frames these testimonies to project bewilderment and mistrust. He questions the gender roles adopted by these women: "These are people's sisters, mothers, grandmothers, but in Moammar Gaddafi's Libya they are a fighting force". MacKenzie comes from a country where women can join the military. Would he report on these terms on women fighting in the US army? Or is his bewilderment due to the fact that these are Muslim women? One woman (mother of 4 children) also reiterates the duality: "I forget my role as a woman, my role is now to fight". Implicit are two conceptions of women: a traditional role within the patriarchal family (mothers, sisters, grandmothers) and a militarized role as actors of violence. While McKenzie seems to consider the first one as "natural", he has a difficulty in taking the second one seriously. He informs that women and girls were used to military training in Gaddafi's Libya and recalls the proven lethal force of the dictator's female bodyguards, but notes simultaneously that most of the women on screen seem unfamiliar with their rifles and also induces a hint of suspicion on their free will ("the volunteers were bused up by the government to meet us"; the camera also catches men pushing women to the camera). The sound of the video report also contributes to discredit these women: the public is confronted with a deafening noise of female vociferation and shouting overwhelmed by shots of guns, leaving a sense of hysteria and femininity gone astray. Finally, the discrediting of these women is further fostered in the text that accompanies the video,<sup>47</sup> which includes paragraphs about rape by Gaddafi's forces: ICC's efforts on the issue and al-Obeidi's story. CNN hence opposes those female fighters to the other examples of Libyan women, whose courage was directed not towards defending the regime with guns, but towards denouncing its misogyny and violence with words and pleas to the outside world. Gaddafi's female fighters had aligned with *the* persecutor of CNN's narrative and therefore could hardly become "victims that matter" (once again, a concept by Boltanski). That "role" had been attributed to al-Obeidi.

Back to her story: While in the first peak the "them" in the formula "we have to save her from them" refers to the regime and its thugs,<sup>48</sup> in the second peak it becomes more diffuse. The news suggest that al-Obeidi was violently deported from Qatar with the connivance of the NCT because she had refused to campaign in the TV channel of the opposition (she claimed they were using her). CNN refers to dangers posed by Gaddafi loyalists in areas under the control of the opposition, but seems to imply as well the Arab/Muslim culture. Now the urgency is to take her away from Libya, a country that is

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<sup>47</sup> "Women appear to be armed and fighting for Gadhafi" (June 30, 2011)

<http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2011/06/30/women-appear-to-be-armed-and-fighting-for-gadhafi/>.

<sup>48</sup> "Al-Obeidi in exile: 'My soul is liberated'" (Nic Robertson, May 18, 2011) is a kind of first "happy end". In an interview in Doha, she thanks all those, specially the Americans, who stood by her and takes her story as having changed Arab perceptions of rape victims.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/05/16/libya.obeydi/index.html>.

presented as bad for brutalized women, and bring her to a safe-haven: the US.<sup>49</sup> News about her heading to Romania and later to the US are permeated by a sense of relief, a sort of “happy ending” feeling.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, the CNN coverage can be regarded as a variation of the old formula “our enemies rape women, we protect women” referring here not only to “our women” but to “their women” as well, an adaptation embedded in the long tradition of Orientalist discourses about “saving the women from the Third World”.<sup>51</sup>

While the mediatization of al-Obeidi must be assumed as an important praiseworthy step that probably prevented the regime from harming her, the benefits of this coverage are more questionable regarding the broader victims of sexualized violence. CNN never confronted the new authorities with the broader problem of wartime rape and never asked them about support to the victims in Libya, i.e. it never went beyond one specific story and never actually engaged with the survivors living in the country. Furthermore, CNN never addressed the issue of the policies of asylum, i.e. it never engaged in a discussion on whether situations of rape like al-Obeidi's could and should be considered as a basis for being granted refugee status. In other words, CNN reported on a victim without addressing the structural problems that were framing the fate of that woman, namely the situation of survivors of sexual violence in post-war Libya and US's asylum policy. What we have in the CNN report is an individual story offered to the public in a sensationalist way until the rescue was successful, thereby giving the public a sense of catharsis. This configuration results from the way the politics of pity were put in motion here: the suffering at a distance was mediated as a fiction enclosed by a narrative that comes to an end. Since the focus had always been al-Obeidi's fate, her exile puts an end to the chapter on her sexual abuse. Hence the spectator does not need to suffer anymore: now she is safe.

The shortcomings of CNN's reporting on al-Obeidi are even more striking since it generalized her rape to the whole conflict: her case was not presented as a crime by some individuals who happened to be linked to the regime; it was signified as proof of the

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, “Qatari expulsion of alleged Libyan rape victim upsets U.S.” (Nic Robertson, June 3, 2011) <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/06/03/libya.rape.case/index.html?iref=allsearch>, “Help Obeidi out of Libya” (Bill Frelick, June 5, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/06/04/frelick.liba.obeidy/index.html?iref=allsearch>, “Alleged Libya rape victim arrives at refugee facility in Romania” (June 6, 2011), <http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2011/06/06/alleged-libya-rape-victim-arrives-at-refugee-facility-in-romania/?iref=allsearch>, “Alleged Libyan rape victim comes to the U.S. to stay” (July 29, 2011) [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-07-29/us/us.libya.al.obeidy.relocates\\_1\\_eman-al-obeidy-cnn-producer-moammar-gadhafi?\\_s=PM:US](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-07-29/us/us.libya.al.obeidy.relocates_1_eman-al-obeidy-cnn-producer-moammar-gadhafi?_s=PM:US).

<sup>50</sup> After the war, CNN has a few reports on her: “Alleged victim rape speaks out” (December 13, 2011) <http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2011/12/09/nr-eman-al-obeidy-sot.cnn?iref=allsearch>, “Alleged Libyan rape victim struggling to start anew in America” (Suzanne Malveaux and Moni Basu, December 13, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/12/13/us/libya-rape-interview/index.html?iref=allsearch>; “A symbol of defiance in Gadhafi's Libya, Eman al-Obeidi just wants to be left alone” (Moni Basu, April 9, 2012), <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/08/us/colorado-libyan-rape-victim/index.html>.

<sup>51</sup> There is a large academic literature on possible intersections between perceptions of female victimhood in Muslim and Third World countries and imperialism in some Western feminist discourses. See, among many others, classics on the topic such as Mohanty, 1984; Yeğenoğlu, 1998: 95-120.

use of rape as weapon of war.<sup>52</sup> But, instead of promoting a discussion of the situation of survivors of rape in post-war Libya, it only served to indict the regime and to prove its inhumanity.<sup>53</sup> Therefore it should come as no surprise that findings on the ground that questioned precisely the allegations of systemic rapes and the use of rape as a weapon of war were simply ignored by CNN.<sup>54</sup> By the same way, references to victims who do not fit in the category of “persecuted by the regime” are scarce and framed in a way that does not allow those cases to challenge the dominant narrative. See, for example, the sexual abuse of black migrants. CNN mentions it in a report about refugees arriving in Lampedusa, but the rapists are identified solely as Gaddafi’s forces. Sexual abuse of black migrants, which is presented by HRW as a diffuse phenomenon in Libya, is meant to function in CNN as a proof of the perversity of the regime.<sup>55</sup>

Another example of framing divergent testimonies can be found in “Harbor sanctuary for Gadhafi’s migrants” (Raja Razek and Libby Lewis, September 8, 2011),<sup>56</sup> which is probably the most detailed report by CNN on the attacks on blacks that were being denounced by human rights agencies at the time. The abuse of black migrants and the practice of racial profiling in the mass arrests of blacks by the anti-Gaddafi forces are explained (and somehow justified) by the fact that Gaddafi hired Sub-Saharan mercenaries. The suffering of black migrants is reported with distance<sup>57</sup> and even accompanied by exculpatory arguments and doubt. CNN says it could not verify HRW

<sup>52</sup> Al-Obeidi told journalists that there were other abducted women when she was raped: “Rape suspects accuse woman of slander” (March 29, 2011),

<http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2011/03/29/exp.libya.rape.victim.slander.cnn>. Her case is repeatedly brought up in the news about the claims of Viagra and cell-phones. See, for example: “ICC to investigate reports of Viagra-fueled gang-rapes in Libya” (May 18, 2011)

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/05/17/libya.rapes.icc/index.html>; “Rape as a weapon of war in Libya” (May 17, 2011),

<http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2011/05/17/exp.nr.robertson.libya.rape.cnn>, “Psychologist: Proof of hundreds of rape cases during Libya’s war” (May 23, 2011),

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/05/23/libya.rape.survey.psychologist/index.html>; “Libyan rebels say captured cell phone videos show rape, torture” (June 17, 2011),

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/06/14/libya.rape.hfr/index.html>.

<sup>53</sup> See also the sexualized abuse of one female journalist, in “Freed New York Times journalists thought they would die in Libya” (April 1, 2011),

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/03/31/libya.ac360.missing.journalists/index.html>.

<sup>54</sup> I’m referring to the HRC’s first report (June 1, 2011), which stated that it found no evidence supporting the Viagra and the mass-rape claims. By the same time, Amnesty International and HRW were also unable to provide evidence for such claims. See, for instance, Patrick Cockburn, “Amnesty questions claim that Gaddafi ordered rape as a weapon of war”, *The Independent*, 24 June, 2011,

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/amnesty-questions-claim-that-gaddafi-ordered-rape-as-weapon-of-war-2302037.html>.

<sup>55</sup> “Lampedusa’s boat people: One man’s story” (Ivan Watson, June 1, 2011)

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/06/01/italy.lampedusa.boat.people/index.html?iref=allsearch>. Lampedusa emerges here as a safe haven for abused migrants. No word about Italy’s previous cooperation with Gaddafi in policing the border and deporting migrants.

<sup>56</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/09/08/libya.africans/index.html?iref=allsearch>.

<sup>57</sup> There is one exception: Shweyga Mullah (“Gaddafi’s nanny”), an Ethiopian domestic worker who was severely burnt by one of Gaddafi’s daughters-in-law. Her case made headlines across the world and she got sympathy from world leaders. CNN presents her case not as unique but only in relation to the family of the dictator (without addressing the broader problem of abuse of domestic workers in Libya and other countries of the region).



denunciations of mistreatment of detainees when it visited one detention facility. There are six references to the existence of mercenaries, while only three to the claims of rape of black women. The use of mercenaries is presented as a proven fact (CNN had interviewed some), but the allegations of sexual abuse are referred to as “dark tales of women being dragged away in the middle of the night to be raped by armed gangs”. Furthermore, the text apparently suggests that blacks do not belong in Libya and are another example of Gaddafi's political aberrations: “They are the people who don't historically have roots in Libya.” Gaddafi's pan-African ambitions surely contributed to the fact that “Up to one-fifth of Libya's six million population are migrants” but this is only one part of the broader picture. The existence of black Libyans (who were also being targeted at the same time)<sup>58</sup> and the geographical situation of Libya at the core of migration routes to Europe are strategically omitted in a report that is intended to ultimately blame Gaddafi for abuses that were being committed at that time by his objectors.

In the process of mediatizing sexual violence, CNN amplified al-Obeidi's case, while dismissing and almost ignoring claims of rape that did not involve Gaddafi's forces. The narrativization of al-Obeidi framed the problem of wartime sexual violence in Libya in a way that ended up by excluding many others types of victims. In that sense, it exemplifies the shortcomings of the need to select the “victims who matter” and the “true persecutors” in the politics of pity described by Bolstanski. As we saw, that process of selection materialized in a political frame that was beneficial for NATO. As such, CNN reiterates the role of rape in traditional propaganda war discourses, where victims stand for their role as emblems of the victimized community and/or as evidence of the brutality and immorality of the enemy, while the cases that do not fit the picture tend to be ignored.<sup>59</sup> In the present, although important steps have been taken to improve the legal protection and the empowerment of rape victims, CNN's coverage of wartime rape in Libya shows us that the tendency to address rape as a defining mark of the enemy is not over. In an epoch where

<sup>58</sup> CNN refers briefly to the abuse of dark-skinned Libyans in “Libyan detainees describe abuse and torture” (Moni Nasu, October 2, 2011), but the report has a positive tone by referring to MacCain's comments on the political will of the new authorities to tackle the problem of torture. See also “NCT will investigate allegations of crimes against pro-Gadhafi forces, official say (October 30, 2011)

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/30/world/africa/libya-militias/index.html>). A comparison with a report by BBC on Tawergha makes the indifference of CNN more explicit. The BBC journalist interviews inhabitants from Misrata who recall their many sufferings during the war (and accuse Tawergha of rape and murder), but he also gives the people of Tawergha a chance to describe their misery as losers of the war: “Cleansed' Libyan town spills its terrible secrets” (Tarik Kafala, December 12, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16051349>).

<sup>59</sup> There are numerous war scenarios corroborating this definition of traditional propaganda war discourses. WWI is a well-known example attesting to the efficacy of rape stories in nationalist discourses. The “rape of Belgium” (concept that was used as a metaphor but also in its literal meaning) worked as an efficient propaganda tool for the Allies (see, for instance, Horne and Kramer, 2002). Rapes of French women by Germans also became a propaganda trope to demonize the enemy (see Harris, 1993). In the early 20s, Germany initiated an international propaganda campaign to protest the French use of colonial soldiers in occupied Rhineland, claiming soldiers from French-African colonies were engaging in mass rapes and creating a generation of mixed-race children (the so-called “black shame” [*Schwarze Schmach* or *Schwarze Schande*]) (on the topic, see, for instance, Wigger, 2009).



women's rights play an important role in defining "Western" values, rape can function as an effective tool to make public opinion sensitive to the problem, call for international engagement, and discredit "enemies", since it tends to be regarded as a form of illegitimate violence.

The coverage of wartime sexual violence by the BBC emerges as less sensationalist. It has fewer reports on the topic and, contrary to CNN, which used foremost al-Obeidi to address it, most BBC reports are not about her,<sup>60</sup> but on broader allegations of the use of rape as a weapon of war. The first peak of the news on the topic is May 23, when a BBC reporter interviewed two pro-Gaddafi fighters in detention, who said that they had been ordered to rape in Misrata. The second peak is after June 8 and focuses on the efforts by the ICC to collect evidence on the use of rape as a weapon of war by the regime. BBC's coverage discusses how far the cases reported indicate that rape in Libya is being used as a "weapon of war" that could be included in the indictment against senior representatives of the regime. It is assumed by BBC that cases of wartime rape always occur, the question now is to know whether it is systemic in Libya. That is to say, BBC focuses on the legal framework in the context of international law. Contrary to CNN's narrative of "the woman in danger", BBC's coverage is framed by the "script" "rape: a weapon of war?" In this sense, BBC emerges as more "up-to-date" since it connects more directly with academic and public debates of the last years that consider that rape cannot be regarded merely as a byproduct of warfare, but should be addressed as well as a structural part of it, i.e. as a possible strategy to dominate and defeat a collective enemy.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> BBC reports on al-Obeidi are also quite supportive of her. In "Parents say Libyan rape claim woman held in Tripoli" (April 1, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12941142>), the public sees photos of her as a child and as a young adult during an interview with her distressed parents. In December 28, she was nominated one of the Faces of the year 2011.

<sup>61</sup> In her influential book *Against our Will*, Susan Brownmiller defended that wartime rape was actually a functional tool in warfare: "Defense of women has long been a hallmark of masculine pride, as possession of women has been a hallmark of masculine success. Rape by a conquering soldier destroys all remaining illusions of power and property for men of the defeated side. The body of a raped woman becomes a ceremonial battlefield, a parade ground for the victor's trooping of the colors. The act that is played out upon her is a message passed between men – vivid proof of victory for one and loss and defeat of another" (Brownmiller, 1975: 38). Such premises gained visibility and were developed in subsequent research on wartime sexual violence and became central in the context of the "new wars", namely in the 90s when the rapes in the wars leading to the disintegration of Yugoslavia were perceived not as random cases (as a byproduct of war), but as part of a strategy to destroy the enemy's community. The possible interconnection between patriarchal values, ethnicity, nationalism and sexual violence were stressed by feminist campaigners in the process of lobbying to include rape in the indictments of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Researchers such as Chyntia H. Enloe (see, for instance, Enloe, 2000) have given increasing attention to the use of rape as a strategy and human rights organizations like Amnesty International (AI) were able to popularize the concept of rape as a weapon of war, thus making it "mainstream". AI's 2004 report *Lives Blown Apart: Crimes against women in times of conflict: stop violence against women* has a chapter precisely on "rape as a weapon of war" (Chapter 3), where it is defined as follows: "As a weapon of war, rape is used strategically and tactically to advance specific objectives in many forms of conflict. It is used to conquer, expel or control women and their communities in times of war or internal conflict. As a form of gender-based torture it is used to extract information, punish, intimidate and humiliate. It is the universal weapon employed to strip women of their dignity and destroy their sense of self. It is also used to terrorize and destroy entire communities." (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ACT77/075/2004/en/944d7605-d57f-11dd-bb24-1fb85fe8fa05/act770752004en.pdf>). Media coverage of this report includes titles such as "How did

The focus is on the nature of the crime, and only indirectly on the nature of the regime. The reports on sexual violence privilege elements that may attest to the use of rape as a weapon of war: the voice of possible perpetrators (who could disclose if there were orders), claims about the use of Viagra to fuel abuse, cell-phone evidence, and Ocampo's declarations about a possible rape campaign.<sup>62</sup> Ocampo stresses that the ICC is not actually looking at sporadic individual cases, but at evidence tracing a chain of command pointing to orders by Gaddafi himself.<sup>63</sup> Gita Saghal, women's advocate and prior campaigner for Amnesty International, also notes in an interview that the specificity of the allegations of rape in Libya being investigated by the ICC have to do with the concept of "weapon of war": they are looking to see whether there is a chain of command that would make the leaders (and not only the rapists themselves) accountable for the crime.<sup>64</sup>

It has to be stressed that the BBC's "script" ends with a question mark, i.e. it does not impose a reading of the rapes as a weapon of war; it discusses it. It provides evidence for and against the main claim. See, for example, the reports by Andrew Harding on the two detainees who confessed rape.<sup>65</sup> Harding claims that the two testimonies about soldiers being ordered to rape to punish the population of Misrata are credible (e.g. he saw no evidence that the detainees had been forced to confess). But he also acknowledges that there might be a propagandist interest behind the disclosure of such stories and notes that individual acts of violence may not be proof of a systematic campaign. In the report "Libya denies 'rape as weapon' claims" (June 9, 2011),<sup>66</sup> Harding highlights the difficulty of getting to the truth in this issue: "UN teams in Libya are saying both sides have carried out human rights abuses although most have been carried out by the Gaddafi's regime. But for now the full truth is being obscured by chaos, propaganda and the familiar fog of war." Harding reiterates that the testimony of the detainees he had interviewed seems credible, but recognizes that both sides are engaged in demonizing the other. International official responses are also contradictory: while Ocampo takes the allegations of a campaign of mass rapes very seriously, Cherif Bassiouni, who was leading a UN rights inquiry into human rights abuses in Libya, is more cautious: "People are accusing each other of a

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rape become a weapon of war?" (Laura Smith-Spark, BBC, December 8, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4078677.stm>).

<sup>62</sup> See also the intervention of the pro-opposition Libyan historian Faraj Najem in the program *Daily Politics* (June 13, 2011) claiming that Gaddafi was using gang-rape as a weapon of mass destruction: "Libya: Historian on Gaddafi troops in gang rape claims", <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-13749709>.

<sup>63</sup> "Libya: Gaddafi investigated over use of rape as weapon" (June 8, 2011) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13705854>.

<sup>64</sup> "Rape is used as a weapon of war" (June 9, 2011) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13707445>; See also "Libya: Clinton condemns rape as weapon of war" (June 17, 2011), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13803556>.

<sup>65</sup> "Gaddafi troops face rape allegations" (May 23, 2011) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9493000/9493814.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9493000/9493814.stm); "Libya: Forced to rape in Misrata" (Andrew Harding, May 23, 2011) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13502715>.

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13720434>.

policy of rape, people are accusing mercenaries and foreign fighters of engaging in rape. I would like to say at this point is more of a hysterical social reaction. We have no evidence of it.”

BBC also interviews guests who dismiss as propaganda the claims of rape as a weapon of war. In the program *Question time*, the writer, academic, and journalist Germaine Greer is asked about whether Britain should commit ground troops to Libya in light of the rape threat. Invoking a perception of wartime rape as a universal phenomenon framed by militarism (“all soldiers in certain circumstances will rape regardless of whether they are ours or theirs”),<sup>67</sup> she ironically suggests that the claims of Viagra are possibly nothing more than “legends about the hated enemy”: “what's wrong with the Libyans? Everyone else manages without!”

BBC's script “rape: a weapon of war?” inevitably privileged coverage of aspects that could attest to the use of sexual violence as a military strategy and hence focused on rape allegations by the forces of the regime. This approach still leaves room for a broader spectrum of victims, namely for individual cases of rape that do not fit the “script”. But, while the allegations of rape as a strategy are at the core of several reports (as indicated by the titles of the reports), the other rape allegations in the war are consequently scarcer and never really the focus. Allegations of rape by the anti-Gaddafi forces are always referred to in the context of other abuses.<sup>68</sup> In one report about abuses of prisoners by the anti-Gaddafi forces, UN human rights chief Navi Pillay is quoted as saying “There's torture, extrajudicial executions, rape of both men and women.”<sup>69</sup> In one of the reports on the waves of racism and the ill-treatment of blacks, a first-hand testimony of a rape victim is included: a 16 year old black Sub-Saharan girl, who was gang-raped by six armed men when her father, suspected of being a former mercenary, was arrested.<sup>70</sup> Her case is not ignored, but it does not make headlines, it is framed as complementary evidence of abuse.

<sup>67</sup> Greer echoes Susan Brownmiller's classic work *Against our will*, a landmark in the feminist approach to rape as a crime framed by patriarchy and militarism. See, for instance, “Rape flourishes in warfare irrespective of nationality or geographic location” (Brownmiller, 1975: 32).

<sup>68</sup> There is only one report on rape that addresses sexual violence regardless of the origin of the perpetrators. In “Libya rape victims face 'honour killings’” (June 14, 2011), Mr. Jamal, the UNHCR's emergency coordinator for Libya, is quoted as saying that they “have also seen evidence that would seem to suggest that rape has been carried out by both sides, but we cannot say on what scale”, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13760895>.

<sup>69</sup> “Libya prisoners make new torture allegations” (January 28, 2012), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16771372>.

<sup>70</sup> “African migrants living in limbo in Libya” (9 January, 2012), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16465272>. BBC looked at the situation of black migrants in Libya even before the war. It had reported on the issue when human rights organizations denounced cooperation with Italy. It also looked closely at the implications of the uprising for Europe's stance on immigration: see, for example, “Libya protests: EU condemns violence and fears influx” (February 21, 2011), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12525155>. During the war, in the series “African viewpoint”, BBC posted an opinion text by the African journalist Farai Senzo, which is a fierce denunciation of official European relations with Libya regarding illegal immigration: “Dying to leave Libya” (May 24, 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13510380>).

BBC's coverage may not be propagandist, but it nonetheless favors invisibilities on the question, or rather a sort of hierarchical categorization that may prevent a complete and sophisticated picture of the crime within this conflict. BBC looks predominantly for one type of rape, while potentially downplaying situations of sexual violence that occurred for other reasons (opportunistic, by common criminals who could benefit from the chaos, sexual abuses in the continuation of pre-war ill-treatment of blacks, etc.). Even the concept "rape as a weapon of war" was addressed only from one perspective, namely in regard to women and their victimization in the context of social conservative patriarchal structures that equal female sexuality with "honor". However, as we can see in AI's above mentioned definition (footnote 61), even in publications for the broader public, the concept refers not only to sexual violence as a form of "controlling women and their communities", but also to the use of gender-based torture to extract information from prisoners. As we have seen, both the HRC's reports and the documents authored by HRW on the war in Libya documented cases that could attest to both uses of rape. However, BBC focused only the first one. Does it signal a greater awareness of women's rights and/or a "militant" attitude against conservative patriarchal mentalities that aim to control female sexuality? Or can it be the case that BBC favored a perspective more prone to othering rape rather than engaging with a subject – sexual torture of prisoners to extract information in war – which ultimately could oblige our Western societies to engage in a discussion about methods used and condoned during much of the "war on terror"?

**"SHE'S BEEN TWICE HURT, ONE BY HER FAMILY AND ONE BY GADHAFI'S TROOP[S]"<sup>71</sup>**

#### **THE CULTURALIZATION OF RAPE VICTIMS**

By calling attention to accusations associating blacks with wartime rape, especially in the context of the siege of Misrata, the reports by HRC and the documents authored by HRW point to an ethnicization in perceptions of sexual violence in Libya. Some cases of abuse and torture of people suspected of being Gaddafi's fighters were precisely framed by suspicions of rape. CNN and BBC paid little attention to this form of ethnicizing sexual violence and made scarce references to the racial and xenophobic tensions expressed in such discourses.

CNN and BBC engage in another form of othering sexual violence, not in reference to the perpetrators, but in the context of the suffering of the victims. HRC and HRW suspected that they were facing a case of underreporting of rape, motivated by the cultural and political context in Libya: a conservative society that sees female sexuality as

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<sup>71</sup> A psychologist from Benghazi talking about a girl who had been raped by Gaddafi's forces "Psychologist: Proof of hundreds of rape cases during Libya's war" (May 23, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/05/23/libya.rape.survey.psychologist/index.html>.

essential to family honor and where an inadequate legal system does not grant rape victims protection and even paves the way to further persecution. Western media coverage tended to stress the damage inflicted on women because of their cultural background, thus presenting those women as simultaneous victims of a political system (Gaddafi's dictatorship) and of their own culture (a conservative Muslim society). CNN emphasizes this perception with frequent references to Islam and the Arab background to stress al-Obeidi's courage.<sup>72</sup> This perception is fundamental for understanding the configuration of the second peak of the narrative "woman in danger", namely the urgent need to get al-Obeidi out of Libya because of Libyan attitudes towards rape. Al-Obeidi herself, her mother and many other Libyan witnesses (like the psychologist mentioned before) corroborated this perception of traditional Libyan culture as hostile to rape victims.<sup>73</sup>

This subtext echoes in the final report on al-Obeidi, which dates from several months after the official end of the war: "A symbol of defiance in Gadhafi's Libya, Eman al-Obeidi just wants to be left alone" (Moni Basu, April 9, 2012).<sup>74</sup> While, at the beginning of the war, she played a fundamental role in gendering Libya as a female entity in need of protection, this last text on her has nothing to do with efforts to justify NATO's actions. The text identifies her once with her country ("But like Libya itself, al-Obeidi is struggling to reconcile past and present"), but on the whole it postulates an increasing gap between her and her culture of origin. "Her heroism [was] a source of inspiration for men and women fighting a longtime tyrant", but now "her fellow Libyans are her harshest judges." The article informs us about her difficulties in the new country (the US), her problems with depression, her financial and professional hardships, her struggle with the language, her rootlessness, but points as well to the promises of freedom in her new existence. Her photo (no veil and smiling) seems to suggest it: a possibility of starting a new life away from the constraints of her culture and past. This is backed up by certain bits of information in the text: she no longer eats Halal, she has barely contact with other Libyans in the US, she broke the engagement with her fiancé in Libya, she does not intend to go back. The information about her childhood signals her character as unique, as different

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<sup>72</sup> There is at least one dissonant voice here: the freelance Egyptian-American journalist Mona Eltahary, when she was invited to discuss al-Obeidi's case in CNN. While sharing the concerns over al-Obeidi's safety in Tripoli and denouncing the shaming of rape victims in Libya, she always uses the word "conservative" (not Muslim) to discuss the problem and refers to the legal framework. She also compares al-Obeidi's courage with the determination of many other women *and men* in the uprisings and calls attention to efforts by women in countries like Saudi Arabia who claim Islam is not the force that oppresses them. "Libyan woman claims rape by militia men" (March 30, 2011)

<http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2011/03/30/exp.am.intv.eltahawy.cnn>.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, "Psychologist: Proof of hundreds of rape cases during Libya's war" (May 23, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/05/23/libya.rape.survey.psychologist/index.html>, "Help Obeidi out of Libya" (Bill Frelick, CNN, June 5, 2011. Frelick is the refugees' director at HRW <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/06/04/frelick.liba.obeidy/index.html?iref=allsearch>.

<sup>74</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/08/us/colorado-libyan-rape-victim/index.html>.



and out of place in her country: "Even as a young child, she had broken down barriers". The reasons: she went hunting, she liked football, she refused to wear dresses until a certain age, she liked wrestling with her brothers, climbing trees, riding bicycles, she wanted to learn foreign languages and to travel abroad, i.e. she refused the "cultural differences between boys and girls" that her family tried to impose on her and she constantly challenged gender roles characteristic of Libyan society. As an adult, she would not submit to the restraints imposed by her culture: the way she talked about rape was "unprecedented" in Libya, given that "conservative Muslim families can blame a woman for bringing dishonor and shame upon them". In this sense, the decision to leave the country emerges as an obvious outcome: "If I leave, I have a chance to live". Libyans emerge as oppressors and exploiters; Americans as saviors: while the NCT just wanted "to exploit her pain to further their cause", "without media coverage and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's deep interest in the case, she might still be behind bars somewhere in her homeland." In the US she is also a case apart among immigrants: "Usually, new refugees find solace in their compatriots. But al-Obeidi did not want to mix with Libyans. Understandably so, Shalaan says. Half the Libyans here still call her a liar, he says." So, she felt betrayed by her homeland.

This report reinforces a subtext that was there from the beginning of the war: Libya is not a good place for rape victims and emancipated women. The article essentializes as "Libyan" certain gender roles that it wants to discredit, in favor of a modern concept of femininity embodied by al-Obeidi, and which, according to the text, apparently can only exist openly outside the country. However, CNN reports on situations and allegations that inevitably make us question that essentialization of the "Libyan culture". The fact that it was actually Libyan men aligned with the NCT who got al-Obeidi out of Libya is minimized in the narrative about her rescue. Then there are the female fighters in the war, Libyan women who took arms and were themselves agents of violence, i.e. women whose actions would inevitably question the definitions of Libyan coming from such reports. CNN reports once on women fighting in the pro-Gaddafi forces, but, as we have seen, adopts a derogatory tone by suggesting inability to fight and lack of agency (male manipulation). Needless to say: after the war CNN never tried to know about the fate of those women as the defeated of the conflict, in a country that CNN presented as not good for women.

A closer look at al-Obeidi's story also questions monolithic perceptions of "Libyan culture". It is not only the fact that, by bursting into the Rixos hotel (a "nest" of the regime) to implicate directly Gaddafi in her gang-rape,<sup>75</sup> she made proof of a tremendous courage, given the dictatorial nature of the regime and its terrible record of human rights abuses. The reactions in Libya are also worth noticing. Firstly, there was public support for her in

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<sup>75</sup> She did not accuse soldiers of raping her; she said "Gaddafi's brigades".



towns under the control of the opposition, including marches to demand her release. In the interview on April 6, when she was still in Tripoli under the control of the regime, she said: “many people here in Tripoli greet me in the streets and recognize my name and say they stand by me and do not believe what they say about me. People here in Tripoli are sympathetic with me.”<sup>76</sup> The unconditional support of her conservative family (not only her mother, but also her father, other relatives and her fiancé) require a more sophisticated reading of Libyan cultural conservatism. Surely the decision to speed up the engagement ceremony and the public support of her family are clearly framed by conservative perceptions of female sexuality and by norms of family and female honor that promote the stigmatization of rape victims. But, at the same time, these acts are intended to oppose the social isolation of one particular rape victim. A similar pattern can be observed in allegations about a commander in Misrata who ordered the destruction of cell-phone evidence of rape to protect the “honor” of the victims and their families,<sup>77</sup> as well as in the claims that some rebel fighters had offered to marry rape victims.<sup>78</sup> These acts do certainly reinforce perceptions that attach shame and vulnerability to rape survivors and deny them justice, but at the same time such moves also suggest a certain degree of nonconformity with those traditional perceptions in the context of revolutionary resistance. These traits of nonconformity are surely distinct from feminist approaches to wartime rape. They will probably be unable to support victims, nor empower or give them any sense of dignity, and they might probably vanish the moment sexual violence ceases to be framed by warfare propaganda. Nonetheless, such actions reported in some Western media channels challenged the monolithic and essentialist perceptions of Libyan masculinities/femininities and Arab/Muslim culture that were being put forth by channels like CNN.

BBC also stresses the conservative nature of Libyan society, which attaches shame to rape victims and their families, but its reports suggest a more differentiated perception of Libyan social struggles. See, for instance, the report: “Libya rape victims face 'honour killings” (June 14, 2011)<sup>79</sup> This report on the dangers faced by raped women who get pregnant confirms the perception of Libya as a bad place for rape survivors: due to the shame attached to sexual abuse and the extreme conservatism of some parts of the country, the victims risk being murdered by their own families. But the text also informs on efforts undertaken by Libyans themselves to denounce the situation, to prevent it and to

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<sup>76</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/04/21/libya.rape.case/index.html?iref=allsearch>.

<sup>77</sup> “Libyan rebels say captured cell phone videos show rape, torture” (Sara Sidner, June 17, 2011) <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/06/14/libya.rape.hfr/index.html>.

<sup>78</sup> BBC reports on these claims: “Gaddafi troops face rape allegations” (May 23, 2011) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9493000/9493814.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9493000/9493814.stm). HRC also hints briefly at this practice: it mentions an “organization which has developed a program to marry victims of rape with volunteer men, as well as to marry men disabled from the conflict with volunteer women” (HRC, 2012a: 139).

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13760895>.

support the victims. Firstly, the denunciations are being done by Libyan aid workers (namely by female aid workers), who are also supporting victims with medical care and HIV tests and offering to pay for abortions.<sup>80</sup> These efforts do not come only from those regarded as progressive from some Western perspectives, but also from religious sectors. Some “fatwas - Islamic clerical rulings - have already been made, which sanction abortion in circumstances such as rape”. Furthermore, the text also reports on the actions by the charity World for Libya engaging “imams across the border in Tunisia to preach that rape is not the victim's fault”.

A similar hint at agency is to be found in a report after the war: “Libyan women battle for empowerment” (Caroline Hawley, December 13, 2011).<sup>81</sup> While describing Libya as a deeply conservative, male-dominated society, it sheds light on the emergence of an “assertive new generation of women's rights activists”. The report informs about a street protest outside the interim prime minister's office: “Dozens of women covered their mouths with tape, to symbolize the silence with which rape victims were greeted by the interim authorities.” One of the protesters says what they want from the government: “The women who also suffered during the conflict should be cared for too. They need psychological help. And we need awareness programs so people know that it's not their fault that they are victims of a crime.” Referring to rape-motivated suicides, another woman says: “We are trying to change that.” This report certainly confirms on-going perceptions on the huge difficulties faced by raped women, but it also reveals nonconformity. Perhaps the video report on the same subject is more revealing: what we see and hear are self-confident women, full of optimism and assertive in their demands for more political power and for a change in society's approach to rape.<sup>82</sup>

## FINAL REMARKS

We could praise the media coverage of the war in Libya for not silencing sexual violence, for putting it at the core of reporting, for allowing some rape victims to make their voices heard, for echoing a greater awareness of women's rights. However, when one compares the media coverage with findings by HRW and HRC, one is confronted with a process of selection, especially if we consider CNN's reporting: some claims by these organizations were picked and amplified, while others were understated or even ignored. Hence we are able to disclose a kind of syntax of wartime time, i.e, a structure in some Western

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<sup>80</sup> See also the above mentioned interview with Gita Saghal. She says that while allegations of rape tend to be investigated only much later because victims are afraid, in Libya they are being investigated while emerging because “women have been speaking out and many in the population have been supporting them.” “Rape is used as a weapon of war” (June 9, 2011) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13707445>.

<sup>81</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16160671>.

<sup>82</sup> “Libya's women hope to find their voice”, 13 December, 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16164664>.

hegemonic discourses on sexual violence, and to highlight the existence of a non-assumed frame which integrates some elements and rejects others and which can contribute to an understanding of the way the hegemonic media represents some parts of the world.

Political agendas and some interests may explain why certain rapes made the cut, while others were ignored or were given less attention. The case of al-Obeidi is emblematic. It got an international projection that hardly matches any other wartime rape case: she was included in BBC's list of "Faces of the year 2011" and she was granted asylum with the support of Hillary Clinton. Gang-rape is experienced by many women in war, but it is also a recurrent experience for illegal female migrants in Libya and in many other parts of the world. Just think of the Mexican border with the US. So, it can hardly be disputed that the media attention and the international recognition awarded to al-Obeidi had not so much to do with her status as a rape victim as with her potential to be used as an icon against Gaddafi.

Orientalist stereotypes (the cultural configuration of the Muslim as inherently different), prejudices towards Muslims, strategies of othering Arabic cultures (at the same time the target of fierce attacks by some political sectors in the countries leading the international military intervention, like the UK and France) may partially explain certain discursive configurations of these rapes. In addition, there has been often in the press an uncritical appropriation of the concept "rape as a weapon of war" for every context of apparent widespread sexual violence, as if the rapes of each war were episodes of the same story. To be sure, this is done with the best intentions, namely to call attention. However, such a quick approach may potentially ignore a great part of the cases of wartime sexual violence (including in scenarios where it exists also as a weapon of war). There is additionally a suspicion sometimes that strategies of othering are going on under the radar in these approaches: it tends to be used to refer to regions and forces regarded as extremely patriarchal and traditionally associated with barbarism and backwardness. One would hardly suggest that claims of widespread sexual violence inside the US army against its female personnel might indicate a strategy or a weapon of warfare.

The process of culturalizing/ethnicizing the suffering of rape victims from Muslim backgrounds has been documented in other parts of the world.<sup>83</sup> Underlying it is not only the conviction that Islam is oppressive of women and that non-European women (especially from a Muslim background) are "inevitably" vulnerable and need "our" protection. Such forms of culturalizing rape also presuppose an opposition between them (Muslims who are uncivilized and barbaric because they do not support their women) and

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<sup>83</sup> See, for instance, Gabriela Mischkowski's (1999) analysis of the German press' coverage of the wars in Yugoslavia.

“us” (who respect women's rights and are, therefore, modern). Such perceptions have been exacerbated in the post-9/11 wars, as women's rights have become an intrinsic part of war legitimization and propaganda. Women's rights were granted increasing centrality as defining factors of Western identities and policies both abroad (the war and occupation of Afghanistan is an emblematic case) and at home (e.g. prescriptive definitions of Europeanness meant to control and contain immigration and the rights of “non-ethnic” Europeans). Hence, discourses aiming at emancipation may end up serving as sources of xenophobic rejection. The media coverage of the war in Libya occurs precisely against this background.

A final note: This paper avoided the biggest challenge posed by the war in Libya on hegemonic perceptions of wartime sexual violence: male rape and sexual torture, both widely documented by HRC and HRW, but almost absent from the hegemonic media coverage. The latter focused cases involving women in order to construct a gendered Libyan identity as a female in need of protection (CNN) and/or to explore the concept of rape as a weapon of war as a product of the submission of women in a patriarchy (BBC). But in how far can the silencing of sexual violence against males and the representation of wartime sexualized violence as a “problem of women” grasp the wide range and complexities of sexual violence in armed conflict? Answering these questions is for another time.

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