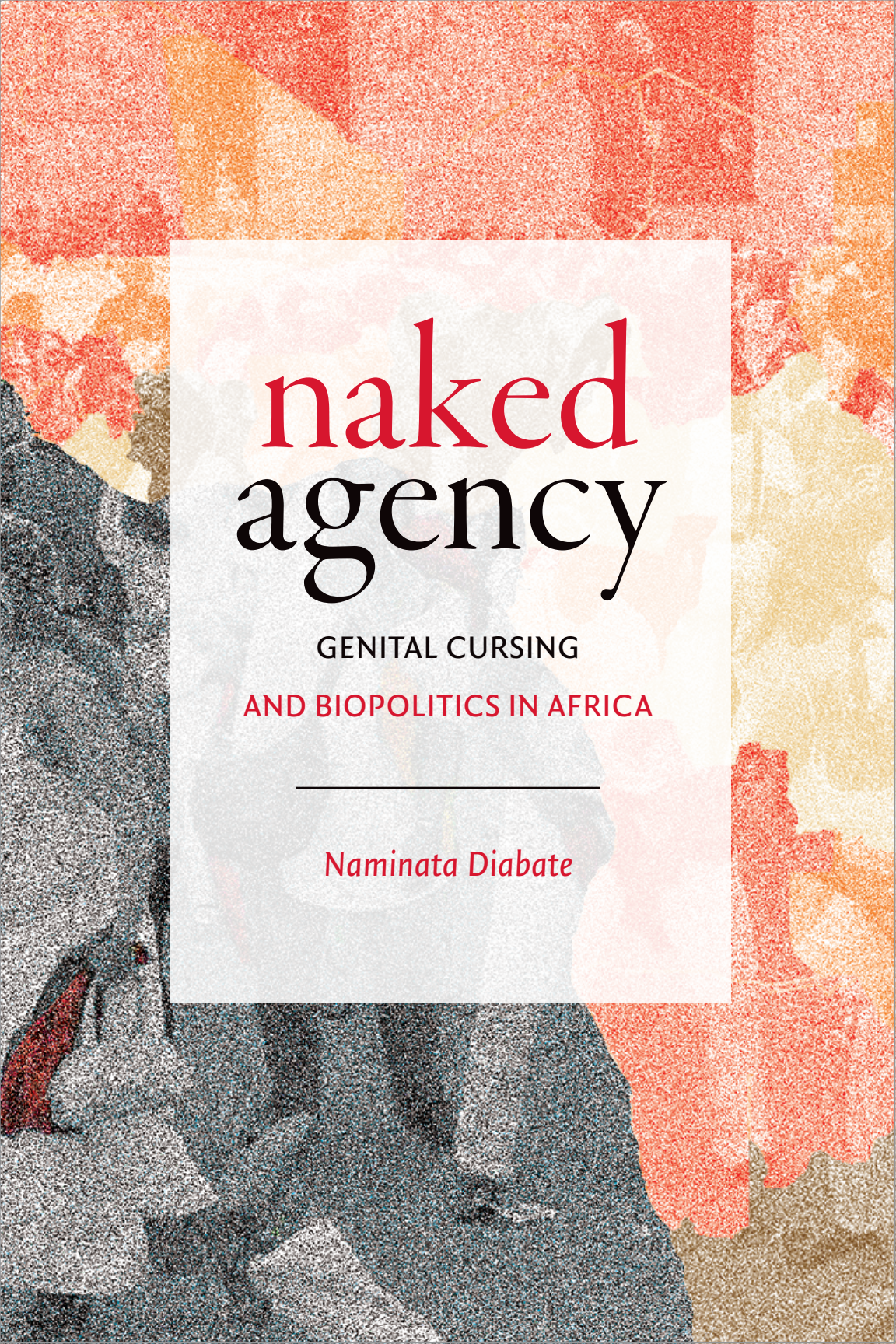

naked agency

GENITAL CURSING AND BIOPOLITICS IN AFRICA

Naminata Diabate

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Naked Agency

Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa

NAMINATA DIABATE

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Dedicated to my
mom,
Sitta Camara,
and my dad,
Morikounady Diabate,
for their faith in me, a girl.

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INTRODUCTION

Exceptional Nakedness

It is a foolish woman who degrades womanhood. —**Malinké proverb**

This was Egbiki, the secret, nocturnal ritual of female genital power. It was an act of spiritual warfare, a critical and dangerous enterprise that the women were undertaking on behalf of the whole village. —**Laura Grillo**, *An Intimate Rebuke*

In July 2002, hundreds of female protesters in Nigeria occupied Chevron Texaco's export terminals and properties, holding hostage seven hundred American, British, Canadian, and Nigerian workers by threatening to get naked. The women demanded employment for their families and basic infrastructure, such as schools, motorable roads, and water and electrical systems. Major international news channels—including ABC News, BBC, Associated Press, and Inter Press Service—brought the incident to the world's attention. Eventually, Chevron Texaco agreed to negotiate with the protesters, leading Associated Press journalist D'Arcy Doran to claim, "For the women, what started out as an act of desperation became a method to victory" (2002). Asked about their abilities to take men hostage without guns or heavy artillery, Helen Odeworitse, a spokesperson for the women in this extraordinary seven-day protest, explained, "Our weapon is our nakedness" (BBC News 2002).

Scholars from Africa and elsewhere have written insightfully on the global significance of the 2002 event to later protest movements. Some highlight the women's indisputable power by drawing on ethnographic data. Others attribute the recent upsurge of resistant nakedness internationally to the Nigerian wom-

en's threat to strip naked to shame multinational oil companies.[1] On her website, baringwitness.org, American activist Donna Sheehan (2002a) identified the women's action as the inspiration to protest in California against the war in Iraq. In academia, most scholars use the terms *genital power* and *genital cursing* for their arguments about the Niger Delta event, independent of whether that was the women protesters' name for their actions.

In this book, I offer a different reading of the July event by considering the women's feelings and the reactions of their targets, supporters, bystanders, and witnesses. For instance, Odeworitse's statement "Our weapon is our nakedness," which was issued after what appears to have been a victory, or at the least a "deal," has become a sound bite in most news reports of defiant self-exposure in Africa. Speaking of the victory, one of the protest leaders, Anunu Uwawah, announced that the oil company pledged to hire more villagers and build amenities (BBC News 2002). Although powerful, Odeworitse's declaration obfuscates several aspects of the event: the constitution of the women's collective, the kind of organizing behind the forceful occupation, the women's expectations, the reactions of their targets, the way the declaration was distributed among media and the possible uses to which it was put, and more. In a world where the idea of Africa as an ontological oddity persists, the self-aggrandizing declaration, made after the "deal," and its endless appearances in Western media participate in portraying the continent and its practices as fundamentally singular. A newspaper report naturally truncates, condenses, and simplifies complex statements, especially for Western readers. Were the women hoping for their "nakedness" to be the most significant aspect of their protest? Perhaps the women did not intend or foresee the uses and misuses of their strategy. By calling it *nakedness*, is Odeworitse stripping the act of its complex connotations to make it legible to the international reader? In her statement, how inclusive is the word *our*? Did the *deal* reflect the women's expectations? Were all of the mature women ready to disrobe to curse, and what was the act to be called?

Unless the women specifically call their disrobing *genital cursing*, as many scholars have done, it is misleading to call it that.[2] The July 2002 standoff is not just a definite event with knowable and foreseeable implications. It is, rather, a complex event interwoven with narratives of desperation, agency, satisfaction, and exploitation. Broadly, because of the attention that nakedness in protest begets, and because of its nature as signifying shorthand, the gesture is subject to mediation and translation, and it demands exploration. As the most universal and yet the most highly context-driven mode of dissent, insurgent nakedness is not just one thing with multiple interpretations. It is many things. It is a different code to decipher deeper cultural and societal accounts each time it is used,

not only in its interpretation but also in its constitution. These are the questions and readings that I emphasize in my exploration of these dramas of desperation, anger, agency, and victory. I suggest that the event and similar others should be read on their own terms but also in conjunction with larger sociopolitical and aesthetic frameworks.

Naked agency is the term that emerges from my innovative readings and that I use to designate the dynamic cycle of power and vulnerability that involves the women and their targets. From the event and its manifestations emerges a cycle of contestation, exploitation, and misreading that may differ from the women's original plan. In this dynamic, the agency of the women, their targets, and other stakeholders are simultaneously co-constitutive, instrumentalized, precarious, and triumphant. *Naked agency* is both a concept and a reading praxis that privileges the dialectical movement between these fluctuating narratives for a more comprehensive understanding of resistant self-exposure. To complement *naked agency*, I interchangeably use more neutral terms such as *defiant disrobing*, *naked self-exposure*, *assaultive nakedness*, and *intentional nudity*. These terms contrast with *genital cursing*, *genital power*, and *female genital power* (FGP). Later, when relevant, I use indigenous words for these acts.

A Tripartite Approach

My multidisciplinary approach and insights into naked agency are revealed through the exploration of dozens of protest demonstrations throughout both Francophone and Anglophone Africa and through attention to multiple media, including documentaries, social-media material, literary fiction, and narrative film. In relation to the women of the Niger Delta's threat to strip naked, two internationally circulating visual renderings speak to the long history, and the importance, of the threat. In 1994 Bruce Onobrakpeya created his plastographic piece *Nudes and Protest* to stage how elderly women of the Niger Delta express their grievances against unrestrained rule and mismanagement of natural resources.[3]

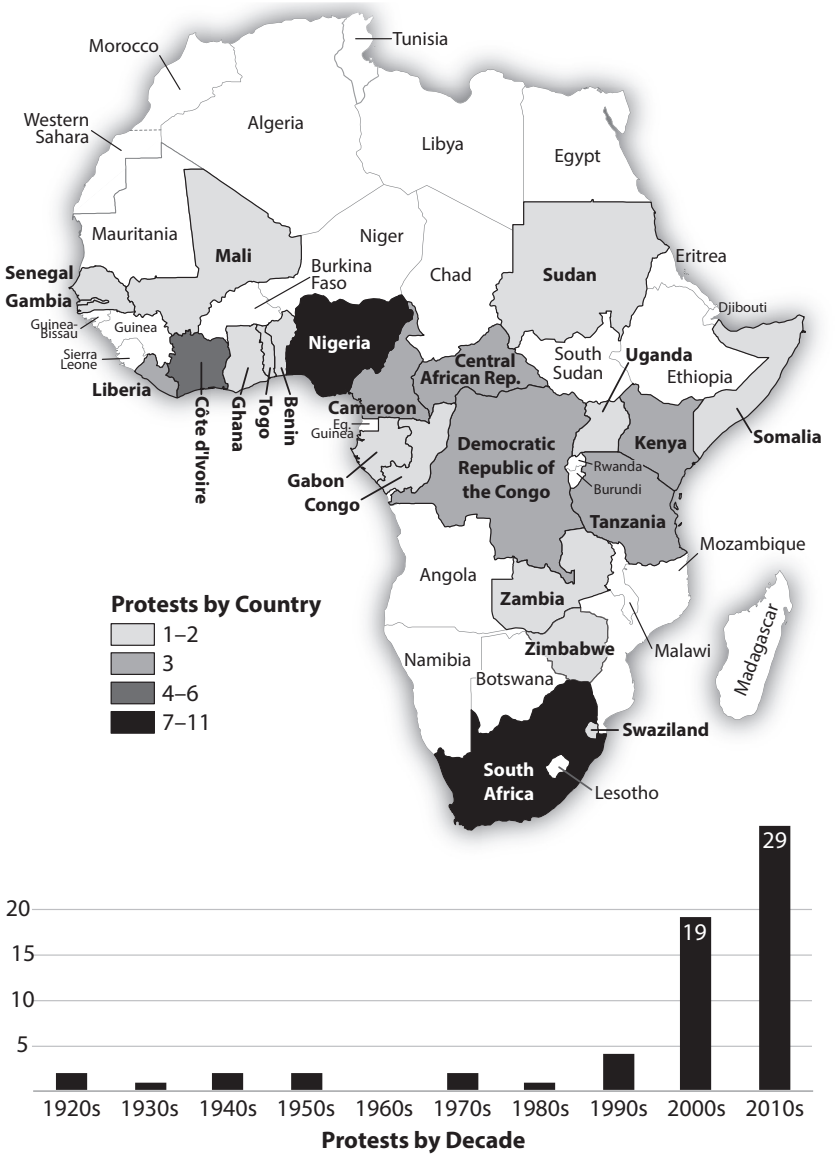
In the blue-and-green artwork, three rows of about thirty mature naked women face targets that are invisible to the viewer, who holds a dominant position over the standing women because of the high viewing angle. Onobrakpeya's staging is not one of outright confrontation between the women and their targets. Here, the emphasis is on the women because the targets are absent from the frame. Surrounded by what appears to be a bush or shrubs and holding leafy branches as maternal symbols, most of the figures seem to cover their breasts with branches or with their hands. Their facial expressions vary,

with some women expressing anger and others looking distracted. Unlike photographs of recent insurgent disrobings with women displaying gestures of defiance, the artwork already invites us to be more nuanced in our engagement with naked protest.

A feature documentary by Candace Schermerhorn, *The Naked Option: A Last Resort* (2010), also documents another group of women's expectations and their rationales for threatening to perform the naked ritual in protest against the actions of oil companies in 2002. As the women discovered during negotiations, their initial demands clashed with the reality of multinational oil companies and their local allies. In this book, I read news reports of the July 2002 event in combination with Onobrakpeya's artwork and Schermerhorn's documentary. Both of these creative works convey something about the women's feelings, the proliferation of insurgent nakedness in Africa, and the reactions that the gesture encounters.

Thus, I resituate the analysis of naked self-exposure within a different set of scholarly conversations—those about our biopolitical era and about insurgent embodiment in contemporary Africa—by choosing a tripartite approach that is descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical. Contrary to the customary postcolonial readings with their emphasis on African cosmogonies versus the universalist, read Eurocentric, interpretations of biopolitics that I explore within this text, my work draws on both African cosmogonies and theories of agency and biopolitics to uncover how certain forms of political participation become paradoxically both legible and illegible in our era. I ask the book's central questions: What kinds of sociopolitical climates and arrangements call for the deployment of self-disrobing in anger? How is the women's agency to be understood and conceptualized in light of the reactions of their targets and of other stakeholders? What is being lost by focusing on precolonial and colonial explanatory frameworks?

Using news reports and historical documents, I describe dozens of protests from the colonial to the postcolonial era (nine decades) in more than twenty Francophone and Anglophone African countries south of the Sahara (see map 1.1 for an overview of protests in the period 1922–2017). Within exceptional and biopolitical conditions, when all else has failed, and when their bodies seem to be all that they have left, the women's insurrectionary gesture often is their last resort. Whether used as an expression of vulnerability, or as a mode of conflict management or resistance, the potency or the inefficacy of their disrobing often stems both from authorizing social structures such as the privileges of motherhood and social cohesion and from prevailing notions of gender and sexuality. Paradoxically, however, their gesture is either exploited or repressed, depending



MAP 1.1 Map of Africa's naked protests (1922–2017). Courtesy of Tim Stallmann.

on the disintegration of these authorizing structures within so-called political secularism.

Comparing West Africa and South Africa in this study, I demonstrate that pairing the continent of Africa and the word *country* gives the wrong impression. In fact, Africa is a heterogeneous continent with differing nation-states, each with its own political history. I argue that the sense of genital cursing as a means of killing offenders by enlisting ancestors, which has been used as a tactic in events in West Africa, differs from the cross-ethnic use of naked shaming in movements such as that of "Fees Must Fall" by students in South Africa.

On the theoretical level, I examine the contributions that attention to resistant self-exhibition can make in our assessment of political agency when both desperation and a sense of power are operative. Bringing together these assumed opposed states through the lens of biopolitics and postcolonial discussions of agency, I analyze emancipatory political subjectivities that are underestimated in dominant Euro-American reflections but overvalued in African studies. As a defining concept, "biopolitics" makes sense because our era is mainly characterized by what some consider to be the futility of agency and resistance against tyrannical and rhizomatic regimes of power. Moreover, such regimes are mainly identified as producing literal or figurative death (Agamben 1998).

In interpreting the women's insurgent disrobing via the theory of agency, according to which there is no agency outside of constraints, the concept of naked agency expands Giorgio Agamben's (1998) conceptualization of "naked life" so as to contribute significantly to an affirmative understanding of biopolitics.[4] The openness and the nakedness of positions of emancipation and constraint reflect more accurately the unstable political subjectivity that has developed within current sociopolitical arrangements, in which the state of exception (Agamben 2005) and the widespread sense of perishability are now normalized. I propose that naked lives and exposed bodies can still be constituted to defy sovereign power, if only briefly and imperfectly. Although Agamben's concept of *la nuda vita* in *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (1995) has been popularly translated into English as "bare life," I refer to translations wherein he and others suggest "naked life" rather than "bare life" as being more appropriate. For example, in Agamben's ruminations on nudity in *Nudities* (2011), he relates the figure of *Homo sacer* to naked rather than bare life.[5] Karen Pinkus and Michael Hardt also translate *nuda vita* as "naked life" in Agamben's *Language and Death* (1991), as do Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino in Agamben's *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (2000). The reference to the figure of *Homo sacer* as "naked life" as opposed to "bare life" carries conceptual im-

plications in Agamben's work. Perhaps "bare," unlike "naked," suggests milder degrees of exposure, when in fact it is the confrontational, shame-inducing, or death-producing aspects of rebellious disrobing, for either the protesters or their targets, that is at the core of the term *naked agency*.

Finally, analyzing more aestheticized genres through an interpretive lens, I highlight the multiple reactions that the women's gesture of disrobing prompts; the women's internal conflicts (whenever knowledge of these is available); and the counterproductive responses of their targets, bystanders, and other stakeholders. Given that the production, experience, and enactment of emotions are central to the performance of aggressive self-exhibition, and given the attention-grabbing nature of most news reports and historical documents with their etiolated accounts of insurgent disrobing, the different and emerging artistic responses that disrobing has elicited from novelists, filmmakers, and other visual artists become crucial. In this book, through an "open," read cross-genre and cross-media engagement, I provide evidence from documentaries, novels, autobiographies, social-media posts, pictorial arts, and narrative films to provide emotion-focused perspectives not yet collected elsewhere. Some of the autobiographies are Gbowee 2011; Maathai 2006; and Wainaina 2011.

In one of my chapters on literary fiction (scene 8), for instance, I use T. Obinkaram Echewa's historical novel *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* ([1992] 1993) to draw attention to the counterproductive effects of defiant disrobing. Through specific narrative techniques, the novel restages gendered colonial trauma to expose the murderous reactions of the women's targets. My chapters on visual materials (scenes 2 and 5) trace particular contemporary configurations in Africa in which the women are both pawns and political agents. The women are compelled to protest against social and political inequities, but they have limited influence on how their lives will be governed. Specifically, the South African short documentary *Uku Hamba 'Ze (To Walk Naked)* (Maingard, Meintjes, and Thompson 1995) demonstrates constraints on women's autonomy, while Jean-Pierre Bekolo's postmodern film *Les Saignantes* (2005) and Candace Schermerhorn's *The Naked Option*: *A Last Resort* (2010) both consider various forms of co-optation to which the gesture of disrobing is subject. Such documentaries and novels depict the clearly defined political stakes of defiant disrobing, enabling access to the thoughts and feelings of women who bare their genitalia. In complementing and adding nuance to news reports and their schematic structures, discursive and representational accounts provide other perspectives to the terms of current debates on naked agency.

I also engage social-media material on an interpretive level to argue that the deployment of "genital cursing" fails in certain online spaces. Coverage through

YouTube videos and Facebook posts ends up trivializing what is supposedly the women's most powerful gesture.

The Era of Exposure?

Since the late 1990s, insurgent nakedness has proliferated worldwide. I have documented almost five hundred collective instances of public nakedness around the world in response to many issues. Globalization, capitalism, HIV/AIDS, war, power abuses, Black Lives Matter, animal rights, land disputes, lactivism, environmentalism, and the rise of Donald Trump are all issues that have evoked naked agency. The proliferation of the act shows that it is less the last resort of oppressed, minoritized groups than it is a global response. From Colombia to Mexico, from France to India, from China to Kenya, various sociopolitical male and female actors have publicly exposed their genitals and breasts in political protest. For instance, in 2004 in Manipur, a small state in the eastern part of India that is under heavy military presence, mothers marched without clothes to express vulnerability and outrage about rape. In the United States, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) campaign "I'd Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur" (2006–19) or La Tigresa in her "Striptease for the Trees" (2000) actions in California have utilized resistant self-exhibition to prosecute conflicts with opponents.

Protests against Donald Trump during and after his road to the White House were more "naked" than those of any previous protest campaigns (including those in 1968 against the Vietnam War and in 2000 against the Iraq War), with numerous protests and scenes of intentional exposure and self-exposure regarding Trump.[6] For example, covers of the July 2015, October 2016, and March 2018 issues of the *New Yorker* depicted a naked Trump, making him the first American president to have had his body exposed to such an extent. The election year of 2016 also saw naked statues of both Trump and rival Hillary Clinton illicitly erected in Manhattan, as well as the online media publication of seminude photographs of Melania Trump from decades earlier (I. Vincent 2016). Whether it was the depicted nakedness of candidates or spouses, or the assaultive nakedness of protesters and celebrants in the United States or abroad, public disrobing (deliberate or forced) was a major phenomenon in 2016. Scenes of nakedness proliferated in roughly seven genres: nude installations, photography, film, painting, sculpture, comedic viral video, and news reports. A few of these scenes merit attention for the insights that they enable regarding naked protest in our globalized world.

In July 2016, renowned American photographer Spencer Tunick—whose

large-scale nude installations draw thousands of naked participants from around the world—organized an installation titled *Everything She Says Means Everything* with one hundred women, just hours before Donald Trump took the stage at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio. The naked women held large mirror discs to reflect "the knowledge and wisdom of progressive women" (*Business Insider* 2016). According to Tunick, Trump was a "loser" (*Business Insider* 2016). Other instances of assaultive nakedness were enacted by several other groups of protesters. In early November 2016, for instance, two female protesters stormed Manhattan polling stations with "Trump, grab your balls" written in black paint across one of the protesters' bare chest and stomach. The other woman had written "Hate out of my polls" around her exposed breasts (Moye 2016). The women were reportedly members of the U.S. chapter of Femen, the international radical feminist activist organization that has staged hundreds of topless protests around the world since 2008. In actions in France, Canada, Tunisia, Russia, the United States, and Spain, Femen has often called its topless protests "titslamism," "sextremism," and "topless jihad." After the Femen protesters of November were arrested and released, one of the women who bared her breasts in protest against Trump was quoted as saying, "We use our bodies to express our ideas" (Chan 2016).

Since the 1990s and in more than two dozen Francophone and Anglophone sub-Saharan African countries—including Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Togo, Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Cameroon, South Africa, Mali, Congo-Kinshasa, Central African Republic, and Ghana—dissident self-exhibition has been appearing with remarkable frequency. Thousands of women in Africa have taken to the streets naked or have flashed their genitals to resist during acute national social and political crises and to punish elected officials.[7] They have also stripped to signify vulnerability, expose distress, or to enlist the support of national or international communities for their causes. Women of Ekiti State in Nigeria who sought to delegitimize their leaders after local electoral rigging in 2008 drew on prevailing shared beliefs about the sanctity of motherhood and social cohesion (K. Ajayi 2010). In 2002 several Ugandan young and middle-aged female opposition activists, wearing only their bras, stormed the Kampala police headquarters and taunted the police, trying to upset their targets (ChimpReports 2012). To achieve these goals, the women took advantage of the social capital of sexuality and of the wider circulation of news and images afforded by the internet and other media.

Uncivil self-exposure has been mobilized in urbanized centers in Africa by women of all ages, educational levels, and occupations.[8] They are widows, civil servants, mothers, street vendors, university students, young, and elderly. The

proliferation of these instances reveals the dangerous social and political climates that have compelled some women to use what has historically been a last resort. Hostile counterattacks against protesters—such as legal threats, arrests, verbal attacks, physical brutality, and even murder—further reflect the severity of conditions provoking the gesture. Indeed, naked agency as protest occurs in such diverse contexts as (perceived) electoral injustice, land grabbing, corporate greed, police brutality, the importation of foreign toxic waste, unethical clinical trials conducted by pharmaceutical companies, and adverse neoliberal policies. These circumstances do not define the continent as an ontological oddity. Rather, it is because Africa is a space of incipience, fabrication, and test-driving of stylistics of power that its populations live and die in these conditions.

As in Africa, protesters in the United States strip naked to signal powerlessness and to demonstrate wisdom and strength. However, in the United States, nakedness is also often mobilized to highlight freedom and to celebrate human bodies. A participant in Tunick's nude installation said, "Being nude in public is a freeing kind of experience. We want to be able to show our bodies and be able to express to people who are telling us what to do with our bodies that they have absolutely, positively no right to tell me or any of those other women there what to do with our bodies" (Bigley 2016). In this statement, contestation, play, and exhibitionism coalesce to expose arbitrary rule. In Africa, defiant disrobing is overwhelmingly performed in a solemn mood, while in the United States, the festive mood of most of the protest demonstrations often blurs the lines between celebration and vulnerability. Perhaps, for these American protesters, celebration and the expression of vulnerability are not antithetical, as entertainment is often a feature of serious matters, for example, some legal trials in the United States. The combination has invited, however, charges of social deviance and has likened those who protest in the nude to those who engage in mooning, streaking, flashing, or exhibitionism. Unsurprisingly, these criticisms have dulled the political efficacy of this kind of self-exposure in the West.[9]

What accounts for this increasing mobilization of uncivil nakedness in political and social contention? In 2007 Jean-Luc Nancy, a major thinker and writer about literal and metaphorical nakedness, justified the proliferation as an index of the nature of our era: the era of exposure. Ours is an age that "feels particularly exposed, that is particularly stripped of ideological vestments" (quoted in Nicklaus 2007).[10] This argument, which is time- and place-specific, is informed by the Fall in the Garden of Eden, a fundamental feature of the dominant Christian accounts of nakedness as weakness, lack, and shame for the unclothed person (Agamben 2011; Derrida 2002; Ferrari and Nancy 2014; Grosz 2006; Nancy 1993). This version of nakedness, which has tended to dominate

the global conceptual landscape, takes the North Atlantic world as the source of empirical data for reflections that may be uncritically perceived as universal.

A practice documented since medieval times in Africa (Diabate 2016), the aggressive disrobing of mature women continues today to provoke intense debates in newspapers, pictorial arts, oral tradition, narrative film, documentaries, novels, and autobiographies, as well as on social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, listservs, and personal blogs). The publicness, the cultural potency, and the extreme sociopolitical conditions required to mobilize protesters explain the interest that resistant self-exposure has received from scholars of many disciplines, including anthropology, psychiatry, political science, sociology, and history.[11] These scholars explore defiant disrobing to examine gender relations and power differentials in sub-Saharan African societies, particularly those marked predominantly by patriarchal regimes.[12] Their studies draw on deep cultural meanings, what I call the "cosmological," to explain the potency of women's power. For instance, in *An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa*, a recent and insightful cultural anthropological study of female genital power (FGP) among the Abidji of Côte d'Ivoire, Laura Grillo (2018) establishes the potency of women's gesture in West African societies. She describes one society's activity thus: "This was Egbiki, the secret, nocturnal ritual of female genital power. It was an act of spiritual warfare, a critical and dangerous enterprise that the women were undertaking on behalf of the whole village" (1). Like Grillo with her term *FGP*, other scholars use terms such as *genital power* (Stevens 2006), *genital curse* (Bastian 2005), *sexual insult* (Ardener 1973), and *bottom power* (Day 2008). The collective nature of the women's act has been framed as *shaming parties* (Edgerton and Conant 1964), *women's mobbing* (P. Spencer 1988), and *punitive delegation* (Talle 2007).[13] The cosmological interpretation by both scholars and politicians has been mobilized to highlight women's absolute power effects.

Unlike these studies and their disciplinary and geographical foci, the claims of *Naked Agency* are larger in scope, covering sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, the book's specificities lie in its theoretical orientation, wide geographic scope, and attention to multiple aestheticized genres, including literature, film, artwork, and social-media posts. For instance, *Naked Agency* and *An Intimate Rebuke* by Laura Grillo move forward the conversation on defiant disrobing in Africa by engaging complementary but different disciplinary and methodological frameworks. In light of these disciplinary specificities, Grillo and I reach different conclusions, particularly how to understand the proliferation of naked protest on the continent. Whereas *Naked Agency* highlights the unstable nature of positions of power by paying attention to women's targets and other stakeholders,

An Intimate Rebuke focuses on the women and their worldviews within the context of a constantly changing world.

The Cosmological

At the core of this interpretative framework are customary beliefs, many of which may no longer be operative. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, for instance, some of these beliefs include the "potency of women's fertility, fear of senior women's sexuality, and prohibitions against incest, particularly among members of uterine households" (Bastian 2005, 46).[14] Incest is committed in these circumstances when males in the community look at elderly women's exposed genitalia.[15] Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, "traditionally, the onlookers are also guilty by association. Customarily, they were expected to also go naked in solidarity with the women's cause" (Oyeniyi 2015, 153). Where social cohesion requires the cooperation of the community in upholding its core values and retributive schema, people fear being associated with such a crime and its resultant social stigma.

The potency of women's bodies is said to lie in the fact that many societies—including the Akan of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, the Beti of Cameroon, the Malinké of Mali, the Igbo of Nigeria, and the Kikuyu of Kenya—consider women's bodies as both life giving and life taking. Ritual nakedness, performed by members of female institutions that are often known, problematically, as secret societies, is part of indigenous religious beliefs, according to which both maleficent and beneficent spirits reside in women's bodies. (Although I consider the term *secret society* problematic because it was used derogatively in the colonialist literature, I will continue to use it in the book for lack of a better term.) Their life-giving ability, "the ultimate in human power" (Brett-Smith 1995, 33), explains the fear that the gesture provokes in men, even in armed men. This potency is called *evu* in Beti (Ombolo 1990) and *nyama* (the principle of evil) in Malinké and Bamana (Brett-Smith 1995; Even 1939; Koné 2004).[16]

It is this putative power that is enshrined in the Malinké proverb, "It is a foolish woman who degrades womanhood." Among the Bamana of Mali, for example, "*nyAma* [is] more dangerous than any other ritual objects, and a man who rests his eyes on female genitals will find his way to the grave or suffer blindness" (Brett-Smith 1995, 208–9). Similarly, in an ethnographic study of sexuality among multiple ethnic groups in Africa, Jean-Pierre Ombolo remarks that "genitalia, especially that of a woman, is considered among Africans to be an extremely dangerous reality: it is capable of creating life and supremely capable of destroying it" (1990, 95).[17] By revealing their tabooed body parts or

threatening men with menstrual cloths, accompanied by incantations of curses, the women are said to be unleashing the forces that reside therein, causing their male targets a myriad of misfortunes, including impotence, infertility, incurable diseases, and literal or social death. Thus, Malians attributed the 1999 death of dictator Moussa Traoré to a "genital curse" by an elderly woman who cursed him for the shooting of her two grandsons by soldiers loyal to him.[18] Such effect is described as a revocation of life (Turner and Brownhill 2004) and as showing a targeted male his "exit door" (Washington 2005). For the offended women and the community, the collective gesture constitutes the ultimate weapon they wield in calamitous circumstances to punish male targets or to ward off evil, the way warriors deploy their deadliest weapons. Exposing tabooed body parts often makes men listen or comply when other mechanisms of resistance or retribution have failed. Thus, cursing is a form of purification because it rids the land of entities and forces that trample its paramount values.[19]

In the Igbo context, for instance, the angry exhibition of mature female nakedness constitutes the last stage in genital shaming and cursing. Earlier stages include the "verbal suggestion 'Do you want to see where you came from?' [and] the expressive movement (untying the waistcloth in a public and ceremonious gesture)" (Bastian 2005, 46). What exactly the women are pointing toward (the womb or the genitalia) is controversial. Shirley Ardener (1973) has suggested the genitalia, Catherine Ifeka-Moller (1975) has posited the womb, and others such as Laura Grillo (2018) have designated both. Usually, these preliminary steps suffice to deter even the most aggressive male.

Although they are both forms of punishment and resistance, *genital cursing* and its less potent form, *genital shaming*, are distinguishable. Whereas cursing consists of mobilizing otherworldly entities to bring death or misfortune upon a male entity, shaming calls the community to alienate a law-breaking individual or group. Given their powerful implications and consequences for both the woman and her target(s), these gestures are not readily deployed; both are used only in especially deplorable circumstances, in particular wife-beating, insulting women, and arbitrary lawmaking.

To lift the curse or shame and to be reintegrated into the community, offenders must follow a strict procedure: acknowledge their wrongdoings, repent, and plead to be given the opportunity to make amends. These amends include making animal sacrifices to propitiate the dead and spirits whose normative codes have been desecrated, and to purify the shamed and cursed bodies. Among the Beti, for example, the process necessary for the annulment of a curse on a son is as follows: during the public ceremony attended by relatives, the cursed son, who has already brought offerings in preparation for the ceremony, kneels and

moves toward his mother in that position. After considering the son's plea for mercy, the mother then goes away to cut a handful of different plants, which she then chews and spits the juice of over him. This ritual reintegrates the son into the community (Ombolo 1990).

As custodians of the social order, women in these societies are tasked with the survival of the community as a whole. They are expected to right its wrongs, which may include punishing offenders, whether of military, political, or royal rank. The women's status challenges the framing of defiant disrobers as mere protesters because their gesture of nakedness is seen as a counterbalancing strategy for the prosperity and survival of the community.

Although insightful and generative, the emphasis on the cosmological can, ironically, be epistemologically counterproductive in that it frames events of aggressive disrobing as mostly empowering for the women. This postcolonial framework is often concerned with and anxious to correct the disempowering images in local and global media of African women as victimized by their traditions. In considerably complicating these commonplace images, traditions become the site of power's actual enactment, not the perceived occasion for oppression. Using ethnographic data produced primarily during colonial and postindependence eras, researchers write as if meanings of the disrobing gesture are often not challenged by the world outside that of the women. In his article "Women's Aggressive Use of Genital Power in Africa" (2006), an analysis of the women of the Niger Delta's threats to go naked in their standoff with the multinational oil company Chevron Texaco in 2002, cultural anthropologist Phillips Stevens Jr. links contemporary events to the mythical and occult aspects attached to the practice, and frames women's defiant disrobing as "genital power." Although a compelling analysis, the article fails to question the uses and abuses that were made of women's images in the international media. Referring to the 2011 Ivorian women's public disrobing, Grillo (2013) also labels their act of disrobing as "genital power" and invokes centuries-long African cosmogonies. In her previously mentioned monograph, Grillo has nuanced her analysis.

As used, such terms predominantly negate a crucial aspect of positions of resistance and power: their temporariness. Although neither Stevens nor Grillo offers a rationale for their choice of terminology, it appears that they attempt to translate into English the practice of defiant disrobing without considering how their usage may reify women's bodies as a space that indefinitely holds something uncritically called "power." To clarify, the word *power* itself is not the problem here; rather, the problem resides in the assumption of the unchanging nature of locations and effects of power. Most importantly, these terms and the

analyses from which they emerge seem oblivious to the backlash that modern-day insurgent disrobing encounters both on the continent and in international media.

The uncritical examination often results in internal contradictions. In her analysis of the "mystical actions" of the urbanized associations of priestesses in the Casamance-Senegalese state conflicts, Irene Osemeka (2011) problematically describes the women's protest as peaceful and nonviolent. This framing betrays a certain superficial interpretative work. How does one articulate cursing as a peaceful demonstration when the protesters hope to inflict a certain kind of injury on the body politic? As I show below, Assane Seck adopts a similar problematic strategy in *Sénégal: émergence d'une démocratie moderne, 1945–2005: Un itinéraire politique* (2005).

Such attempts by scholars, which I call the "romanticization framework," seek to uphold ideologically certain images of African women as powerful and their modes of contestation as uniquely celebratory. More recent studies such as Grillo's *An Intimate Rebuke* (2018) provide a more nuanced approach to nakedness as a form of political speech. In her book, Grillo foregrounds the "strategic essentialism" that mature women mobilize in the face of disempowering and imported gender ideologies. This acknowledgment demonstrates that the power effects of FGP can no longer be consigned to a timeless tradition.

Unlike Grillo's study, however, most accounts of uncivil self-exposure give us an incomplete picture of the dynamic that undergirds the performance or threat of defiant disrobing in the postcolonial biopolitical space, where forms of resistance are putatively futile. Given that their societies are becoming increasingly precarious, and in a time when both women and men are experiencing the effects of processes of gender restructuring, precolonial and/or nativist explanatory matrixes offer insufficiently clarifying elucidations. Further, in light of the ensuing intense debates in politics and various media, we need a broader understanding of the constraints and freedoms that produce, enhance, or curtail the power effects of women's insurgent self-exposure. Such is my aim in this book.

If accounts of genital cursing in Africa draw on the local without pretension to universality, reflections on defiant disrobing among dominant Euro-American thinkers invoke provincial contexts for meanings that are clothed in universal garbs. I suggest that although aggressive self-exposure is a universal gesture, it is also one of the most highly context-driven modes of dissent and vulnerability—a classic case of the principle of "universalism without uniformity" that Richard Shweder (2012) has conceptualized. Insurgent nakedness for purposes of purification and cursing is not an African specificity, as countless examples from ancient Greece to contemporary China suggest. A few rep-

resentative cases include the ancient Greek figure of Baubo (Chausidis 2012; Cohen 1997; Marcovich 1986; Murray 1934); women during the French Revolution (Cameron 1991; Hunt 2002, 2013; Landes 1988, 2003; Vallois 1992); Machiavelli's story of Caterina, the Countess of Sforza (Hairston 2000; Kalogridis 2010; Miles 1989); the Mexican writer Salvador Novo's *La guerra de las gordas* (1994);[20] Chinese women's ritual self-exposure during the defense of the city in western Shantung during the Wang Lun uprising of 1774 (Henry 1999); and the Irish Sheela-na-gig ritual of genital flashing (Dexter and Goode 2002; Freitag 2004; Rhoades 2010).

Despite its transhistorical and transcultural nature, however, intentional self-exposure can defeat the yearning for endowing what is essentially a universal act with universal meaning. The intended meanings of naked self-exposure often fail to transcend their local connotations. In that sense, I call the gesture a "signifying shorthand" because its meanings not only invite but also demand further exploration.

The Concept

The new theoretical framework that emerges from this study is "naked agency," which designates the incessant negotiation of power relations between the women and their targets and other stakeholders. This dynamic can best be understood in terms of openness, or figurative nudity, of naked agency. This concept alludes to the unsolicited yet generative encounter between African local cosmologies about exposed tabooed skin; Africanized political institutions; and dominant accounts of nakedness as a state of vulnerability, truth, and innocence. More broadly, my work also disturbs the commonplace images—promoted by the media—of rape, mutilation, and pathology associated with women's bodies in Africa. It also fundamentally reframes questions of women's sexuality and power by offering an alternative to opposition of sovereign subjects and their victims that informs much research in African studies.

Given the ubiquity of discussions of female genital cutting (FGC), an act that emerges in the transnational discourse on African agency and gender politics, readers who are interested in African women's sexual repertoires might be tempted to place questions of FGC into the discourse. In fact, the in-between space that women who display naked agency inhabit is indeed a space similar to that occupied by women in contexts of FGC. As Chantal Zabus (2007), Fuambai Ahmadu (2017), Wairimũ Ngaruiya Njambi (2004), Lori Leonard (2009), and others have argued, there is a kind of agency in local African women fighting against, or endorsing, FGC, a long-established tradition that some

deem harmful. This manifestation of agency both curtails and amplifies male power. Female secret societies, the agents of genital cursing, are also customarily the guardians of the "excision" ritual among young girls. The power effect of the clitoris explains why it is feared, ritually worshipped, and cut as the paramount punishment for adulterous women, as Jean-Pierre Ombolo (1990) notes in his comparative anthropological accounts of sexuality in Africa. These resistant practices, both progressive and regressive, regarding FGC emerge in contexts caught between two putatively opposed orders, authenticity and foreign influences, as Saida Hodžić argues in *The Twilight of Cutting* (2017).

In one sense, defiant disrobing is not fundamentally antipatriarchal; rather, it works in tandem with patriarchy. The gesture derives its power effects from the patriarchal parameters of anatomical determinism—worth emphasizing in light of interpretations of these gestures as implying safety, freedom, and success for the women. These considerations further nuance the account of agency that this book promulgates.

Naked agency is more capacious than any single indigenous African term because each ethnic group examined has its own terminology (table I.1). All these terms describe female-only actions. The term *adjanou* in Baoulé does not translate as *naked*, or *nakedness*; instead, it refers primarily to the sacred and secret exorcism ritual during which naked elderly women mobilize the entities within their bodies either to curse an offender or to ward off evils. Similarly, the name *anlu* in Kom to designate genital-cursing rituals actually means "to drive away." Within that name resides a reference to a famous Kom legend in which women disguised themselves as men to drive away the neighboring Mejang. *Adjanou* and *anlu* are not just descriptive of nakedness; in Ivorian and Cameroonian representations, they evoke fear and awe because they carry historical and customary connotations as well as unexplored and complex valences. Imposing a single term would flatten geographical and historical specifications about the meaning of public disrobing. The term *naked agency* accomplishes the task of moving beyond the ethnic and the local without carrying specific ethnic connotations but also allowing for them.

Unlike terms such as *genital cursing*, *FGP*, and *oto*—which suggest fixity, localization, the ethnic, and freedom from the effects of historical and social variations—*naked agency* names a complex and unstable gesture. Given the slippages, confusions, and often contradictory motivations and responses, the women's gestures are a set of "open strategies"—naked strategies, with positions that are constantly subjected and emerging.[21] Although this study's starting point is the African context, I ultimately move beyond that continent to name and highlight the dominant features of most instances of resistant self-

TABLE 1.1. Ethnic terms in sub-Saharan Africa

Term	*Ethnicity*	*Country*
adjanou	Baoulé	Côte d'Ivoire
anlu	Kom	Cameroon
bomampi	Attié	Côte d'Ivoire
ebgiki	Abidji	Côte d'Ivoire
gbiteté	Ewe	Togo
guturama	Kikuyu	Kenya
kilipat	Pokot	Kenya
koo	Bassa	Cameroon
mevungu	Béti	Cameroon
momomé	Agni	Côte d'Ivoire
moribayassa	Malinké	Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali
ndong	Balong	Cameroon
olkishoroto	Maasai	Tanzania
oto	Igbo	Nigeria
setshwetla	Zulu	South Africa
titi ikoli	Bakweri	Cameroon

exposure: the fluctuation between positions of victimhood and sovereignty, or more accurately, victimhood in sovereignty, or sovereignty in victimhood.[22]

In modern usage, although *naked* and *nude* are often used interchangeably to designate the unclothed human body, they are encumbered with cultural variations and historical determinations. Definitionally, *naked* derives from Germanic *nackot* and means "having no clothing on the body, stripped to the skin; unclothed."[23] In Middle English, *naked* moved from being merely descriptive to becoming evaluative—destitution, and shame in the naked person. It was then frequently used in "the context of a person's birth, perhaps to connote a newborn child's vulnerability or innocence" (OED). This connotation has persisted into the present. *Nude*, from the Latin *nudus*, was primarily used in the legal context to mean "not attended by any formalities or pledges," or "lacking consideration."[24] *Nude* also meant "open, simple, plain, naked, bare, unclothed" (OED). Whereas *naked* is used more generally to designate vulnerability and absence of normal clothing, *nude* is utilized to refer to nakedness considered positive or aesthetic, especially in photographs and other works of art. These associations reflect the implicit relation to rank and hierarchy that characterizes Anglo-Saxon and Latin words (Barcan 2004).[25] And that negative conception of clotheslessness is automatically opposed to that of agency, self-determination, and resistance (Agamben 2011; Nancy 1993).[26]

Naked in *naked agency* makes sense when we perceive the amplificatory impact of the imbricated categories of gender and race on exposed genitalia. Surprisingly, though, the women can be both naked and nude. They can be described as *nude* because they are clothed in cultural significations: in both the grammars of reverence from their perspectives and those of uncivility from the viewpoint of their targets and opponent-critics. However, considering the historical discursive injury that has cast images of African female bodies as vulgar, with its residual effects that continue to shape current valuations of these images, the Nigerian women's bodies during their 2002 threat may be discursively labeled *naked*. Although the term *nude* suggests multilayeredness and may break away from the long, historical wound inflicted on black bodies, I found its connotations too artistic and tame for the kind of political and social work that the protesters are doing. Either way, these unclothed bodies escape the rhetoric of plainness, understood as meaninglessness. Here, *naked* is used both figuratively and literally to emphasize the confrontational exhibition of bodies in public as well as the women's lack of options.

Agency in *naked agency* designates women's ability to act or react, intentionally or otherwise, in punishing offending males or signaling vulnerability, or both. My use of "agency" disavows the dominant liberal model that is equivalent to autonomy, intentionality, free will, sovereignty, and transcendence. Not surprisingly, these liberal accounts of agency, provincial and yet clothed in the garb of the universal, are themselves being resisted both by practices of agency and by theorizations of agency. *Naked agency* is one such theorization that calls attention to cultural and geographical corners, as well as to certain peoples who have been left outside the original history or seminal conceptualizations of agency. I engage but exceed each of the four dominant conceptualizations of agency in poststructural and postcolonial circles. Whereas Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2009) defines agency as institutionally validated action, Gabriela Basterra (2004) formulates it as the power one feels. These two versions draw on Michel Foucault's classic reflections on power (1978, 1979, 1980, 1982, 1997) and Judith Butler's account of the paradoxical nature of subjection in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). Through disobedient nakedness, the actors may be simultaneously negotiating between institutional validation and survival instinct. It is unclear whether Nigerian women's targets drew on customary belief systems to interpret the women's threat to disrobe. However, given that the women's ability to react, which succeeded in demonstrating their agency, backfired in some ways, it becomes clear that there is no agency outside of restrictions. This interpretation of *naked agency* exposes important aspects of what it means to be an acting agent in challenging material conditions.

My focus on naked agency should not be misconstrued as an argument for defiant disrobing as the only avenue of collective female resistance. It should not be conflated with an uncritical excavation mission. The spirit of this book, which is to transcend dichotomies and "to learn from below," resists such monolithic representational politics. Because of today's higher female literacy rate, women in Africa marshal a greater variety of conventional tactics of participatory democracy. Even those who expose themselves, either in anger or in ritual, often mobilize conventional strategies to prosecute grievances or to bring about change.

The Scenes

Throughout the book, I use the term *scene* rather than *chapter* to foreground the performative nature of the women's act, thus joining the performers and their audiences into a mutually constitutive dynamic. The scenes are organized into three sections: (I) Restriction, (II) Co-optation, and (III) Repression, each highlighting a different aspect of naked agency. Table 1.2 shows, alphabetically by country, the notable female naked protests over the last nine decades that I will be drawing on in my discussions.

Section I, "Restriction," unpacks sociopolitical circumstances that require the women's gesture of disrobing at the same time that they constrain the extent of the women's agency.

Scene 1, "Exceptional Conditions and Darker Shades of Biopolitics," analyzes the 2011 women's march and cursing ritual in Côte d'Ivoire to highlight the once-exceptional but now normalized conditions that call for disrobing in contention. These conditions, without which the women's ability to act would have been invisible, have been explained as biopolitical and even necropolitical. Biopolitics is the imbrication of life processes into political calculations in the name of enhancing peoples' lives. The inherent contradiction of a biopolitical form of power is that it creates a scheme in which some people enjoy political and legal prerogatives and protection while others are depoliticized through the normalization of the state of exception. Similar contexts evince the possibility of emancipatory political subjectivities, which carries broader implications for biopolitical theorizing by decentering its dark side.

Scene 2, "Dobsonville and the Question of Autonomy," closely reads *Uku Hamba 'Ze (To Walk Naked)* (1995), a short documentary on the 1990 female naked protest in South Africa, to uncover the texture of women's self-determination. With access only to the women's regrets and triumphs, I argue that the actors' agency is precarious because of their extreme emotions—fear,

TABLE 1.2 Notable female naked protests in sub-Saharan Africa, 1922–2017

	Country	*Year*	*Protests and Grievance(s)*
1	Benin	2013	Women of the market of Gbogbanou: threat against market clearance
2	Cameroon	2010	Farmer and grazer land conflicts
		1993	Takumbeng: electoral injustice, dictatorship
		1958	Kom women: cross-contour farming issues
3	Central African Republic	2015	Young women: rape
		2014	Women: sectarian violence
		1979	Mothers: Bokassa's dictatorship, arbitrary detention
4	Côte d'Ivoire	2011	Paris: international entanglements
		2011	Abobo, March: electoral injustice
		2011	Yamoussoukro, February: electoral injustice
		2010	Didievi: Gbagbo's dictatorial practices
		2003	Exorcism, Dominique de Villepin/neocolonialism
		1949	Political prisoners
5	Democratic Republic of the Congo	2014	Factional politics, support of Alex Kande Mupompa
		2012	Refugees in Uganda, better living conditions
		2006	Killings of elderly women
6	Gabon	2015	Market women: racketeering
		2009	Election-related contestation
7	Gambia	2001	Sacrifice of a dog for electoral purposes
8	Ghana	2007	500 women: threat to march naked to the seat of government against dismissal of district chief executive
9	Kenya	2001	300 women: land dispute, wildlife preservation programs
		1992	Political prisoners, Wangari Maathai
		1922	Harry Thuku arrest protest
10	Liberia	2014	Widows: payment of benefits
		2008	Refugees in Ghana, relocation packages
		2003	War negotiations, Leymah Gbowee
11	Mali	2012	Rumors of women walking naked against Amadou Toumani Touré
		2003	Dictatorship, military violence

(*continued*)

TABLE 1.2 (*continued*)

	Country	*Year*	*Protests and Grievance(s)*
12	Nigeria	2016	Kaduna, December: against Gov. El-Rufai
		2016	Ebonyi, October: detention of community president-general
		2015	Ibadan, November: white elephant project
		2014	Kaduna, September: governor's visit, killing fields
		2013	Threat against child marriage bill
		2012	Ogun: invasion of the community by hoodlums
		2009	Ekiti: electoral injustice
		2003	Electoral injustice
		2002	Niger Delta: multinational oil companies' exploitative practices
		1947	Yorubaland: female taxation
		1929	Igboland: the Women's War, female taxation
13	Republic of the Congo	2002	Electoral injustice
14	Senegal	1980	Usana: students' strike
15	Somalia	1996	Dictatorship
16	South Africa	2016	university students, October: "Fees Must Fall"
		2016	university students, April: sexual harassments and rape
		2016	Pretoria: local elections
		2012	Limpopo: water shortages
		2006	Prison inmates: relocation
		2001	Kempton Park in the Gauteng province: women's protest against police for denying them access to Bredell farm for their belongings
		1990	Dobsonville: slum clearance
		1959	Beer hall boycott
17	Sudan	2009	Dictatorship, men's inactivity against dictatorship
18	Swaziland	2000	Land dispute
19	Tanzania	2003	Land dispute
		2000s	Criminalization of female genital cutting
		1977	A government decree that Maasai must wear "modern" dress to use public transportation

TABLE 1.2 (*continued*)

	Country	*Year*	*Protests and Grievance(s)*
20	Togo	2013 1933	Manipulation of constitution, dictatorship Increase in taxes and the levying of new fees on market women; arrest of two local political leaders
21	Uganda	2015 2012	Acholi women: land dispute Police brutality
22	Zambia	2017	Mothers and grandmothers: topless to express their hurt at government's detention of their leader, Hakainde Hichilema
23	Zimbabwe	2016	Threat of disrobing against police brutality

desperation, anger—and social and historical determinisms. Despite standing up to the country's apartheid regime, these women fluctuate between history-making and patent victims. That in-between position, what Carole Boyce Davies has called in a different context "the migrating subject" (1994), also resonates with the protest as standing at the junction of apartheid and postapartheid eras, between the 1959 beer hall boycott and the recent cross-ethnic shaming nudity deployed by South African students. Exploring this lineage demonstrates that the meanings of resistant nakedness (available in European languages and circulating internationally) differ markedly from the account of "genital cursing" as annihilating offenders by calling on ancestors in West Africa. The comparison challenges the concept of Africa as a unified entity.

Section II, "Co-optation," foregrounds complex (disabling and enabling) responses to the women's gesture. The lauding reactions paradoxically magnify and undermine women's agency, thereby highlighting the dialectical nature of insurgent disrobing.

Scene 3, "Africanizing Nakedness as (Self-)Instrumentalization," draws on historical accounts and newspaper articles from the late 1950s to the 2010s on Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, and Senegal. I show the ways in which civic leaders Africanize, read "overplay," the power effects of resistant nakedness for nationalist or factional political interests. However, by exploiting the social capital of tradition and indigenous religious practices to become agents while being exploited, the women problematize current and simplistic instrumentalization arguments that emphasize women as victims of powerful forces.

Scene 4, "In the Name of National Interest," engages the 2008 arrest of Liberian women war refugees in Ghana and the shame dance in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's fantasy novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). This scene showcases a different kind of exploitation that works in two ways. The first aspect allows postcolonial bureaucrats to use mature female insurgent self-exposure to silence dissenting voices and to carve out a space of agency for themselves. The second aspect consists of civic leaders' co-opting "traditional" women's dances for "national" purposes, and the women's own instrumentalization of genital flashing—not to advance economic interests as in scene 3 but rather to shame elected officials. The goal of this scene is to uncover intentional self-exposure as both enabling and repressive for civic leaders and the women themselves.

Scene 5, "Film as Instrumental and Interpretive Lens," continues the thread of co-optation with a discussion of the postmodern film *Les Saignantes* (2005), demonstrating how the filmic text exploits women's purifying Mevoungou ritual to heal the postcolonial modern state. The Mevoungou ritual—banned by German missionaries in the nineteenth century—is revered among the Beti of Cameroon because its power centers on the clitoris, which women worship in moments of communal crises to ward off evil forces. I closely read the film to underscore not only the apocalyptic vision of a necropolitical state but also the necessity of enlisting a female-centered ritual to heal the ills of the found(l)ing fathers. Through women's bodies and the film's tropological counterdiscourse to postcolonial necropolitics, hope in the deathscapes becomes viable against the further implementation of dystopia.

Section III, "Repression," documents the physical and rhetorical backlash that defiant disrobing encounters within postcolonial biopolitical circumstances. This backlash problematizes arguments of genital cursing or female genital power as uncritically empowering.

Scene 6, "Secularizing Genital Cursing and Rhetorical Backlash," explores news reports in several countries to highlight what I call the "secularizing" tendency—efforts by public officials and intellectuals to strip the gesture of its assumed religious connotations, and of its harming and murderous effects. Consequently, the gesture, which becomes a violation of decorum within political secularism, also becomes available for state repression. The secularizing/deritualizing trend—the most widespread of all reactions—indexes the unfinished business of the postcolonial nation-state regarding its indigenous religious practices. Yet to consider deritualization as only constraining is to disregard how it benefits women protesters, including South African students of the Fees Must Fall movement, who are not banking on the sanctity of their bodies or on their status as moral guardians to inflict shame.

Scene 7, "Epistemic Ignorance and Menstrual Rags in Paris," explores a manifestation of the secularizing trend and draws on recent social-media material and newspaper reports in which Ivorian women cursed American and French political authorities. My goal is to demonstrate how these ritual cursings, called Opération Kodjo Rouge, and silence, a form of epistemic ignorance from the French political class, contribute to a deeper understanding of how globalization both reads and represses its own colonial histories. Globalization has enabled the visibility of specific social movements. Yet, given the standardization of cultural, political, and social norms, globalization also represses modes of political dissent not consonant with the Enlightenment-inflected and bourgeois-informed channels of participatory democracy. Although visible, the modified women's cursing rituals, the most violent gesture they could unleash, are considered nonviolent and are therefore ignored or dismissed in a paradoxical dynamic of globalization.

Scene 8, "(Mis)Reading Murderous Reactions," closely examines T. Obinkaram Echewa's historical novel *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* ([1992] 1993), a fictionalization of the 1929 Women's War, in which thousands of Igbo women exposed their naked buttocks. Here, I account for the murderous responses that self-exposure has met in the colonial period. In rewriting the colonial gendered trauma through specific formal strategies, the novel provides the most nuanced account of the political stakes of naked agency. The restaging of the war displays a wide range of instances of aggressive disrobing in order to highlight both the protesters' and the targets' emotions and counterattacks. In that sense, the novel displaces the commonplace images of victimhood attached to women's bodies without falling into the easy trap of triumphalism.

The epilogue, "Defiant Disrobing Going Viral," revisits the question of proliferation first addressed in the introduction. Despite its proliferation, and as a signifying shorthand, naked protest is subject to translation and mediation, and its performance demands further exploration. As the most universal and yet the most highly context-driven mode of dissent, the deployment and reception are often predicated upon a host of ways of thinking about the body, sexuality, privacy, moral injury, clothing, and other factors that transcend social sharedness. I conclude by asking whether it is reasonable to wonder if, as more and more bodies get naked in both real and virtual spaces, that which is the ultimate weapon for some women might become merely one more ludic spectacle of globalization.

Ultimately, I hope these scenes cumulatively will enhance our understanding of forms of contestatory agencies in a world of increasing precarity, neoliberal biopolitical practices, and globalization. The negative tonality in current

biopolitical thinking as a response to feelings of extreme perishability has led some to consider pointless any form of resistance, with the consequential degraded view of political subjectivity. In bringing to our attention these protesting women and their exposed bodies, *Naked Agency* argues that desperation and vulnerability in exceptional circumstances can constitute a generative category for deliberating on political subjectivity.

NOTES

Introduction

1 Alaimo 2010; Barcan 2004; Carr-Gomm 2010; Lunceford 2012; Souweine 2005; and Stevens 2006 establish a direct link between these events.

2 However, when relevant, I use the term *genital cursing* to signal what the gesture is called in the published literature.

3 Three versions of *Nudes and Protest* are available online. I analyze the green-and-blue version available in Judeh 2012. Despite its seminal status as one of the first visual renderings of defiant self-exposure in Africa, Bruce Onobrakpeya's plastographic artwork has received relatively little scholarly attention. See the second and third versions in Mwantok 2016, and MutualArt's *Nude and Protest* (Red Line Experiment) 2007.

4 *Biopolitics*, the political rationality undergirding the government of the polis, is used here rather than *biopower* because of the former's encompassing capacity. Biopolitics includes biopower, the simple capacity to legislate sovereignty and the strategies dictated by biopolitics. Another conceptual distinction is grounded in Foucault's deeper definition of resistance as not just negation but also, and perhaps more importantly, as creation (1978, 1979, 1980, 1982, 1997). According to Maurizio Lazzarato's "From Biopower to Biopolitics" (2002), the move from biopower to biopolitics reflects Foucault's theoretical development. Given these distinctions, I deploy biopolitics in my engagement with other theorists of power, including Agamben, Achille Mbembe, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for whom biopower is a less generative concept. For more on the distinction, see also Lemke 2011.

5 For more on the implications of "naked life," see de la Durantaye 2009; Robert 2013; Salzani 2012, 2016.

6 Discussing the ubiquity of nakedness in Trump's road to the White House, Barbara Browning (2016) highlights the accessibility of the gesture to all, making it perhaps one of the most available strategies, one that is assumed to be almost universally accessible.

7 The term *woman* does not indicate my reification of *women*. The fact that only a certain category of females could feel the power to inflict injury on the body politic underscores how *woman* is not a single category in these societies (Amadiume 1987; Hoffman 1998; Oyěwùmí 1997).

8 *Africa* here refers to sub-Saharan Africa and its multiple forms of governance, cultural practices, and historical conditions. *Africa* should not be understood as a homoge-

neous continent; I take seriously Mudimbé's (1988) reflections on the fictionality of the continent.

9 Several Euro-American documentaries have featured the playfulness of protest disrobing, e.g., the French *La nudité toute nue* (Nicklaus 2007) and *La face cachée des fesses* (Pochon and Rothschild 2009), and the Canadian *Naked* (Bissell 2000). *Naked* is not distributed but I obtained a copy from the filmmaker.

10 "Il y'a une sorte de force de la nudité aujourd'hui dans la pensée, et sans doute je crois parce que nous sommes dans un temps qui se sent particulièrement exposé, et particulièrement dévêtue de vêtements idéologiques" [A strong sense of nudity pervades our thinking. That is so, I think, because our era is one that feels particularly exposed, that is particularly stripped of ideological vestments]. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

11 See, for example, Amadiume 2003; Ardener 1973; Awasom 2003; Bastian 2002; Brett-Smith 1995; Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Conrad 1999; Diduk 1989; Drewal and Drewal 1983; Ekine 2008; Grillo 2018; Hodgson 2017; Jackson 2012; Kah 2011; Nkwi 1985; Prince 1961; Ritzenthaler 1960; Serubiri 2017; Shanklin 1990; Stevens 2006; Tanga 2006; Tripp et al. 2009; Van Allen 1972; Wipper 1982.

12 The use of anthropological texts to contextualize the protest and its effects is fraught with tension, since the texts cannot be taken at face value. In fact, anthropological research should be understood in the larger and contentious conversation around cultural anthropology and its objects. In *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Things* (1988), Valentin Yves Mudimbé discusses the role that anthropology has played in reifying Africans and their cultures as abnormally different from an imagined Western-universal norm. For more on the controversy over anthropology, see Jane Guyer's *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (2004), in which she echoes Mudimbé: "'The cultural particularism of anthropology' . . . tends 'to make Africa look like a pathological departure from a standard model based on Western experience and institutions'" (172). These reflections serve as a cautionary measure against either investing the value of science in anthropological descriptions of the rituals or rejecting them. Since these texts are nearly the only option for making contact with these cultural practices, their outright rejection will not only curtail the possibilities of understanding these societies but also constitute an epistemic violence against these rituals and the women who draw strength from them.

13 For references to *bottom power*, see Baker and Mangan 1987; Day 2008; Hodgson and McCurdy 1996; Matory 1993; Stephanie Newell 2002; Ogunseitan 2010; Ogunyemi 1996, 2007; Okeke-Ihejirika 2004; Viola, Bardolph, and Coussy 1998.

14 If seniority was crucial to the effectiveness of genital cursing among the Igbo, it was otherwise elsewhere, especially among the Beti (Ombolo 1990). According to Jean-Pierre Ombolo, women of all ages had the capacity to curse targeted males.

15 Kassim Koné, email communication, March 2013.

16 Similar paradoxical understandings of female genitals as both destructive and life giving have been observed throughout the world. In *A Brief History of Nakedness* (2010), Philip Carr-Gomm lists the uses of naked female genitals in ancient rituals in South American, Indian, and European folk magic, in which they were designed to

attract love and to enhance the fertility of the land. For example, women would walk, dance, and sing naked and sometimes urinate in the fields, or under the moonlight, "to encourage the growth of crops, or assist in finding a love partner or drawing closer the love interest." In that case, "the women were using their nakedness in another form of fertility magic to encourage the evolutionary aim of partnership: the birth of children" (Carr-Gomm 2010, 38). Carr-Gomm not only highlights the influence of these practices on rituals of modern witchcraft but also links them to contemporary events, such as the urgent attempt of fifty Nepali women in 2006 to induce rainfall by ploughing naked in their drought-ridden fields. One of the ritual participants was quoted in a local newspaper as saying, "This is our last weapon, we used it, and there was light rainfall" (Carr-Gomm 2010, 40). In "Nudity" (1987), Arvind Sharma provides a list of auspicious meanings bestowed on the female naked body, ranging from rain-making and crop success to human fertility (8–9). The ancient Greek story of Baubo, who cheered up the grieving goddess Demeter by shaving off her pubic hair and exposing her genitals to her, is another frequently cited myth about the therapeutic properties of female self-exposure (Chausidis 2012; King 1986; Marcovich 1986; Olender 1985). Similar accounts of the apotropaic nature of female genitalia have been reported in India, Japan, China, and Ireland. For authoritative texts on these, see Dexter and Mair 2004; Freitag 2004; Guest 1937; Pearson 1997 and Rhoades 2010 on Ireland; Donaldson 1975; Schmidt 1987 and Sonawane 1988 on India; Le Anh 2004 on China and Japan; and Witzel 2005 on Japan and India.

17 "Par ailleurs, le sexe, surtout de la femme, est tenu chez les Africains pour une réalité extrêmement dangereuse: capable de produire la vie, il est suprêmement capable de la supprimer."

18 Kassim Koné, email communication, March 2013.

19 Although Misty Bastian's studies (2001, 2002, 2005) are about the Igbo-speaking peoples of Nigeria, her findings resonate with those of other scholars, including Sarah Brett-Smith about the Bamana (1995), Shirley Ardener (1973) and Robert Ritzenthaler (1960) about the Kom, and Jean-Pierre Ombolo about the Beti (1990). Around the world, scholars have uncovered the potential cosmological destructive power of female bodies. In *Encyclopedia of Esoteric Man* (1977), Benjamin Walker reports, "The vagina is a destructive orifice and a devirilizing element in the female structure, and sexual intercourse results in a kind of castration. Woman then becomes the devouring female, the vulva incarnate" (305). This myth is restaged in cultural productions such as Lichtenstein's comedy/horror movie *Teeth* (2008). In *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy* (2004), Ruth Barcan also notes the image of the *vagina dentata*, toothed vagina, and the association of nudity with witches and witchcraft. Barcan highlights the contradictory and rich meanings associated with female nakedness and contrasts ancient times with contemporary. In ancient times, female nudity, like the phallus, was vested with magic power. However, Barcan claims that the long history of wild, powerful, sinister, or sacred meanings of female nakedness are being displaced by the modernization process, with its attendant "curbing and limiting of some of the archaic meanings of female nakedness and the domestication of its wilder meanings" (191).

20 In *La guerra de las gordas*, translated into English as *The War of the Fatties and Other*

Stories from Aztec History (1994), Salvador Novo dramatizes how during the war with the Mexicas the battalion of armed men of the Aztec army was defeated by naked women and their milk: "The most hair-raising battalion bursts into our ranks. They came up shouting and slapping themselves on the belly. We were so shocked we couldn't move. And when they got close to us, they squeezed their chichis and bathed our faces with squirts of warm, thick milk!" "The secret weapon! The atomizing pump!" (54).

21 A similar conceptualization of openness is Charles Taylor's "open space" (2017) wherein it stands at the midpoint of multiple prevailing perspectives and benefits from their vantage points. Additionally, Carole Boyce Davies's influential concept of the migrating subject (1994) has paved the way for naked agency.

22 The edited volume *Vulnerability in Resistance* makes a similar point. See, for instance, Judith Butler's "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance" (2016).

23 OED Online, s.v. "Naked, adj.," Oxford University Press, accessed January 8, 2019, www.oed.com.

24 OED Online, s.v. "Nude, adj.," Oxford University Press, accessed January 8, 2019, www.oed.com.

25 These distinctions have been the subject of many studies. Compounding the divide, art historian John Berger draws on work in the aesthetic vocabulary to distinguish between nudity and nakedness in relation to the act of seeing and being seen, declaring, "To be naked is to be without disguise. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress" (1972, 54). Linda Nead (2002) and Rob Cover (2003) reject the binary for different reasons. Whereas Nead highlights the gendered aspect of the binary, Cover considers poststructuralism and its emphasis on the loose boundaries between sexuality and obscenity, which he calls "derailed categories." Although cogent, Cover's attempt is a refusal to acknowledge the prevalence of systems of hierarchy that still structure the postmodern world.

26 Despite claims about the secular nature of the West and despite the cultural diversity therein, it is impossible to think about nakedness outside the Christian tradition (Agamben 2011).

Scene 1: Exceptional Conditions and Darker Shades of Biopolitics

1 For an account of the incomplete nature of Foucault's reflections on biopolitics, see Thomas Lemke's *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (2011). Foucault's accounts of the concepts of biopower and biopolitics are articulated in *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *The Will to Knowledge* ([1978] 1998); *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978* (lectures of January 11, and February 8, 15, and 22) ([2004] 2009); and "Lecture 11 of 17 March 1976," in *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* ([1997] 2003).

2 There is a twist in this Swiftian Modest Proposal if Summers's memo was serious. Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729) is a satire in which he jokes about eating Irish babies.