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# Painful Discourses: Borders, Regions, and Representations of Female Circumcision from Africa to America

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**PAINFUL DISCOURSES: BORDERS, REGIONS, AND REPRESENTATIONS  
OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA**

**A Dissertation**

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**in**

**The Department of English**

**by  
Tameka L. Cage  
B.A., Dillard University, 1999  
December 2006**

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## Abstract

This project considers issues of representation and how literature, personal testimony, popular culture, and African film script a narrative of change and/or participate in change in the female circumcision debate. Texts that currently shape the female circumcision debate are increasingly focused on viable methods of social change and couch issues of change in dynamics of discourse and representation, including Obioma Nnaemeka's *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses*, Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf's *Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives*, and Oyèrónké Oyewùmi's *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, all of which I cite in the dissertation. These texts resist "othering" and focus instead on how African women self-identify in a world that often images them as helpless and devoid of agency and power. This project not only brings new information to bear about how female circumcision is transnationally discoursed, but also offers new ideas of how members of the global community view the "other." In addition, Painful Discourses offers new readings of literary texts that have female circumcision as a major theme; positions literary texts as key in discourse-making about FC; emphasizes the necessity of women's personal accounts of circumcision to educate nations about this practice; and privileges African perspectives about FC. The project details central issues in female circumcision discourse, particularly the dynamics that fuel how female circumcision and the millions of girls and women who have and will undergo the procedure are represented, as well as crucial moments, persons, and representations that have created a moment of "border crossing" in our transnational understandings about the

practice, including “travelogues,” ethnography, autobiography, and US print media. The project also features the personal narratives of two women who were circumcised in East Africa. The project appropriately ends with the consideration of African novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène’s 2004 film, *Moolaadé*. The film is a cinematic representation of anti-circumcision discourse as well as an aesthetic masterpiece that confronts the changing identity of an unnamed village caught between traditions of the past and “modernities” of the present. I conclude the project by offering new ideas for representation.

## Introduction

### Migrations of the Self: Writing about Female Circumcision

Navigating issues of power, authority, and difference is never a simple task. Ethnicity, the body, and representation further complicate politics of identity, producing a “hectic” discursive moment where one must prove who one is, from where one comes, and to what discursive landmark one is going before one can easily “speak” on an issue. To speak out of turn, in a postmodern context, is the new identity theft. As Paul Gee asserts in *Discourse Analysis*, we must begin “with the question of *who* you are when you speak or write and *what* you are doing...If I have no idea who you are and what you are doing, then I cannot make sense of what you have said, written, or done” (22). In light of Gee’s insistence that to “speak” necessitates a clear declaration of identity, I open with an explicit statement of who I am, what I am doing and hope to accomplish in this analysis.

I am an African-American womanist/feminist/activist/researcher interested in how representation shapes the world in general, and female circumcision as a cultural practice in Africa in particular. I am not African, though my ancestors were. Yet I acknowledge that my ethnicity as *African-American* has prompted my interest in Africa. I have visited the continent twice, not to retrace or find my roots necessarily, but in effort to rediscover the community I have lost due to slavery and the Middle Passage, historical circumstances neither I, nor my ancestors could control. These two visits, however, are not the only determinants in how I “see” Africa. For indeed, I have been taught to see the continent—“under Western eyes” (Mohanty 17) — as “other.” Unfortunately, being born of African ancestry does not cure this “dis-ease” (Wilentz 2).

In *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, African Diasporic scholar and womanist/feminist Carol Boyce Davies elucidates the relationship between Black women's identity and place and the implications of this relationship on Black women's fictions and personal narrative. She posits that the Black woman writer is a "shifting subject" who courts multiple identities and subject positions and whose body might be viewed "without borders." She historicizes the Black woman's ancestry, claiming it is as "hybrid" as her migrations from one border to another, which shapes the unique trajectory of the Black woman's "self" in the African Diaspora. She expounds,

The re-negotiating of identities is fundamental to migration, as it is fundamental to Black women's writing in cross-cultural contexts...It is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that re-negotiates the terms of Black women's experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities...Black women's writing should be read as a series of boundary crossings, and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing (3, 4).

I centralize Davies's argument to situate my personal migrations between the US and Africa and the bearing such migration has on this project. These migrations, though not central in this project, cannot be considered apart from it. Before my travels to Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana, I had witnessed Africa only as it was presented through various media, primarily film and television, which is the way most of our culture perceives nations and communities foreign to us. My earliest "witnessing" memory is from childhood, as I watched Steven Spielberg's 1985 film adaptation of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. In the novel and the film, Celie "witnesses" Africa through her sister Nettie's letters about her travels as a missionary. Though Spielberg had claimed when he read the novel he wanted to "rescue" Celie—a problematic position to take—the film is

directed beautifully. Viewers “witness” as Celie does, the scene of Celie’s backyard in rural Georgia becoming the fictional landscape of the Olinka village somewhere in Africa, birthed from Walker’s imagination and her own attempts to locate her African self. The scenery was fascinating: red soil, lush trees, open fields, and sunsets that mirrored any summer evening in my native Louisiana. During certain scenes, the landscape was identical to a relative’s tidy, serene house in the country. Africa looked like home.

Like millions of other Americans, I have witnessed stereotypical images of “Africa,” though what we’re shown is a small representation of life on a vast continent with varying peoples and various ways of living. Too often the American ideal of Africa has been shaped by Discovery channel presentations where lions, monkeys, and zebras dominate the screen, while a “native” African man wearing little to nothing is armed with spear in hand in preparation for the hunt, and a bare-breasted African woman cooks or tends the children in the backdrop. Images like these led countless children and adults of mixed races to ask upon my return from the continent, “Did you see any lions or monkeys or zebras?” Very rarely was I asked about the people I’d met or their interests or what we might have in common in a cultural context.

How do these images shape our perception of Africa? When we have perceived at least some aspect of Africa’s vast identity as a place, including who its people are, what they believe and how they believe, how do we then speak, write, and respond? For members of the academic world, how do we counteract what is miswritten and misspoken in public discourse?

With this consideration, my aims in this project are twofold: to uncover how discourses shape the debate on female circumcision (FC)—couched in dominant hegemonic Western discourse as an immoral “African practice”—and to represent the discourses, as well as the practice, ethically. I consider voices that have played a key role in how circumcision is discussed in the global community; those that have been underscored like Thiong’o, whose novel, *The River Between*, has not received nearly the same attention in the US as Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, but is extremely important in understanding the variables and intricacies of this sensitive issue in an African context; or those that have been devalued, ignored or dismissed, like the personal testimonies by women who have been circumcised, the subject of Chapter 4. This interdisciplinary project, then, offers new considerations for the future of representation in race, gender, cultural, and African Diaspora studies, and finally, in studies specifically about female circumcision. Below, I briefly discuss the recent attention given female circumcision in the US, then navigate my personal journey through this representation and my attempt to render new, engaging approaches to understanding female circumcision as a practice, impacting the global community more than ever. I contend that there is no time like the ever-shifting present to engage in the discourse of how this practice has been imaged in a historical context and how it affects lives in Africa and the West.

Nahid Toubia, “a Sudanese woman, physician, activist, researcher, and scholar” (31), contends, “A few decades ago, few in the West would have heard of FGM (female genital mutilation.) Today it is clear, that of all the topics concerning African women’s health and African women’s rights, it is now the one *most frequently written and talked*

*about*” [emphasis mine] (33). Put another way, FC (or FGM) is the topic most frequently “discoursed” as it relates to African women’s bodies. Though other issues plague African women’s health and bodies, such as HIV/AIDS, death from pregnancy and childbirth, (Toubia 33), socio-economic disprivilege, and currently, in Congo and Darfur, serial rape and brutal attacks on African women’s genitalia and emotional selves, the gaze of the West seems addicted to what “African women” are doing to their own genitalia and the genitalia of their daughters. This fixation with FC and African women has generated its own meta-discourse that now surfaces in US news programs, talk shows, women’s popular culture magazines, newspapers, television shows, and documentaries.

Gee gives insight about “little d” vis-à-vis “big D” discourse (7) in his book, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. He explains that “little d” discourse indicates “language used on-site,” while “big D” discourse denotes “ways of acting, interacting, feeling, believing, valuing and using various sorts of objects, symbols, tools, and technologies—to recognize [oneself] and others as meaning and meaningful in certain ways” (7). In light of Gee’s analysis, a “D/discourse” analysis (Gee 7) about FC must consider not only what is spoken about FC and African women’s bodies, but also how language is spoken, to whom, why, when, and for what purpose. For this project, then, I consider language spoken about FC, and probe socio-cultural factors in Africa and the West that determine how discourses are made. Below I consider an important discourse moment and “staging” of discourse in relation to FC representation.

The mantra of second-wave feminism declared, “the personal is political.” Gee contends, “language-in-use is everywhere and is always ‘political’ (1). This relation between the “personal” and “political” necessitates that I narrate when I first became

aware of female circumcision as a cultural practice, mainly because the “popular culture-meets-African culture” moment elucidates my interest in “meaning-making” about female circumcision as a practice. In September 1995 I was a first-year college student and on a particular day I watched women who had been circumcised—some who said they had been ‘mutilated’—talk about their experiences on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. I was horrified and angry as I listened to these women speak of personal loss, sadness, trauma, emotional and physical pain. I recall vividly one woman’s flight from her country to seek political asylum in London in hopes that she might shield her two daughters from the practice. I cried as I listened to a lovely African woman speak about the difficulty in accepting an invitation for a casual date, fear of the moment she might have to expose the truth about her genitalia.

I knew nothing about the politics of representation then, nearly ten years ago; I knew nothing about how Western media, including *Oprah*, has the power to edit, misrepresent and downright lie to “create” a story or to persuade audiences on what to believe about a person, an act, or a cultural practice. As I watched Winfrey’s talk show on this day, I could only listen. And though I could not explain what this act of listening meant then, I understand now that I was “bearing witness” to these particular women’s pain, and that the image of their faces, the sounds of their voices, and the memory of my witnessing endured throughout my academic career and has led me to this research.

Toubia explains to those outside the African continent or circumcising communities confused as to whether they have the “right” to study FC:

‘Should I, as an outsider give myself the right to study, comment on, or act against FGM?’ My simple answer is ‘Yes!’ Yes, if you want to add your skills and your resources to help those working with the FC/FGM practicing community. Yes, if you

stand side by side with them, look into their eyes and speak with them using the same human language. Yes, if you do not view them through the glass shield as ‘other.’ Yes if you do not believe in your own superiority. Yes, if you will actively seek out and facilitate the rich and diverse voices of African women. Yes, if your action will allow those you study to enhance their sense of dignity and humanity (40).

Toubia offers instruction on how best to assist African women working to effect change in their communities. As Toubia argues, foremost in this action—to use Chandra Mohanty’s term—is to “decolonize” the gaze, or put another way, to resist the tendency of seeing Africans as grossly foreign. Researchers like myself who are interested, indeed invested, in how female circumcision is represented must first understand its significance to the cultures that practice it. Then, based on this knowledge, work with African women invested in change, whether through education, special programming, or quite simply, by listening to what matters in her daily life.

This project considers issues of representation and social change and how literature, personal testimony, and African film script a narrative of change and/or participate in change. Texts that currently shape the female circumcision debate are increasingly focused on viable methods of social change and couch issues of change in dynamics of discourse and representation, including Obioma Nnaemeka’s *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses*, Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf’s *Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives*, and Oyèrónké Oyewùmi’s *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, all of which I cite in the following chapters. These texts resist “othering” and focus instead on how African women self-identify in a world that often images them as helpless, hopeless, and devoid of agency and power. This project will not only bring new

information to bear about how female circumcision is transnationally discoursed, but will also offer new ideas of how members of the global community view the “other.” This project offers new readings of literary texts that have female circumcision as a major theme; positions literary texts as key in discourse-making about FC; emphasizes the necessity of women’s personal accounts of circumcision; and privileges African perspectives about this practice. Chapter 1 details central issues in female circumcision discourse, particularly the dynamics that fuel how FC and the millions of girls and women who have and will undergo the procedure are represented, as well as crucial moments, persons, and representations that have created a moment of “border crossing” in our transnational understandings about the practice, including “travelogues,” ethnography, autobiography, and US print media. In Chapter 2, I analyze Alice Walker’s representation of FC in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and in the documentary/book, *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*. I consider the discourse of transatlantic Black feminism/sisterhood and investigate the role of the Middle Passage in Walker’s representation. I argue that though Walker is frequently misguided about African women’s identity, she nonetheless enables social awareness and highlights crucial aspects of the circumcised female body in physical and emotional pain. Chapter 3 examines Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between* as an African response to female circumcision that falls under the rubric of anti-colonialism discourse. In this chapter, I approach female circumcision in context of its relevance to the Gikuyu tribe and its castigation by the European mission that has invaded the borders of Gikuyuland. I investigate Thiong’o’s new masculinity as portrayed in his protagonist, Waiyaki, and consider the role of education in social change.

Chapter 4 features the personal narratives of two women who were circumcised in East Africa. I probe the dynamics of their narratives in terms of Foucauldian theories of power, sex, and “voice.” I posit from the outset that their representations—and similar representations—about female circumcision should be the primary component in transglobal understanding. Chapter 5 appropriately ends with the consideration of African novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène’s 2004 film, *Moolaadé*. Set in Burkina Faso, the film is a cinematic representation of anti-circumcision discourse as well as an aesthetic masterpiece that confronts the changing identity of an unnamed village caught between traditions of the past and “modernities” of the present. I examine African women’s solidarity, modernization, and masculinity in the film, as well as Sembène’s sensibilities about the practice from an Africanist subject-position. Each chapter interfaces with another; issues of colonialism, for example, emerge in *Possessing* and *River*; dynamics of Black feminism are as important to an analysis of Walker as they are in considering bonds among women in *Moolaadé*; the theme of female rebellion emerges throughout. What is also consistent—I hope—is the “call” for discourses that do not produce more pain by failing to consider the African woman’s selfhood as meaning is made about this practice.

## 1. Borders, Regions, Representations: Female Circumcision and Discourse

In one dream, I saw Africans sitting inside a behaviorist's examination room surrounded by two-way mirrors. The intention was to confront them with reflections of their disturbed, uncivilized and sick state of being. Meanwhile, on the outside, the 'others,' mostly Westerners, looked in through the glass, unable to see themselves. They appeared confident and impassive as they scrutinized the Africans with the cold gaze of self-assured Western professionals. If this image is indeed the model of interaction between cultures, how will there ever be a true dialogue between them, between the 'self' and the 'other' on both sides?

Nahid Toubia, "Female Genital Mutilation: Contesting the Right to Speak of Women's Bodies in Africa and the West"

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Anthropologist Emmanuel Babatunde locates the polemics of the female circumcision debate in two representations: the "traditionalists" who claim "any attempt to abolish [female circumcision] will undermine the total fabric of traditional culture," and the "abolitionists" (3) who argue that the practice "dehumanizes the female" (3) and denies her basic human rights. While this argument holds true for a sect of those invested in the politics of FC as a cultural rite as well as for those who assert the practice is a violation of human rights, like Tobe Levin and Efua Dorkenoo, both of whom lead organized group efforts in Europe to eradicate the practice, it is not the whole of the female circumcision debate, nor do these positions themselves determine how female circumcision is understood and interpreted as a cultural act in a transnational context. In *Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives*, Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf argues, "The dialogue about women's rights and human rights that has begun within these

communities has reached from local to national and transnational forums, shifting the terms of the debate from the victimization of women to women becoming agents of change in the most intimate and collective dimensions of their lives” (24). My task, then, is two-fold: to investigate the debate itself, as in what people believe about this practice, and also to examine how discourses are made about FC that help *determine* what people believe.

The title of this project, *Painful Discourses: Borders, Regions, and Representations of Female Circumcision from Africa to America*, describes the dynamics that mediate knowledge and images about female circumcision as a practice that occurs in certain parts of Africa.<sup>1</sup> I consider discourses formed in America, Europe, and Africa, including fiction, autobiography, ethnographic studies, film, popular magazine articles, and activist literature. The project that seeks to understand the age of transglobal identity, multiculturalism, and international intellectual exchange and how these discourses diverge and coalesce, despite and within differences based on region, borders, and culture. Below, I deconstruct key terms that guide the project and its aims.

“Borders,” as I mean the term, denotes the socio-cultural lines that divide the world, in this case, Africa and the West. The term indicates, too, that when a researcher, activist, or physician from the West chooses to investigate, work with or represent another culture, she must acknowledge the extent to which she is engaging borders. To successfully cross the border, as Chandra Mohanty encourages, she must first recognize that borders of difference exist, learn the culture of the border in which she has crossed, and above all, respect her new environment by exhibiting cultural sensitivity and, if a

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<sup>1</sup> Female circumcision is also practiced in some parts of Asia and the Middle East, though most academic and non-academic attention is most concerned with the practice as it occurs in regions of the African continent.

Westerner, anti-imperialist attitudes. “Regions” delineates areas of Africa where circumcision is part of mainstream traditional culture vis-à-vis the West, a culture that, for the most part, has imagined female circumcision as not only unhealthy, but also inhumane. Finally, “representation” indicates the way FC is talked about, written about, and imaged in transnational discourse.

I observe “borders” and “regions” as a framework to understand that lines of social demarcation surrounding the FC debate are increasingly complicated by a rising number of immigrants from circumcising regions of Africa who have crossed and are crossing into US and European borders, and who intend to circumcise their children and grandchildren in the US. A recent story of such “border crossing” occurred in Atlanta in 2004, when an Ethiopian immigrant, Khalid Adem, allegedly circumcised his two year-old daughter with scissors. Though Adem denies the claims, asserting that either his former wife, Fortunate Adem or someone close to the family had circumcised the child, the issue remains that Adem’s two year-old daughter was circumcised within the region of the United States, despite Congress’s September 30, 1996 provision criminalizing the practice as part of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act of 1996. Considering this kind of “border crossing,” FC is no longer a cultural practice performed exclusively in Africa, but also in the States and in parts of Europe. As sociologist Rosemarie Skaine posits in *Female Genital Mutilation: Legal, Cultural, and Medical Issues*, “Immigrants, refugees, and tourists intersect the world. The first and third worlds no longer are separate” (3, 4). As borderlines and regions become more complicated, then, so does representation. Pertinent issues include how the US and Europe represent the circumcised woman’s body vis-à-vis the various cultural meanings of FC in

circumcising regions in Africa.

Why *Painful Discourses*? First, as Michel Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality*, in discourse production, silences are administered even as “voice” is achieved; that though power is produced, so is powerlessness; and with the propagation of knowledge also comes mistaken beliefs, misconceptions, and misrepresentations (12). This project considers how dominant cultures produce discourses that inflict pain and frustration on cultures it assumes power over when it silences their voice and stifles and/or condemns their worldview. Second, and I respond to this in more detail later, the discourse of FC is framed in Western discourse as “painful.” US discourses often apply words like “horrible,” “torture,” and “cruelty” to explain the practice of “female genital mutilation,” ignoring the varying degrees of pain involved in different kinds of circumcision, while failing also to consider “variations in the expressibility of pain as one moves across different languages” (Scarry 5) and cultures. Finally, despite the West’s homogenizing of different forms of female genital operations (James 7), these practices *do* inflict real pain on thousands of girls and women, either from the act of amputating all or part of the genitalia, or from physical complications that ensue, including pain caused from slow or trapped menstrual flow, childbirth, and urination. In the past decade, discourses of pain about female circumcision have been documented and/or explored by researchers, ethnographers, talk show hosts, physicians, and journalists; I investigate personal testimonies of such pain in Chapter 4. Though this project seeks to understand, investigate, probe, and problematize discourses, it resists affiliating as either “opposed” or “against” the practice of FC, but seeks instead to interrogate and offer strategies to mend these “painful discourses.” Because the primary focus of this project is on how the

discourses of feminisms (Chapter 2), colonialism/masculinity (Chapter 3), personal narrative (Chapter 4), and African cinematic worldview (Chapter 5), shape the female circumcision debate, this first chapter is a review of significant historical, cultural discourses that have helped shape meaning about female circumcision, including representations in scholarship, literature, the media, and ethnographic study. I begin with the role of nomenclature in discourse making.

### **What's in a Name?: Clinical Facts, Nomenclature, and Discourse**

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that the total number of women who have undergone female circumcision ranges between 100 and 140 million in 28 African countries, although cases are increasingly being discovered in Europe, Australia, Canada, and the US, and other places immigrants have migrated.<sup>2</sup> WHO also approximates that at least two million girls will undergo the procedure each year. The pretexts for female circumcision fall into these categories, which vary among ethnic groups: socio-cultural, hygienic and aesthetic, spiritual and religious, and psycho-sexual. The types of circumcision are classified as follows: clitoridectomy or sunna (Type I); excision (Type II); infibulation or pharaonic (Type III); and unclassified (Type IV), which includes,

pricking, piercing, and/or incising the clitoris and/or labia, stretching of the clitoris and/or labia, cauterization by burning of the clitoris and surrounding tissue; scraping of tissue surrounding the vaginal orifice or cutting of the vagina, as well as introduction of

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<sup>2</sup> The origins of the practice are unknown, though research indicates the practice predates both Christianity and Islam. "Pharaonic" circumcision refers to a type of circumcision researchers believe was practiced during the dynasty of Egyptian kings.

corrosive substances or herbs into the vagina to cause bleeding or for the purposes of tightening or narrowing it (Skaine 8).<sup>3</sup>

Clitoridectomy denotes the amputation of part or all of the clitoris; excision occurs when the clitoris and the labia minora (inner lips) are removed, though the vagina remains open; and infibulation, the most severe form, indicates the removal of the clitoris as well as part or all of the labia minora, and at least part of the labia majora (outer lips). When infibulation is performed, “the two sides of the vulva are then pinned together by silk or catgut sutures, or thorns, thus obliterating the vaginal introitus except for a small opening, preserved by the insertion of a tiny piece of wood or reed for the passage of urine or menstrual blood” (Dorkenoo 5). Of the three types, infibulation is least frequently practiced, and is performed primarily in the eastern regions of the continent like the Sudan, while excision is the most commonly practiced, in countries forming “a belt that crosses Africa’s mid-section from Senegal to Kenya to Tanzania” (James 10).

Though the types of circumcision listed above indicate the ways circumcision is performed in different regions, how one defines “circumcision” might depend largely on one’s political stance: opposed to the practice, in favor of it, or as advocate of cultural relativism. As anthropologist Abusharaf asserts, “Whether genital cutting is called ‘circumcision’ or ‘mutilation’ is in and of itself telling of the inimical ideological debates and contrasting systems of knowledge at stake in the controversy” (“Virtuous,” 115). In *Sex and Social Justice*, Martha C. Nussbaum asserts,

‘Female genital mutilation’ is the standard generic term for [female circumcision] and [clitoridectomy] in the medical literature...the term ‘female circumcision’ has been rejected by medical practitioners because it suggests the fallacious analogy to male

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<sup>3</sup> Statistics and information taken from the World Health Organization fact sheet.

circumcision, which is generally believed to have either no effect or a positive effect on physical health and sexual functioning (119).

For many feminists, activists, social workers, and medical practitioners, the term “female circumcision” denies the different effects “circumcision” has on male bodies versus female bodies; does not accurately describe the pain many women experience when “circumcised;” and finally that the term does not effectively communicate that the equivalent male operation would mandate amputation of the penis. For feminists against the practice, perhaps the worst obliteration in calling the procedure practiced on women “circumcision” is in its denial that the practice is “performed to suppress and to control the sexual behavior of girls and women” (Dorkenoo 4). Those opposed to the practice, then, use the term “female genital mutilation” (FGM) because it indicates that the practice is not only harmful to women but is deliberately cruel, patriarchal violence stemming from male need to govern women’s bodies and sexuality. Stanlie James, co-editor of *Genital Cutting and Transnational Sisterhood: Disputing US Polemics*, counters, however, that “female genital mutilation” is as misleading as “female circumcision” because it assumes “that all female genital cutting (FGC) is mutilating” (7). Researchers like James, Abusharaf, and anthropologist Janice Boddy have posited that “female genital mutilation” assumes all circumcision occurs under patriarchal dominance and in this vein helps to portray circumcised women as helpless “victims” who *must* surrender their right to healthy, intact genitalia and sexual pleasure as opposed to self-actualizing, autonomous beings who choose “circumcision” for themselves.

Nomenclature is so central in scholarly discourse about female circumcision that in James’s *Genital Cutting*, each contributor chooses her/his own term to denote the practice, among them “female genital cutting,” “female genital surgeries,” “female

genital operations,” and “clitoridectomy” (7). These terms seem to enact a politics of respect for cultures that circumcise, perhaps because the book’s goal is to produce culturally sensitive discourse about FC and challenge “Western perceptions and misrepresentations around the cutting of women’s genitalia” (James 7). In *African Women and Feminism: the Politics of Sisterhood*, edited by African feminist and scholar Oyèrónké Oyewúmi, three of the four contributors—all African women—use the term “female circumcision” to proffer agency to African women said in Western discourse to be “mutilated,” and therefore “tortured.” As Dr. Nahid Toubia explains,

We accept that the term female genital mutilation has been too widely used to be rolled back. In fact, we prefer to retain the term FGM at the policy level to remind everyone of the effect of this practice on girls and women. However, we advocate the use of the term female circumcision when dealing with affected individuals, parents, or other community members. Consider what an African woman may feel when a stranger asks her if she is ‘mutilated’ or whether she plans to ‘mutilate’ her daughter. It is important that we respect the feelings and beliefs of individuals even as we inform them of facts contrary to these beliefs (Toubia 368).

Based on Toubia’s argument, there is a matter of ethics to consider even in nomenclature. I have chosen the term “female circumcision” out of respect for the two women I interviewed, who refer to the procedures performed on them as “female circumcision,” and also as a way to participate in progressive, ethical representation of female circumcision and the women who choose and reject it as a traditional cultural practice.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Though Stanlie James uses “female genital cutting” to denote FC, such terminology would be misleading here because neither of the women I interviewed were cut; their labia majora were sewn together, thus enclosing all of the vaginal area and embedding—not cutting—the clitoris or any other part of their genitalia. Though I have chosen to use the term “female circumcision,” the term “female genital surgeries” or “female genital operations” may have also been appropriate...

This section has attempted to approach how personal-political opinions frame terminology and discourse about FC. Equally as important, however, is that female circumcision, as mentioned previously, inflicts physical, emotional and/or psychological pain on thousands of women, including hemorrhage from rupture of the blood vessels; post-operative shock; urinary and kidney infections; complications from menstruation; and painful intercourse (Dorkenoo 13-15). Perhaps this type of pain has led to the common ideology that FC is torturous and cruel to women, and thereby “mutilating,” though to reduce the practice to “pain” is generalizing and reduces the significance of the practice to cultures that have performed it for centuries. This discourse of pain and “torture,” however, might be best understood with a consideration of Fauziya Kassindja’s plea for asylum within US borders. Kassindja’s case represents a historical moment not only in US immigration history, but also in meaning-making and representation of female circumcision in the global community. To frame the Kassindja case and subsequent media publicity and public awareness, I consider Kassindja’s autobiography, *Do They Hear You When You Cry*, as well as autobiographical accounts of female circumcision by Nawal El Saadawi, Waris Dirie, and Fadumo Korn.

### **Autobiography, Representation, and the Discourse of Pain**

In her article, “Writing Autobiography,” feminist and cultural critic bell hooks elucidates her personal, mired journey towards representing and reclaiming the “self” via the autobiographical form. She explains, “It was clearly the Gloria Jean of my tormented and anguished childhood that I wanted to be rid of, the girl who was always wrong, always punished, always subjected to some humiliation or other, always crying...There was very clearly something blocking my ability to tell my story” (429). Perhaps this

“something” was not only hooks’s “longing to kill the self [she] was without really having to die” (429), but also the reality of being African-American and female in a racist, sexist culture, in a family where “secrecy and silence” were “central issues” (429). Like hooks, Egyptian feminist, physician, and activist Nawal El Saadawi expounds on the difficulty of reclaiming the self from a past where otherness—particularly femaleness—was a marked, subjugated identity, where childhood questions about female powerlessness in the face of absolute male dominance were unanswered. In *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, Saadawi contends, “Society had made me feel, since the day that I opened my eyes on life, that I was a girl, and that the word *bint* (girl) when pronounced by anyone is almost always accompanied by a frown” (9). Though Saadawi attempted to resist her family and society’s preference of boys over girls, men above women, by asking questions that critiqued the blatant sexism that thrived in and outside her home, she could not prevent what she calls “the painful incident that had made me lose my childhood once and for all” (9). In the opening chapter of *Hidden*, “The Mutilated Half: the Question that No One Would Answer,” she recalls the physical and emotional pain of being circumcised:

I was six years old that night when I lay in my bed...I felt something move under the blankets, something like a huge hand, cold and rough, fumbling over my body, as though looking for something. Almost simultaneously another hand, as cold and as rough and as big as the first one, was clapped over my mouth, to prevent me from screaming...My blood was frozen in my veins. It looked to me as though some thieves had broken into my room and kidnapped me from my bed. They were getting ready to cut my throat which was always what happened with disobedient girls like myself in the stories that my old rural grandmother was so fond of telling me...Somehow it (the sharp object) was not

approaching my neck as I had expected but another part of my body. Somewhere below my belly, as though seeking something buried between my thighs. At that very moment I realized that my thighs had been pulled wide apart, and that each of my lower limbs was being held as far away from the other as possible, ripped by steel fingers that never relinquished their pressure. I felt that the rasping knife or blade was heading straight down towards my throat. Then suddenly the sharp metallic edge seemed to drop between my thighs and there cut off a piece of flesh from my body. I screamed with pain despite the tight hand held over my mouth, for the pain was not just a pain, it was like a searing flame that went through my whole body...I just wept, and called out to my mother for help. But the worst shock of all was when I looked around and found her standing by my side. Yes, it was her, I could not be mistaken...right in the midst of these strangers, talking to them and smiling at them, as though they had not participated in slaughtering her daughter just a few moments ago (7, 8).

Through the act of memory, Saadawi retells the night of her circumcision and creates a language of physical pain. In *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry contends, “Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story” (3). Autobiography becomes the vehicle for Saadawi to “voice” her physical pain and to cast that pain as part of oppressed womanhood in the Arab world. Saadawi’s remembrance of pain suggests the pain of circumcision exists within and beyond her physical self, within and beyond what her mind can comprehend or understand. The “shock” of the physical pain, however, is secondary to the betrayal she feels when she recognizes her mother’s presence at what she terms her “slaughter.” Her surprise at her mother’s presence signifies the culture of silence surrounding the female circumcision ritual, a dynamic I explore in greater detail in Chapter 4. Yet through autobiographical recovery, Saadawi erases the silence that had previously hovered over

her circumcision and re-members the “mutilated” self. Saadawi’s autobiographical account of her painful circumcision exists within a larger framework of “painful discourses” that span all disciplines.

As previously mentioned, medical practitioners, social activists, and feminists opposed to female circumcision use pain as a discursive strategy to argue for its eradication. In *Born in the Big Rains*, Somalia native Fadumo Korn depicts her circumcision at the age of seven and subsequent bouts with rheumatism as a result of the procedure. The narrative chronicles her path to health, recovery, and activism. Waris Dirie, also from Somalia, uses the pain of her circumcision as well as her fame to spread awareness about the practice and to campaign against it. Dirie was circumcised at age five in Somalia, became an international fashion model, and is currently a United Nations (UN) Special Ambassador Against Female Genital Mutilation. The Somali native has written an autobiographical trilogy that details her life as a circumcised woman and activist: *Desert Flower: the Extraordinary Journey of a Dessert Nomad*, *Desert Dawn*, and her latest book, *Desert Children*, published over an eight-year span. Dirie’s first book, *Flower*, was an international bestseller and spread considerable awareness about female circumcision as a cultural practice. *Desert Dawn* focuses on her work for the UN and her return to her Somali homeland. *Desert Children*, Dirie’s latest book, chronicles her efforts with journalist Corinna Milborn to abolish female circumcision in Europe. Below, I focus on *Flower*, as it was instrumental in spreading awareness about female circumcision, but more importantly, it holds Dirie’s remembrance of pain on the day she was circumcised.

*Flower* is the courageous story of Dirie's life as a "camel girl" in a family of nomads. She details her lone flight through the dessert at age thirteen to evade a marriage, arranged by her father, to a much older man. Eventually, Dirie's "flight" leads to work as a domestic in England where she is "discovered" by a model scout. As the story progresses, Dirie leads her readers into the confusion she feels about her body and her sexuality, and even the irony of becoming a fashion model, considered the apex of aesthetic appeal, while feeling "unwhole" as a circumcised woman. However, Dirie's remembrance of being infibulated—the most severe form of circumcision—at age five is the cornerstone of the narrative, for each memory of her life somehow speaks to that moment. She recalls,

The next thing I felt was my flesh, my genitals, being cut away. I heard the sound of the dull blade sawing back and forth through my skin. *When I think back, I honestly can't believe that this happened to me. There's no way in the world that I can explain what it feels like* (emphasis mine.) I feel as if I were talking about someone else. It's like somebody slicing through the meat of your thigh, or cutting off your arm, except this is the most sensitive part of your body. However, I didn't move an inch. I wanted Mama to be proud of me. I just sat there as if I was made of stone, telling myself the more I moved around, the longer the torture would take. My legs began to quiver of their own accord. I passed out. When I woke up, the Killer Woman had piled next to her a stack of thorns from an acacia tree. She used these to puncture holes to sew me up. My legs were completely numb, but the pain between them was so intense that I wished I would die (42).

Though Dirie remembers the infibulation and the pain that pulsed through her body in its aftermath, she nonetheless expresses disbelief that this procedure actually happened *to*

*her*. This disbelief and the intense pain she feels, renders the re-telling difficult. A return to Scarry's theorizing of pain elucidates Dirie's attempt to reconcile the pain she feels but cannot adequately comprehend or explain:

Physical pain is exceptional in the whole fabric of psychic, somatic, and perceptual states for being the only one that has no object. Though the capacity to experience physical pain is as primal a fact about the human being as is the capacity to hear, to touch, to desire, to fear, to hunger, it differs from these events, and from every other bodily and psychic event, *by not having an object in the external world* (emphasis mine.) Hearing and touch are of objects outside the boundaries of the body, as desire is desire of *x*, fear is fear of *y*, hunger is hunger for *z*; but pain is not 'of' or 'for' anything—it is itself alone (161, 162).

Considering Scarry's provocative exploration of pain, I note that Dirie does not describe the pain she experiences but the procedure that causes pain. While she employs words to describe *what* happens, she is unable to describe the pain itself, primarily because there is no language adequate for such pain; it is a feeling beyond the realm of understanding, explained by Dirie's assertion, "There's no way in the world I can explain what it feels like" (42). There is a definite barrier, here, between the two experiences: physical pain and the language to describe it. As Scarry explains, there is no external object in which to contextualize the pain; neither is there an escape from it. The pain is one with and within Dirie's body, even as it simultaneously wears the identity of an "alien" invader. Perhaps the most certain signifier of the extent of Dirie's pain is in her quiet hope for death. And even this secret wish is experienced internally, devoid of spoken language.

Dirie's reference to the circumciser as "Killer Woman" is similar to El Saadawi's terming her circumcision a "slaughter." Both Dirie and El Saadawi employ the discourse of torture to tell the story of her pain—to name it—and also as tools to argue that

circumcision be eradicated. Notably, *Desert Flower* was published in the same year as Kassindja's *Do They Hear You When You Cry*, written with Layli Miller Bashir. Below, I analyze how Kassindja's "transnational ordeal" (Piot 225)—her face, name, and the potential pain she might experience from circumcision—created a fiery discourse and heated debate.

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Paul Gee asserts, "A discourse analysis involves asking questions about how language, at a given time and place, is used to construe the aspects of the situation network as realized at that time and place and how the aspects of the situation network simultaneously give meaning to that language" (110). He relates the necessary consideration of "situated meanings and values...attached to places, times, bodies, people, etc" (Gee 110). Considering Gee's analysis, I probe the language used to construct Kassindja's story in US media discourse, particularly the discourse of pain and "torture." Kassindja's story offers insight about what became an endeavor, driven by the US media, to protect one young woman from "pain."

Kassindja was 17 when she arrived in a US airport in December 1994 seeking political asylum. She had fled her home in Togo, West Africa in hopes of escaping *kakiya*, the name for "genital mutilation" in her tribal language. Though her tribe, Tchamba-Kunsunti, practices the circumcision of girls to prepare them for marriage, Kassindja's affluent father, Muhammad Kassindja, forbade the circumcision of his daughters, insisting that it was morally wrong and harmful. When he died, Kassindja was forced into the care of his brother and sister—both of whom felt the young girl was spoiled by her father and consequently discontinued her education—who had arranged

for her marriage to an older man with three wives and also for her to be circumcised before the wedding. Tradition in the Tchamba-Kunsunti tribe deferred authority of the family to a man's brother in case of his death, which prevented Kassindja's mother from interfering. Nonetheless, to prevent Kassindja from entering a polygamous marriage and to protect her from "mutilation," Kassindja's mother and eldest sister arranged her departure from Togo to enter Germany illegally. After several months in Germany, Kassindja flew to the US where the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) denied her entry into the States.<sup>5</sup> She was strip searched, chained, and detained in poor conditions at detention centers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey for nearly two years. The dynamics of Kassindja's case changed drastically, however, when an outcry from US citizens rallied around the young woman and began to openly accuse the INS for its unjust treatment, particularly because Kassindja had sought refuge within US borders from, (as it was described in US media discourse), "the horrible practice of female genital mutilation."

In his article, "Representing Africa in the (Kassindja) Asylum Case,"<sup>6</sup> cultural anthropologist and scholar of African-American studies, Charles Piot explores how the Kassindja case was "discursively constructed in various global arenas" (Abusharaf 23). He probes how "the courts and the Western media selectively appropriated the 'facts' of

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<sup>5</sup>Allegedly, Kassindja used a passport given to her by a Nigerian man whom she befriended while in Germany. The passport had belonged to the man's sister who had moved to England. He explained, "When you get (to America), you just give it to the customs officer and say it's not yours and explain what happened to you and ask for asylum" (Kassindja 146).

<sup>6</sup> Piot purposefully misspells Kassindja, using "Kasinga" instead. In his article, he refers to INS and other documents, including *The New York Times* article by Celia Dugger, which use the incorrect spelling and therefore follows suit. I use the proper spelling of Kassindja's name above, but call attention to the misspelling as part of the marginalization and "otherness" Kassindja experienced with the INS and interestingly enough, with the US media. I find it compelling that even the media, driven to "properly" represent Kassindja and the hardships she experienced in detention centers, would err in the spelling of her name. This misspelling, and as Piot puts it, "mispronunciation" (Piot 250), calls us again to consider how institutions of power represent and misrepresent "the other," even when it seeks to aid that other.

the case and demonized the local (Togolese) community in the process, which came to stand metaphorically for all of Africa" (Abusharaf 23), and argues that the Kassindja case is not only about a search for freedom, justice, and independence, but also about family, modernity, tradition, change, and the West vis-à-vis Africa. Though he recognizes the power of the US media in constructing a narrative about "Africa," female circumcision, and Kassindja herself, he does not critically analyze the articles, namely those published in *The New York Times*, that placed Kassindja's case in the midst of US socio-political discourse. The following analysis attempts to fill this lacuna.

On April 15, 1996, the *New York Times* featured Kassindja as their front page, headline story.<sup>7</sup> The article, "Woman's Plea for Asylum Puts Tribal Ritual on Trial" by Celia W. Dugger, portrays Kassindja as a near "victim" of "genital mutilation" who was being revictimized and "tortured" by US immigration. On the left of the article, Kassindja is captured in two different images: one photo, taken in Togo for her wedding shows the young woman stylized in lovely make-up and traditional Togolese bridal attire, though she is not smiling and her eyes are averted downward, away from the camera's lens. The second photo presents her as a prisoner behind an iron gate, wearing "prison blues" ("Plea"). The images place Kassindja's name with two "faces" of cruelty: first, the forced marriage and "mutilation" she fled Togo to avoid and second, as a prisoner—bound by unjust INS regulations—who had been behind bars for two years, during which time she endured unexpected difficulties, like being denied sanitary napkins, being held in isolation, and being locked in maximum security with a convict ("Plea"). Dugger retells

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<sup>7</sup> Though Kassindja had been detained for nearly two years, she was released nine days after the *Times* article was released, indicating the power of media discourse. And though an immigration judge denied Kassindja asylum upon arrival in the States, she was granted asylum by the Board of Immigration Appeals within two months after the *Times* article was published.

Kassindja's story, including her privileged upbringing; the heartbreaking, unexpected death of her father; the debunking of her mother as family matriarch; and finally, her search for asylum, which led her to the INS judge who had declared that Kassindja was "not credible" ("Plea"). Yet, as I discuss in fuller detail later, Kassindja had no case for asylum apart from the reality of having her woman parts "scraped" off ("Plea"), if forced to return to Togo. Therefore, the article could not represent Kassindja's plight apart from depicting circumcision as "mutilation." Dugger writes,

The (female circumcision) rite is widespread in 26 African nations. Typically, a tribal elder cuts off the clitoris and sometimes other portions of a woman's genitals without anesthesia. It often leads to serious health problems or even death, which according to Ms. Kassindja was the fate of her maternal aunt. The World Health Organization estimates that 85 million to 114 million girls and women have been mutilated ("Plea").

For millions of Americans who read the *NY Times*, FC seemed a heinous act, a crime that would cause Kassindja immense, unnecessary pain or even kill her if she was ordered to return to Togo. The article sparked a heated debate between US citizens—angered that America's promise of "liberty and justice for all" did not hold true for Kassindja—and INS forces, portrayed as a bestial machine that operates on a platform of injustice and cruelty of its own. Though the Dugger article misrepresents FC with the phrase, "typically, a tribal elder cuts," as if all circumcisions occur in the manner described, I am more interested in its communication of FC as a practice that inflicts not only pain, but also deliberate torture on the "innocent" female body. I return, then, to Scarry's *Body in Pain*, where she describes torture as both a "pain" and a "discourse." Scarry contends that torture is pain *inflicted* or *assigned* to a body that becomes its own language:

While torture contains language, specific human words and sounds, it is itself a language,

an objectification, an acting out. Real pain, agonizing pain, is inflicted on a person; but torture, which contains specific acts of inflicting pain, is also itself a demonstration and magnification of the felt-experience of pain. In the very processes it uses to produce pain within the body...it bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer's body (27).

Scarry's explanation of torture is important in an analysis of the *Times* article, primarily because FC is couched as "torture" that would be inflicted on Kassindja should she return to Togo. The discourse of "mutilation" becomes a signifier of torture. Once language of "torture" is established, worthy ground is made for asylum. As Piot explains,

I am fully prepared to believe that Kassindja was being coerced into marriage and into a ritual practice that she did not want to undergo...But here's the rub...(US) law requires that asylum claims be based on membership in a cognizable social group that comes under persecution. This contradiction is the proximate cause of the demonizing imagery that Kassindja's lawyers were forced to draw on. To win the case, they *had* to portray her as coming from an unchanging patriarchal society of mutilators. And because the lawyers got Celia Dugger to write the story they had scripted and the human rights organizations to reiterate this narrative endlessly on the Internet, it is this contradiction that I see as responsible for producing this *global discourse* (emphasis mine). Needless to say, this cultural script transcends the courtroom, and borrows racist, imperialist and missionary images of Africa that are centuries years old. Nevertheless, it was here produced in a new register, and with a focus and visibility that is unprecedented (232).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Piot explains that he played a "minor role" in the Kassindja case (225). He states that one of Kassindja's lawyers had contacted him to ask, based on ethnographic work he'd conducted in Togo, if he would serve as an expert witness during her first hearing at the INS. He declined, however, insisting that the ethnic group he had worked with in Togo does not practice female circumcision. He asserts, "While I was sympathetic to Kassindja's plight...I sensed that, if I testified at her hearing, I would be forced to seriously compromise my own views and, in the process, reify those images about Africa that many of us work hard to undo in our classrooms and in our writing, or else I would do damage to her case" (225). This statement enables a moment to not only understand Piot's personal politics as it relates to the Kassindja case, but the

Though Kassindja did not experience pain from “mutilation,” the discourse of pain she *could have* experienced and *would* experience if denied asylum, emitted such “painful” language, that the pain becomes a language apart from Kassindja’s ordeal; in short, the pain takes on a language and meaning of its own that casts an imperialist “Western eye” on “Africa” and the practice of female circumcision. In this vein, multiple discourses were created about US immigration, Kassindja herself, and perhaps most importantly, FC as a cultural practice, and “Africa” as place. Yet, this discourse and the subsequent outcry from US citizens enabled Kassindja to become the first person to be granted asylum based on the possibility that she might be circumcised. Kassindja details the duo of the *Times* article and support from US citizens in *Do They Hear You*:

That did it. I was famous now...Talking to Celia Dugger at *The New York Times* was the key...The clinic (where Kassindja was undergoing medical treatment) couldn’t handle all the calls that came pouring in. Neither could Equality Now, which got so many they had to set up a special 800 number...People from all walks of life, all religions, all levels of society, all professions, started calling. Television producers called, newspaper and magazine writers called, radio journalists called, book publishers called, movie people called...All because they were so powerfully moved by one article in one newspaper about one suffering, incarcerated female refugee. Me (463).

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layers of individual and collective interests, investments, and motives of the case in relation to the representation of Kassindja, “Africa,” and US immigration politics. He further explains that though he declined the invitation to testify, he decided to write a letter—perhaps out of sympathy for Kassindja—based on ethnographic literature not his own, that the people of Kassindja’s tribe indeed practice Type I circumcision and that it was “likely” that a woman would have to undergo the procedure before marriage. Piot explains “astonishment” that his letter was used throughout the trial process, though he had used outdated anthropological scholarship and had “said nothing of substance about Kassindja herself” (225). He ends the passage with, “This gives some indication of the house of cards on which this legal case was built” (225), signifying dynamics of the case that were and were not exposed, to benefit Kassindja, no doubt, but that might castigate Africa in the process of Kassindja being granted asylum.

This passage offers critical information and tidily summarizes all the vested interests and various representations involved in the trial. Likewise, the passage not only informs how discourses effected social change in the Kassindja case, but ultimately, how these discourses came to depend on each other. I return to Piot's assertion that Kassindja's lawyers "got Celia Dugger to write the story they had scripted" (232), which was, in essence, that Kassindja was running for her life and that asylum in the US was her only hope of survival. The mass dispersal of the *Times* article was arguably the most powerful tool in Kassindja's plea. Kassindja and her attorneys depended on the *Times* article to tell "a truth" about Kassindja's plight, and to use that "truth" to sway its audience to sympathy. The expected outcome was achieved. Exposure from the article moved citizens to action that would pressure "the highest administrative tribunal in the United States immigration system" ("US Grants"). Kassindja, who had become the face of the campaign to expose "mutilation" and the "unjust" policy of the INS, also courted a second identity as a "suffering, incarcerated, female refugee," which undoubtedly contributed to her case.

Because her case had set precedence in how courts would manage not only cases involving female circumcision, but also "claims from women who have suffered because of discriminatory cultural practices in their home countries" ("Cruelty"), as well as how INS policy would be affected "post-Kassindja," discourses that labeled FC as a form of torture continued to be published in the *NY Times* after Kassindja's release from the detention center and after she was finally granted asylum. On September 27, 1996, Anthony Lewis, wrote an article entitled, "Covering Up Cruelty," where he attacked a newly passed immigration bill that promised to "crackdown on illegal immigrants"

(“Cruelty”), but was allegedly created “to harass and torment legal immigrants” (“Cruelty”). In the article, Lewis refers to FC as “butchery,” and scolds US Senator Dianne Feinstein for supporting the bill. He writes, “Some of [Feinstein’s] constituents may remember that she wanted women like Fauziya Kassindja to be denied asylum without a fair hearing or appeal, and sent home to be mutilated” (“Cruelty”). On October 3, 1996, Feinstein countered with a note to the editor where she insisted,

I abhor the inhumane practice of female genital mutilation. I supported granting asylum to Ms. Kassindja, and I support listing the practice as a method of persecution warranting asylum in the United States so that women like Ms. Kassindja will not be turned away when fleeing such cruelty (“Mutilation”).

Clearly, Kassindja’s story had left an impression on journalists, politicians, and US citizens, but so did FC as a “method of persecution” and “cruelty” designed to inflict pain on women. This portrayal of FC as “cruel” and “harmful” without any attempt to investigate why it matters to ethnic groups that practice it is perhaps one of the dynamics that frustrates Piot as an anthropologist. He therefore asserts, “It is clear, at least to me, that before long, anthropologists will be more fully brought into the FGM asylum process, if not by the lawyers of those seeking asylum, then certainly by an INS that worries about being deluged with asylum claims” (233). Piot’s prediction forces us to consider all the varying representations that are necessary to think about FC as a cultural practice.

Though Kassindja’s story was represented and sometimes skewed by the media, she crossed the “borders” of this representation in her autobiography, *Do They Hear You When You Cry*, two years after her release from detention. Kassindja recounts being so frustrated with life behind bars and with INS that she had decided to return to Togo,

though she knew she would face the “mutilation” she had attempted to escape. While in detention, when she and a friend from a tribe that practices female circumcision, are in the shower alone, Kassindja is terrified when she discovers her friend had been “mutilated” in her country. She recalls,

It was so odd, so strange. Why was she showing me herself naked?...She was leaning against the back wall of the stall, under the shower spray, squatting slightly, braced there with legs spread apart, hands on her thighs, smiling this sad, loving, tender, smile as water streamed down her body...‘Look here. I want you to see this...’ I looked. I screamed...I couldn’t speak. I shook my head, tears streaming from my eyes...There was nothing there. Nothing. She had no genitals. Just smooth flesh with a long scar running vertically between her legs where her genitals should have been....‘Fauziya,’ she said. ‘Do you want this to happen to you?’ I shook my head, unable to speak ( 449).

Though US citizens had understood FC from the lens of the media, the above account encourages Kassindja’s readers to “come closer” to the pain she had witnessed through the pain of a friend, and renders testimony to the effects of “mutilation.” If, for instance, there had been any doubt that FC is not only painful, but torturous and shameful, this passage alone convinces, indeed echoes, the representation of FC as portrayed in *NY Times*.

I have explored how Kassindja’s story illustrates the power of media discourse to represent and to *dictate* public perception. FC has not only surfaced in highbrow print media like *NY Times*, however. Below, I consider how FC is represented in popular women’s magazines as well as the concepts of US voyeurism and the “othering” gaze.

## **What's *Jane* Got to Do With It?: FC in US Popular Magazines**

As an entity, the media acts as an omnipresent force that constructs how we see the world, ourselves, and ourselves in relation to the world. Our perceptions, too, are shaped by what we are informed of daily by media images, which mass produce “truth” and stereotypes. Because the media influences and even determines our perceptions, as illustrated in the case of Kassindja and “FGM,” there is a clear correlation between the media, identity politics, and “discourse making.” Myra Macdonald considers media as a powerful source of representation in the global community in her book, *Exploring Media Discourse*. She asserts that cultural assumptions assist in meaning making, and charts how discourse is made:

Representation, in whatever form or medium, appears insubstantial alongside the materiality of real occurrences. Yet words and images, by defining and labeling phenomena, frame the terms in which we think...The meanings we attribute to words and images depend on cultural assumptions, and help, in turn, to perpetuate these...Verbal labels and visual signifiers cannot avoid carrying social and cultural baggage...What I have been describing is the operation of ‘discourse’ (9, 10).

Considering MacDonald’s exploration of how the media “makes” discourse, I consider the West’s perceptions of female circumcision, and how these perceptions shape the practice’s “identity” in the Western imagination.

For the Western mind, eye, and ear, thinking about, hearing about, and reading about FC often results in what Claire Robertson calls the “EW! factor” (54), which connotes, at once, a type of disgust and fascination. The West has become special spectator to FC, leaving scholar-activists like Nahid Toubia questioning its motives and interests:

I am left wondering what the Western obsession with FC/FGM is all about. Is it because the subject appears tantalizing and exotic? Does it provide comforting reassurance that to be born in the West is to be born lucky? Is it an amnesic device to help the West forget its own shameful history of the treatment of women? Is it a way to re-ignite a sense of superiority...? Why is it that a story of children dying and disabled by measles, or women dying of childbirth, is just not as interesting? Is there perhaps a pornographic element that fires the imagination? (38).

I am interested in Toubia's interrogation of the West's fascination with FC as an "exotic" act that feeds its cravings for "deviant" bodies, especially when those bodies are foreign, female, and sexualized as "different." Western fascination with non-European women's bodies, specifically genitalia, can be traced to the colonial period, and is perhaps best illustrated by the story of Saarijite Baartman, popularly called "The Hottentot Venus." Baartman was brought from South Africa to England to be exhibited, naked and caged, in museums there and in France. Europeans were fascinated with her "enlarged" buttocks and "oversized" labia that "proved" African women were hypersexed and primitive (Gilman 235). It is no surprise, then, that the West would respond in horror and intrigue in response to FC. It may be surprising, however, that in April 2004, *Jane* asked, "Bored with your Brazilian? Hundreds of North American and European Women are Choosing Female Genital Mutilation."<sup>9</sup>

*Jane* is a fashion magazine with teenage to early twenty-year old White females as its target audience. A reader flipping through magazines like *Jane* is bombarded with ads for lip gloss, the latest handbags, and all manner of "discourses" on the popular culture body, including tips on how to lose weight fast and how to keep a boyfriend

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<sup>9</sup> "Brazilian" indicates a type of bikini wax.

interested. Despite articles that pique teen interests and service a market driven by girls and women obsessed with their bodies and weight, the magazine considered the serious practice of “FGM.” Karen Catchpole, author of the article, investigates a subculture of White women in North America and Europe who are choosing to cut their genitals.

When asked why she chose the procedure, one woman allegedly responded, “I will be closer to who I want to be—a more compliant female” (“Bored.”) Another explained that without a clitoris, she can focus on giving her boyfriend pleasure during sex and that as a result, sex is now “comparable to a French kiss,” and that she is “very happy with the results” (“Bored”). Catchpole offers that White women who want to be circumcised are perhaps intrigued by the procedure because it is mostly practiced in Africa, which makes it “exotic.” She also suggests that by engaging in these surgeries that are not part of their cultures, White women are insensitive to thousands of girls and women who do not want to be circumcised but are forced to be, as well as those who suffer extreme physical complications and even death from circumcision.

The *Jane* article can be read alongside discourses on FC that site breast augmentation, plastic surgery, or any similar US procedure in which “women’s bodies are altered to conform to a social definition of what it means to be a woman” (Catchpole 257). Activists like Nussbaum and Toubia insist that before the US judges cultures that circumcise, it should look to practices like these that are sexist and patriarchal. In countries like Sudan, some proponents of FC argue that it enhances the beauty of female genitalia, which is the same impetus for women in the US and Europe who undergo cosmetic surgery to enhance their breasts, buttocks, and lips and staple their stomachs.

Rogia Abusharaf's study in Sudan, which I consider in greater detail later, is the basis of her article, "Virtuous Cuts: Female Genital Circumcision in an African Ontology," where an informant, Saadia, explains, "...We say that pharaonic (circumcision) is good because after it is done the girl's genital area becomes very beautiful and smooth...For this reason, all my daughters were given pharaonic" (Abusharaf 123).<sup>10</sup>

"Bored" is a necessary representation in my attempt to contextualize how various discourses have created meaning about FC as a practice that is no longer affecting *only* African women *in* Africa, or for that matter, no longer affecting *only* African women. Secondly, the article interrupts the typical discourse of *Jane* to generate awareness to its target audience. Thirdly, though the article features how FC has become sensationalized in the West, it resists sensationalism, which demonstrates cultural awareness and the brand of sensitivity anthropologists argue is necessary to effect change.

*Jane* is not the only fashion magazine that has responded to female circumcision. In its April 2003 issue, *Marie Claire* boasted a cover photo of popular music star, Christina Aguilera wearing a mini-skirt; headlined "Sex: Your Secret Obsessions," and featured the article, "I Said No to Female Genital Mutilation." The article is the story of Genet Girma, a young Ethiopian woman, as told to Jan Goodwin. The story explains Girma's decision to resist circumcision after having to help hold her sister down to stop her from screaming during her circumcision and therein witnessing her sister's near

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<sup>10</sup> Like Abusharaf, Janice Boddy explores the role of aesthetics in the social fabric of Hofriyat, a small village in northern Sudan where she has conducted extensive ethnographic study of female circumcision as part of the complexities of the community's social structure as it relates to gender, spirituality, and fertility. She explains that female circumcision is practiced in Hofriyat to preserve chastity and curb sexual desire (686), and also to make women pure, clean, and smooth (688). She found that what makes a woman "beautiful" in Hofriyat culture, including white skin—thought to be purer and closer to godliness and made that way on brown-hued women by a kind of "smoke bath" that sloughs off the first layer of skin to reveal a smoother, lighter complexion—and thin facial features, is closely associated with the same themes of purity, cleanliness, and smoothness that regulate female circumcision.

death, four years prior to when her own circumcision was scheduled. She recalls watching a video of a circumcision, provided by the Kembatta Women's Self-Help Center-Ethiopia, where she explains, "men fainted" because "they didn't know how circumcisions were done," then going home to tell her mother what she had learned (Girma 158). When her mother told her regardless of what she had learned, her circumcision would take place in a few days, Girma and her fiancé, Addisie Abosie, fled and "decided to turn [their] wedding into a lesson for the community" (Girma 158). At the wedding, Girma says she and 417 bridesmaids wore signs that read, "I will not be circumcised. Learn from me," while her fiancé wore a sign, "I am happy to marry an uncircumcised woman" (Girma 158). Their wedding was broadcast on local television, though neither of their families, angry over Genet's choice to rebel against tradition, attended. Genet explains, however, that "peace is being made in [their] families" (Girma 158). She asserts, "We learned that the power to stop FGM is in our hands" (Girma 158). The article ends with the mini-columns "Why Female Genital Mutilation Continues" and "How You Can Help," informing readers to write letters to the United States' Ethiopian Ambassador and the United Nations' Ambassador to Ethiopia and "to support the work of groups like the Kembatta Women's Self-Help Center-Ethiopia, and other educational organizations that are teaching women around the world that FGM is not their destiny" (Girma 158).

By creating space for Genet to tell her story in her own words, *Marie Claire* privileges Genet's voice and her experience, a necessary action to achieve social awareness. Below, I engage ethnographic research, which as a field, has revealed perhaps the most "accurate" depiction of FC by interpreting it from within cultures that practice

it. Scholarship from ethnographic studies has spread awareness on how to represent this practice in a manner that does not compromise the dignity or autonomy of circumcised women. I also incorporate how ethnography has assisted in social change. Because this project locates significant discursive shifts in how female circumcision is studied and understood, I do not analyze the ethnographies in anthropological terms alone, but rather as critical moments in transcultural representation.

### **Ethnographic Research: Strategies for Social Change**

Early publishings about female circumcision prominently featured Western perspectives that often neglected the important task of studying cultures that practice FC before condemning its proponents as misinformed, misled, and powerless. Arguably, though the Western world became aware of the practice of female circumcision, its gaze often operated outside the boundaries of an African reality. Put another way, the method of inquiry was not ethnographic—where the customs of circumcising communities as “place” were studied and approached with seriousness and sensibility—but rather, repetitious of Western assumptions about Africa as primitive and uncivilized. As editor of *Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives*, Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf contends, “The depiction of Africans as cruel and uncivilized in feminist representational discourses created considerable disapproval and remonstrations; these discourses are seen as a continuation of ‘imperial meaning-making’ in which Africa and African women are constantly thought of in non-African terms” (13). To combat such *misrepresentations*, Abusharaf proposes ethnographic study. She asserts, “In contrast to most writings on female circumcision, which approach the subject from a personal, ideological and polemical, or feminist interventionist perspective, ethnography yields profound insights

into the positions and perspectives of those who perform and undergo this ritual practice" (17). When ethnographers conduct research, they do not seek to change the culture under study, but seek instead to live with its inhabitants as observers and participants in their everyday life. Though they may form conceptions about the culture they are studying, they must be prepared to cast away former thoughts and learn new ideals from the culture in which they have immersed themselves. In "Womb as Oasis: the Symbolic Context of Pharaonic Circumcision in Rural Northern Sudan," Janice Boddy not only takes her readers on a journey into female circumcision as part of a "wide variety of local beliefs" of Hofriyati culture (682), but she also escorts them into her personal ideology about female circumcision and how her presence in the village changed her perceptions about the practice. She explains,

Before I arrived in the area I was aware that Hofriyati females underwent genital mutilation in childhood, and I had read several descriptions of that operation...Nothing, however, adequately prepared me for what I was to witness...Initially I felt numb by what appeared to be the meaninglessness of the custom; yet, as time passed in the village, I came to regard this form of circumcision in a very different light...I discuss my growing appreciation of its significance, for it is only in understanding the practice, its meaningfulness for women who undergo it, and its embeddedness in village culture, that those who are presently committed to its eradication might approach the problem with the sensitivity it demands (682).

First, Boddy acknowledges that there is a stark contrast between reading about female circumcision and witnessing its practice firsthand. While reading enabled access to knowledge about the practice, only by immersion in Hofriyati culture is she able to understand its significance in a local context. Second, she closely associates this kind of

intimate study—and I would argue, intimate fellowship—with social change, which is a necessary stroke. As Babatunde explains,

As long as the effort to abolish female genital surgery is predicated on the identification of gore and barbarism with sub-Saharan Africa, the impression will endure that such effort is yet another example of the extent to which those with little understanding of African culture will go to wage relentless cultural warfare against the continent. Antagonisms create a siege mentality that will only translate into an increase rather than a decrease in the practice as a way of demonstrating the autonomy of practitioners (7).

Ethnographers, then, conduct research that is beneficial to those who oppose circumcision, as well as those who support it as a cultural tradition. By utilizing an ethnographic stance, understanding is exchanged. As Skaine expounds, “Why does the practice (of female circumcision) continue despite the efforts inside and outside of Africa to end it? The answer is found by exploring African themes such as relationships, social codes, cultural and commercial customs, traditions, and proverbs” (3).

In the late 1970s, while working for the US Agency for International Development, Austrian-American journalist Frans Hosken claimed to have “discovered” the practice of female circumcision in Africa. She raised money, returned to Africa, and wrote *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*. Like Boddy, Abusharaf, and Gruenbaum, Hosken investigates the practice of circumcision while in Africa, but does not represent the practice, as Abusharaf suggests, in African terms (Abusharaf 13). In the 1993 preface to the fourth edition, Hosken asserts,

I have been asked again and again ever since I started writing and publishing about FGM in 1975: How did you find out about FGM, which was so carefully concealed, especially from Western women, and why are you still pursuing this? I heard about FGM quite by

accident the first time I traveled all over Africa in 1973, but it was next to impossible at that time to get any facts...When I started my investigation, I was all alone; there was nobody I could ask about anything (6).

Hosken's stance, here, is consistent with feminist imperialist approaches to female circumcision, precisely because during her travels "all over Africa," she does not question African women. She posits instead that "FGM is nothing so much as a culturally approved form of violence against women, quite aside from culturally approved wife beating which is practiced by most African men...FGM is a training ground for male violence. It is used to assert absolute male domination over women...all over Africa" (4, 5). The report does not pose the significance of female circumcision to any of the practicing cultures, but argues that African women must be "rescued" from this barbaric practice.

Hosken recounts a crucial discourse moment that lends critical insight on how women from the West should *not* engage "other" cultures. She recalls that "FGM" was discussed by a panel during a conference in Copenhagen:

The women in the audience from Denmark and Europe and other Western cultures were eager to support any proposal made by the African/Middle Eastern women panelists who each spoke for the situation in her country; but *they had little to propose and were unable to cite any programs Western women might support* (281).

Hosken presents herself and the Western women in the audience as all knowing advocates eager to help distressed African women if only African women had the "sense" to follow them. Hosken's escapade into African culture and the practice of FC occurred under the guise of "feminism," yet she blundered by presenting herself as "salvation" for "African" women.

Perhaps no other discourse representation, besides Alice Walker's perhaps, has ignited such a heated debate about female circumcision in the global community. Physician Nahid Toubia claims that Hosken "systematically attacked African women who were interested in dealing with the practice in their own country and ignited a 20 year conflict between African women's rights and Western FGM crusaders...and [claimed] to be the undisputed salvation missionaries against the barbaric practice" (35). Though Hosken's brand of feminism ignored borders and difference, her scholarship proved worthy for women ethnographers who recognized difference and were eager to shed the comfort of their culture to understand others.

As a result of this postmodern shift in concepts of self and other, anthropologists, ethnographers, and social scientists that participate in the discourse of FC focus on circumcised women's lives and experiences through field work and ethnographic studies. Ellen Gruenbaum's *The Female Circumcision Controversy: an Anthropological Perspective* insists that social change is imperative, but incorporates her fieldwork experiences in the Sudan to make a claim for cultural relativity. In *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men and the Zur Cult in Northern Sudan*, an ethnographic study, Janice Boddy illustrates how in this Sudanese culture, circumcision is a rite of passage, a celebratory occasion in a young woman's life where she migrates from girl to womanhood. Boddy demonstrates, too, the multi-layered societal ramifications of circumcision, such as fertility, marriage, sexual intercourse, and childbirth.

Like Boddy and Gruenbaum, Abusharaf locates her study, featured in her article, "Virtuous Cuts: Female Genital Circumcision in an African Ontology," in the Sudan. Abusharaf explains that she collected her research during two stages of fieldwork in 1996

and 1998 and that she chose Douroshab, an Arab-speaking, Muslim township, “because of the ubiquity of infibulation, the most drastic type of genital surgery performed on girls” (114). The broader implication for this selection, however, is Abusharaf’s belief in ethnography as the most viable method to achieve cultural understanding and social change. Abusharaf intends her research, then, “to shift the emphasis from agency and autonomy to a discussion of the ideology that shapes women’s participation in the ritual” (114).

To stage her argument, Abusharaf proposes, “Is circumcision a vicious act of mutilation and injury, or a virtuous act of purity and rectitude” (114)? By posing this question, Abusharaf engages in two varying ideologies about female circumcision, frequently, if not always, at war: on one hand, those who castigate the practice as heinous and harmful, and on the other, those who uphold it as not only necessary, but right. More importantly, however, is her decision to create what I call a discourse of virtue for a practice that has been reviled by the West since colonialism, an act that exposes her attempt not to *give voice* to circumcised women who believe female circumcision is a positive attribute, but to call attention for erroneous representation that portrayed circumcised women *as* voiceless. She admonishes representations that deny circumcised women the empowerment and arguably the respect that should be due to them:

To readers of Fran Hosken’s *Report*, Esther Hicks’s *Infibulation: Female Mutilation in Islamic Northeastern Africa*, or Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar’s *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*, the tyranny of patriarchy and the oppressive nature of gender relations in African cultures are evidenced most dramatically in the cultural practice of female circumcision. These representations stress a notion of patriarchy in which the African woman is seen as wholly subservient, passive,

‘voiceless’: someone whose sexual and reproductive potential is controlled by men and whose genitals are mutilated in silence and without protest. However, as [these] narratives make clear, African women, not men, insist on circumcising their daughters... Anthropologists have focused on circumcision as a cultural expression involving the body, its modification, and the ensuing cultural and socio-political implications... Feminists and other human rights activists, however, are often indifferent to these considerations; they consider circumcision a form of violence against women, indistinguishable from rape, trafficking, forced prostitution, physical and emotional abuse, stalking, and sexual harassment...The reason this controversy has been so significant, then, is that many of the issues it raises do not address genital cutting as ritualized surgery. Rather, this surgery encompasses a concatenation of issues relating to culture, gender, feminism, context, anthropology, human rights, women’s agency, self and other, civilization and barbarism (113, 117).

She elucidates that the practitioners of circumcision argue that the procedure is an act of virtue, and “through ritual performance...ensure the transmission of cultural ethos within their lifetimes” (113). An informant explains that though circumcision is painful and subsequently, sexual relations are painful, her circumcision gives her power to abstain from sex in order to control her husband. She argues, for instance, that she refrains in order for him “to see the problem exactly from her point of view” (130). She asserts, “My view about the circumcision of women is that I don’t have a problem with the pain experienced. I think the pain goes away, but the relationships between men and women become very equal and strong. Circumcision gives a woman that power” (130). Her studies illustrate that, at least in this region, female circumcision is a matriarchal act that demonstrates woman’s autonomy and that “elucidating women’s perspectives within societies rather than criminalizing them is not only a pressing political issue, but also the

only strategy for the formulation of a sound anti-circumcision policy in the new millennium” (137).

As a result of ethnographic study and international policy, the United Nations set up an educational program to protest female circumcision in Senegal. As education increased, many villages began to renounce the practice of circumcision, agreeing with physicians and teachers that the practice led to major health complications. The nonprofit organization, Tostan is also educating women in the village of Malicounda, Senegal. As a result, women who are not circumcised are no longer viewed as social outcasts, and are now able to marry, where formerly, they were unable to marry because their uncircumcised bodies were seen as unclean (Armstrong 22). Because of this educational training, various African villages are choosing to discontinue the practice of circumcision.

Nawal Nour, a Sudanese-American woman and physician, founded the African Women’s Health Practice at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, which concentrates on the medical and emotional needs of women who have been circumcised in their African home lands. In her work, Dr. Nour focuses on the lives of circumcised women, including medical risks surrounding the practice.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, I return to Nahid Toubia’s dream of a scenario of the West as quietly hostile investigators, analyzing, problematizing, dissecting, and inspecting the African mind, body, and culture deeming itself worthy and sophisticated of such an analysis. The dream presents a portrait of a West obsessed with its own image and

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<sup>11</sup> I briefly spoke with Dr. Nour on October 8, 2004 when she appeared on National Public Radio’s “The Connection” after the announcement of her MacArthur grant. Our dialogue was about how to effect change through field research and the importance of listening to women who have lived through the experience of female circumcision to teach Westerners about this practice.

superiority, which would prevent, as Toubia claims, “a true dialogue” between the West and Africa (33). Toubia, along with many African scholars, admits feelings of frustration and anxiety over the West’s misrepresentations. This project, then, seeks to ease this cultural anxiety and help us to engage the “other,” without “othering.” Therefore, the next chapter suitably opens with a consideration of Alice Walker—as novelist, activist, and womanist/feminist—who brought necessary attention to the harmful effects of female circumcision as a cultural practice, and whose discourse in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks* began an impassioned transatlantic debate about the body, African women, and the African-American search for Africa as homeland. I also consider how Walker’s discourse participated in the West’s imperial lens on the African as “other;” though Walker’s discourse “taught” countless Western citizens that female circumcision existed, she simultaneously alienated members of the African intellectual community who felt her representation was distorted by her Western heritage, despite her ancestral connections to the continent. The chapter, then, attempts to untangle issues of identity, race, feminist Diasporic consciousness, and cultural healing.

## 2. Place(ing) Alice Walker: Feminisms, Trauma, and the Politics of (African) Sisterhood in *Possessing the Secret of Joy and Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*

'Middle Passage': the WORD means blues to me.  
Look at it front or backside, it still means BLUES to me.  
If I'da been a sailor on the Seven Seas  
I'da sailed the seven ENDS and let the MIDDLES be...  
But if I'da been a sailor, I'da still been black.  
THAT'S why the blues keeps sailin' back.  
The blues keeps sailin' back....

James A. Emanuel, "The Middle Passage Blues"<sup>12</sup>

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The function of any ideology in power is to represent the world positively unified. To challenge the regimes of representation that govern a society is to conceive of how a politics can transform reality rather than merely ideologize it. As the struggle moves onward and assumes new, different forms, it is bound to recompose subjectivity and praxis while displacing the way diverse cultural strategies relate to one another in the constitution of social and political life.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*

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I...rely on the inspiration I get from glimpsing the possibilities that bridging our differences as women of color hold. We cannot permit separatism or fear to deny those possibilities or crush that future.

Barbara Smith, *Homegirls: a Black Feminist Anthology*

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### **Diaspora/Identity: the "Black Atlantic" and Black Feminism**

The dispersal of peoples from the African continent to the US, Europe, and the Caribbean to form the African Diaspora has enabled varying creative and critical representations of Blackness, frequently at odds over what, in fact, defines Blackness and whose Blackness is privileged over the "Other." As Angeletta Gourdine poignantly asserts in *The Difference Place Makes*, her study of sexuality, gender, and Diaspora

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<sup>12</sup> Excerpted from *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, et al.

identity, the “cultural identity of Blackness has become contentious intellectual property” (1). Although this contention is informed, in part, by postmodernity, which calls as part of its praxis for the de-centering of socio-political representation from the majority to the subaltern, one must look to the history of people of African descent to find the core of our representation woes. When Africans were forcefully migrated from the African continent via the villainous character of slavery, what resulted was “the presence of African bodies in non-African places” (Gourdine ix). This “presence” of African people resulted in multiple, hybridized identities, where Blackness no longer denoted “Africanness” alone, producing a meta-narrative of Blackness across the Atlantic. Though persons of African descent may share “cultural patterns of behavior” (Gourdine 7), have an ancestry in common, even perhaps a global, socio-economic struggle in common, we lack a common social identity. Yet, as diasporic citizens, we fall under the “unfinished identity” (Gilroy 1) of being “Black” people. The implications for this homogenizing ambiguity are vast, particularly when considering the boundaries that are so easily blurred, unjustly crossed, or potentially violated when members of the Diaspora misrepresent an/other.

In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy offers a triumphant, provocative exploration of the Diaspora that captures the plight of its people who, since the Middle Passage and the slavery that ensued, have been resilient, yet fragmented as an undone jigsaw puzzle, trying to locate its “self.” He exposes the social, geographical, and intellectual difficulty in breaching the gap between the African homeland and the lands to which Black people have been “shipped.” I centralize his interest in the relationship between transatlantic difference and gender struggle as a facet of Diaspora disconnectedness. Though Gilroy does not explore this relationship in depth,

I position it as critical to my argument. I locate the “place” where Black feminist discourse engages the discourse of the Diaspora--in *Possessing* and in theory--forming a transglobal body of intellectual and political work that strategizes firstly, how to remap the Diaspora’s traumatic history, then how to represent its “sisterhood” relations in the context of “the kinship that Diaspora implies” (Gourdine ix). Gilroy explains,

The precise weight we should attach to the conspicuous differences of language, culture, and identity which divide the blacks of the Diaspora from one another, let alone from Africans, are unresolved within the political culture that promises to bring the disparate peoples of the black Atlantic world together one day...The themes of nationality, exile, and cultural affiliation accentuate the inescapable fragmentation and differentiation of the black subject. This fragmentation has recently been compounded further by the questions of gender, sexuality, and male domination, which have been made unavoidable by the struggles of black women...(34).

These “struggles” beckon to West African shores, to the Black female slave’s journey over uncertain seas, her hope to cultivate a spirit of resistance, whether boisterous or subtle, in her female descendants. Feminist-activists like Barbara Smith, a foremother of Black women’s intellectual thought, received the baton of hope from her enslaved ancestor with confidence that through the act of solidarity, Black women would live free of racial discrimination, patriarchal injustices, and economic disparities. By lobbying for race-gender equality, Smith and fellow feminist activists, namely Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Michelle Wallace, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker, envisioned that Black feminism, or “womanism,” would enable Black women’s self-representation in the social, political, and intellectual spheres.

This chapter contributes to Diaspora race studies, as well as the continuum of transatlantic feminist thought that closely analyzes sisterhood as a model of socio-political, transcultural relations between women. I investigate Walker's "diasporic dreams" and use her "sisterhood" as a lens to address crucial issues that emerge in *Possessing* and *Warrior Marks*, primarily the politics of race, "place," and trauma. In *Possessing*, I investigate Walker's choice to revisit her African heritage through Tashi's pained body, informed by Walker's need to reclaim her fragmented self, historically dislocated by the Middle Passage. I also interrogate the role of transcontinental community in the text as a base to reconcile political, social, and cultural differences between women of the Diaspora, particularly when the body is a contested site. Though members of the global African community justifiably contested *Possessing*, I argue that the text illustrates Walker's attempt to heal and reconcile the gap between the African and African-American community. I approach *Warrior Marks* as visual representation of Walker's "homegoing," as she returns to the coast of Senegal to "remember the ancestors" and lay the narrative of enslaved Africans aside and within the narrative of circumcised women. Before delving into the politics of the novel and film, a history of Black feminism in the United States and its convergence with the "Black Atlantic" is necessary.

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In "A Black Feminist Statement," published in one of the most defining texts in Black feminist history, *All the Whites Are Women, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, the Combahee River Collective assert, "Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently

valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy" (15). As "stepdaughters" of the feminist movement of the 70s and 80s, African-American women fought oppressive discourses that either swallowed them whole or ignored their existence entirely. Birthed from Black women's disillusionment within the feminist movement--dominated by White women--and the Black Liberation Movement--dominated by Black men--the Black feminist movement would provide a counter-narrative of history's stereotypical portrayal of the Black woman in America "as the antithesis of the good, the true, and the beautiful" (Bennet 13), in favor of a celebration of Black women's intelligence and traditions, "to make it a little easier simply to *be* Black and female" (Smith xxxiv).

By privileging the race factor in relation with "the feminine," African-American women created a space in which to free themselves from racial prejudice that kept them marginalized within the Women's Movement. As revolutionary writer, Alice Walker was at the forefront of womanist theology. In her classic collection of political essays published in 1983, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Walker defines a womanist as,

A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior...Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter), and women's strength...Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female...Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (Walker xi, xii).

By calling attention to difference between Black and White women, Walker's womanism forced mainstream feminism to consider its wayward politics of silencing women to whom it had pledged sisterhood, while it simultaneously ignited a fire in African-American feminists who found voice in Walker's doctrine. Argues Smith, "Alice Walker's definition of 'womanist' certainly makes the connection between plain common sense and a readiness to fight for change" (xxiv). Womanism responded to the issue of cultural displacement: feeling alienated, ignored, undervalued, underestimated, and obliterated in the US.

If Black women in the US felt like strangers in a dark land in the feminist movement, their search for "light" would be unanswered in the Black Nationalist Movement, which was monopolized by Black men advancing agendas that did not include Black women. These men demanded that Black women, whom they viewed "possessions," rather than autonomous beings, stand in unwavering support of the African American man and "his" struggle. Writes feminist Michelle Wallace,

It took me three years [in the Black Liberation Movement] to fully understand...that the countless speeches that all began 'the Black man...' did not include me...I was told of the awful ways in which Black women, me included, had tried to destroy the Black man's masculinity; how we had castrated him...We had much to make up for by being gentle in the face of our own humiliation, by being soft-spoken, ideally to the point where *our voices could not be heard at all* (emphasis mine)...The message of the Black movement was that I was being watched, on probation as a Black woman, that any signs of aggressiveness, intelligence, or independence would mean I'd be denied even the one role still left open to me as 'my man's woman' (6-7).

Though “Blackness” had initially carved space for Wallace to recover and rediscover her ancestry, including the Black woman’s heroism throughout American slavery and her “African roots,” it eventually became synonymous with “silence” and the forsaking of her identity. Asserts Smith, “The period of Black nationalism...despite its benefits, had a stranglehold on our identities. A blueprint was made for being Black and Lord help you if you deviated in the slightest way...the brothers had in fact created a sex-biased definition of ‘Blackness’ that served only them” (xi). The politics of Blackness surfaced yet again in the Black Liberation Movement, a masculinist organization that decided a woman’s perception of what Blackness meant was obsolete. Based on bold statements from Wallace and Smith, Blackness was not regulated to empowering Black women in the Black Liberation Movement. Therefore, as Gloria Hull asserts, “It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of Black and white men” (Hull 14).

Smith defines the Black feminist movement as,

A movement committed to fighting sexual, racial, economic, and heterosexist oppression, not to mention once which opposes imperialism, anti-Semitism, the oppressions visited upon the physically disabled, the old and the young, at the same time that it challenges militarism and imminent nuclear destruction (Smith xxix).

With their newfound autonomy, Black feminists would voice issues most pertinent to their sense of being, denouncing centuries of subjugation as undisputed “other” in the US, and in the process, creating a new narrative of Black women’s power and unity that would bridge the Atlantic to the struggle of women in the “Third World.” As Gloria Hull

asserts in *But a Few of Us Are Brave*, “The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women and those of Third World and working people in general” (Hull 21). Based on racist experiences in pseudo-solidarity with White women in the feminist movement, Smith recognized that any attempt for *real* solidarity with non-US women would require a sincere acknowledgment and analysis of cultural difference. In *Homegirls: a Black Feminist Anthology*, Smith asserts, “When we’re truly autonomous we can deal with other kinds of people, a multiplicity of issues, and with difference, because we have formed a solid base of strength with those with whom we share identity and/or political commitment” (xliv). In her captivating manifesto of the aims of Black feminist organizing and theory, Smith painstakingly illuminates difference in race, region, class privilege, and sexual orientation, a missing element in the White-oriented feminist movement that opened the door for Black feminist praxis. Smith teaches as she is willing to be taught that the otherness she experiences as a Black woman in the States does not occur under the same rubric of otherness as her female counterparts around the world, and that “Blackness,” though a reviled identity in US lexicon, does not immediately acquaint her with the struggles of other women of color. She explains,

Often, both Black and White women in the U.S. have equated the term ‘Third World’ with ‘Afro-American.’ This collapsing of identities has created falseness in our own understandings, and in those of white women who are unable to make distinctions. Like Black women, Native American, Asian American, and Latina women are involved in autonomous organizing at the same time that we are beginning to find each other...But with the reality of connection among women of color, we confront again the fact of difference...Like many Black women, I know very little about the lives of other Third

World women. I want to know more and I also want to put myself in situations where I have to learn. It isn't easy because, for one thing, I keep discovering how deep my own prejudice goes. I feel so very American when I realize that *simply by being Black* (emphasis mine) I have not escaped the typical American ways of perceiving people who are different from myself...In my own favor, I hope, is that I have a thorough knowledge of what it feels like to be dismissed because of one's physical being, language, and culture (Smith xlii, xliii).

By conceding that American-ness is an ill platform by which to engage the world, Smith privileges the role of difference in transglobal feminist alliances, a stroke of cultural-sensitive politics that feminist theorists like Chandra Mohanty assert must be done if feminism is to thrive "without borders." Alternatively stated, feminism must first acknowledge differences among women, then through the act of solidarity, work collectively despite those differences.

In her essay, "One Child of One's Own: a Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s)," Walker echoes Smith's commitment to globalizing the Black feminist movement. She contends,

To contemplate the women's movement in isolation from the rest of the world would be--given the racism, sexism, elitism, and ignorance of so many American feminists--extremely defeating to solidarity among women...women's freedom [is] an idea whose time [has] come, and it [is] an idea sweeping the world...To the extent that Black women dissociate themselves from the women's movement, they abandon their responsibilities to women throughout the world (41, 42).

Though Walker and Smith agree that Black women in the States should become involved in the global women's movement, there is *difference* in their approaches. Smith expends considerable effort discussing differences between Black and White women in the States

as well as differences between US women and those abroad. Though Walker's early writing unabashedly responds to what she calls "white female chauvinism" (Walker 39), her work is more responsive to all women, particularly women of color, suffering under global patriarchal oppression. She asserts, "The enemy within is the patriarchal system that has kept women virtual slaves throughout memory" (Walker 41). Walker lists "the stamping out of clitoridectomy and 'female circumcision' in large parts of Arabia and Africa;" "the heating of freezing urban tenements, in which poor mothers and children are trapped alone to freeze to death;" and "the stopping of pornography, child slavery, and molestation of minors" as part of "work of a feminist nature" to be done (Walker 41), indicating these issues fall under the spectrum of patriarchal oppression. Yet no mention is made of difference, for instance, between the "circumcised" woman in Africa and the "freezing" woman in an urban tenement, which is perhaps Walker's gravest error.

In Walker's third novel, *The Color Purple*, female circumcision surfaces as a minor theme when Olivia, sister of the protagonist Celie, journeys from southern Georgia to Olinka, a fictitious land in West Africa, where she meets Tashi, who embraces the ritual as sacred because it is one element of her culture that colonizers cannot take from her. Walker asserts that over the years, "the subject trailed [her]" and "surfaced in [her] dreams" (xiv). She recalls that "a minor character in the film [*The Color Purple*]... a young woman from Kenya, reminded [her], simply by her presence, that [she] had unfinished work to do" (Walker xiv). Walker asserts that Tashi, "uncommonly tenacious...led [her] finally to conclude she needed, and deserved, a book of her own" (284).

Some African critics have argued that as an “outsider,” Walker’s knowledge of FGM is not only negligible, but also unjustly informed by cultural imperialists like Fran Hosken who know just as little about the practice as she does. In the wake of *Possessing*’s publication, Paula Giddings, in a 1992 interview, comments to Walker: “Now, you know what the main thrust of the criticism against you will be: How dare this American judge us? What gives this Westerner a right to intervene in our affairs?” (Giddings 1) Walker responds,

Slavery intervened. As far as I’m concerned, I am *speaking for* (emphasis mine) my great-great-great-great grandmother who came here with all this pain in her body. In addition to having been captured, put in the hull of a ship, packed like sardines, put on the auction block, in addition to her children being sold, she being raped, in addition to all this, she might have been genitally mutilated. I can’t stand it! I would go nuts if this part of her story weren’t factored in. Imagine if men came from Africa with their penises removed. Believe me, we would have many a tale about it (Giddings 2).

For Walker, female circumcision is part of the “untold” discourse of the Diaspora. She argues that her “Western” heritage is debunked by her familial connections to the African continent, thus enabling creative space (and “speaking” privilege) to protest female circumcision as a harmful practice against women. Though Walker would agree that American slavery was a dark institution that, over centuries, crippled the lives of millions, she asserts that slavery “intervened” as the vehicle that connects her to her ancestral “home.” She deliberately recounts traumatic images of the Middle Passage to remember the female ancestor who may have crossed the Atlantic without intact genitalia, placing that narrative alongside the widely historicized narrative of the trauma Black bodies incurred in the bowels of slave ships, wounded—and often dying—in its

limited space. In this guise, *Possessing* manifests as a Black feminist reclamation of the Black woman's body and her sexuality across time, space, and the troubled waters of the Middle Passage. Walker clearly intends for *Possessing* to tell a narrative that had been long silenced: the narrative of the Black female body in pain. For love of her female ancestors, Walker sought to tell their story.

However, as the politics surrounding *Possessing* illustrate, representing the Diaspora, no matter how sincere the effort, can rarely--if ever--be accomplished devoid of controversy and potential confusion for the author and/or her audience. Walker writes that her ancestor “*might* have been genitally mutilated” (Giddings 2). Questions arise: from which West African tribe can Walker trace her ancestral heritage? Did this tribe practice female circumcision? If so, was the form of circumcision excision? Walker's lack of knowledge about this “ancestor” who may or may not have been genitally mutilated brings us back to the “inescapable fragmentation” Gilroy attempts to negotiate in *The Black Atlantic* (34).

Though Walker clearly is invested in representing the ancestors--the past “mothers”—the backlash that ensued after *Possessing* was published, of which I discuss momentarily, illustrates the necessary negotiation with and respect for present-day “sisters.” Some African feminists have responded in outrage over this “discourse blunder” from Walker,

When Africans get in trouble, whom do they call? Everybody. They call on people they shouldn't even talk to—trying to raise money, appealing to people to fight their battles, buying guns from Russia and the United States. They [Africans] invite all of these experts from Europe and the United States to go there and to say their bit about AIDS, to sell them condoms. So they can accept what I—someone who loves my former home—

am saying. *They don't have a leg to stand on so they better not start hopping around me!*  
(emphasis mine) (Giddings 2).

Perhaps African scholars who criticize Walker are most alienated by her inability to locate herself in the imperializing discourse of the “Europe” and “United States” she claims Africans run to for aid. Though Walker suggests that “Africans”—a generalization of the continent and its people—are “crippled,” she neglects to historicize why and how they became handicapped, or better put, *underdeveloped* by Western powerhouses, mainly Europe. Walker attempts to assert power over the African continent, suggesting that because of the continent’s socio-economic “handicap,” they have neither power nor privilege to critique her discourse. In short, they must and should accept her discourse because “they don’t have a leg to stand on,” and they can only protest her by “hopping” on the one leg that remains.

Though Walker claims to love Africa, her “former home”—and my argument dismisses neither her devotion nor her sentiment—the question stands, how does she *see* her African female counterpart? Loving the circumcised woman may not offer the kind of reconciliation that clearly needs to be made with the African woman who desires to be seen as autonomous and whole, much in the same way Walker and other Black feminists sought to be “seen” in the feminist and Black Liberation movements. Considering Walker’s courageous, historical, and highly successful contributions to womanist theory *as well as* some members of the African intellectual community’s frustration with her negligent politics, I ask, has Black feminism experienced an identity crisis? Or is the problem best centralized in the difficulty in first mapping, then “discoursing” the Diaspora and its traumatic history? Or, is the tension between Walker and African feminists a manifestation of the identity crisis of the Diaspora, meaning the extent to

which the Diaspora has only recently featured the voices of its daughters? Perhaps what we are now witnessing, for the first time, are the birth pangs of a Black/feminist/transatlantic discourse, one that did not exist before the voices of women of African descent fashioned it.

Since Nettie's journey to Africa in *The Color Purple*, and Celie's vicarious travels via Nettie's letters, Walker has clearly been fascinated with the "homeland," and therefore sought to negotiate its space by journeying her female characters into its depth. As African feminist Oyeronke Oyěwùmi explains, "It is perhaps not surprising that the search for Africa continues to structure questions of black identity in the United States. This quest for Africa, often articulated as a theme of 'paradise lost,' is an idea whose resonance partially rests on the infinite plasticity and malleability of Africa in the black American imagination" (14). The following section investigates Walker's personal fragmentation concerning the African continent, a private longing made public through her writings. I place Walker's portrayal of Tashi in conversation with African feminists who often castigate her, but who most of all, seem to want understanding, not only from Walker, but perhaps, the world.

### **In Search of "Diaspora" Sisterhood: Walker and African Feminism**

In her book *Womanism and African Consciousness*, African feminist Mary Kolawole asserts, "None of the Euro-American schools of feminism is adequate for expressing the yearnings of all women at all times...A simultaneous existence of various feminisms is inevitable" (11-13). The "Third World" woman who once "played in the dark" to Western feminist discourse is now pushing her voice, to quote bell hooks, from margin to center. A burgeoning body of feminists born in the "Third World" concerned

with “decolonization in feminist thought” (Mohanty 5), such as African feminists Oyèrónké Oyewùmi, Nontassa Nako, Obioma Nnaemeka and East Indian feminist Chandra Mohanty, defies what scholar/poet Nkiru Nzegwu calls “sisterarchy” (vii, viii) or “feminist imperialism” (Oyewùmi 35) in favor of postmodern feminist praxis. They argue that Western feminism cannot define their identities, ills, or oppression, and warn against the misconception that African women are incapable of speaking for themselves. Acclaimed Ghanaian novelist Ama Ata Aidoo asserts, “...No one wants to hear African women discuss their own problems” (Aidoo 47). In this way, argues Oyewumi, Western “feminist scholarship has created its very own African women,” (27) mute, docile, and powerless. Yet, Ghanaian feminist Abena Busia asserts, “We [feminists] are not obliged to break bread together, though that is always comforting. But to work together, what it takes is a deep, enduring respect based on an acceptance of our mutual humanities. But that compassion can only come if we but show charity to each other, and doing that requires a facing of history” (258). Perhaps Walker believed she was “facing history” when she penned Tashi’s story: the history of female circumcision as a practice that injures women’s emotions, bodies, and sometimes—perhaps *too* often for Walker—kills them.

Tashi’s journey begins in Olinka, her fictitious home, where she witnesses the pillaging of her land under the oppression of colonialism. To rebel, she undergoes clitoridectomy in hopes of reclaiming her identity through tribal tradition. She soon realizes her homeland is doomed under colonial rule, and is burdened with “the curse of enforced exile” (Gilroy 111). As her search for healing unfolds, Tashi and her small community of supporters, including her husband, childhood friend, and psychotherapist,

soon realize the circumcision has driven her mad. Filled with rage that had been long silenced, Tashi murders M'lissa, the circumciser she blames for the death of her sister, Dura, and for her own physical and emotional wounds. By novel's end, Tashi is convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

Walker writes in the afterword, "A portion of the royalties from this book will be used to educate women and girls, men and boys, about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation..." (285). Walker's overt mission was to war against circumcision by generating social awareness. And she accomplished it. Asserts Oyewùmi, "By the end of the book...there is no doubt that, for Walker, the story must be read not as a work of imagination, but as a call to arms" (159). *Possessing* was a *New York Times* bestseller; at the time of its publication, Walker—the first woman of African descent to win the Pulitzer Prize—had become one of the most accomplished writers of the twentieth century, which contributed to her campaign. As Stanlie James asserts, "Through Tashi's fictional story Walker has managed to focus attention on this issue in ways that have eluded human rights activists who have toiled unheralded for years to affect change" (87). Yet, the novel, for many African critics, is problematic, despite Walker's "sheroics." These critics argue the novel is often tainted with Walker's Western supremacist ideology "that she can and must rescue those unfortunate [African] women from themselves" (James 89).

Walker's imaging of Tashi is consistent with historical accounts of Africans as ape-like when she writes that as a child, Tashi's hand and arm looked "like that of a monkey" (7). Later, as an adult, Walker creates a scene of Tashi using her tongue—like a wild animal—to mold her son Benny's ill-shaped head, deformed by tools doctors use

to deliver him from her infibulated vagina (61). Perhaps scenes like this one, which sensationalize and exoticize Tashi, supposedly an “African” woman, led various critics to conclude that Walker reduces African women to their “genital status” (Robertson 55). Chikwenye Ogunyemi contends that, “Walker presents her protagonist, Tashi, as the infibulated woman par excellence—a mad, stupid, rootless, idle, malodorous shuffler” (245). Ogunyemi’s perspective captures the outrage of many African scholars, and lends a necessary perspective on the degree of disdain for the “character” Walker created, so distant, as Ogunyemi would argue, from an accurate representation of an African woman.

Critics argue that Walker’s privilege as a woman of the West blurs her vision of an Africa that produces wise and thoughtful daughters who do not circumcise their daughters to hurt them, but rather to give them what they believe is vital to their cultural identity. As Nontassa Nako asserts, Walker’s “reading of African women and their bodies evinces the same kind of ethnocentrism she decried in white feminist scholars” (191). Though Walker’s womanist theology had provided voice for African-American women in the 80s, what was perceived as imperialist feminist praxis became a thorn in the side of African scholars and feminists who assert she cannot and *does* not speak for them. As Oyewùmi asserts in “Possessing the Voice of the Other: African Women and the ‘Crisis of Representation,’”:

A more recent development can be seen in the emergence of scholars and writers like Walker who claim to fall into the nebulous category of Third World Women and women of color, non-Euroethnic women who have now stepped into the high heels of their European sisters to speak for and about women from other regions of the world—women of which they know nothing and with whom they have few common interests...Often

these categorizations function as yet another opportunity to elevate one group at the expense of another (Oyewùmí 170).

The problem with Walker's representation is where she locates herself in relation to "the other" she portrays (Nako 189); she sets herself up as a "legitimizing presence" (Nako 193) who knows best what African women should do with their lives, daughters, and most importantly, their genitalia. Yet, Walker's most intimate claim is to the reader at the end of the novel. She contends, "Certainly I recognize Tashi as my sister" (285). How is this "sisterhood" possible, when one considers Walker's problematic characterization of Tashi and her assumptions (and accusations) against Africa—evidenced in the Giddings interview? The root of the conflict is Walker's two-ness as lost daughter of Africa and citizen of the West.

In *On the Winds and Waves of Imagination: Transnational Feminism and Literature*, Constance Richards observes, "The 'invention' of Africa in the political and literary imaginings of African peoples, continental and diasporic, represents a contested space divided along the lines of culture and nationality upon which location, positionality, and identity construction determine political practices that extend to the acts of writing and reading texts" (103, 104). Critics frustrated with Walker's portrayal of Tashi, then, might look to the author's history and ethnic origins, not to excuse Walker's imperialist gaze upon the "continent" but to understand from whence it comes. In a note to the reader, Walker writes, "I do not know from what part of Africa my African ancestors came, and so I claim the continent. I suppose I have created Olinka as my village and the Olinkas as one of my ancient, ancestral tribal peoples" (285). Walker's "claim" to "the continent" lends way to multiple interpretations: at first glance, a

romantic fantasy where she can fashion a land and name it “Africa,” but perhaps most earnestly, as a desperate yearning to understand the place from which her foremothers and fathers came, a hope lodged not only in Walker’s heart and imagination, but perhaps, too, in the collective souls of African-America. To Walker, Africa is more than “place;” it is her birthright and inheritance. Yet the truth of her separation from the continent—a separation she neither chose nor orchestrated—is revealed in the counter-discourse from African feminists.

Walker not only fills the gap of wonder about Africa with a fictitious land, Olinka, but also with language etched from her desire. In *Possessing*, her word for circumciser, “tsunga,” is one of her “made up African” words (Walker 284). She contends, “Perhaps it, and the other words I use, are from an African language I used to know, now tossed up by my unconscious” (285). Whether “tsunga” is a product of any African linguistic system past or present is unlikely and *unauthentic*. Members of the African community who reject Walker’s discourse in *Possessing* do so, in part, because of its “unauthentic” depiction. Linguist and rhetorician Margery Fee problematizes the relationship between “authentic” discourse and power in ethnic/ethnic representation in her essay, “Who Can Write as Other?”:

How do we determine minority group membership? Second, can majority group members speak as minority members, Whites as people of color, men as women, intellectuals as working people? If so, how do we distinguish biased and oppressive tracts, exploitative popularizations, stereotyping romanticizations, sympathetic indentifications...The problem is complicated by the increasing number of writers who...are of mixed ancestry, who...have been raised in ignorance of their ancestry...All this makes the idea of accurately or finally distinguishing authentic from inauthentic

discourse impossible: the ideal of ‘authenticity’ has been proven to be, like so many others, relative and context-bound (242, 245).

Perhaps Walker found it difficult, therefore, to confront her privilege as a Western woman and dared not accept the truth that despite her minority status in the States, she became an oppressor when she used her voice and power to construct identity for African women and their bodies. In sum, Walker’s ethnicity as an *African-American* woman did not erase her privilege as an American woman, nor does being “Black” create power for her to speak for and about African women with the same ease and acceptance she enjoys when writing about African-American women. As Oyewùmí asserts, “Homogenizing concepts like ‘Third World women’ and ‘women of color’ and even ‘Black women’ are used to erase cultural specificities, but also, and more importantly, to mask regional and class privileges undergirding the global system” (170). Despite the rejection of Walker’s claim to sisterhood by some African feminists, such as Oyewùmí and Nontassa Nako, Walker seems confident that her heritage as a woman of African descent coupled with efforts to eradicate female circumcision proves her work is done in sisterhood and solidarity with African women. Yet, one of her most grave mishaps occurs in *Warrior Marks*, when she equates a childhood wound inflicted from her brother’s bee-bee gun with post-circumcision vaginal wounds, crippling her claim to sisterhood. I investigate this error below, yet, I also consider *Warrior Marks* as a text that operates in tandem with *Possessing the Secret of Joy* as part of Walker’s effort to remap her personal history as a daughter of “Africa” and as an African-American woman who strives to overcome patriarchy. I critically approach *Warrior Marks* as Walker’s “travelogue” and campaign

against “FGM,”<sup>13</sup> as well as her argument that “FGM” is part of the global, patriarchal system to oppress women. I am particularly interested, however, in *Warrior Marks* as Walker’s attempt to heal her disjointed relationship with Africa and the “slave past.”

### **Going Home: *Warrior Marks* and Diasporic Representation**

*Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* is a documentary film and book Walker co-created with Indian-British film director Pratibha Pamar. It features interviews with activists against “FGM,” all of whom are African; women and girls who have been circumcised; mothers who have or will circumcise their daughters; women who assert they will never circumcise their daughters; and village circumcisers.<sup>14</sup> Yet, *Warrior Marks* is as much Walker’s personal journey “back to Africa” as it is a documentary to spread awareness about “FGM” in hopes of ending it. The documentary is set in various parts of West Africa, including Senegal and Burkina Faso, and also in London, where Walker interviewed Efua Dorkenoo and Aminata Diop, a young woman who fled her home in Mali to avoid circumcision.

The film opens with Walker reading from a letter she had written to Pamar as African women dance to the sound of a drum. Adolescent girls wrapped in colorful fabrics from head-to-toe sit nearby. The girls have completed the circumcision rite and the women are dancing in celebration. Walker reads,

Dear Prathiba, I am sending you the little script that I hope will be part of the film. I don’t know just how you’ll do it, but I think it can be worked in throughout the discussions about genital mutilation so that *I’m a part of the subject, and not just an observer. I’ve*

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<sup>13</sup> For purposes of clarity, I use “FGM” interchangeably with “mutilation” for this section because it is the language used in *Warrior Marks*.

<sup>14</sup> The book was published after the documentary was finished. It features full-text interviews, some featured in the film, others that are not, as well as personal journals of both Walker and Parmar and letter exchanges between them as they prepared to make the film. My analysis, then, is centered on both the book and the film, as they are one in the same.

*done this in a deliberate effort to stand with the mutilated women not beyond them. I know how painful exposure is* (emphasis mine); it is something I've had to face every day of my life, beginning with my own first look in the mirror in the morning (13)!

Writing herself into the script of the documentary as “part of the subject” is Walker’s attempt to negotiate her history and also to stand in solidarity with women who have been circumcised. As Gourdine explains, Walker is “searching for [her] kin, looking for the social, cultural, and political space into which [she] can insert [herself]” (15). However, Walker seems “blinded” by her compassion for circumcised women; she is unable to “see” that referring to circumcised women as “mutilated” is problematic. To “stand with” women who have been circumcised requires social responsibility on many different levels, including how their condition is categorized, and also, how one views their wounds. From Walker’s perspective, the “first look in the mirror” is the adhesive that binds her with circumcised women: the phrase explains Walker’s “visual mutilation” at age eight. Clearly, Walker intimately associates her “blackwoman’s” (Gourdine 15) body with the circumcised woman’s body. Yet, these bodies, though “Black” and woman, are not the same.

After reading the excerpt, Walker recounts that when she was eight years old, her older brother had received a b-b gun as a Christmas present, and shot her, destroying the pupil of her eye. She explains that because she was a girl, she did not receive a gun. She contends, “What I had, I realized only as a consciously feminist adult, was a patriarchal wound...It is true I am marked forever, like the woman who is robbed of her clitoris...It was my visual mutilation that helped me ‘see’ the subject of genital mutilation” (17, 18). Walker concludes that her eye wound is actually a “warrior mark” because from the ashes of her childhood devastation, including her parents’ lack of protection and emotional

support, she has become “someone who loves life and knows pleasure and joy in spite of it” (17, 18). This “warrior mark,” from Walker’s perspective, is a mark of resistance against patriarchy, and represents her decision to live full and free, in direct opposition to the life of subjugation intended for her as a girl and woman. Walker identifies her injury as deriving from patriarchal systems that support male violence against girls and women while it simultaneously blames women for being victimized. She then equates the wound incurred from her brother’s gun with the post-operative wounds of circumcised women and girls. She claims that as a “maimed” woman, she can advise along with circumcised women “that mutilation of any part of the body is unnecessary and causes suffering almost beyond imagining” (19). Here, Walker assumes that all circumcised women share her “anti-FGM” views. She “speaks for” circumcised women who may acknowledge the pain of circumcision, but nonetheless value it as part of their culture. While many African women who have been circumcised abhor the practice, others are in favor of it. As she and Pamar sit face-to-face, Walker explains the interconnection she feels with the circumcised girl, based on her feelings of being abandoned after her brother shot her, which her family called, “Alice’s accident” (Walker 16):

My own visual mutilation occurred when I was eight and it led me to a place of great isolation in my family and in my community and a great feeling of being oppressed. And also, there wasn’t a sufficient reason given for it, nor was there sufficient comfort given to me as a child. And I see this mirrored in the rather callous way that people assume, ‘Why, yes, you take a little child off, you know, and tell her she’s going to visit her grandmother. On the way, you divert her attention from the trip to the grandmother’s and you instead hold her down and relieve her of her clitoris and other parts of her, you know, genitalia.’ And basically you leave her to heal from this as best she can. Everybody else

is making merry, you know; she is the only one crying. But somehow you don't care, you don't show sensitivity to this child's pain. I made a very strong connection with that.

Walker's memory of physical and emotional pain experienced during childhood drives her choice to identify with the circumcised girl, whom she describes, is tricked into being circumcised, uncomforted and left to mend her own wounds and ultimately, to recover, alone.<sup>15</sup> She assumes that both her wound and theirs occur under the auspices of patriarchal oppression, although, as I have shown in Chapter 1, the practice is often rooted in a matriarchal system of "being." However, Walker does not consider different ideals about the body in various socio-cultural contexts. As Nako asserts, "With [Walker's] representation of the African woman's body, she does not account for the different meanings that different cultures attach to the body. Her reading of African women's bodies is informed by her Western culture and its privileging of the body" (191). It is important to consider that circumcision is necessary if the African woman is to be respected in her society. Therefore, the pain experienced may be secondary to her assurance that her social position will not be jeopardized. In this guise, Walker fails to interpret female circumcision as part of a complex social system of identity and its role in a culture's tradition. Furthermore, she defines "family" based on her experiences of childhood abandonment and erroneously privileges that narrative above what "family" means in the context of ethnic groups that practice female circumcision. For example, a circumcised girl being left alone to heal after her operation is often part of the rite of passage, and therefore may not carry the same meaning as Walker being abandoned after she is shot. Equating these wounds underscores the extent to which Walker is "culturally

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<sup>15</sup> The depiction of circumcised girls as being deceived is part of the culture of silence surrounding the practice, which El Saadawi and Wirie have responded to in autobiography, and is also a dynamic I explore in Chapter 4.

blind” about female circumcision in an *African* context. Though Walker and the women she interviewed for *Warrior Marks* share a common biology as members of the female sex, she errs in assuming they share “a common gender” (Boddy 56), which is not a fixed norm, but rather a socially constructed category with meaning that varies across cultures.

Yet, the “connection” Walker feels with circumcised women and girls extends beyond the body politic to the “significance of place.” From Walker’s perspective, she and the women she chooses to “stand with” share a common heritage, and though they were reared on either side of the Atlantic, are nonetheless “kin.” As part of their respective journeys, Pamar and Walker film some of Walker’s commentary on “FGM” at the House of Slaves on Gorée Island in Senegal. The House of Slaves is one of many “slave houses” that remain along the coast of Africa, though one might more appropriately think of these towering edifices as “dungeons.” The “houses” now exist in memoriam to thousands of African men and women who, once transported to the “house” from their various villages, would experience their “last bit of Africa before being shipped to America” (Walker 74). And even this “last bit” of “home” was experienced in chains, which indicates the extent to which “home” had already been lost.

In her remembrance of the day, Pamar observes, “On the twenty-minute ferry trip to Gorée, we shot some beautiful reflective shots of Alice” (Walker 214). Perhaps the decision to film Walker’s Black, female body crossing the waters en route to Gorée, is intended to tap into our collective consciousness, and therein, remember the Middle Passage. Clearly, Walker’s “homegoing” is pivotal to the film; her body functions as the center of the production. Even as viewers witness several interviews and protests against “FGM,” as well as a powerful, interpretive dance by Richelle, a Black female dancer, to

demonstrate “the removal of...pleasure...via genital mutilation” (Walker 227), the lens of the camera coaxes its viewers to study Walker’s frame as it moves from water to landscape.

When the crew arrived at the House of Slaves in 1993, Joseph Ndiaya was its administrator and curator. Ndiaya is an important figure in my consideration of Walker’s transatlantic journey. Like the West African griot, he escorts Walker into her past to help negotiate her present. He offers her a sculpture of a Black man in chains and remarks to both Walker and her assistant, also African-American, “I know you have come here on a pilgrimage, and it is good that you are here. You are very welcome. You could be my distant cousins or my long-lost relatives. We, each of us, are related” (Walker 214). Ndiaya not only confirms the case of kinship I have attempted to make here, but he also affirms Walker’s need to find her “kin” while on this voyage. He hints, too, that like the African-American, the African is also searching for her/his lost relatives, carried across an ocean, never to return, except for the possibility that their descendants might migrate to the continent as Walker does. Walker notes that Ndiaya looked “just like my mother’s brothers” (74) and “the fatherly kindness of his voice and his look of being a relative completely undid me, and I started to weep, completely without intending to or even thinking that I might” (74). Perhaps Walker’s tears are triggered by her need to reconcile personal issues of family. After all, she had incurred a “patriarchal wound” in America, but was now in the presence of a man who made her weep out of kindness rather than pain, which interfaces with Paul D of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, who also caused women to weep by the tenderness of his presence. Further, while Ndiaya’s presence comforts Walker, it also reminds her, perhaps, of what she has lost in the way of ancestral, familial

ties to the continent. She adds, “I suddenly realized that this is probably the response of many African Americans who come to Gorée Island...” (Walker 74). Here, Walker attempts to explain, through her own emotions, the African-American experience of “going home,” their bodies located in the place where their ancestors may have began, if not on Gorée, then perhaps another “slave dungeon” on the African coast. Before departing the House, Walker writes this note in the guest book: “My ancestors, mother and father, sister and brother. I feel you so strongly here in this place. I weep without intending to; I will continue to remember and pray for your rest in my soul” (Walker 75). For Walker, the connection between the ancestors and “FGM” is apparent; the “mutilated” woman is as bound as the shackled slave journeying to an unknown land.

Earlier, I highlighted Walker’s purpose to tell the “untold” story of the female slave who may have been “mutilated.” Research indicates that female circumcision has been practiced for thousands of years, though, as previously mentioned, the origins of the practice are unknown. Many West African countries that perform the procedure were also part of the slave trade, not limited to but including Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Senegal. Feasibly, though I have yet to discover research that proves this, a female slave may have had some form of circumcision before her forced journey to the West.<sup>16</sup> As Pamar and Walker stand on the grounds of the House of Slaves, Walker contends,

Well, nowhere have I seen any mention of the fact that women who were enslaved along the coast of Africa here (on Gorée Island) and who came out through this particular

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<sup>16</sup> While research about whether female slaves arrived in the “New World” with genitalia that had been excised, infibulated, or otherwise operated on is somewhat outside the scope of this project as it is currently, I am nonetheless fascinated by the possibility. Therefore, future research will likely include investigation of “bills of slaves” and descriptions of slaves as disseminated at public auctions and between slaveholders to further delve into this issue.

house, for instance, there's no record to show that they were probably mutilated and infibulated, so we have to think about what that was like for those women who were not only subjected to all of the cruelties that everyone else was subjected to, but they in addition had been stitched shut so that every bodily function through the vulva had to be horrendous.

While Walker's concern may have implications for the African slave woman's experience as a displaced body in the West, questions arise. Would a circumcised female slave have attempted to continue the tradition of circumcision in her descendants, using the miniscule power she might possess? Would female circumcision, then, have become epidemic in antebellum African America? Would slave owners have banished the practice from fear that circumcision might affect fertility and their obsession with breeding/mass producing Black bodies? I raise these questions not only to interrogate Walker's consideration of this aspect of the slave woman's story, but also to situate its significance in her anti-"FGM" campaign. Walker's attempt to map the "diasporic history" of the circumcised woman's body overlaps with her hope to locate and contextualize her own history and diasporic identity. Because this section engages "place," I am interested in the locale of Walker's discourse of the circumcised body "in transit" as she stands on Gorée Island, the "other" side of the Atlantic, the "other" side of her history. As Walker concludes oration on the plausibility of the circumcised woman's "middle passage," the camera zooms on her image standing at the infamous "Door of No Return," the slaves' final destination on African soil before boarding the nearby slave ship. The image is striking: a darkened silhouette of Walker's body in contrast with the

open door, illuminated by sunlight and the ocean.<sup>17</sup> Arguably, hundreds of years later, Walker, too, is in a place of uncertainty, not about where she will be taken against her will, but about her African ancestry before slavery. As she slowly walks from the door, Walker's voiceover begins: "The House of Slaves on Gorée Island in Senegal was the beginning of the journey for many of our captured and enslaved ancestors bound for the Americas." The image and Walker's commentary calls the audience to remember that though Walker is free, her ancestors were not. Yet, she chooses to identify with their painful voyage.

### **Lean On Me: Friendship as the New "Sisterhood"**

Walker's "personal journey" in the book *Warrior Marks* ends with a portrait of her standing beside a group of African women. She explains the portrait below:

While Pratibha and I had discussed making the film back home in California...I'd told her my vision for the end of the film. I want to be walking down a road with African women, I'd said; I want it to be clear that we are going on with life, and I want the audience to feel it should rise up and go on into life with us...what should we see coming down the road toward us but a group of colorfully dressed, fast-stepping women...So there we all were, on a dusty, middle-of-nowhere road in the far outback of the Gambia, walking with a steady if hasty beat. The women were beautiful and full of humor. Even though we didn't speak each other's languages, we managed to laugh a lot...It was like a dream, really. I knew them so well, I felt; indeed, I felt I knew the very road we were walking on. And somehow I also knew that, together, we'd get to the end of it (Walker 85, 86).

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<sup>17</sup> The "Door of No Return" is a significant place in African and African-American history as the last stopping point before Africans left the "slave dungeon" and boarded the slave ship. The "Door" signifies the uncertainty of the Passage, as Africans did not know where they were journeying, and ultimately, whether they would ever return home.

There is a tone of not only kinship, but perhaps most earnestly, friendship in Walker's analysis of this moment, as she stands with African women on a solitary dirt road. In this section, I attempt to offer friendship as a viable option to sisterhood. A review of the history of Black, global sisterhood in relation to feminist ideology is helpful to situate Diaspora kinship and to offer friendship as a potential alternative if "sisterhood" has "run its course" in context of transnational Black feminist praxis.

For white feminists who initiated the term, sisterhood communicated "shared oppression, solidarity, common victimization, community of interests and political activism" (Oyewùmi 4). Though white feminists seemingly opened wide the circle of sisterhood, their race and class privilege prevented a real sisterhood with women of color, creating an unequal, if not unjust, sisterly relation. bell hooks argues, "The idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality" (44). Walker's vision of women's common pain, though an attempt to reinforce the doctrine of sisterhood, is flawed by its negation of cultural difference. Chandra Mohanty warns against the essentialist assumption that all women live unequally to men and have experienced identical hardship under patriarchy. She argues,

This focus on the position of women whereby women are seen as a coherent group in all contexts, regardless of class or ethnicity, structures the world in ultimately Manichean terms, where women are always seen in opposition to men, patriarchy is always essentially the invariable phenomenon of male domination, and the religious, legal, economic, and familial systems are implicitly assumed to be constructed by men (Mohanty 113).

Ultimately, for Mohanty and hooks, the idea that all women everywhere have experienced the same “magnitude of suffering” (Mohanty 111) handicaps political strategy, thus ripping at the seams the very fabric of feminist aims. For these feminists, the real struggle is won when feminists resist “the freezing of difference” (Mohanty 117). Only through this act of privileging, instead of silencing, can “sisterhood” realize its goal of global equality for women.

Yet Oyewùmí contends, “It is a myth that sisters are ever equal” (3). She explains sisterhood was adopted based on the “Euro-American nuclear family,” (13) which differs from the structures of relationships and family bonds in African societies. She questions how the concept of global sisterhood can be constructed without a consideration of African modes of interpersonal organization. She asks explicitly, “What cultural norms are being injected into African forms? And, for what purpose and to what effect?” (Oyewùmi 12, 13) At the root of Oyewùmi’s problematizing is the question of power. Much like first wave feminism of the 70s, the feminist who lacks class and ethnic privilege falls prey to the system that dominant Western feminist ideology has chosen. In this context, what benefit does a model that ignores African women offer in terms of their socio-cultural, economic progress? Clearly, though sisterhood can inspire *dreams* of a woman-centered utopia, it does not promise automatic coalition between women, particularly when histories, memories, and global static stifle sisterly bonds from continent to continent, and further, when women’s personal and collective views about feminism and what it means are also varied and vast. Oyewùmi, therefore, explores other forms of relationships prominent in African societies that promote unity, solidarity, and love, such as mothering, co-mothering and friendship.

In her book, *What Are Friends For? Feminist Perspectives on Personal Relationships and Moral Theory*, Marilyn Friedman defines friendship as “a relationship that is based on approximate equality and a mutuality of affection, interest, and benevolence. Friendship, in this sense, can occur between or among lovers or familial relations as well as between or among people not otherwise affiliated with one another” (189). Because friendship includes a moral, heartfelt devotion and respect from one human being to another, and promises, too, to consider the “other” not as “other,” but as a human with specific needs and interests, it may prove a greater affiliation to achieve solidarity and social change than sisterhood. First, there is no limit to whom one can extend friendship. Secondly, equality is key in Friedman’s definition, primarily because sisterhood, in its original form, never promised equality among feminists, only solidarity. How could solidarity be “real” if sisters were never on equal footing from the beginning? Friedman expounds on a woman’s favoring of her friend above herself, and in this way, promoting her friend’s needs above her own. She asserts,

Commitment to a person in her unique particularities...takes as its primary focus the unique concatenation of wants, desires, identity, history, and so on of a particular person. It is specific to that person and is not generalizable to others. It acknowledges the uniqueness of the friend and can be said to honor or celebrate that uniqueness. The interests and best interests of the friend become central...to determining which of one’s own actions are right or wrong and which goals and aspirations are worthwhile...A friend’s successes become occasions for our own joy...the causes she champions may inspire our own devotion. We show partiality for our friend by attending selectively to her particularity in all its details and variety (191).

If a relationship among feminists like the one above could successfully be implemented, there would be no need for an illusory bond that imagines shared difficulty that no one can see or feel. After all, if a feminist is to know the nature of her beast, and if that beast is indeed patriarchal domination, she must also know that the beast is not threatened by illusions or shadows, but is intimidated by a real foe. In this case, the greatest foe to patriarchal oppression is the revelation of reality and the sharing of that reality with women invested in each other's pain and struggle. As Friedman explains, this is achieved when one friend—perhaps a “sister,” perhaps not—takes up the *actual* concerns of her friend, as opposed to those that affect her own life, or for that matter, those issues she believes her friend should be most concerned about. Imagine, for example, that Walker had considered African women as friends and asked, “What does my friend consider important? What harms her? What offends her? What gives her hope and courage? How does she respond? How does she feel about what happens to her?” (Friedman 199). Such questions, centered on the African woman's identity and what is most important in her life, which may or may not be circumcision and its politics. Western concern for her socio-economic advance and/or the education and feeding of her children, might have created a more positive discursive response from African feminists. Further, the politics of friendship do not *prevent* or discourage sisterhood. Therefore, had Walker endorsed friendship, as Friedman presents it here, as part of her sisterhood model, there is an increased possibility that her “sisterhood” would not only have been accepted, but also returned.

### **Coloring Inside/Outside the (Diaspora) Lines: Tashi's Transnational Community**

Though Walker may not have extended the understanding needed to produce affirming discourse from African feminists, Tashi's support group, "a loving community that includes an African-American man, a European man and woman, and a young man who is both biracial and bisexual" (Giddings 4), shapes much of Tashi's "identity narrative" (Gourdine 16). From Africa to Europe to America, these characters nurture Tashi through madness, confusion about her culture, and the physical and emotional wounds left from infibulation. In the Giddings interview I refer to earlier, Walker explains, "I was never a separatist, but now more than ever my own life is so multiracial, multiethnic, multisexual, multieverything...That's why we find ourselves connecting so deeply in these different communities, with all these different people" (Giddings 4). Perhaps Walker's "multi" identity enabled her to delve into the community Tashi would need to support her through rage, insanity, fear, isolation, and healing as she attempts to find her "post-circumcision" identity.

Olivia, Benny, Pierre, Mbat, Lisette, Mzee, M'lissa, Raye, and Adam—"bear witness" to Tashi's trauma. Their names ring like a lyric, of sorts, or a roll call of extended family: Olivia, a young African-American missionary who befriends Tashi when her family moves from the States to "Olinka;" Adam, Olivia's brother who is first Tashi's lover, then her husband; Benny, the son Tashi conceives with Adam; Lisette, a French woman and Adam's extramarital lover; Pierre, bisexual "love child" of Adam and Lisette; Mbat, a young African woman who befriends the elder Tashi when she returns to Olinka from the States; M'lissa, the woman who circumcises Tashi; Mzee, Tashi's "elder" and psychotherapist; and Raye, who becomes Tashi's psychotherapist after

Mzee's death. These characters mend Tashi's wounds not only by loving her, but perhaps more importantly, by becoming "mouthpieces" for her pain. As Elaine Scarry asserts, "Because the person in pain is ordinarily so bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that the language for pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain but who speak on behalf of those who are" (6). Tashi's multicultural community rallies to her side and "sees" into her wounds; through their stories, we are able to understand Tashi's story, including her emotional anguish.

In a conversation with his mother, Pierre contemplates, "I recognized the connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of women in the world" (137). Born of an adulterous relationship between Adam and Lisette—who seems to care as much for Tashi as she does for Tashi's husband—Pierre is perhaps the least likely character to feel empathy for Tashi. However, he absorbs his mother's feminist ideology and loves Tashi, though Tashi does not love him; on the contrary, she resents her husband's affair with Lisette, and therefore, Pierre becomes a signifier of Adam's adultery. Yet, as Tashi's madness becomes "healed," she relinquishes her former hatred of Lisette and Pierre, seeing the two as one being, working in tandem to ease her pain. Tashi muses,

I am thinking of how I never met Lisette. How she tried to know me. Tried to visit me. Wrote me letters. Tried to interest me in French cooking...Sent me her son. And how I refused her. How I thought she knew me too well. And then suddenly, after a long, painful struggle, she died. Leaving Pierre her eyes—for his eyes are not Adam's—and it was those knowing eyes, with their appraising look, that...saw into me. Even into my dreams (159).

Here, a moment of familial and cultural healing is achieved. By overcoming her former resentment, Tashi is finally able to “see” Pierre as an individual who desires to see her “unified” as a whole self, both emotionally and psychologically.

### **Engaging the Diaspora: Raye, Tashi, and Olivia**

Because Walker’s subject position as African-American, woman, and woman/feminist generated such a specialized moment in relation to the construction of Africa and African women, I find it useful to interrogate Walker’s portrayal of Tashi’s relationships with Raye and Olivia as African-American women. In this section, I focus on the effect Tashi’s “torn” body has on these friendships, and deconstruct Walker’s privileging of America as Tashi’s healing place.

We first witness Tashi through Olivia’s young eyes on the day her family arrives in Olinka as missionaries from America. Tashi’s sister, Dura has died, as we later learn, from bleeding to death after being circumcised. As Tashi loses her “blood” sister, she acquires Olivia as friend, whom she later refers to as “the sister of my heart” (Walker 24). In light of my earlier exploration of sisterhood and friendship, it is necessary to note that for Walker, at least in her portrayal of Tashi’s intimate relationship with Olivia, the terms “sister” and “friend” are interchangeable and denote the same meaning: shared love and mutual trust. The relationship, however, is shattered, for a time, by colonialism and Tashi’s desire to be circumcised.

After years of watching her tribal customs castigated and being forced to submit to the ways of the missionaries and Whites, Tashi concludes circumcision is the only way to reaffirm her identity as an Olinka. Striking a warrior’s pose astride a donkey, she glares menacingly at Olivia as she prepares to ride to the circumciser’s home. She

explains, “Olivia begged me not to go. But she did not understand” (Walker 21). Tashi makes the difficult decision to follow after her culture and heart, despite Olivia’s attempts to discourage her. Olivia pleads, “...Don’t do this to yourself, please, Tashi... We’ve been friends almost all our lives... Don’t do this to us” (Walker 21). I am interested in Olivia’s request that Tashi not “do this to *us*.” Olivia’s words are saturated with feelings of pain shared with Tashi; from Olivia’s perspective, Tashi’s body is her body, and vice versa. Olivia believes she has a stake in Tashi’s body, her pain, and ultimately in the outcome of her life. She attempts to protect Tashi from the pain she will experience from the procedure, as well as pain she will feel *for* Tashi. For Tashi, the pain is justifiable if it would lead her to identify with the ancient ways of her tribe, which has at its core the circumcision of women to ensure their cleanliness, and ultimately, their ability to participate in the community of the tribe. Herein Tashi rips her body from her sister’s care and control as she pursues her dream of being “accepted as a real woman by the Olinka people” (Walker 122). The two women’s bodies are torn apart, once by Tashi’s choice to be circumcised, and again by Olivia’s inability to understand the decision.

Tashi muses, “[Olivia] was like a lover... she was crying and there was part of me that longed to trample her” (Walker 21). In a strange twist of friendship and fate, Olivia becomes signifier for Tashi’s resentment towards colonialism, and in a blast of hate, she dismisses her as “a foreigner” (22). Tashi explodes, “Who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? It is always we who have to change... You are black, but you are not like us. We look at you and your people with pity... You barely have your own black skin, and it is fading” (Walker 23). Though Olivia and Tashi are *Black* women, they are not the same; there is difference in their heritage, as well as their perceptions of culture

and its significance. For Olivia, race is a non-factor, which offers her the privilege of choosing to protect Tashi's body. She can only visualize pain at the moment of Tashi's circumcision, and can neither understand nor relate to Tashi's impetus to become circumcised. Yet for Tashi, race is pivotal. Olivia had become a Black woman in "white face," a pawn for White colonizers, and ultimately, a foe to Tashi and Olinka. The fact that they shared an African heritage was negated by Olivia's identity as a missionary. Just as Walker's Blackness disallows her speaking privilege for African women, so does Olivia's "Blackness," in the way it is performed as a colonizing missionary, separate her from Tashi. Though the two women eventually reconcile, as Tashi defiantly leaves the village, she says of Olivia, "I recognized myself as the leopard in her path" (Walker 24). Put another way, she recognized herself as the devourer of her friend's devotion.

In Africa, Tashi departs from Olivia's side as "friend" and "sister," but in America she cleaves to Raye, the therapist who helps her recover from post-circumcision, psychological wounds. As the relationship develops, Raye becomes a signifier of solidarity and healing. Though Tashi initially resents Raye because she is self-actualized and whole, with sound mind and intact genitalia, she comes to relate to her as "friend," particularly after Raye undergoes what she calls "gum mutilation" (Walker 133) in effort to understand some of Tashi's physical pain. Having been diagnosed with gum disease, "She'd had her gums turned down like socks around her teeth, their edges clipped and insides scraped, and then sewed up again, tight, around the roots of her teeth" (Walker 133). In response to Tashi's disgust and anger over the "mutilation," Raye responds, "Don't be mad because my choosing this kind of pain seems such a puny effort...In America it's the best I can do. Besides, it gives me a faint idea" (Walker 133). Tashi

muses, “Suddenly, in that guise, Raye became someone I felt I knew; someone with whom I could bond.” (Walker 134). Whereas Olivia had attempted to protect Tashi from pain, Raye sacrifices her body in effort to *feel* Tashi’s pain. Tashi concludes that Raye’s “mutilation” is ancient medicine to heal her wounds, and locates the compassionate deed as proof of Raye’s African-ness. She expounds, “I realized that though Raye had left Africa hundreds of years before in the persons of her ancestors and studied at the best of the white man’s schools, she was intuitively practicing an ageless magic, the foundation of which was the ritualization, or the acting out, of empathy” (Walker 134). As a result of this act of compassion and self-mutilation, Raye transforms her role from psychologist to friend in her attempt to identify with Tashi’s suffering. In *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-Ease*, Gay Wilentz contends that for writers concerned with cultural healing, “the healing process at the center of the texts is grounded in the suppressed traditions of their specific culture group” (Wilentz 3). Perhaps Raye’s “mutilation” is Walker’s attempt to illustrate that cultures that are estranged, in this case the African-American with the African, can be healed.

As an African with few relationships with African-Americans, Tashi’s ability to trust Raye’s investment in her wellness is initially threatened by her wayward imagining of Raye as an African-American woman. This section supports my theory on relations between African and African-Americans, and reveals the extent to which these relations are pained terrain. In one of their early sessions, Tashi drifts into fantasy:

Suddenly a story involving Raye popped into my mind: I saw her clearly as she would have been in the nineteenth century, the eighteenth, the seventeenth, the sixteenth, the fifteenth...Her hands on her hips, her breasts thrust out. She is very black, as black as I am. ‘Listen, cracker,’ she is saying, ‘did you sell my child or not?’ The ‘cracker’

whines, 'But listen, Louella, it was my child too!' The minute he turns his back, she picks up a huge boulder, exactly like the one that is in my throat...(Walker 119).

Here, Tashi identifies Raye's skin color as proof of her Africanness, absurd of course because Africans range significantly in skin pigmentation. Perhaps more importantly, however, is the issue of power and powerlessness in Tashi's fantasy. The African-American woman who found herself enslaved in America was not only torn from her homeland, but faced the likelihood of rape; the selling of her children; the inability to choose her own lover; physical abuse from the master, mistress, or any white American who chose to assault her. Considering these dynamics, Raye would have lacked the agency and power Tashi imagines. As a womanist, activist, and cultural critic, Walker knows well that this imaging of Raye as an enslaved Black woman is a farce. In this sense, Walker is just as misguided in her depiction of Raye as an African-American woman as African feminists suggest she is about Tashi. Tashi muses, "I was reminded of a quality in African-American women that I did not like at all. A bluntness. A going to the heart of the matter even if it gave everyone concerned a heart attack. Rarely did black women in America exhibit the same graceful subtlety of the African women. Had slavery given them this" (Walker 119)?

One must wonder why Walker constructs this image of Raye in Tashi's imagination. Perhaps Walker shares Tashi's fantasy. In an attempt to rewrite the image of African-American women in slavery, Walker manipulates Tashi's imagination to contest the narrative of African-American slave woman as disempowered and therein create a new image. As Wilentz asserts, "Talking about and identifying culture is a complex issue...In a postmodern age, we are painfully aware of the inter/cross/trans aspect of cultural identity. So an individual's subject position in juxtaposition to one's ethnic group

is always a tenuous matter” (2, 3). African-Americans or Africans in America, as some prefer to be called, need to be weaned from their romantic ideas about Africa and Africans. Likewise, Africa and Africans need to resolve mourning over their lost ancestors, of which African-Americans are a product.

If Tashi’s ideals about African-American women varies from historical accounts of their degradation in dominant White culture, so does her hope in America as her new home. While on trial, the colors of the Olinka flag wave before Tashi in the courtroom. Yet she fantasizes, “I think of the flag of my new home, America. I see with my mind’s eye, that red and blue and white flag” (Walker 107). Such devotion to America is infrequent in African-American literature, where the African-American protagonist is often entirely invisible to majority culture. For African-American writers who chose exile in the fifties and sixties, such as James Baldwin and Richard Wright, “America itself [became] the dark continent” (Bhabha 6). Finding themselves displaced in America, with no real rights, voice, or governmental protection, they found solace in France, and in the case of W.E.B DuBois, Ghana, West Africa. Tashi’s devotion to America may have come as a result of the awareness of self and body she discovers there. She explains, “It was only after I came to America...that I even knew what was supposed to be down there...My own body was a mystery to me, as was the female body, beyond the function of the breasts, to almost everyone I knew” (Walker 121). In Olinka, Tashi’s body is veiled, shrouded in darkness. Yet, Walker constructs America as a healing place where Tashi discovers the secrets of her anatomy as woman. Displaced from her home, Tashi identifies America as the site where her body is pieced/”peaced” together, where her psychological parts and wounded places come to form a whole body. Though I have

attempted to “place” America in Tashi’s healing process, in the section below, I focus more closely on how Tashi arrives at the place of healing from within.

### **“Some Forgotten Wound”: Memory and Trauma**

Tashi’s story filled a necessary void by exposing the effects of female circumcision on the psyche of circumcised women. Before *Possessing* there had been clinical research on the complications female circumcision inflicts on the physical body, but negligible investigation of the traumatic effects of the practice (Dorkenoo 24). Yet physicians and activists like Efua Dorkenoo and Dr. Nahid Toubia have investigate the traumatic effects of circumcision on women and use the truth of these women’s experiences as tools to eradicate the practice:

The women complain of symptoms of anxiety and depression, loss of sleep, backache and many other complaints uttered in sad monotonous voices. When I probe them a little, the flood of their pain and anxiety over their genitals, their sexual lives, their fertility and all the other physical and psychological complications of their circumcision is unbearable. These women are holding back a silent scream so strong, if uttered, it would shake the earth (Dorkenoo 26).

In light of Dorkenoo and Toubia’s findings, I reemphasize my argument that Walker intends to bring light to Tashi’s pain and thus cause one fictional character to represent suffering experienced by multitudes of women. Though Walker’s characterization of Tashi is warped, as I’ve illustrated, and though I support critics who criticize Walker for using her status as a well-known writer of privilege to legitimate the voice of African women, it is necessary to note that Walker also legitimizes “the experience of suffering itself through “literary language” (Schweizer 1). Walker confronts and probes a subject that desperately needed to be examined, which is the suffering and extreme trauma many

women experience from this practice. Walker, therefore, employs the agency of her pen to communicate the suffering circumscribed women often endure, but also views herself as sharing that pain. In a note of thanks, Walker recognizes her therapist “for helping [her] loosen some of [her] own knots and therefore become better able to distinguish and tackle Tashi’s” (Walker 287). Walker’s attempt to negotiate internal emotions associated with connection with the subject of women all over the world, female circumcision, and the Diaspora indicates a psychoanalysis issue. Though some critics of Black literature assert psychoanalysis is “inappropriate” (Tate 16) for literature in the African-American canon and has been called by some an “anathema in the Black intellectual community” (Tate 16), Claudia Tate argues in her book, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race*,

I am asking Black criticism to consider the roles of the narrator and protagonist in constructing various racial dilemmas...While we cannot gain direct access to the inner worlds of authors, we can detect and analyze the traces of emotional meaning left behind in print. Ascertaining how this process works in Black textuality can, I believe, provide a model for understanding how individuals transform the material circumstances of cultural experience into personal emotional and cognitive meaning (17).

Considering Tate’s exploration of the implications of psycho-structures on identity, I consider Tashi’s psychosis, which begins with the visual assault of seeing her homeland pillaged and maimed. She is asked to “make the foreigners welcome” (Walker 15) on the same day she assumes “the role of witness to her sister’s torture” (Levin 247). Olivia recalls, “It would have been difficult to ignore Tashi. Because though many of the faces that greeted us seemed sad, she was the only person weeping. Yet she uttered not a sound. The whole of her little cropped head and reddened brown face bulged with the

effort to control her emotions” (Walker 8). Bombarded with pictures of despair and enforced silence, Tashi “saw the old people laid out in the shade of the rocks, barely moving on their piles of rags...the women making stew out of bones, [her people] stripped of everything but [their] black skins” (Walker 24). She swells with the belief that the sacrifice of her body and submission to the nationalist hero, “Our Leader” (Walker 115) might resurrect the dying Olinka ways. She thus bears the “burden put upon [her] individual body to serve as the sole site of memory” (Lambek, Antze xiii) of a time when the Olinka were free. As Tashi abandons the encampment, she muses, “Here and there a defiant cheek bore the mark of our withered tribe. These marks gave me courage. I wanted such a mark for myself” (Walker 24).

To bear witness to her own pain, Tashi must re-member. Tashi’s memory of her sister’s death is triggered by a videotape of two fighting cocks, owned by Mzee, the European therapist who nurtures her to memory. Upon witnessing the fight, Tashi faints and is initially assumed dead. For days after her recovery, Tashi is obsessively driven to paint in full color an enormous cock, then later, a narrow foot shuffling across the ground. Tashi’s painting gives life and memory to her suffering. The painting in itself means nothing to Tashi except that it consumes the sum of her energy and mental capacity. Yet, when the painting triggers the memory of her sister’s suffering, it becomes an open door for self-discovery. In *Suffering and the Remedy of Art*, Harold Schweizer explains the role of art in relation to pain and suffering:

By virtue of its irreducibility to meaning or explanation, by its very refusal to function according to the laws of reason and logic, art requires an opaque materiality like the body

in pain. Like the suffering body, the meaning of art is in its non-referential autonomous dimension, its own subjective temporality and irreducible particularity (2).

Following Schweizer's explanation, I assert Tashi's painting recovers the memory of her pain. When the painting is complete, Tashi remembers that the foot belongs to M'Lissa, and that she had seen the bird and the foot on the day of Dura's "initiation." The bird's role is to devour the "unclean" parts—the clitoris included—that had been removed from Dura's body. Only then can Tashi release the "boulder lodged in her throat," (Walker 83) and finally achieve speech to utter the truth she'd trapped, for years:

I knew what the boulder was; that it was a word; and that behind that word I would find my earliest emotions. Emotions that had frightened me insane. I had been going to say, before the boulder barred my throat: my sister's death; because that was how I had always thought of Dura's demise. She'd simply died. She'd bled and bled and bled and then there was death. No one was responsible. No one to blame. Instead, I took a deep breath and exhaled it against the boulder blocking my throat: I remembered my sister's *murder*, I said, exploding the boulder (Walker 83).

Though it is unfair for Walker to brand circumcisers as "murderers," as opposed to keepers of tradition, I am more interested in this scene as it relates to recovered memory and its relevance in healing from psychological trauma. Dori Laub asserts, "The fear that fate will strike again is crucial to the memory of trauma, and to the inability to talk about it" (67). Only after remembering and declaring her sister's pain can Tashi recognize her own. As a result, she is able to voice her own pain when on trial, she screams to the court, "Can you bear to know what I have lost?" (Walker 35) In a moment of strength, Tashi testifies to her own horrid existence without the need of validation from her "love circle" or the court itself.

## **“Lamentation and Mortification”: Mourning the Clitoris**

In *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*, literature and cultural critic Karla Holloway explores the concept of "black death" in twentieth century African America, taking as subject stories "already familiar with the reader or...those that might not get fully recalled to voice or text but that nevertheless continue to haunt our cultural imaginary" (1). As an African woman who becomes, by way of cultural hybridity, an African-American, I consider Tashi in context of the trope of mourning Holloway examines. First, Tashi mourns her lost clitoris, which represents sexual pleasure with her lover and husband, Adam. Second, the clitoris symbolically represents Tashi's culture, lost to colonialist exploitation. Though she sacrifices her clitoris for culture, the culture she knows will never return; hence, she mourns it. Third, Tashi, like thousands of slaves whose lives are lost during the perilous Passage, and like thousands of girls and women who die of complications from female circumcision, faces an untimely, unfortunate death. Though Tashi muses, "I am no more. And satisfied," readers bare her execution-style demise and the death imagery that begins with the unloved leopard that stages Tashi's story. However, in dying, Tashi gains freedom. In this context, *Possessing* rings as a "mourning" song for the ancestors Walker remembers through Tashi's dismembered body. Holloway contends,

Black death is a cultural haunting, a 're-memory'...Black deaths and black dying have cut across and through decades and centuries as if neither one matters more than the incoherent, associative presence of the other. Even if the story is grief-stricken, the act of memorializing retains a particular aspect of a culture's narrative, and for blacks in the Americas, some notion of racial memory and racial realization is mediated through the veil of death (3, 7).

Holloway's allusion to time suggests that the traumas of Black experience, in a socio-historical context, are not only cyclical, but somehow, socially *expected*, which is perhaps why she pauses to memorialize the way African-Americans live, die, and are mourned.

In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud contends, "Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (243). Tashi mourns the entire make-up of herself, including homeland and sexual organ that have been stripped from her being.

**Discourse Intentions, Discourse Creations: (Bitter) Fruit that Came from *Possessing***

Above I have contextualized the major issues that emerge in *Possessing*, a provocative, controversial novel that has forced the intellectual world to consider how we talk about, write about, and discourse the 'other.' Though Walker's discourse *intention* was to create a healing narrative whereby Tashi's "dis-eased" (Wilentz 2) body is mended and the act of female circumcision revealed to people previously unaware of it, her discourse *creation* ignited a "war of words" between the West—the self-professed think tank of the world—and Africa, already weary of the West's domineering doctrine on its affairs. And it was a worthy war. As a result of Walker's representation of African women and female circumcision, African women began to "talk back," not only to Walker but also to the West. By enacting the Senegalese concept of "*sani-baat*" or voice-throwing (Kolawole 7), African women threw their voices into existing Western feminist discourse, demanding space to represent themselves. For African feminists like Nako, responding to—and resisting—Walker is a necessary distraction:

Indeed the fact that I am preoccupied with Walker's text, her omissions and misreadings, rather than getting on with the urgent task of defining for myself who I am and what my

purpose is, is a testament to the unequal power relations that we are trying to address. Thus, Walker's incessant wailing over the blameless vulva is distracting most of us from the work we need to do. Unfortunately we do not have the luxury of ignoring it in hope that it will go away, but have to address it lest it drowns out whatever else we have to say as African and Black women (194).

Though Nako seems annoyed by her need to respond to Walker's mishaps, I argue that responding to Walker manifests as the very work Nako contends needs to be done. By countering Walker, Nako indeed defines "for [herself]" who she is, while also affirming that the only person who can speak for her, is her and women with whom she is in solidarity.

Few would argue that Walker's search for Africa materializes also as a "search for sisterhood," (Busia 259) and whether she achieves it pales in contrast to what her efforts opened in terms of transglobal discourse and transnational communication. As a result of Walker's discourse, feminists invested in social change have learned afresh how critical it is to acknowledge difference and inequality. Furthermore, Walker calls us to participate in *zakhor*, "translated into English as both an imperative and an obligation: remember" (Simon, 10). To forget Tashi's pain, or to discard her story because of Walker's misrepresentation would negate the experiences of women who have suffered emotionally and physically from genital cutting. As Stanlie James argues, "In the momentous struggle to move beyond arrogant perception and toward perspicacious integrity, theorists and activists are challenged to understand the nuances of their own cultures, even as they are becoming cognizant of the complexities and subtleties of other cultures" (James 109). Despite obvious flaws, critics must acknowledge the boundaries Walker shattered and the interdisciplinary, inter-global conflicts *Possessing* ignited.

In this chapter, I have read *Possessing* as a novel that falls under the rubric of Diasporic feminist discourse. Though issues of colonialism and postcoloniality emerge in *Possessing*, I choose to closely interrogate these issues in the following chapter as they emerge more prevalently in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*. Though Tashi's body is a contested site, as I've illustrated, the female bodies in *River* are even more disputed as signifiers for circumcision as rite/right. As a writer who was raised in a colonized society, Thiong'o's novel about masculinity, circumcision, and education, and cultural work places readers in the thick of colonial struggles.

### **3. Freedom to Choose: Education, the Body Conflict, and Masculinity in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between***

The present predicaments of Africa are often not a matter of personal choice: they arise from an historical situation. Their solutions are not so much a matter of personal decision as that of a fundamental social transformation of the structures of our societies starting with a real break with imperialism and its internal ruling allies.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind*

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It is as if the realms of fiction and reality were divided by a line that, when maintained, offers the possibility of winning but, when crossed, signals the inevitability of losing.

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

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The righteous must be able to locate the damned.

James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*

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Love's in need of love today.

Stevland Morris, aka "Stevie" Wonder, *Songs in the Key of Life*

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In *The River Between*, published in 1965, Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o captures the struggle between a European mission and the Gikuyu tribe; the latter group is determined to maintain their customs, despite oppressive Eurocentric invasion. At the center of the novel is an ancient prophecy that Waiyaki, last in an ancestral line of prophets, will lead the Gikuyu tribe to freedom. Waiyaki obeys the command of his father, Chege, to "Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the Mission place. Learn all the ways and secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your own people and the ancient rites" (Thiong'o 20). Of the tribe's ancient rites, circumcision of girls and boys is mandatory to be accepted into the tribe, and to learn its history. For the tribe, circumcision is the core of its community and a rite to be celebrated, while the Mission condemns it as evil and immoral. From the tribe's perspective, fighting for circumcision becomes a fight for tribal freedom: to continue in their ways without the interference of white colonizers who know little about them or the traditions they hold

sacred. Waiyaki is circumcised, completes his education at the Mission school, and is heralded by the tribe as the “Teacher” who will deliver them from the rule of the Europeans. As a son of the tribe and student of the Mission, Waiyaki becomes “border crosser,” entangled between two warring ideals of the body and its meaning in a socio-cultural context.

The tribe rejects Waiyaki, however, when they discover he has fallen in love with Nyambura, an uncircumcised woman, and that he aided her sister, Muthoni, as she lay dying after being circumcised; they consider his intervention “unclean.” Though Waiyaki hopes to unite the non-Christian tribe with the Christian converts, his efforts cannot materialize. For the tribe, purity is essential; therefore, intermingling with either the Whites or Christians is forbidden. For members of the Gikuyu who convert to Christianity, like Joshua, father of Nyambura and Muthoni, “All the tribe’s customs were bad...There would never be a compromise” (Thiong’o 80). Hence, Waiyaki’s “mission” seems doomed, as well as his “call” as savior.

Jack Mapanje contends, “*The River Between* depicts an African traditional world on the brink of disaster brought about by the impact of imperialism” (ix). Central issues that emerge in the novel concern the struggle for tribal survival against the towering power of colonialist education and religion; the female body as war zone for cultural power; “education for freedom;” and masculinity. Waiyaki’s male body, though often in transition between his mission and tribal selves, is not contested as much as women’s bodies in the text, yet his devotion *to* women’s “deviant bodies” is. When Waiyaki falls in love with Nyambura, he breaks from the tribe’s patriarchal traditions, and rewrites traditional tribal masculinity, creating a neo-masculinity in the tribe. He learns, however,

that his revolutionary ideals about love for “banned” women, especially as he is “called” to deliver the tribe out of bondage, is treason. Thus, the tribe abandons him and leaves him to be judged by the council of elders. In the tradition of the savior trope, he is betrayed by the people, abandoned, and led to an untimely, unfortunate “end” with Nyambura at his side, who will likely fall with him. Though Thiong’o does not explicitly suggest that Waiyaki and Nyambura will be killed for their deviant acts against the tribe—Waiyaki for loving Nyambura, and Nyambura for converting to the Christian faith—it is a possibility. At the very least, they will be exiled away from their beloved home, Gikuyuland.

In this chapter, the politics of choice enacted by Waiyaki and other characters is central: Waiyaki chooses to heed the call as the “One” anointed to bring light and hope to the tribe, as he simultaneously chooses to resist the identity the tribe projects onto him; Nyambura chooses to love Waiyaki despite her father’s threats; Muthoni chooses to become circumcised despite her father’s disapproval. In light of Muthoni’s choice, I consider Thiong’o’s role as a male writer who elects to construct a female character who chooses circumcision. I investigate the politics of each individual’s choice in effort to position “choice” as crucial, not only as an underlying theme in *The River Between*, but also as a pivotal component in the female circumcision debate. I argue that Waiyaki represents Thiong’o’s neo-masculinity; though Waiyaki is influenced by the tribe’s ideals about masculinity, he nonetheless chooses to follow his own path, which includes loving an uncircumcised Christian convert. I consider Waiyaki as Thiong’o’s “voice” of protest against female circumcision. I also locate the relationship between masculinity and memory in Waiyaki’s journey into “manhood.”

Because *River* is a text that captures the tribe's hope in education as liberation, I consider Thiong'o's decision to resist colonial oppression by privileging his language and culture in his works. I find it useful, then, to ground Thiong'o in a particular activist discourse as I did with Walker in the previous chapter, primarily because issues of education are crucial not only in the author's life, but also in the life of his protagonist. Below, I highlight Thiong'o's liberation politics in relation to Paulo Freire's theory of liberation pedagogy.

### **Ngugi's Call to Arms: Anti-Colonialism and Visions of Freire**

Using the force of empire, British colonialism sought to demolish the liberty of Kenyan indigenous persons; to refashion them into clones of themselves, to void Kenyan cultural histories, and to inform Kenyans that should they return to their pre-colonial ways, they would find themselves irrevocably damned, and subsequently left behind. Colonialism's goal was to replace the Kenyans' "heathenish" traditions with its allegedly more refined ones, while its imperialist perspective contended that Kenyan collective identity lay solely playing the role as dutiful sons and daughters to the "colonial mother" (Fanon 37), Britain. This perverse argument was cloaked in the guise of protecting the wayward children from themselves. Kenyans were therefore diverted from their history and communal identity, and were forced to "swallow" the facts and histories of its "mother country." With colonialism coiled around the Kenyan from head to foot, they were coaxed—seductively—into believing their history paled in glory aside that of the Europeans. In *Wretched of the Earth*, one of the foremost scholars of colonial discourse, Frantz Fanon paints a vivid portrait of colonialism's agenda:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of

the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it...the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness. The effect consciously sought by colonialism was to drive into the natives' heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality. This cultural obliteration is made possible by the negation of national reality, by new legal relations introduced by the occupying power, by the banishment of the natives and their customs...(210-213).

Considering Fanon's explanation of the primary goal of colonialism, which was to convince the "native" that their national history was a pool of nothingness before the feet of European civilization landed on the African continent, I now look to Thiong'o as a revisionist who uncovers the alleged "darkness" of Gikuyu history, language, and culture, tenaciously re-possessing it from colonizing forces.

Thiong'o, who has been called "the most radical of all the Third World, postcolonial writers" (Nasta 328), has endeavored to resist colonialism through revolutionary writing and by calling for collective resistance by the peasant and working classes—educated and non-educated alike—of the Gikuyu people of Kenya. Asserts Thiong'o's co-visionary, Ousmane Sembène,

Ngugi, in particular, is the enemy of his government. It is not he who is the adversary; it is Ngugi's government that is his adversary. Nor is Ngugi the adversary of his people; he wants his country to be prosperous. Every time I meet him tears come to my eyes...whenever Ngugi takes up a topic, it is his life that is at issue (Sembène 60, 61).

Ngugi's activism consists of exposing the ills of colonialism as an institution, while holding fast to Kenyan history, culture, and aesthetics. His detention in a maximum security Kenyan prison under the Kenyatta regime from 1977-78 for his part in *I Will*

*Marry When I Want*, a play that exposed the bigotry of governmental officials, did not deter his efforts to use his pen, his intellect, or his belief in the unity of art, solidarity and resistance to liberate Kenya's poor.<sup>18</sup> Thiong'o's resistance, however, is revealed not only in the political content of his work, but also in his language choice. Midway through his career, Thiong'o abandoned the English language and has since written only in Gikuyu, his native language. In light of his decision to favor his "mother tongue," Thiong'o expounds, "Why, we may ask, should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues? Why should he see it as his particular mission? We never asked ourselves, how can we enrich our languages?" (Thiong'o 8). Thiong'o insists that English culture, history, literature, language and education should have neither place nor prestige in Kenyan life. He asserts, "There are many great English writers...and that tradition is very important. But nevertheless, as important as it is, it does not really reflect the human condition as expressed in the actualities of my history, and of my environment" (Nasta 330). Therefore, Thiong'o endeavored to restore the language of his people through his literary works, and therein uplift their values and traditions. For Thiong'o, language "has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" and "is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (Thiong'o 13, 15). Likewise, he asserts, "Education is part of culture and culture is part of education. They run into each other, and one way of looking at education is as a process of integrating a people into the dominant culture of that community" (88).

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<sup>18</sup>Jomo Kenyatta was Kenya's first president after it won its independence from Britain. Though Kenyatta advocated Kenyan nationalism, he was adverse to "the growing challenge from intellectual nonconformity especially among peasants" (Britain vi). I consider Kenyatta's role in discourse on female circumcision later in the text.

Considering Thiong'o's critique of language as culture and education as part of culture, I will now interrogate the relationship between language and education as an important dynamic in colonialist establishment. This path will then lead to Paulo Freire's "banking concept of education" where I probe colonialism as self-fashioned, though wayward, "teacher" and the colonized as its subjugated "students." By reading colonialism through the lens of Freirian pedagogy, I interrogate its efforts to distort "how [the colonized] perceived themselves and their relationship to the world" (Thiong'o 16).

Thiong'o has written extensively about the politics of language in colonial education. Just as slaves in the US were socialized over centuries to bow in reverence to their masters, the colonialist political establishment—materialized best through their educational system—instilled in the colonized that it was not happenstance that they lived in social and economic inferiority, but that they were *created* to do so. Thiong'o recounts the brutal way the colonial regime responded to "mother tongue" in schools he attended:

In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was *the* language, and all others had to bow before it in deference. Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment—three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks—or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as 'I AM STUPID' or 'I AM A DONKEY...' (Thiong'o 11, 12).

When a people's language is destroyed, and they are then commanded to speak the "master's language," a painful discourse is created. This discourse of pain varies from the pain I explored in Chapters 1 and 2. As I mean it here, pain communicates a "death walk" where the oppressed must sacrifice the key aspects of their culture and replace them with alien ways of the colonizers. When native people refuse, as Thiong'o

illustrates above, they are humiliated, shamed, and abused. For the sole purpose of domination and acquisition of Kenyan goods and properties, the British forced Kenyans to accept English education as the only means of learning, or suffer the harsh consequences.

As described earlier, in the relationship between colonizer and the colonized, the colonized is the “tabula rasa” on which the colonizer proscribes identity, acting out Freire’s “banking concept of education,” where the colonizer is the “teacher” and the colonized are “students.” Freire explains the “concept” as centered on these key factors: that the student never learn to critically evaluate her/his society and that she/he believe that the world the teacher has created, in which they are intellectually and socially inferior, represents reality. Freire expounds:

[The teacher’s] task is to ‘fill’ the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality...Narration (with the teacher as the narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher...This is the ‘banking’ concept of education [where] knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence...The banking approach...will never propose to students that they critically consider reality (52-55).

As Freire explains, the colonized “student” needs to practice what he calls *conscientização*, which is “learning to perceive social, political, and economic

contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire 17). A key element in this stance is rejecting the idea that colonizers are the most capable to correct the “ills” of the colonized, and the colonized must admit colonizers’ supreme knowledge. Waiyaki’s father, Chege, therefore instructs Waiyaki to learn from the Whites, that he might understand their customs, hierarchies, and social sanctions in order to defeat them. Yet he also admonishes his son to resist their “making” of the world and the “banking concept” of the Mission school. Below I explore Waiyaki’s relationship with his father as he journeys from boyhood to “savior,” and thereby charts a Kenyan construction of masculinity and memory. The discussion of masculinity is followed by a consideration of Waiyaki’s stance that education offers the only means to achieve tribal freedom.

### **Masculinity, Memory, and the “Mission”: Waiyaki’s Journey**

In *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*, Lahoucine Ouzgane contends that discourse about womanism and African feminism has opened space for critical analysis on the subject of African masculinity. He asserts, however, that “while a great deal of attention is paid to womanhood and motherhood [in an African context], there is no equivalent discussion of manhood and fatherhood” (6). Like feminism, recent research on masculinity first dismisses “the idea that all men are the same,” which “has occasioned the shift from the concept of masculinity to the concept of masculinities” (Ouzgane 4). In effort to supplement and expand the representation of African masculinity in scholarly writing, I probe Waiyaki’s “masculinities,” particularly when he performs gender in relationship with his father, when he is circumcised, and ultimately in his choice to love an uncircumcised woman.

As Abraham hopes in the promise that Isaac will make him father of many nations, Chege deposits his legacy in Waiyaki and hopes his son will not fail the tribe by contaminating it with Christianity, the “the new cult” (Thiong’o 37). Thiong’o writes of Chege, “He knew that age was now fast telling on him and that he had not many days to live and he came to pin his whole faith on the young man. It was as if his life, his heart, was being carried by Waiyaki and he feared the boy might stumble...He lived in the son” (37). Waiyaki’s initiation into manhood by becoming circumcised is central to achieving Chege’s trust to lead the tribe. Chege asserts that circumcision “would help him absorb the white man’s wisdom more quickly and help the tribe. And this was what he wanted; to see Waiyaki become a man before he himself died; then he could be sure that the work he had begun...would not perish” (37). For Chege, circumcision will release a great power in the boy, which will enable him to balance between the ways of the tribe and the “white man’s learning.” This great power is manliness, in the traditionally African heroic form. Chege muses, almost maliciously, “You could more readily trust a man than a *kihii*, an uncircumcised boy” (Thiong’o 38). For Chege, then, if Waiyaki is not circumcised, he is not a man, and therefore incapable of becoming the prophet destined to deliver the children of Gikuyu out of bondage.

Like many sons, Waiyaki is eager to please his father, and thus eager to have his manhood validated by circumcision. On the day Chege entrusts Waiyaki with the prophecy that he is “the black messiah” (Thiong’o 37), he instructs him to “leave the cattle and goats with your mother, for tomorrow we shall go to the hills” (Thiong’o 14). This command to abandon his boyhood chores foreshadows that Waiyaki will soon step over the threshold from boyhood into manhood. Once in the hills, Waiyaki swells with

pride as his father recounts the story of Gikuyu and Mumbi, the ancient father and mother of the tribe. Thiong'o asserts, "Waiyaki felt close to his father as he had never felt before. He felt a glow rising inside him. Was he not drinking from a calabash of trust and responsibility? *Tiitheru*, of a truth, he was maturing. The hidden things of the hills were being revealed to him" (14). Chege feeds Waiyaki the tribe's history and his memory of it like manna from heaven. As he does, he imparts manhood into his son. As Waiyaki absorbs his father's words, he feels "a heaviness making him a man" (Thiong'o 21). Herein is the bond of memory and masculinity between father and son. Waiyaki is unable to achieve masculinity in its fullness, however, until he is circumcised. Chege plants the prophecy into Waiyaki before his initiation as if it is a seed that would take root once he is circumcised and at that moment, able to experience manhood. Not until after the initiation, then, can Waiyaki carry out the prophecy. This newly found manhood would open the door prepared for Waiyaki to become the great savior his father had prophesied. As Waiyaki sits in the Honia River to let the cold water numb the pain of his circumcision, Thiong'o paints a portrait of the significance of ritual circumcision as part of a social system dependent on triumph over colonialist exploitation, which differs significantly from infant circumcision:

All his life Waiyaki had waited for this day, for this very opportunity to reveal his courage like a man. This had been the secret ambition of his youth. Yet, now that the time had come, he felt afraid. He did not, however, show it. He just stared into space, fear giving him courage. The knife produced a thin, sharp pain as it cut through the flesh. The surgeon had done his work...Around him women were shouting and praising him. The son of Chege had proved himself. Such praises were lavished only on the brave (Thiong'o 44).

Here, I consider the relationship between memory and masculinity. Because it had been memorialized so richly in Gikuyu culture and lore, Waiyaki had long hoped for the day of his “initiation.” As he sits in the actual moment of his circumcision, he reflects on his past as a boy, recalling the courage he had hoped to exhibit on this day. As he remembers, his body is re-membered in the ways of the tribe: as he loses the part of his body symbolic of boyhood, he not only gains the respect of his father and the women chanting his bravery, but also acquires full membership as a Gikuyu man, now able to become “salvation” for the people. Waiyaki’s body aligns with history, and in this way *becomes*. Though male circumcision is significantly different from female circumcision, from an anti-colonialist perspective, circumcision of both sexes is essential to life as a Gikuyu, a concept I explore later as illustrated in Kenyatta’s *Facing Mount Kenya*.

After the initiation, Waiyaki continues his education at the mission school. Though the white missionaries see him as “a possible brave Christian leader of the Church,” (Thiong’o 21), Waiyaki’s mission to save his people from domination trumps his loyalty to the mission. Obeying his father’s instruction, he neither accepts Christianity nor follows Western “vices.” Soon after he completes his education at the mission school in Siriana, Waiyaki opens his own school, Marioshoni, the first to be built after the tribe breaks from the Mission. Though Chege does not offer Waiyaki an explicit strategy to save the people, Waiyaki devises his own plan, which centers on education. As Waiyaki inwardly contemplates his life as border crosser, journeying between the tribe and the Mission, he muses on education as “medicine” to cure the land and people from colonialism induced sickness:

With the little knowledge that he had he would uplift the tribe, yes, give it the white man’s learning and his tools, so that in the end the tribe would be strong enough, wide

enough, to chase away the settlers and the missionaries. And Waiyaki saw a tribe great with many educated sons and daughters, all living together tilling the land of their ancestors in perpetual serenity, pursuing their rituals and beautiful customs and all of them acknowledging their debt to him. Perhaps this was the mission, the mission the Sent One would carry out...[Waiyaki] saw only schools, schools everywhere and the thirst that burnt the throats of so many children who looked up to him for the quenching water. And he wanted to feel all would get this water (Thiong'o 83, 93).

I return briefly to Freire's "banking concept of education" where the student can only become actualized by resisting the teacher's dictatorial pedagogy. As Waiyaki envisions the tribe empowered through the education he will give them, he simultaneously imagines them achieving social awareness. In this way, he can uproot the corrupt seed of colonialism, which teaches his people to see themselves only as dutiful pupils ordained to obey their colonizing "teachers." Waiyaki is confident that when the children of the tribe discover "the white man's learning and all his tools," which includes the propaganda of the natives' inferiority, they will come into the revelation that the Europeans are not superior, and are thus trespassing on sacred, tribal land.

While Waiyaki hopes education will free the Gikuyu, he also fears Western learning might pollute the tribe: "His father had warned him against being contaminated by the ways of the white man. Yet he sometimes wondered. Was the education he was trying to spread in the ridges not a contamination?" (Thiong'o 69) *The education he was trying to spread*. Though Waiyaki does not become "contaminated" with the ways of the "White man," he is influenced by progressive ideals learned at the mission. Yet he intends to use what he learns to subvert the paradigm of European supremacy. I note here that Waiyaki is aware his method of education would differ from tribal custom *as well as*

the mission school's imperialism. As he studies in the mission school, he does what he has been instructed to do, which is to take the best of the "white man's" wisdom and use it for the tribe. The one Western belief he adopts is that circumcision of girls should not be a mandatory rite of the tribe, which enables his love for Nyambura and his care for Muthoni "as she lay dying." To fully understand Waiyaki's choice to resist traditional tribal notions about the uncircumcised female body as deviant and undesired, it is necessary to historicize circumcision, particularly female circumcision, and its relevance to the Gikuyu tribe. The most essential text for such an analysis and the most used by theoreticians is *Facing Mount Kenya: the Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*, published in 1962 by Jomo Kenyatta.

### **History and *River*: Visions of Kenyatta and Waiyaki's Stance Against FC**

Though Kenyatta was a "thorn in the side" of Thiong'o in the late 1970s, an analysis of *Facing* discloses "a view from the inside" of circumcision as ritual and rite, which I use to navigate issues of identity, representation, and "the body" as they emerge in *River*. Kenyatta details the history, beliefs, customs, social practices, and livelihood of the Gikuyu people and painstakingly positions *Facing* as a nationalist discourse to promote African unity and solidarity and to thwart white colonialist domination. *Facing* establishes a Kenyan/African worldview of Gikuyu life, subverting the dominant representation of Kenya (and Africa) by Europeans who frequently discourse the African man and woman as "primitive" in effort to control their lives and land. For Kenyatta, telling the history of his tribe is imperative to their freedom. However, what is most necessary, he contends, is that African perception about African practices is privileged in intellectual discourses:

I know that there are many scientists and general readers who will be disinterestedly glad of the opportunity of hearing the Africans' point of view, and to all such I am glad to be of service. At the same time, I am well aware that I could not do justice to the subject without offending those 'professional friends of Africa' who are prepared to maintain their friendship for eternity as a sacred duty, provided only that the African will continue to play the part of an ignorant savage so that they can monopolize the office of interpreting his mind and *speaking for him* (emphasis mine). To such people, an African who writes a study of this kind is encroaching on their preserves (xvii, xviii).

Kenyatta dismisses the "savage" paradigm promoted by Europeans and engages in "discourse war" for the right to speak about his culture and people, asserting himself as possessing both intellectual authority and cultural authenticity to speak about Gikuyu as a Gikuyu. Foremost in his discourse is the defense of *irua*, the Gikuyu word for female circumcision. Kenyatta historicizes anti-circumcision resistance from European missionaries and counter-resistance by the Gikuyu, including the 1929 ordinance by the Church of Scotland Mission that children attending the school must denounce circumcision; if they did not, their educations at the mission school were discontinued. Though this ban was lifted when a "gentleman's agreement" was reached between the missionaries and Kenyan government, the missionaries "maintained that teachers must be only those who had denounced the custom" (126), hoping they might influence students to denounce the practice as well. Angered by what they believed to be the missionaries' attempt to undermine their culture and to pollute the minds of their children, the Gikuyu lobbied for schools independent of missionary influence. The result, Kenyatta explains, "was the foundation of Gikuyu independent schools," which were "entirely free from missionary influence, both in education and religious matters" (126). In 1930, the House

of Commons again raised the issue of clitoridectomy. Members of Parliament were appointed to investigate the practice and invited Kenyatta to sit in on the committee meeting, which represents a crossing of socio-political borders by both the Parliament committee and Kenyatta, assuming the committee had invited Kenyatta to represent Gikuyu perspective about the practice under question. The committee agreed that education was the best method of responding to the issue and “to leave the people concerned free to choose what customs was best suited to their changing conditions” (126). Assumedly, these “changing conditions” connoted changes employed by the British, namely their form of modernization; their notions about the body; and their consideration of “right” and “wrong” symbolisms of the body in a cultural context. Though circumcision continues to be performed in some parts of Kenya, it is interesting to note the language of the 1930 Parliament agreement perhaps signifies that, for Parliament, the issue would ultimately not be determined by the Gikuyu alone, but would be shaped by European influence. In 1931, a conference on African children was held in Geneva, where some European delegates argued the “barbarous” practice should be abolished by law. However, other delegates argued that education was the most beneficial and most rational method to “enable the people to choose what customs to keep and which ones they would like to get rid of” (Kenyatta 127), which prevented the practice from being abolished by law at that time. Based on these meetings, declarations, and differences about female circumcision, its role in Gikuyu’s national history is evident, not only in terms of its significance to the Gikuyu, but also the tool it became to resist colonialism. As Ellen Gruenbaum asserts, “In the Gikuyu case and doubtless many others, ethnic identity and nationalism paralleled one another” (103). This exploration of

the historical relationship between missionary education and the Gikuyu tribe not only establishes Gikuyu opposition to missionary sanctions about *irua*, but also sheds light on Thiong'o's choice to historicize this tension in *River* through the politics of education and characters who represent resistant identities.

Before explaining the socio-cultural significance of the practice, Kenyatta posits, "It is unintelligent to discuss the emotional attitudes of either side (of the female circumcision debate), or to take violent sides in the question, without understanding the reasons why the educated, intelligent Gikuyu still cling to this custom" (128). He argues that "outside observation" (xviii) is blinded by its own ideals of culture, pain and the body, and is therefore unable to "see" the practice of circumcision and its value in the Gikuyu community. He contends,

For years there has been much criticism and agitation against *irua* of girls by certain misinformed missionary societies in East Africa, who see only the surgical side of *irua*, and without investigating the psychological importance attached to this custom by the Gikuyu, these missionaries draw their conclusion that *irua* of girls is nothing but a barbarous practice and, as such, should be abolished by law. On the other hand, the Gikuyu look upon these religious fanatics with great suspicion. The overwhelming majority of them believe that it is the secret aim of those who attack this centuries-old custom to disintegrate their social order and thereby hasten their Europeanization. The abolition of *irua* will destroy the tribal symbol, which identifies age-groups and prevent the Gikuyu from perpetuating the spirit of collectivism and national solidarity which they have been able to maintain from time immemorial (130, 131).

Kenyatta argues for cultural understanding in hopes that Europeans who abhor female circumcision can resist the tendency to label his tribe as "savage" and "barbaric" because

of this ancient rite. He first explains that circumcision signifies a Gikuyu youth has reached adulthood and is “born again, not as children of an individual, but of the whole tribe” (145). When a young man or woman is circumcised, his or her parents are promoted in society. It is impossible, he asserts, to become a member of the tribe if one remains uncircumcised and “taboo” for a Gikuyu man or woman to marry and engage in sexual relations with an uncircumcised partner. He further explains,

The history and legends of the people are explained and remembered according to the names given to various age-groups at the time of the initiation ceremony. For example, if a devastating famine occurred at the time of the initiation, that particular *irua* group would be known as ‘famine’ (or *ng’aragu*). In the same way, the Gikuyu have been able to record the time when the European introduced a number of maladies such as syphilis into Gikuyu country, for those initiated at the time when this disease first showed itself are called *gatego*, i.e. syphilis. Historical events are recorded and remembered in the same manner. Without this custom, a tribe which had no written records would not have been able to keep a record of important events and happenings in the life of the Gikuyu nation (129, 130).

The history of the Gikuyu is not only inscribed in the collective consciousness of its members, but also on the body and in this way, remembered. Moreover, special bonding occurs among youth who undergo the rite together; even elders of the tribe remain intimate friends, connected by the event of their initiation.

Kenyatta’s term for the regulations of female circumcision in Gikuyu culture is “socio-biological” (129), which indicates the degree in which the procedure performed on the body is part of the social fabric of the culture, and in this guise, more than a physical “mutilation.” Kenyatta explains that operations on boys and girls is done by “trimming

the genital organs of both sexes” (129), indicating Type 1 circumcision or clitoridectomy. Kenyatta seems to collapse the procedures as the same, though as I explain in Chapter 1, medical research has proven the operation on girls and boys are considerably different and have different effects on the body. Describing the procedures in this way is perhaps intended to minimize European attention to the physical aspects of the procedure and instead, to emphasize the social significance of circumcision for both girls and boys.

Kenyatta’s extensive explanation of the practice and his fiery castigation of faulty European interpretation of Gikuyu social systems indicates his devout interest in the continuation of circumcision of both sexes, despite the pain involved. I would argue, however, that Thiong’o does not share his views, demonstrated most poignantly in Waiyaki’s anti-circumcision sensibility. Waiyaki insists that the key to eradication of female circumcision is through education, not by force, and that it would take time to abolish the practice because it is so ingrained as part of Gikuyu tradition. He muses, “Circumcision of women was not important [to the Gikuyu] as a physical operation. It was what it did inside a person. It could not be stopped overnight. Patience, and above all, education were needed” (Thiong’o 135). Though Waiyaki acknowledges circumcision’s importance to the tribe, he also advocates the need for social change. In light of Waiyaki’s stance on circumcision, I differ with Tobe Levin’s assertion that *River* “deals with female circumcision, not from a feminist, but from a humanist and progressive standpoint” (Levin 211). I argue instead that the novel is at once humanist, progressive, *and* feminist, primarily because of Waiyaki’s choice to sacrifice the privilege of his maleness to ponder a suitable solution to end potential suffering for women who undergo female circumcision. Ouzgane expounds, “All men have access to

the patriarchal dividend, the power that being a man gives them to choose to exercise power over women” (Ouzgane 7). Yet, Waiyaki lays down his power for the sake of women’s health and wellness—despite the tribe’s strict guidelines—which is an aim of feminist ideology and activism.

To interrogate the politics of feminist representation, I must revisit issues raised in Chapter 2 concerning Walker and her novel. Few Western feminists would argue that Walker’s *Possessing* is not a feminist text, despite misrepresentations of Tashi that outraged many African scholars and feminists. This is due to at least three factors: the protagonist, as well as her author, are female; Walker self identifies as a womanist/feminist; and perhaps most importantly, because *Possessing* promotes an anti-circumcision discourse in tandem with traditional Western views about the practice. Yet, as argued previously, Tashi did not function as an absolute representation of African women or *circumcised* African women, for that matter. Though *River* is authored by Thiong’o who is male, his unique experience as a member of the Gikuyu tribe who, at the time of *River*’s publication was living in writing in his homeland, enables him to create two uniquely feminine dilemmas in relation to circumcision, as well as one unique male choice to become friend to one and lover to another, a deed that bespeaks human kindness and feminist activism.

Though Levin validates *The River Between* as “progressive” and “humanist,” she resists labeling it feminist because of Muthoni’s choice to become circumcised. She asserts that though Muthoni’s rebellion is “of great symbolic import,” ultimately, “it is right to defy [her] father’s law; it is wrong to choose clitoridectomy” (Levin 218). However, defying her father can only yield clitoridectomy as a result. By resisting her

father, Muthoni is doing more than debunking patriarchal power; she is also resisting European ideals about the body in favor of gaining the kinship of her tribe, which indicates her thirst for community, which her father had denied her. Moreover, Levin does not privilege Muthoni's choice in context of Gikuyu gender/sex norms. For Levin, clitoridectomy is wrong because it is rooted "in unconscious fears of the female and ambivalence vis-à-vis sexuality" (211). She argues, "Male insistence on female 'rites' is displaced impotence and is ultimately deconstructive" (211). Here, she considers but does not privilege Muthoni's autonomy in choosing what she believes is right for her whole self, including her body.

Yet, my focus is more centered on Waiyaki. Though Waiyaki is male, the circumstances that befall him as well as the women around him, to whom he renders care and compassion, are just as important as the prophecy that directs his life, and ultimately, his masculinity. Waiyaki, Thiong'o's empathetic masculine response to female circumcision, rewrites the script of masculinity, which generates a new thoughtfulness not only about possible ways men can respond to circumcision, but as a model of *how to* respond. From my perspective, Waiyaki is a feminist activist. Perhaps feminism should proffer serious attention to a category that acknowledges "men performing feminism," which crosses the border of what we think when we think of gender categories and activism. Below, I explore Waiyaki's role in Muthoni's life and death, as well as the politics of Muthoni's choice to become circumcised.

### **"I Want to Be Circumcised": Choosing Rite, Choosing Right**

In *River*, the European Mission forbids circumcision of girls, believing it to be evil and wholly barbaric. The most forceful holder of this view is Joshua, a Gikuyu and

zealous convert to Christianity. He “believed circumcision to be so sinful that he devoted a prayer to asking God to forgive him for marrying a woman who had been circumcised...Sometimes, when alone with Miriamu, his wife, [Joshua] would look at her and sadly remark, ‘I wish you had not gone through this *rite*’” (Thiong’o 30). Joshua’s disgust with this wife’s circumcision helps our reading of his character as entirely transformed by religious doctrine, as he finds his new identity in the Christian faith. In this section, I explore circumcision as chosen rite for Joshua’s youngest daughter, Muthoni, who loses a father in hopes that she might gain the tribe.

As Muthoni and her sister Nyambura go to the river to draw water, Muthoni says quietly, “I want to be circumcised” (Thiong’o 24). Nyambura attempts to discourage her, reminding her of their father’s wrath, as well as her new identity as a Christian. Muthoni, however, remains steadfast. She explains,

Father and Mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians. I too have embraced the white man’s faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man’s God does not quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more... (Thiong’o 24).

Like Waiyaki, Muthoni acknowledges that to have access to the tribe, including its customs and history, she must become circumcised. Though Joshua, her strict Christian father, enforces rules to isolate Muthoni from the tribe, she nonetheless longs to be a part of it. Her deep yearning to be circumcised, then, is both social and communal, which echoes Waiyaki’s sentiment that circumcision is not about the body alone, but “about what it [does] *inside* a person” (Thiong’o 135). Muthoni is therefore willing to experience the pain of circumcision because it promises unity with the tribe.

As Waiyaki sits in the river, pain from his circumcision overtaking him, he wonders, “What was Muthoni feeling...He thought that if he had been in her position he would never have brought himself into such pain” (Thiong’o 45). Though he immediately “hate[s] himself for holding such sentiments” (45) against a tribal rite, it is important to note that even in boyhood Waiyaki possesses special concern for women, their “bodies in pain,” and their unique social position in the tribe. Furthermore, perhaps Waiyaki is also acknowledging the difference in pain between male and female circumcision and the different effects on the male and female body after circumcision occurs. When Waiyaki nervously asks Muthoni why she had chosen to leave her father’s house to be circumcised, she replies, “How could I be outside the tribe when all the girls born with me at the same time have left me? I want to be a woman made beautiful in the tribe; a husband for my bed; children to play around the hearth...Yes—I want to be a woman made beautiful in the manner of the tribe.” (Thiong’o 42, 43). At the heart of Muthoni’s desire to be circumcised is the deeper desire of being validated as a woman in the tribe, which is impossible apart from circumcision, as an uncircumcised woman in the tribe is considered “unclean” and therefore unfit to marry. Though it is likely that Muthoni could marry a convert and become married without being circumcised, she chooses to find identity within the tribe. I am interested, too, in the process in which Muthoni would be “*made beautiful*” in the tribe. Perhaps her sentiment is a reference to the woman, wife, and mother she would become after circumcision, and the “beautiful” life she would experience in that role. Or, it may be an allusion to the tribe and its customs as “beautiful,” therein offering an experience more ethereal than the religious ideology disseminated from the mission and her father. Her statement, however, might also

indicate that her physical body, or more precisely, her genitalia, can only become *beautiful* and a *woman* after she is circumcised. As I illustrate in Chapter 1, in upper Somalia and southern Sudan, circumcision of women is driven by aesthetics as much as sexuality, the common ideology that woman's genitalia is only beautiful *without* the genitalia. For the Gikuyu, circumcision purifies the body, thus making it acceptable and arguably "beautiful," as an uncircumcised body is considered unfit for intercourse and therefore unable to procreate. Muthoni's hope, however, is not realized; her wound does not heal, and she becomes delirious in pain chanting, "I am a woman now" (Thiong'o 49), while laughing and crying. Her body and psyche are caught between two worlds: hope and delirium, life and death.

When Joseph learns that Muthoni has been circumcised despite his objection, he forbids either his wife or Nyambura from visiting her. Nyambura, however, defies her father and visits Muthoni at her aunt's house in a distant village. Witnessing her sister's physical deterioration, through tears and anger she asks, "Why?" (Thiong'o 49) Muthoni answers, "You too will have to make a choice one day" (Thiong'o 49). Her words are prophetic; though Nyambura does not elect circumcision, she does choose Waiyaki as the man of her heart, which conjures her father's anger and rejection as fervently as it had risen against Muthoni. Joseph considers the tribe to be "lost" and doomed apart from Christianity, and therefore perceives all members of the tribe to be damned; thus, he entirely disassociates from it and its traditions. As the controlling patriarch of his family, he forces his wife and daughters to follow. I consider Nyambura's choice to love Waiyaki despite her father's threats to disown her later in further detail. For now, I focus on the significance of Waiyaki's ethics of compassion.

When Waiyaki notices the herbs her aunt administers do not improve Muthoni's condition, he decides that she must be escorted to the Mission hospital. Though Waiyaki had not been close to Muthoni, he visits her frequently and becomes "troubled" (Thiong'o 49) over her sickness. In the previous chapter I probed Olivia's stake in Tashi's pain. This principle manifests again here. Though Waiyaki and Muthoni are "genders apart," whereas Tashi and Olivia are "cultures apart," Waiyaki resists bypassing Muthoni's body in pain. Later, when Waiyaki is accused of disgracing and betraying the tribe, this act of kindness is used against him. One of the elders says of Muthoni, "She was not clean. Yet you took her to the hospital. You touched a dying woman, a dead body. And were you ever cleansed?...You are not ignorant and you know what this means to the tribe" (Thiong'o 120). In his own defense, Waiyaki explains that he did not touch Muthoni after she had died, but also adds, "I took Muthoni to the hospital. Because she was ill. I could never have let her die if I was in a position to help" (Thiong'o 121). Yet Waiyaki is deeply invested in Muthoni's pain, not only as a bodily issue, but also as a philosophical one. Like Nyambura, he does not understand Muthoni's choice. The crucial element, however, is that he strives to understand.

Levin defines Muthoni's "mission" as a "failure" (214) because she dies. What Levin calls a "failure," however, the tribe considers "martyrdom." Muthoni is therefore valorized by the people of Gikuyu as courageous for resisting the Europeans in favor of Gikuyu tradition. Writes Thiong'o, "Within a few weeks the name of Muthoni was a legend. Stories grew up around her name" (Thiong'o 55). To the tribe, Muthoni's death demonstrates to the Europeans that neither her body nor her will lie in their control. The tribe blames her death on the "new faith" (Thiong'o 55), while Livingstone, head of the

Mission, charges the barbarism of the tribe, asserting that circumcision proved “that these people were immoral through and through” (Thiong’o 54). In this guise, Muthoni’s body becomes emblematic of the division between the Mission and the tribe, her body more contested as “place” than the “river between.”

By choosing circumcision, Muthoni crosses the border between “sinner” and “saint,” between traditional woman of the tribe and “child of God.” Near death, Muthoni utters to Waiyaki, “Tell Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman beautiful in the tribe” (Thiong’o 51). Waiyaki calls Muthoni’s attempt to reconcile the conflicting ideals of the tribe and the Mission an “obsession” (51) that cannot be actualized. He contends,

Muthoni had tried. Hers was a search for salvation for herself. She had the courage to attempt a reconciliation of the many forces that wanted to control her life. She had realized her need, the need to have a wholesome and beautiful life that enriched you and made you grow...If the white man’s religion made you abandon a custom and then did not give you something else of equal value, you became lost. An attempt at resolution would only kill you, as it did Muthoni (Thiong’o 135).

In the opening of the chapter, I argued that Waiyaki is Thiong’o’s “voice” against female circumcision, a point I explore in greater detail here. As Thiong’o’s “voice,” Waiyaki does not valorize Muthoni, though he acknowledges her courage and empathizes with her desire to identity as a member of the tribe. Instead he argues against European influences that would force a woman to choose between her heritage and foreign ideology about religion and the body. Perhaps Thiong’o allows Muthoni’s death to illustrate the extent to which the colonial system had confused Gikuyu identity. Herein an anti-colonialist discourse is made. Clearly, Waiyaki as “voice” for Thiong’o does not agree with

circumcision for women, yet he simultaneously disagrees with Europeans using self-fashioned dominance to relate this to the Gikuyu.

Waiyaki's devotion to Muthoni begins our understanding of his progressive, feminist ideals about women and circumcision. Yet his love for Nyambura, an uncircumcised woman, reveals in greater fullness Waiyaki's neo-masculinity. Below, I interrogate the "impossibility of love" between Waiyaki and Nyambura in effort to reveal further implications of *River* as anti-colonialist discourse.

### **A Love "Between": Nyambura and Waiyaki**

I explore love because it is not only the quintessential emotion that is common among peoples in a global context, whether in a romantic or non-romantic sense, but also because finding it and holding steadfastly to it in a highly politicized environment is almost impossible, as illustrated in *River*. In *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, bell hooks asserts,

Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation, we will not be able to create a culture of conversation where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination (243).

After Waiyaki's first conversation with Muthoni as she lay ill, he begins to feel loneliness that he cannot easily define. Writes Thiong'o, "That night a feeling that he lacked something, that he yearned for something beyond him, came in low waves of sadness that would not let him sleep" (Thiong'o 43). Though Waiyaki thrusts himself into the fullness of educating the Gikuyu children, he longs for human contact, yet he is unaware of this. He wonders, "After all, what was the longing, what was the something for which he yearned? Did he know it himself? Yet the hopes and desires kept on haunting him"

(Thiong'o 68). As he falls into a fitful attempt to sleep, he thinks of Muthoni, now dead, and his sister who had died as a child. Everything around him is fog and darkness as he muses on the dead girls he has loved until a vision of a woman interrupts the bleak scene:

The edges seemed to be forming. He could now see the outline of a shape coming into being through the thinning mist. Waiyaki waited for it to melt away into nothingness but it did not. The shape remained there, fixed, and he could not drive it away. He peered at it and for a time was fascinated by it. It was the shape of a woman and he could not make out who she was (Thiong'o 69).

Perplexed and lonely, Waiyaki thrusts himself out of bed and walks along the ridges. Under the moon's glare he questions, "Yearning. Yearning. Was life all a yearning and no satisfaction?...Perhaps nobody could ever know" (Thiong'o 70). As he walks, however, he nearly collides with Nyambura: "And all at once, Waiyaki recognized the shape in his mind that had refused to melt into nothingness" (71).

Waiyaki recalls that he had first met Nyambura at Muthoni's bedside. It is as if Muthoni's death had gently urged her sister and the man who stood by her in death to fall in love, thus creating a "love triangle" with Muthoni at the top of the isosceles, her angelic robes draped down the two sides to unite Waiyaki and Nyambura. From the outset, however, Nyambura is associated with the physical body of her sister. Alone in his hut, Waiyaki is captivated by a vision of Nyambura that transforms into a terrifying image of Muthoni:

He saw that the hands of the other people, including Joshua, were stretched towards [Nyambura]. For a moment he stood still, fascinated by the sight. And then horror caught him. They were all pulling her into pieces, as if she were a thing of sacrifice to the god of the river, which still flowed with life as they committed this ritual outrage on her. And he

too had joined the crowd and was tearing her to himself and she did not cry out because she was now dumb. Then he saw that it was Muthoni, and she was thrown into the river and she was saying, 'I am a woman now.' The river carried her with it into a darkness which no one could fathom (Thiong'o 114).

Waiyaki's "vision" captures the politics of woman's body in the novel, which is that all forces, whether the tribe or the Mission, have an argument about whether a woman should be circumcised. From the tribe's perspective, "circumcision of women came to be equated with the return to traditional Gikuyu values" (Levin 210). Perhaps this is why Nyambura becomes Muthoni in Waiyaki's vision; he fears that her body will also become a sacrifice.

As stated earlier, Chege's dying wish is to see Waiyaki become a man in the tribe, and lead it out of bondage. He trusted Waiyaki, then, not only to be the "Moses" who would deliver the children from "Pharaoh," but also the faithful son who would obey the ancient tribal rites, including marrying a circumcised woman. Before his death, Chege had thought, "Who had ever heard of a girl that was not circumcised? Who would ever pay cows and goats for such a girl? Certainly it would never be his son. Waiyaki would never betray the tribe" (Thiong'o 37). Yet Waiyaki contends, "Nyambura was not circumcised. But this was not a crime. Something passed between them as two human beings, untainted with religion, social conventions or any tradition" (Thiong'o 73).

The tribe believes circumcision to be essential to a young woman or man's future in the tribe. The tribe feels that, by loving Nyambura, Waiyaki has chosen the "ways of the white man" above their traditions. Waiyaki's mother asks, "Is it true that you are marrying Joshua's daughter?...You know what this would mean? You must not do it. Fear the voice of the Kiama. It is the voice of the people. When the breath of the people

turns against you, it is the greatest curse you can ever get” (Thiong’o 116). Her words ring true. In the end, the tribe accuses Waiyaki of treason and remind him of the oath he had taken to remain pure to the tribe, though in his heart he reasons, “The oath did not say that he should not love” (Thiong’o 144). Waiyaki’s choice to love Nyambura is similar to Muthoni’s choice to become circumcised. Both, then, become living sacrifices, dying for the attempt to live as members of the tribe while embracing the new ways promoted by the mission. After the tribe finds Waiyaki guilty, they agree that the Kiama, the elders of the tribe, should judge him. The novel ends on a dark note: “[The tribe] knew full well what they had done to Waiyaki and yet they did not want to know” (175).

### **Things Fall Apart: Mission Accomplished?**

I allude to the title of Chinua Achebe’s classic masterpiece because every sacred entity “falls apart” for Waiyaki: his dream of educating Gikuyu children, thus leading them out of bondage from the colonial “mother”; his hope to marry Nyambura; his will to live for the tribe. Just as Muthoni learns one cannot reconcile the ways of the tribe with the mission, so does Waiyaki. I contend, however, that though Waiyaki’s mission to save the tribe from colonialism fails, Thiong’o succeeds in creating a male character who is at once incisive, sincere, and a healing balm to women in pain. I also offer the possibility that it is best that the novel ends “unhappily.” With such an ending, the message is painfully clear that colonialism not only underdeveloped Africa, but also that it made life for the colonized brutal, oppressing their finances, bodies, and even their love.

In this chapter, I have explored masculinity and woman’s body as contested sites; the potential of education to heal the wounds of oppression; and have raised issues pertinent in transnational masculinity studies. In the previous chapter, I argued that Walker’s

feminist consciousness was ill-accepted by some African feminists, despite Walker's certainty that *Possessing* is a feminist text. Thiong'o's anti-circumcision discourse in *River*, on the other hand, captures what was a real struggle between the Gikuyu tribe and European missions, while Walker's representation of circumcision offers far less in terms of authentic discourse. In the following chapter, I consider again issues of "authenticity" and representation in the testimony of two women circumcised in East Africa. Their experiences narrate boundaries and borders as they recount stories of how they discovered the "truth" of their bodies.

#### **4. "What Was Before and What Was After": Agency, the Body, and Culture in the Narratives of Two East African Women**

The discourses explored by Walker and Thiong'o address pertinent issues about the body, representation, community, and "authenticity." In this chapter, two women who were circumcised in East Africa exhibit authenticity in new ways, by speaking from personal experience. The narratives of these women—"Kinsi" from Djibouti and "Mushtag" from Somalia—resist "misconceived" notions about their identity as African women who have been circumcised. As they speak, it is clear they lack neither agency

nor power. As Joan W. Scott asks, “What could be truer, after all, than a subject’s own account of what [she] has lived through?” (Scott 59)

Kinsi and Mushtag speak of their mothers, their bodies, and their lives after circumcision.<sup>19</sup> They also discuss their decisions to have the circumcisions undone, an autonomous act that indicates the reclamation of their bodies.<sup>20</sup> They assert that not all female circumcision is “mutilation,” which I mention in Chapter 1, and that though Western discourse often insists that female circumcision is fueled by intent to harm and/or torture women, in their societies, it was performed as an act of protection and security. They illustrate, too, as some Western feminists have argued, that in their respective communities, the practice is rooted in patriarchal tradition that seeks to control women’s bodies and sexuality. This relationship between the discourse produced by dominant hegemonic Western thought vis-à-vis African women’s thought affirms what has been a thread throughout this analysis, that the “truth” of female circumcision can

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<sup>19</sup> The procedure performed on both women is similar to infibulation because their vaginal openings were stitched, leaving a small hole for urine and menstrual flow. However, their procedure is also dissimilar because infibulation involves amputation of most of the genitalia. Though Kinsi and Mushtag were circumcised, they were not cut. This procedure, then, would likely fall in the category of Type III/Type IV circumcision because their genitalia was stitched (Type III) and tightened (Type IV). I want to emphasize that in certain parts of East Africa, when a woman is infibulated and becomes married, either her husband penetrates the stitches or a medical professional removes them. Mushtag explained that removal of the stitches by penetration, however, is not practiced in her region of Somalia, that usually, women have the stitches surgically removed before marriage. However, in various parts of Somalia, husbands often prefer penetration, because his “duty” is to “break” his wife in this way. For an example of such a case, see the documentary film *The Day I Will Never Forget* by Kim Longinotto. Part of the film details the life of a Somali nurse who was circumcised as a child and now fights for women’s rights to obtain healthcare for physical complications due to circumcision. The documentary features an interview with a local Somali woman who is debating on whether to have the stitches from infibulation removed by a medical practitioner or her husband. The woman initially agrees to have the stitches surgically removed; the documentary shows the procedure, even the woman’s wincing. However, as the pain becomes unbearable, she asks the nurse to stop. The nurse adheres to her command, but explains to her that penetration by her husband will be much more painful. The woman explains she must first have her husband’s permission before she proceeds; he returns a few weeks later to inform the nurse that he will penetrate the stitching.

<sup>20</sup> I recognize Kinsi and Mushtag were able to reverse their procedures more readily because they were not cut. However, as mentioned in Chapter 1, as more awareness is spread about the effects of female circumcision on the body, medical procedures are being created to meet the physical needs of circumcised women, even those who have been infibulated, as Dr. Nawal Nour has devised a procedure that reverses infibulation.

only be located inside the lives of women who have been circumcised and in their respective communities, and simultaneously, that the West and Africa are not the binary opposites the media and historical racist, imperialist scholarship has depicted.

The power of these narratives, however, is that they not only “talk back” to the West, but also to Africa. Their discourse counters aspects of their homeland’s social systems, including silence about the female body and sexuality, as well as Western imperialist views. Based on her experience as a licensed midwife, Kinsi’s narrative, for example, stands against her culture’s myths about woman’s body and female circumcision. Mushtag argues against female circumcision by insisting that families educate their daughters about sex instead of performing female circumcision, which she calls “extreme.” Clearly, Kinsi and Mushtag can address these issues in ways the West cannot, and therein, teach the West how best to effect change.

Both women explained that in their societies, it is taboo to speak about female circumcision and sexual intercourse. As Mushtag explains, sex is discussed in coded languages and imagined as the invisible “evil” girls and unmarried women must resist. In this vein, a culture of silence is formed about sex, and as Kinsi adds, all aspects of woman’s body. Although the West is guilty of silencing women’s bodies and issues concerning women’s health, the women interviewed for this study are not restricted by the same “culture of silence” in the US as they were in their countries, which in part led to Kinsi’s statement, “I feel there is a reason God brought me to the United States.”

As the women’s voices “take flight,” they achieve power. Michel Foucault has theorized that power can be achieved through discourse about sex, and indeed this is an issue in Kinsi and Mushtag’s narratives. I am interested in how his analysis situates the

power dynamics as Kinsi and Mushtag speak outside the “reach” of the dominant hegemony that prescribed silence as the only acceptable discourse in which to “not talk” about sex or circumcision. Foucault asserts,

If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places [herself] to a certain extent *outside the reach of power* (emphasis mine); [she] upsets established law; [she] somehow anticipates the coming freedom (6).

This chapter considers how once “outside the reach of power,” Kinsi and Mushtag create critical discourse on community, gender, language, and the politics of the circumcised body. As Mushtag and Kinsi “talk back” to dominant Western and African discourses, I analyze their narratives based on the discourses they dispel, as well as new information about female circumcision that emerges from their “telling.” As they “call,” I “respond” with an attempt to unravel the texts of their voices. I begin with a section on how I gained access to their lives, which is followed by a brief interrogation of transcultural “vagina silence.” Each subheading thereafter is lifted from the women’s narratives. The “voice” of this chapter is reflexive; I locate myself as researcher within the language.

### **Gaining Entry: the Beginning of Difference**

Gaining entry into a field is complicated, primarily because in most cases, the researcher is not part of the community she is observing/researching. For this reason, she will often need the assistance of a “culture broker” to introduce her to the culture as well as the people she will interview. It is important, then, that I explain how I met my culture broker, who assisted in setting up these interviews.

In Spring 2003 I enrolled in an Ethnography course in the Department of Geography and Anthropology to help prepare for this project. Over the duration of the course, I became friends with a female doctoral student, who is Muslim and originally from Haiti. I knew female circumcision affected some but not all Muslim women in some regions of Africa. I also knew she held a leadership position in the Louisiana Affiliation for African Affairs (LAFA), an organization that provides community and support for Africans living in Baton Rouge. I surmised, based on her religion and affiliation with LAFA, that she potentially had connections with women I could interview. At this point in the research, I was not as driven to interview circumcised women as I was to understand female circumcision from the perspective of African women, whether circumcised or not. I also felt the demographic might be riper for me to find perspectives on FC from African women more readily than I would find women who had the actual procedure done who were currently living in Baton Rouge.

Initially, this student was concerned about my intentions, not because she did not trust me, but because she is wary of how non-Muslims often marginalize Muslims in this country, and most importantly that in the West, Muslim women are imaged as oppressed. Though she and I shared the bond of both friendship and “Blackness,” our difference emerged when I, a non-Muslim, indicated I wanted to interview Muslims. Again, as in previous analyses in this project, difference must be accepted as a critical, important dynamic, if we hope to understand other cultures. She asked questions to ensure I would not “other” Muslims by portraying them as “victims.” When I explained that I was interested in speaking to African women about their perspectives on circumcision, she felt comfortable. She informed me that she could not “speak for” her friends and would

not promise they'd allow me to interview them. She candidly explained, "I will talk to the people I know who will possibly talk to you. I'll ask them if it's okay to give you their phone numbers; that's all. It'll be your job to ask them for interviews." Of approximately seven women, I was able to contact four, all of whom agreed to an interview. Of those four, Kinsi and Mushtag were circumcised. Without my friend's assistance, I am certain a dialogue between myself and the women featured here would not have come to pass.

### **Vagina Dialogues: Navigating Difference**

The title of this section is taken in part from the title and concepts explored in Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler is a poet, playwright, and drama instructor who, out of a fascination with "vaginas," including the culture of silence around them, and the way histories have ignored, devalued, mocked, and degraded the vagina, toured the US to interview hundreds of women about their vaginas. She asked about menstruation, sexuality, and how they learned to speak or not speak about their vaginas during girlhood. The *Monologues* dramatize some of the interviews, and have been performed all over the world, by Ensler as well as amateur and professional casts.<sup>21</sup> Clearly, Ensler's goal was to enact social change about the way the world views and understands female genitalia.

Ensler's interest and devotion to women, their bodies, and their vaginas, enabled a necessary discourse to emerge about the way women's genitalia has been castigated over centuries and through cultures. She deliberately used the word "vagina" to discursively retrieve the word and extend power and "voice" to women. She writes in the introduction of *Monologues*, "I say [the word vagina] because I believe that what we don't say, we don't see, acknowledge, or remember. What we don't say becomes a secret, and secrets

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<sup>21</sup> I was a member of *The Vagina Monologues* cast at Bucknell University in February 2006. My participation in the production was due, in large part, to my interest in women's bodies, sexuality, and empowerment.

often create shame and fear and myths. I say it because I want to someday feel comfortable saying it, and not ashamed and guilty” (xx). In keeping with Ensler’s interest in de-silencing the “culture of vaginas,” these narratives operate as a counterpart to her work, contextualized in an African worldview. My decision, for instance, to ask Kinsi and Mushtag about how they learned to speak about their vaginas is inspired by *Monologues*.<sup>22</sup> I believed that there could not be a discussion about female circumcision apart from a discussion of the vagina as a place, entity, and discourse. I hypothesized if the biological name for woman’s sexual organs was unspoken during childhood and puberty—the period when girls begin to understand being “woman”—there was most likely a “silencing” of women’s sexuality in their respective communities. I thought about my own pre-pubescent and post-menarche years; no one ever said “vagina.” As children, my sister and I were taught that the correct language for “that area” was the word “private,” which discursively, translates into “restricted” area. Mushtag explained that though she could not recall the exact word used for “vagina” in her community, she knew the word painted an ugly portrait. She explains,

We used to use a word. I can’t think of the way to translate it, but it’s like the thing that is messy, the thing to take care of... You know when you’re telling a little child, ‘Be careful from this. It’s yucky, or it’s messy or it’s something that you don’t want to mess with?’

They use a word like that for it.

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<sup>22</sup> In *Monologues*, Ensler includes female circumcision as a “vagina fact,” which is part of the chorus/backdrop of the *Monologues*. The brief description begins, “Genital mutilation has been inflicted on 80 [million] to 100 million girls and young women...about 2 million youngsters a year can expect the knife—or the razor or a glass shard—to cut their clitoris...” (63). Ensler lists the source of her information: an article published in the *NY Times* on April 12, 1996 during the Kassindja case. Again, the power of media discourse is prevalent; more importantly, however, is the significance of “discourse crossings” in the female circumcision debate.

If we join the language I learned about the vagina with the language Mushtag learned, we would get a meaning like this: the vagina is silenced, dangerous, and revolting; not just in Africa, not just in America, but in both places. I am interested here in how difference meets similarity in this instance. Though Mushtag and I do not share a common gender, we do share the common silencing of our bodies and sexualities. Perhaps this interview, or better put, conversation enabled both of us to begin to break the silence.

### **Mushtag**

I was worried I would become lost, not because Mushtag's directions were bad, but because I am bad with directions. I was careful to repeat the directions she'd given me over the phone as I sat in the parking lot of the Wal-Mart near my apartment. I had gone there to purchase batteries for the tape recorder en route to her house. I knew the conversation would be as rich as the previous two, and did not want a loss of battery power to interfere. She was patient as I asked twice if I had written exactly what she'd said.

When I arrived, Mushtag was in the bedroom toward the back of the house, while her husband attended their beautiful daughters, a six-month old and toddler, both dressed in pink. He had come to the door and led me past the gate that would keep the toddler from running around the house or hurting herself. Mushtag yelled that she'd be out in a minute, while her husband invited me to join him on the sofa. He was watching the "700 Club," a Christian news show, and he commented that he favored George Bush as president, stating that he thought him to be a "good man." Above our heads was a panoramic framed portrait of an Islamic temple, including words sketched in gold Arabic script. Above the mantle was a portrait of Mushtag and her husband in wedding attire;

they were dazzling in white, her dress lacey, his tuxedo crisp. I stared at the portrait, captivated by their image. She is a gorgeous woman who looks like a modeling agency might pay her for her smile and the light in her eyes. He resembles a tennis player, fit and athletic. The baby is in his lap, drifting in and out of sleep while the toddler dances around me, curious about who I am but not taking a step toward me. Their house is roomy and I am comfortable as I wait for Mushtag.

When she emerges, she is wearing the smile I had spent minutes admiring. Her long hair is fluffed around her face, pulled back at the top. She asks if I had found the place alright. Her voice is warm as she invites me into the kitchen. I sit at the bar while she prepares Arabic coffee.

Before we begin the interview, Mushtag asks if I will allow anyone to hear her voice recorded on the tape. I assure her no one will hear the tape but me. I also inform her that I will, however, write about what she shares. She feels comfortable with this. She explains that she is eager to talk about female circumcision because in her culture, the topic is “taboo.” Though her sisters and friends speak about it sometimes, it is different to talk about it with someone outside the culture.

### **“She Didn’t Do It to Hurt Me”: Community, Awareness, and Forgiveness**

I began the interview by asking Mushtag when she was circumcised. Her answer revealed much more than I had anticipated. As she responds, she dispels Western misconceptions of circumcision as torture, and counters popular Western rhetoric that labels circumcised women as “victims.” As noted earlier, Mushtag does not consider the procedure performed on her mutilation, and obviously does not feel victimized, though she later explains that she is against FC. She began:

It's funny, 'cause I don't remember when I had [the circumcision.] I was a baby, less than three months old. I was one of the lucky ones because since I had it done at the hospital, it was not whole mutilation like when they remove a lot of parts. It was just the two labia was sewn together. Then, of course, I had it undone. I had something very clean and very safe, but in a way, still going with the culture and everything because my mom was under a lot of pressure to do it. [People were saying,] "You have a daughter. You need *to do it for her*, etc." So, she wanted to do it, but at the same time, she went to the hospital, and made sure someone who knew what they were doing, was doing it.

I was intrigued with the concept of social pressure, primarily because before this interview, I had not encountered "pressure" as a real dynamic to consider as part of the "culture of circumcision" in some regions. Though I knew mothers and/or grandmothers arranged for girls to be circumcised to ensure they would be "marriage worthy," I did not know that cultural pressure seemed to present mothers with little choice but to circumcise their daughters. Mushtag explains that the community encouraged her mother that circumcision would be for Mushtag's benefit. In this guise, circumcision is presented as an act of love that would promise security and a good life. I asked Mushtag to elaborate:

*TC: You said your mom was under a lot of pressure. From whom? Like the community?*

M: The community, her parents, and her friends. Uhm...even though at the time...she had some ideas that [circumcision] might not be the best, but at that time, there were no laws. That was in '75. Even now there are no laws in my country against it. It wasn't something everyone was against; it was just a cultural practice. It was just like maybe piercing your ears. Everyone does it, even though it's painful and hurtful. But, in the long run, it's okay. It heals, just like we do shots for the kids here [in America.] So, she was under that kind of pressure.

Though Mushtag does not justify circumcision here, she is able to remove her feelings about the practice to explain the community's approach to it, which is one of the most powerful aspects of her narrative. From the community's perspective, if Mushtag's mother had decided not to circumcise her because of the pain involved, they would simply counter that the wound would heal. By comparing FC to cultural practices in the US, like vaccination for children and ear piercing, Mushtag enacts discursive "border crossing" to assist in my learning about the practice, and to communicate the viewpoint of her community. Though we allow painful, "unnecessary" cultural practices in the US, like ear piercing and plastic surgery, we often judge other cultures without seeking to understand the socio-cultural relevance of practices like FC.

Though Mushtag's mother had succumbed to the pressure of the community, she later expressed regret over the decision. As Mushtag explains:

And of course afterwards [my mother] learned more [about circumcision] and she felt bad. But, I don't have any bad feelings toward her because the way she did it, she didn't know any better. But, as we grew older and as she learned more and there was more awareness and more on tv, she felt bad, and asked me to forgive her. Just knowing that makes me forgive her because she didn't do it to hurt me. I know if she had to go through it again, she said she would not do it. And she asked me not to do it to my daughters either. So, that kinda explains to me that it was not someone who did it in a hurtful way.

In her best judgment, she thought it was the right thing to do.

Mushtag, here, enacts an ethics of forgiveness rooted not only in compassion for her mother, but also an understanding about her culture. She equates forgiving her mother with the revelation that her mother had no intentions of inflicting pain on her, but quite the opposite, to perhaps spare her daughter from ridicule and shame.

There is also an important equation in Mushtag's narrative relevant to an understanding of how change is effected. Above, we see that Mushtag's mother learns awareness, asks Mushtag's forgiveness, then asks that Mushtag not circumcise her daughters. Put another way, awareness=social change. Only after her mother learns social awareness can she then request that Mushtag not circumcise her daughters, which assists in breaking the generational cycle of FC in her family. Narratives like this one oppose the Western assumption that African mothers who circumcise their daughters do not love them, or that they are deliberately torturing them. Ideally, discourses like the one above will lead to less resentful language by dominant Western hegemony.

**“I Think It's Horrible”**

I knew it was vital that I ask an African woman from within a culture that practiced female circumcision to explain the practice from her perspective. I surmised that her interpretation of the practice as well as her knowledge about it would be more authentic than any documented fact:

*TC: Can you tell me, Mushtag, when [circumcision] is practiced, what is usually the reason for it?*

*M: The purpose is so the female will not have any sexual experiences outside marriage. Physically it's not possible to do, no matter how much [force is exerted]; there is no [vaginal] opening. The two inner lips of course are put on top of the opening. Nothing can happen.<sup>23</sup> The second reason is so the girls would not get pregnant and bring shame to the family.*

*TC: Uhm, what do you think about that?*

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<sup>23</sup> In Mushtag's community, traditional ripping of vaginal stitches does not occur, which is why she does not acknowledge this form of penetration. This form of penetration does occur in some areas in Somalia as well as Sudan, which Kinsi responds to later.

M: I don't think it's the right way to protect the girl or to show her this is the right thing to do. I understand where [parents] are coming from. They don't want their kids to get pregnant...They are very conservative. They don't want their daughters to have sex before marriage. And I understand all that. But, the method they used is just extreme. How far they went is just so extreme. One can argue and say, "Yeah, it works" because it does. Nothing happens, and all [the girls] have their babies when they get married.

Mushtag explains her cultural dynamic as so obsessed with chastity that it uses female circumcision as an "extreme" form of birth control, which she strongly opposes. Based on Mushtag's commentary, the burden of society is put on the woman and the female reproductive organ, which leads me to revisit my earlier discussion about vagina politics. There is an obvious fear communicated about woman's sexuality, perpetuated by the idea that a woman can only be chaste or sexually "pure" if her vagina is surgically shut. As Mushtag expounds, the "extreme" measure is "successful" because the women do not give birth out of wedlock. However, as she explains below, even as chastity and fertility are controlled, woman's physical health can be jeopardized during and after circumcision:

I strongly disagree with [the practice of circumcision.] I think it's horrible. I'm glad there are people who understand and they will not do it again. But, the sad part is that there are people who still believe in that, and still will do something like this. And back home, even now, it is still practiced on some girls. In some cases, the circumstances are severe. They are not safe, they are not clean, unsanitized. Maybe not even the right knife...It's just much easier to educate [the girls] to make sure they don't [have premarital sex.]

Mushtag raises important issues about women's health to support eradication of FC, citing unhealthy conditions under which the operation is performed. Again, she does not

condemn her culture's belief in sexual purity for girls; on the contrary, she seems to respect it. She argues, however, that instead of practicing FC, which she describes as "severe," the culture should educate girls about sexuality in order to prevent pre-marital sex and trust that the girls will adhere to what they have been taught. Moreover, Mushtag's belief in the necessity of awareness to effect change is the same dynamic that caused her mother to ask her forgiveness. As awareness spreads, there is an increased number of African women who believe circumcision should be abolished. Some, like Mushtag no longer live in Africa, but remain part of the culture of that region. Others, like her mother, remain in Africa and are enacting activist principles by asking their daughters not to circumcise their granddaughters.

Though Mushtag's mother felt she did not have a choice about whether to circumcise Mushtag, and though Mushtag did not have a choice on whether to be circumcised, Mushtag enacts choice to have her circumcision reversed. She explains,

Of course today, because of all the advances in medicine, one can undo [the circumcision] whenever they want to, and it doesn't have to be because they're getting married. I know some people who've done that. I have some friends in Canada who've done that. They're not married, but they just...not even to have sexual experiences, but just to get it undone, to have a...what do you call that...to have a...what [do] you call that...gynecological exam?

*TC: Pap smear?*

M: Yes. Pap smear. 'Cause it's not possible to do that [unless the circumcision is reversed.] Just to do that and to make sure everything is actually the way it's supposed to be instead of things being imbedded in each other like that. (Slight laughter.)

*TC: So what made you get it reversed?*

M: The reason I had [the circumcision reversed] is mainly because of health problems. Like with my period. It was not coming out as much as it should. It was giving me a lot of pain...It was so slow, and it was like pouring from a small kettle slowly...I learned about [having the circumcision reversed], heard about it, read about it, talked to different doctors, and came to the conclusion that it should be done.

*TC: So, was it done before or after you got married?*

M: It was before. Shortly before.

Mushtag explains that she and her friends had their circumcisions “undone” for their own health before they were married. Because much of the politics in support of FC in Mushtag’s community is centered on preventing pregnancy outside marriage, Mushtag and her friends act autonomously by choosing to reverse their circumcisions in an act of reclamation of self and body. By reversing the circumcision, they illustrate that they are capable of caring for themselves and perhaps more importantly, that it is not mandatory that their labia be sewn to prevent them from engaging in intercourse. When Mushtag experienced complications from FC, she educated herself and concluded she should have the procedure reversed. Though she had no control over becoming circumcised, she was in total control when she decided to have the procedure undone. Therefore, the mark of culture becomes uninscribed, and her sexual organs become “hers.”

Arguably, more narratives like this should be prominently featured in Western discourse. Mushtag demonstrates respect for her culture, even as she opposes circumcision, and thus, has it reversed. Leslye Obiora asserts, “Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, Western analyses continue to be informed by misconceived notions of African women as nothing but subjugated and devoid of agency” (265). Why are moments when circumcised women take back their bodies minimized, while images

and thought that promote African women as passive or docile are perpetuated by Western media and discourse? What is at stake for the West when/if we do not represent the Third World woman as she really is? Or better stated, what is at stake when we admit that just as there is no monolithic Western woman, there is no monolithic “Third World” woman? At present, a plausible conclusion is that the West fears we will lose power in a global context if we surrender the power of the image and the power of “meaning-making” in the circumcision debate.

### **“Even if I Try I Won’t Be Successful”: Discourse and Sexual Control**

Mushtag’s narrative lends equal insight about the politics of the body as it does the politics of language about the body. She explains in detail how adults in her community used language to inscribe meaning on the body as a preventive tool to dissuade against sexual intercourse; not only was the body circumcised, which imposed physical limitations, but adults reemphasized the circumcision with language that confirmed the actuality of the body, which imposed psycho-social restrictions. This duo of body/language restraint produced chaste girls who could not, even if they wanted to, have sex, or even think about having sex without their parents’ warnings speaking from within. As Mushtag expounds,

Our parents would say, “Don’t [have sex], but even if you try you will not be able to do it.” OK. Then it’s like, “Maybe I could go ahead and try to do what [mischievous girls] were doing, but *even if I try I won’t be successful* (emphasis mine).” So, I think that in itself takes the whole interest in that subject, and immediately steers you in a different direction. So, it’s actually so amazing. As much as I hate this thing that was done, it made all of us [girls] focus less on boys and relationships [at] such a young age...

As a youth, Mushtag's identity is constructed as much by her circumcised body as it is by her parents' discourse about her body. Though she is undoubtedly aware that she is circumcised, her parents' warning that she cannot have sex prevents her from attempting. Below, she explains how her parents could have "tricked" her into believing she was circumcised:

When you're little, even though we were circumcised...if my parents would have said, "Well, you cannot [have sex] because you are circumcised," I would have believed them anyway. I would rather they [said] it as a trick, and [didn't] actually [circumcise me], but they did it anyhow.

In Mushtag's youthful imagination, if her parents said she was circumcised, there could be no other truth about her body. Therefore, as she explains, circumcision was not necessary to prevent her from engaging in sexual behavior, nor was it as powerful as her parents' discourse about her body. We can use this scenario to consider the extent to which FC is necessary to restrict a girl's sexuality. In essence, the effects of circumcision and the effects of language that warned against sex would have the same outcome: chastity until marriage.

Not only does circumcision restrict girls' sexual behavior, as Mushtag explains, but it also defines them *as* girls and prohibits activity associated with adolescent masculinity:

In Somalia, they don't let girls climb trees. They don't let them sit in certain ways. They would say, "You can't do that. You're a girl!" But, they don't mean in terms of you're less than a man or in terms of sexism, what they mean is, "You are circumcised," but they don't like to use the word [circumcision] like that. So, they don't say, "You're

circumcised.” They say, “You are a girl.” That’s what they say because to them, being a girl has a lot to do with being circumcised...It’s all attached to them.

Based on Mushtag’s explanation of the body politic for adolescent girls in her community, we come to understand that she was *made* a girl by circumcision. Also, the language of circumcision is coded in the social fabric of Somali culture, so that the girls and the “elders” can speak about circumcision without using specific language, which indicates the “taboo” nature of the subject, as well as how potent it is as a social practice. Moreover, because of the circumcision, girls’ physical activities are limited; not only are circumcised girls sexually restricted, but they are also socially restricted.

#### **“Did I Have That?” Silence and Uncertainty**

I open with Mushtag’s response to the clitoris as source of desire because, as I later discuss, when she first discovered that in other regions of Africa, like Sudan, the clitoris is removed, she becomes terrified by the implications for her own body. This aspect of her narrative also offers knowledge about varying opinions about desire:

*TC: Is it true that circumcision is supposed to quench desire?*

M: That is the idea, too. They say that because they put the sensitive part—the clitoris and all that—on the inside. In some cases, I guess this is what they call mutilation when they cut it off, chop it off. I don’t know if they do it knowingly or unknowingly because these are not people who are medically educated. But, perhaps they do, in some cases know these are the parts that are important. That’s why they’re doing it. However, in reality, there is no desire or feelings that go away...When they remove the clitoris however—I think, which I don’t have, so I don’t have that experience—but, I heard in some cases that when they remove it, it has to do with feeling less...some people say it’s God’s way and he’s installed that in females, so no matter what you do, that [desire] won’t go away, no matter what you chop off...But, I haven’t heard of it totally going

away. The argument is that once they remove the clitoris, desire is really lessened, so perhaps that person will need more arousal, something like that.

Much of Mushtag's explanation here is speculative, most likely because, as she explains, her circumcision did not include cutting of her genitalia. However, her narrative indicates the intra-continental differences about circumcision as a practice. Even within the borders of "Africa," acknowledging difference is imperative; Mushtag's speculation occurs because she can only be certain of what circumcision represents in her worldview, and is therefore unaware of what it means in a social and physical context, for example, in Sudan. Below she explains the fear she experienced when she thought her clitoris might have been amputated when she was circumcised:

*TC: How did you feel/react when you heard there was a type of circumcision that involved total removal of the clitoris?*

M: Oh, my goodness! I was very shocked. Because I was worried, "*Did I have that?* What did I have?" It was so funny. I used to touch [my vagina], and I used to say, "Well, it's a little chubby in there, so something is under there..." It was scary. Then you tell yourself, "Is the body missing something it is supposed to have?" I felt worried. I looked at it as something that was temporary that I could undo. But when I learned about all the things that went on, I started to think, "Well, it's more complicated than I think. They could have done more, they could have done less. I really don't know what's going on there"...Even now, back home there are people trying to explain...there is something about your body you don't know anything about. Just going through that, and having it undone. Just thinking, if I have sexual relations, it will be very difficult...The whole idea of going through the experience of trying to understand what your body was before versus what it became, because there's no one to tell you that. Because not necessarily your mom did not [tell you] exactly what was before and what was after. It's not like a

weight loss picture where they show you, “This is before and this is after.” It’s like, what happened? What exactly happened? And no one knows the answer.

This portion of Mushtag’s narrative is perhaps the most revealing in terms of physical uncertainty. The undercurrent of her narrative, then, is silence. She must speculate about her body because no explanation is given about what she has experienced. Because she was circumcised as an infant and was never informed about what “circumcision” meant biologically, she harbored an inner silence about her body, and only by touching could she deduce that she had a clitoris. Though there were firm definitions in place in her society about what the meaning of circumcision in a social context, she nonetheless had questions about what her body had and what it had lost.

### **Kinsi**

Kinsi and I had agreed to meet at a local coffee shop. I was early. She was on time. As I sat at a table near hers, we made eye contact and concluded we were the two people looking for each other. She was charming and energetic, and expressed excitement about the prospect of having me as a new friend. During our interview, we spoke like we’d known each other for years. The connection helped both of us relax as I began the interview.

The dynamics of Kinsi’s narrative are informed by her work as a midwife and her life as a “border crosser” between her homeland, Djibouti, and the US. She conveys a resistant attitude towards her culture’s expectations of women, which she sees as rooted in an oppressive tradition, that may be for the benefit of men, but perpetuated by women. Interestingly, Kinsi’s self-proclaimed “rebellious” actions against her culture’s social restrictions on women and girls began while she was in Djibouti, which enabled her to consider the US as “providence;” the US became the place where she felt her identity as a

non-conformist could thrive, though it was not the place of its origin. It is important to note that much of Kinsi's rebellion was against her mother, whom she adores, but felt "imprisoned" by during her ascent to womanhood.

### **"I Was Six Years Old"**

Unlike Mushtag, who was circumcised as an infant and therefore unable to remember the procedure, Kinsi was old enough to remember. She recalls traveling from Djibouti to Somalia for her mother to circumcise her along with her three sisters, an early experience in "border crossing" for Kinsi. Somalia, where her family owned a second home, became not only a place to vacation, but also the place where she was circumcised. It becomes "marked" in her memorization of the event, as she remembers the "crossing of borders" when she remembers circumcision.

K: I remember the day I was circumcised. I was six years old. My mom did it to me and two other sisters at the same time. I remember my grandmother—she was alive at that time—telling my mother, "Don't do that to [her.] She is too young." And [my mother said], "I prefer to do it to the three of them at one time." We did it in Somalia because Djibouti is very hot in the summer, so people go to Somalia during the time school is closed. In the summer, school is closed in June, July, and August. So, we had two houses over there. We used to go in the summertime, then come back.

A critical aspect of re-memory occurs when Kinsi recalls her grandmother's attempt to interrupt the procedure—for the moment—fearing it would be too dangerous for a young child to undergo. Kinsi's body, then, is caught between her grandmother's plea and her mother's persistence. This exchange is memorialized as part of her circumcision. Yet, Kinsi's silence is also a factor. Though she remembers the conversation between her mother and grandmother, she does not recall speaking, which is normal, considering that

children are often silenced on matters relating to their well-being, whether physical, emotional, or otherwise.

This silence, however, did not end on the day Kinsi was circumcised. Though Kinsi was circumcised with her sisters—which seemingly might create an opportunity for bonding through their remembering—the “culture of silence” has prevented discussion about the procedure. Though Kinsi desires to openly discuss the procedure, her sisters do not.

*TC: Do you and your sisters talk about [circumcision]?*

K: No.

*TC: Did you go through any type of withdrawal or anything [similar]?*

K: Me and my best friend used to talk a lot. My sisters left early because they got married, so I never talk about it with them. But, if I do talk about it [to them], they think it’s taboo or that I’m crazy, so I talk about it with my best friend a lot.

Kinsi’s difference is actualized by her interest to speak about a cultural practice that carries a double meaning. Based on her narrative as well as Mushtag’s, circumcision is such a normative part of life for women, that it is not discussed. Yet, it is also considered “taboo” because of its association with the sexual aspects of the feminine body. Kinsi dares, then, to transgress not only her sisters’ labeling her as “crazy” or deviant, but also her culture’s “silencing” of the female body in general, circumcision in particular. By discussing the practice with her “best friend,” Kinsi achieves personal-political freedom and arguably, breaks down discursive walls.

Kinsi’s “radical” approach to life as a woman born in Djibouti, however, does not end with her passionate pursuit to discuss circumcision, despite her sisters’ disapproval. She also resists the cultural sanction of female circumcision based on religion, and in a

unique twist, associates religious rhetoric used to support circumcision with her mother being coerced by their local community to circumcise her.

*TC: Do you think that circumcision occurs in Djibouti because it is cultural or is it associated with religion?*

K: It has nothing to do with religion at all. It's culture. Because in my religion, it says that a man has to be circumcised, which I agree with because clinically, it's good for guys; but, for females, not at all. It's cultural.

*TC: Did anyone try to use religion to support it?*

K: There's a lot of people who use [religion]. But, that's the thing. If my mom did not [circumcise me], her sisters, her cousins, her neighbors would say, "What's wrong with you? Why didn't you do this to your daughter?" So, that's the thing. She [will listen to other people, then she will feel bad about that], so she [will] have to live for other people and what they think about her and what they think about her family. And I hated that. I thought, "I don't want to live for other people."

By collapsing the identities of her faith with her mother in the context of her circumcision, Kinsi indicates the power of both forces; her mother's patriarchal authority as well as the authority of religious doctrine used to support circumcision— which as Kinsi argues, is a farce. (As Kinsi mentions and as I posit earlier in this project, the Koran does not support female circumcision; it is not mentioned in the text.) For Kinsi, "living for herself" as opposed to "living for other people" involves using her critical lens to critique the social system that regulates female circumcision as a *cultural* practice. Like Mushtag, she interrogates the social fabric of her community, not because she does not understand why her mother circumcised her, but perhaps, to help us understand.

**"I'm Against It"**

Though Kinsi seems to possess commanding knowledge about social regulations that sanctioned her circumcision, like all researchers, activists, human rights workers, etc., who interested in this practice, she does not know its origins. Therefore, she uses the folklore of her culture as a means to explain the procedure from a socio-historical perspective. In the midst of recollecting the tale, however, she explains her feelings about the practice and dispels myths associated with it:

I'm against it. Totally. I don't know where we get that idea. Some say we get it from that sick man in Egypt a long time ago who used to be a businessman, and used to travel a lot. So, he used to circumcise his wife and close everything to make sure that when he [came] back from his business trip, she would not have sex with another guy. So, that's [what] I heard my people say [it came from.] So, the parents think that when their daughter is circumcised, surely she won't have sex until the day she gets married which is totally wrong.

The “business man” to whom Kinsi refers is often perceived to be a pharaoh, hence the term “pharaonic circumcision.” Parents attempt to model the folktale, believing that circumcision prevents lasciviousness. Kinsi’s consciousness, however, debunks this idea; female circumcision is fueled by myth. The myth of the practice’s origins as well as the myth that female circumcision will prevent premarital sex depend on each other, and are both inaccurate.

Based on her experiences as a midwife, Kinsi dispels the notion that FC is a deterrent against sexual intercourse and pregnancy. Though Mushtag describes that in her community FC prevented sexual intercourse, Kinsi counters with a memory of witnessing circumcised women who were unwed and pregnant:

The guys and the parents believe that circumcision means that the woman is a virgin...We had an experience at the hospital [when I was a midwife.] And the doctor would show females who were circumcised and how we could prove if she was a virgin or not. [The guys] think that when a woman is circumcised, she's a virgin which is wrong, 'cause when I used to deliver [babies as a midwife], [I discovered] she can be circumcised and not be a virgin.

If a woman can become pregnant before marriage when circumcised, as Kinsi explains, I am interested in cultural myth that gives meaning to the body, even as it ignores biological possibility. Kinsi's narrative reveals to cultures that practice female circumcision that FC does not ensure chastity. Her words, then, could be used as viable tools to effect change.

### **“I Want to Marry Five Men”**

During the interviews, I came to understand the differences between myself as an African-American woman and Kinsi and Mushtag as African women, particularly how issues of sexuality and femininity differ between our respective “borders.” However, though I could not abandon the relevance of difference, I also noticed similarities during what became intimate, often enjoyable conversations. I end with a statement from Kinsi that details a life of early resistance, but became a light-hearted moment between the two of us as the interview ended:

I remember when I was 12 or 13. I told my mother, “I'm gonna get married and when I get married I want to marry five men.” She couldn't believe it. In my culture, [when] the neighborhood heard me saying that, they thought about my mother: “Oh, my God! You don't talk to your daughter?” And [my mother] beat me. And I didn't care. In my culture

and in my religion, when a man is marrying a woman, the husband's family always goes to the female family to ask if [his] son can marry [their] daughter. And I said, "Why does the man have to do that? Why can't the woman's family go [to the husband's family]?" I don't know why I used to say that...And now, when I came here four years ago, I see the way the American people live and everything, and I think maybe there is a reason that God brought me here. And I'm 27, and being 27 in my culture is getting old. So, even when I talk to my mom and my mom's friends, they'll say, "What are you waiting for? When are you gonna get married?" So, [marriage is] like a job that a woman has to do when she gets in her twenties. Get married and have a kid. That's all. Did you see that movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*?<sup>24</sup>

TC: Yes, I did.

(Both laughing.)

K: When I saw that movie, I was laughing; it's the typical thing in my culture.

Kinsi concludes that God had led her to America to be the person she had been in Djibouti—autonomous, resistant, and critical—without being chastised. Though women in the US are controlled by patriarchy as well, Kinsi finds freedom that did not exist as readily in Djibouti. Perhaps living beyond the borders of her homeland enabled her to resist traditional expectations for women to a fuller degree than she would have if Djibouti remained her residence.

## **Conclusion**

These narratives offer transnational perspectives about female circumcision as a cultural practice. As "border crossers," Mushtag and Kinsi have lived in the "world" of

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<sup>24</sup> *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is a romantic comedy set in Chicago. The lead character is unmarried, in her thirties, and works at her family's restaurant as a waitress. Her family pressures her about her unmarried state, seeing her life as tragic before she meets a handsome "gentleman" who proposes shortly after their courtship. Kinsi's comparison of her culture's expectations of women and marriage with similar dynamics in the film highlights my interest in popular culture as a medium that enables two seemingly cultures to consider "other."

East Africa, as well as the “world” of the West. In this vein, they are able to speak about female circumcision in context of their cultures in Africa, while they are also able to engage notions about the body from a different cultural perspective. Their narratives indicate that the issue of female circumcision, as I have attempted to argue throughout this text, is no longer an “African” practice; on the contrary, it is a global issue. Mushtag offers education as an alternative to FC; her narrative participates in the process of educating Western readers and listeners, as well as women from her culture. In the following chapter, I consider Sembène’s *Moolaadé* as an African perspective on female circumcision as a cultural practice. The film operates in tandem with Mushtag and Kinsi’s narratives as an African-centered anti-circumcision discourse that advocates social change; similar issues of transnational identity, modernity, and social change prevail in the analysis.

## 5. “A Question of Life and Death”: Women’s Resistance, Solidarity, and the Problem of Modernization in Ousmane Sembène’s *Moolaadé*

If we do not praise and dignify our women’s heroism, which I see as pre-eminent, Africa is not going to be liberated. Let’s be clear about this: if we do not accord women their rightful place, there will be no liberation. Women work a whole lot more than men do, and if work was in and of itself liberating, women who farm fields daily would have long been liberated. Women’s emancipation doesn’t only depend on labor. If we do not wake up and appreciate justly the role of women and share responsibilities, we will lose. But I think there’s a gender revolution going on in Africa anyway, and we will have to conform.

Ousmane Sembène, “Still, the Fire in the Belly: the Confessions of Ousmane Sembène”

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European critics are afraid to look at African cinema...Europeans close their eyes in order not to see the questioning of Western values, the reaffirmation of cultures repressed by the West, and anti-colonialist discourses.

Manthia Diawara, “Popular Culture and Oral Traditions in African Film”

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In this age of mixing and hybridity, popular culture, particularly the world of the movies, constitutes a new frontier providing a sense of movement, of pulling away from the familiar and journeying into and beyond the world of the other.

bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*

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Art is not outside the province of power struggles in society.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa*

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To frame my aims for Chapter 5, I situate discourses examined in previous chapters. In Chapter 2, I problematized Walker's representations of female circumcision, noted where she failed and triumphed, and argued that much of Walker's "painful discourse" come from her belief that her ethnicity and her sex validated her as "the voice" for African women. Perhaps Walker's most insensitive representation is in her depiction of female circumcision as a cultural practice, circumcised women, and circumcisers. In *Possessing*, female circumcision is constructed as torturous, the ultimate price women pay for being women. In Chapter 3, I identified Thiong'o's protagonist, Waiyaki, as representative of a "new masculinity," primarily because of his choice to affiliate with two women whose bodies were considered taboo. I also explored Thiong'o's depiction of Muthoni who, like Tashi, chooses circumcision for love of tribal culture. Unlike Tashi, however, Muthoni dies, but in death, is valorized by the tribe. I emphasized that in the context of colonialism, Muthoni's body becomes a symbol of the tribe's resistance to colonial oppression. In Chapter 4, I analyzed oral narratives of circumcised women, both who disagree with the practice, and offer solutions for social change, namely education and awareness. This chapter considers a cinematic African

perspective about female circumcision that provides a visual representation of an African village enacting change through its own people. I end the project with this chapter to centralize the need to focus on African ideals on change, as the African perspective is aware in ways the West cannot be, about African social systems and identity.

### **Dismantling the Master's House: Sembène, from Margin to Center**

For castigated, disenfranchised people, artistic creation becomes more than art, but an act of defiance and survival, a medium to critique the governing body in power while affirming the social identity of the oppressed. Despite limited resources, capital, and means of production, African cinema seeks to counter historic Euro-American depiction of “subhuman,” savage Africans, in favor of a narrative that celebrates African people, culture, and African indigenous languages. For decades, Western cinema has owned the film industry and the politics of mass image production, imposing its ideology “on a set of dominated peoples” (Hondo 19). In *African Experiences of Cinema*, Med Hondo asserts that in relation to the African community at large, the Euro-American film industry “never represent(s) their personality, their collective or private way of life, their cultural codes, or, of course, the least reflection of their specific art, their way of thinking, of communicating—in a word, their own history, their civilization” (40). Because images—particularly “big screen” images—educate, inform (and far too often misinform) about race, gender, class, and culture, African cinema offers a perspective of “Africanness” rooted not in Western imperialist consciousness, but in an African worldview. In a postcolonial context, African cinema illuminates the struggles of an African state crippled by colonialism and recovers the African artistic, intellectual self, stifled and silenced by colonialist dictates.

Considered “the father of African cinema” (Pfaff 21), Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, alternatively called Sembène Ousmane or Sembène, implements his creative genius to expose not only the sadism of colonialist oppression, but also resistance by the “peasant” class to the colonial system. A self-defined “unacademic,” Sembène employs cinema to combat imperialist social systems, including the privileging of French language/culture over the indigenous language/culture of his native Senegal. In a 1992 conversation with Sada Niang, Sembène explains, “Colonialism took away our lands but not our heads. At home, our daily acts were regulated by our culture. The French language acted as a tool of communication with the dominator. It was not the language we used at home, in the yard, or at the market” (Niang 91). Here, Sembène conveys that African consciousness was not surrendered to the dominant culture, that the community sought to fight for its survival despite the damaging effects of colonialism. Conceivably, his community’s recalcitrance to French language and culture influenced Sembène’s personal defiance. As a youth, Sembène was expelled for “striking back” at his French teacher who had slapped him (Gadjigo 1). This early resistance to colonial authority perhaps marked the beginning of a life and artistic career fearlessly steeped in “striking back.” No longer dependent on the French education system, Sembène became an autodidact who learned the French language and culture to gain access into the world of the dominator, while maintaining allegiance to his native “tongue” and culture. Ever present was his vision that African peoples become free from the imprisoning gaze of the West, which often proscribed an inferior identity on its African “subjects.”

In 1979, at a conference at New York University, Black feminist, writer, and scholar Audre Lorde famously proclaimed,

Survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change (112).

With vision set beyond a temporary anti-colonialist movement toward enduring social change, Sembène sought to create a legacy that would reinstate an African perspective of the African self, shifting the control of the gaze from the colonialist oppressor, therein “dismantling the master’s house” where Africans are imaged as bestial “other.” To successfully counter the Western gaze in his films, Sembène rejects the West as the center of knowledge, social consciousness, and intellectual discourse. He expounds, “The West is not my point of reference. Sure, we learn from Europe, and we must, but only organization and technology. For the rest, I am the center of the universe; Africa is my universe. I need no lesson from the West, neither moral nor how to conduct my life” (Niang 5). As a young man, the filmmaker was employed as a dockworker and soldier, though activist efforts remained at the heart of the work he sought to do. His critical social lens upon the plight of his countrypersons led Sembène to a life in the arts. He began as a fiction writer, but out of a desire to “reach a non-literate African audience...(and to) reclaim from colonial and neocolonial misrepresentation the reality of an African past and present and to proclaim the dignity, independence, and power of African cultural forms for the continent’s future” (Gadjigo 1), the Senegalese native decided on a career in filmmaking, attending the Gorki Institute in Moscow.

In *Sembène: the Making of African Cinema*, a documentary produced by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Manthia Diawara that maps Sembène's cinematic legacy and contributions to African consciousness and social awareness, Sembène explains,

I found myself at the age of 40, wandering throughout Africa. I was 40 when I first realized the potential impact of cinema. Cinema is a kind of shared myth for the public. In a movie theater you have Catholics, Muslims, Gaullists...I was driven to film as a way of communicating my ideology. I myself prefer literature to cinema. But in our time, literature is a luxury. We want to compress history, and maintain our oral tradition. So cinema is an important tool for us. It is, of all the arts, the most appealing for a large audience.

For decades, Sembène's audience has looked to him as an ambassador of African life and culture, as imaged from the blueprints of his imagination to the commanding screen. Film critic and scholar Françoise Pfaff asserts that Sembène's films "are primarily intended for African audiences for whom they serve as a tool for progress through self-examination. But for the non-African viewers, Sembène's films are valuable reflectors of Africa's history, traditions, and changing societies, thus bringing about a new awareness of foreign thought, customs, and aesthetics" (21). Sembène's latest film, *Moolaadé*, was featured in *The New York Times* when it debuted at the New York Film Festival on October 13, 2004. Writes A. O. Scott, "...While this film is troubling, it is also infused with a remarkable buoyancy of spirit...a rousing political film that is a critique of traditional forms of authority and a celebration of the warmth and dynamism of African village life" ("Heroism"). *Moolaadé* enabled a necessary perspective to enter US discourse on female circumcision, one that critiques female circumcision as harmful,

painful, and potentially deadly to women and girls, but does so in an African context, from an African subject position.

Set in Djerisso, a small Muslim village in Burkina Faso, *Moolaadé* is a multifaceted story of courage and resistance, where the social order of the close-knit community is transformed by one woman's heroism and defiance. When the film's lead character Collé (Fatoumata Coulibaly) offers protection to four young girls who flee the local excision ritual performed by crimson-clad circumcisers referred to as the "salindana," the power balance between men and women, tradition and modernity, and life and death are proactively disturbed. To ensure the girls' protection—and to defy the cultural tradition of excision—Collé enacts the "moolaadé," a protective spirit. Though the moolaadé is protective, it threatens to become murderous if transgressed. While the moolaadé is in effect, the girls cannot be removed from the compound Collé shares with her husband, co-wives, and daughter, and thus, cannot be excised; if they are taken from the compound, death will ensue. Known in the village as a "madwoman" and a rebel for refusing to have her daughter, Amsatou (Salimata Traore), circumcised, Collé opposes circumcision after two of her children die, unable to be naturally birthed from her womb. From the film's onset, Collé's resistance sets the stage for the village's confrontation with its identity. Led by Collé, village mothers force the "salindana" to lay down their circumcising knives after yet another girl, Jaatu (Mariama Souabo), dies during the procedure and two others, rather than submit, have thrown themselves down a well.

Thematically, the film pulsates on the underlying motif of modernization. First, the village husbands blame the influence of modern media, primarily radios, for Collé's resistance and decide to confiscate and burn their wives' radios to prevent additional

“subversion.” The radios symbolize not only technology, but perhaps more importantly, the women’s access to anti-circumcision discourse. Radio announcers dispel myths about circumcision and emphasize that the Koran, the holy book of Islamic faith, does not demand circumcision of women, which directly opposes traditional village belief. Second, though Amsatou, Collé’s daughter, is promised in marriage to the village “prince,” Ibrahima (Moussa Sowie), Ibrahima’s father and village chief, Dugutigi (Joseph Traore), opposes the marriage when he learns Amsatou is a “bilakoro,” an uncircumcised woman, an identity that is an abomination to village life, and threatens the “bilakoro” will never be married. Educated and employed in France, Ibrahima is wealthy, handsome, and successful, and is given a proper “prince’s” welcome upon his return to the village. Caught between the “modern” world and village life, Ibrahima must choose the traditional path of masculinity, rooted in tradition and opposed to modernization, or create a new tale of masculine progress influenced by his life abroad.

Sembène contends that *Moolaadé* is his “most African” film because it occurs “within the African cultural tradition” (Gadjigo 4). Locating the film in the heart of the village, away from the city, is perhaps an act of resistance to the notion that Africa must compete with and/or depend on large cities of the West to experience social change and modernization. The locale of the film also illuminates “heroism in (African) daily life” (Gadjigo 4). Sembène asserts, “These are the heroes to whom no country, no nations gives any medals. They never get a statue built” (Gadjigo 4). For the lack of a monument erected in their honor, *Moolaadé* applauds the “unsung hero” and the African village that is often imaged as shiftless in Western imagination. In a conversation with Samba Gadjigo, Sembène explains the dimensions of his film:

In *Moolaadé*, there are two values in conflict with each other: One the traditional, which is the female genital excision. This goes a long way back. Before Jesus, before Mohammed...It was instituted as a value in order to, in my opinion, continue the subjugation of woman. The other value, as old as human existence: the right to give protection to those who are weaker. When these two values meet, cross, multiply, clash, you see the symbolism of our society: modern elements and elements that form part of our cultural foundation. On top of those add the elements that belong to the superstructure, notably religion. These are the waters in which this group, this film, sails (4).

The allusion to oceans is befitting, as *Moolaadé* offers a missing piece in the transnational puzzle of female circumcision representation. Sembène not only articulates a womanist/feminist consciousness, in tandem for example with Alice Walker's politics, but also a deep awareness of African cultural tradition, an element often missing in Western creative and critical approaches. This final chapter critically examines *Moolaadé* as a necessary media that interrupts the privileging of the Western narrative about female circumcision in favor an African perspective—sensitive to culture, religion, and oral tradition—but unflinching in its anti-circumcision discourse. I probe the dynamics of social change in relation to African women's solidarity in the film, most evident between Collé and her co-wives, but also among the women of the village who organize against the "salindana" to protest circumcision. Though in "Virtuous Cuts," Abusharaf contends, "African women, not men, insist on circumcising their daughters" (113), *Moolaadé's* "shifting" masculinities, most apparent in the characters Ibrahima, Mercenary, and Cirè, embody Sembène's stance that both men and women must cooperatively work to eradicate female circumcision to achieve lasting change. Lastly, though change begins

with the women's radios—most noted as a Western technology medium—it ends with the women themselves, even after their radios are set ablaze directly in front of the village mosque. Sembène's mantra is that change must come from the villagers. I consider the dynamics of modernization and technology in the film as developed in Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio's *Beyond the Black Atlantic: Relocating Modernization and Technology*. They assert, "The last surviving great narrative of the West may be the idea of inescapable, ubiquitous globalization, which is largely based upon technological modernization" (Goebel 1). As borders shrink and technologies expand, Sembène imagines a world where the great Western narrative of absolute knowledge and global conquest is challenged by a village's autonomy, but riding on the back of a woman's resistance.

Comparatively, Sembène's attention to borders is noteworthy: the borders between Africa and the West, between genders, between past and future. Sembène also crossed geographical boundaries to make *Moolaadé*; the film was shot in Burkina Faso, 2000 miles from his native Senegal. In *Moolaadé*, Setting is central, as the choice to make the film exclusively in an African village denotes Sembène's cultural perspective. He explains,

I could have done it somewhere else, but I would not have had this setting that I searched for and didn't find except here. I simply looked for a village that responded to my creative desire. Why shouldn't I paint a rose black? I went to Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, and Guinea Bissau. But when I saw this village I told myself, this is the village! But there's more: this hedgehog-like mosque in the middle of the village, its unique architecture in the Sub-Saharan region. This architecture wasn't inspired by outside

influences; we owe it to the termite ants, to the anthills, the symbol of *Moolaadé* (Gadjigo 5.)

The ancestral spirit of the first king is said to be in the anthill, adjacent to the village mosque. The location of these monuments signifies the village's spiritual beliefs, that while it exists as a Muslim community, it nonetheless holds fast to its traditional spiritual identity. The film juxtaposes the animist tradition, represented by the anthill, which is adjacent to the mosque. The antennae for the radios, however, is nearby, which signifies that modernity will become as relevant to the village's identity as traditional practices and beliefs that had shaped it.

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In her article, "To Make a Film Means to Take a Position," filmmaker Sarah Maldoror contends, "Nationalities and borders between countries have to disappear" (46). Because one of the underlying themes of this project is to understand and navigate the borders that police the circumcision debate, I find it key to consider the international borders Sembène crosses via *Moolaadé* as cinematic text. In *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, bell hooks contends, "Movies remain the perfect vehicle for the introduction of certain ritual rites of passage that come to stand for the quintessential experience of *border crossing* for everyone who wants to take a look at difference and the different without having to experientially engage 'the other'" (2). By facilitating change spearheaded by women, Sembène crosses the border of stereotypical Western ideology and imagery about African women as voiceless, docile, and eager to circumcise their daughters, then recreates a new tale that details courage, unity, and resistance. With a masterful stroke of genius and at least in part out of love for his homeland, Sembène creates a storyline that enables viewers to understand circumcision's importance to the

village, while his artistic point-of-view unflinchingly decries the practice must be abolished. What viewers actually witness, then, is the village's move towards modernity, actualized through one woman's resistance that "catches fire"—almost literally—throughout the village, a moment that depicts "everyday struggles of Africans to empower women at the grassroots in the process of social transformation" (Abushraf 24). To argue that *Moolaadé* is a film about female circumcision alone would restrict its power and creative potency, for the film rotates on the axis of gender, identity politics, and social change, all as they relate to village life and female circumcision as a cultural practice. Abusharaf contends,

In spite of the heavy weight that society places on individuals and communities to conform to its dictates and conventions, numerous examples of resistance demonstrate women's adaptability and receptivity to change—and even, happily, their ability to initiate and achieve social transformation in accordance with their own interests...Forces of change within societies where female circumcision has traditionally been carried out have led courageous women and men to modify the practice or end it altogether, and the innovation has spread through multiple social channels until it is widely accepted (16).

### **“We Do Not Wish to Be Cut”: Resistance, Solidarity, and African Feminism**

The cornerstone of Sembène's filmography is built on the theme of refusal. As he explains in *Ousmane Sembène: Dialogues*,

In a given situation, there will always be characters who will say no. It would not be accurate to say that a whole people accepted or refused, but I work with types of characters and I am very sympathetic with those who refuse. Some things are simply not to be accepted. Human beings reach greatness only to the extent that they refuse these things and assume themselves. In fact, when a human being refuses, he/she takes charge

of himself/herself...Since the dawn of times, refusal has been a sign of fundamental dignity (Niang 98).

In *Moolaadé*, refusal begins when six young girls abandon the local circumcision ritual. Exclaims Jaatu, the youngest, “We do not wish to be cut!” Their collective flight represents a stroke of willfulness and early solidarity; even as youths, the girls deny the cultural tradition of circumcision in attempt to choose what they feel is right for their bodies. Sembène’s choice to illustrate resistance by six girls is a testament to the praise he holds for women’s strength and resilience. In the documentary film *Making of African Cinema*, the filmmaker explains, “Women have always been especially important in my life” (“Making”). Though six girls abandon the ritual, only four arrive at Collé’s compound. As Collé raises her hand in preparation to beat the girls, assuming perhaps the girls had fled to her doorstep out of some mischievous behavior, Amsatou declares to her mother, “Do not beat them. Look at their clothes; they’ve deserted the excision.” Though the audience does not discover until later that Amsatou is uncircumcised because her mother is against the practice, we are given a glimpse into Amsatou’s spiritedness and solidarity with the four girls. From the onset, she wears her mother’s mark of resistance. Amsatou’s allegiance is neither to the village nor to the practice of circumcision, but to her mother. Though this allegiance is temporarily tested when her betrothal to the village “prince” becomes jeopardized, Amsatou is clearly a non-conformist.

This scene where four girls seek the refuge of one woman, enables Sembène to transform the importance of women from his personal reality to his film, in a way that is uncanny and atypical in African cinema, a market primarily dominated by men. As Farida Ayari asserts,

It is worth noting that nine times out of ten, female characters in African films meet a sorry fate. No doubt because the filmmakers feel they have a pedagogic and moral mission, the screen presents characters who cannot overcome. There are almost no positive heroines. Filmmakers are quick to show us the examples that must not be followed, but rarely do they show women with all their qualities as well as faults without judging them (183).

Yet Ayari lists Sembène as an exception to this tendency. From the onset, it is clear that Sembène seeks to portray an image of the African woman, Collé and the thousands she represents, who resist *and* overcome. Though the community judges Collé, Sembène's lens does not.

When "First Wife," Hadjatou (Maïmouna Diarra), emerges from her quarters and sees the girls kneeling at Collé's feet, she softly brings her hand to her mouth and cries, "Oh God." Her compassion for the girls indicates that she will assist Collé in protecting them. In the next moment, Cirè, their husband, steps from his quarters into the yard. As the three wives kneel to greet him, their bodies hide the four girls from his view. Though the women position their bodies in a submissive posture, their bodies together are able to hide the girls, and of course, they recognize this. They manipulate their social position as women—clearly a lower class in the village dynamic—to protect the girls, an action they perform in solidarity. As husband and wives exchange greetings, the "language" of the village drum is heard. Ciré interprets:

Ciré: What is this early morning drum announcing?

Hadjatou: We were also wondering about the drum.

Ciré: They are looking for something. It sounds rather serious. They are looking for human beings. Not one or two people. Six people are missing.

As part of the village culture, Hadjatou, like her husband, understands the drum, yet feigns ignorance, as if unaware of whom the drum is searching. She uses her position as “First Wife” to ward off her husband’s suspicion, knowing that he trusts her authority. Though I later investigate Ciré’s masculinity, entwined in his elder brother’s terse, violent ideal of “masculine” behavior, I note here that his interpretation of the drum portrays him as a gentle, thoughtful man concerned with the lives of others, as he smiles approvingly and tenderly at his wives before departing on a business trip. Though he disappoints this identity when his brother attacks his manhood, he recovers his own selfhood by the end of the film.

Initially, there is tension among the wives. Alima, the “Third Wife,” the youngest and meekest, opposes protecting the girls. However, Amsatou immediately challenges her, speaking directly to her mother, “Mother, do not deny them. One cannot deny someone protection.” Despite the risks associated with harboring the girls, Amsatou is steadfast in the counsel she gives her mother. Again, Sembène chooses Amsatou as the mouthpiece to intercede for the girls, an action that foreshadows Amsatou’s future and whether she will remain “bilakoro” despite her engagement to the village “prince.” Later, Alima says to Hadjatou, “Elder, I do not want to be burnt by the fire Collé has started.” Immediately, Hadjatou silences her, indicating that despite Alima’s fear, she must stand in solidarity with Collé. In the privacy of their quarters, Hadjatou says to Collé, “I am on your side. I often lie to protect you. You can trust me.” Without Hadjatou’s “blessing,” protecting the girls would be impossible. If the senior wife disapproves, Collé must obey her orders and send the girls away; to do otherwise would disrupt the authority balance between the wives and ultimately, in the home. However,

Hadjatou's agreement secures Collè to not only protect the girls, but perhaps more importantly, to protect them by activating the moolaadé, revered and respected by the villagers. After tying a rope of red, yellow, and black yarn from one side of the compound's entrance to the other, Collé explains to the girls, "See this rope? You will only cross it with my permission. Neither can I dismiss you from the house before the end of the moolaadé...Whoever breaks that law will be killed by the moolaadé." The seriousness of the girls' need for protection calls for the moolaadé, from Collé's perspective, revealed in a conversation between her and Hadjatou, the matriarch of the family:

Hadjatou: Collé, you've started the moolaadé. Are you aware of the responsibilities?

Collé: Elder, it is a question of life and death.

Hadjatou: I won't add a word.

Hadjatou's silence indicates that, like Collé, she understands the severity of the circumcision ritual, and that in essence, the girls' lives are at risk if she does not protect them from their mothers as well as the "salindana." When the "dean" of the "salindana" explains Collé's refusal to circumcise Amsatou, the male elders respond in shock, particularly Amath, Collé's brother-in-law. The men mutter to themselves, "No one ever married a bilakoro." However, the spirit of the "moolaadé" complicates the salindana's plea that the men force Collé to release the girls. A wise woman, Collé knows she needs the moolaadé to protect the girls. Asserts a male elder, "None can transgress the moolaadé. Its spirit is formidable. To calm its spirit one needs to shed blood."

Collé "bears the burden" of resistance as the speaker who puts the curse of the moolaadé into action. She employs her voice to call on the protective spirit—a respected cultural phenomenon—perhaps stronger, even, than the belief in circumcision,

recognizing that as a woman, her authority alone can ward off neither the mothers who want their daughters “purified,” the “salindana” who believe in the cultural relevance of female circumcision, nor the male elders who believe Collé to be a subversive madwoman. Thus, she holds the power, not only over the fate of the four girls, but ultimately, over the entire village. As the catalyst of the moolaadé, only Collé can end the spell by uttering the “word” to end it. Collé, in essence, transcends her being from mere village woman to “the word.” Hadjatou advises Collé not to utter the word to end the moolaadé, saying, “Do not utter it. It is dangerous. The moolaadé is unforgiving. Years ago two wives died of it. Keep the girls here.” The spirit itself, then, holds power even over Collé. Hadjatou insists, “I, too, do not like excision...I (had my daughters cut) against my will.” Collé responds, “I got it. I am taken as the sacrificial lamb.” She feels she has become the local image for anti-circumcision antics, yet even her elder co-wife claims privately to Collé that she does not “like circumcision.”

During a quiet moment that introspectively becomes a teaching moment for not only the girls, but also Sembène’s audience, Collé asks the girls why they had sought her for refuge:

Collé: Why did you choose to come to me for protection?

Nafi: Six of us wanted to go to the city, but we do not have any connection. You are our last resort. The two others went a different way.

Collé: How did you get the idea?

Oumy: We were told you refused to have your daughter cut. Now you are our only lifeline.

Collé: Oumy, there is too much gossip at the well. You should know that purification is one thing, and moolaadé a different thing. Jaatu, what about you?

Jaatu: My older sister died of the purification. That's why I don't want to get cut.

Awa: Mother, you did not have Amsatou cut.

Jaatu: Is it true that a "bilakoro" cannot have children?

Collé: That is not true.

The girls, perhaps without their mothers' awareness, had formed a consciousness about circumcision based on Collé's resistance, which speaks of their autonomy. At the end of the pedagogy session, Collé and the girls happily applaud, as if in triumph: their potential to be mothers would not be ruined because of their identity as "bilakoro." Collé's knowledge about circumcision dispels local myths about uncircumcised women. Her action is feminist because she empowers the girls based on her personal empowerment, transgressing and debunking accepted cultural norms about woman's body.

In *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power: from Africa to the Diaspora*, African feminist Obioma Nnaemeka contends,

The feminist spirit that pervades the African continent is so complex and diffused that it is intractable. Not too long ago, a colleague asked me to provide a framework for African feminism as articulated by African feminists. My off-the-cuff response was: "the majority of African women are not hung up on 'articulating' their feminism;" they just do it. In my view, it is *what* they do and *how* they do it that provide the 'framework;' the 'framework' is not carried to the theater of actions as a definitional tool. It is the dynamism of the theater of action with its shifting patterns that makes the feminist spirit/engagement effervescent and exciting but also intractable and difficult to name. Attempts to mold 'African feminism' into an easily digestible ball of pounded yam not only raise definitional questions but create difficulties for drawing organizational parameters and unpacking complex modes of engagement. In this regard, it will be more accurate to argue not in the context of a monolith (*African feminism*) but rather in the

context of pluralism (*African feminisms*) that captures the fluidity and dynamism of the different cultural imperatives, historical forces, and localized realities conditioning women's activism/movements in Africa—from the *indigenous variants* (emphasis mine) to the state-sponsored configurations in the postcolonial era (5).

Undoubtedly, the dynamic between Collé and her co-wives, particularly Hadjatou, and their decision to protect the girls operates within a feminist paradigm, though neither of these characters might necessarily declare their love, respect, and devotion to each other as “feminist.” I argue alongside Nnaemaka that perhaps the action would go unnamed, though the politics of “unnaming” are infrequent in this age of identity wars where all identities under the sun must be articulated and called into being. Reading African feminist praxis in this way, forces us to understand that Western intervention is not needed to “save” African women, nor do African women need to live by the standards set form in Western feminist doctrine.

The solidarity of the wives is tested when the “salindana” arrive at the compound, angry that Collé is harboring the girls. Hadjatou gives Collé a machete to defy the “salindana,” casting herself as a menacing, armed presence. In this exchange between Collé and the “dean” of the “salindana,” we first hear Collé's testimony of survival and loss:

Dean: Collé Ardo, seven years ago, you refused to have your daughter purified. I purified you, along with Seynabou, Binetou, Salba, Coumba, and Binetou. Why do you oppose the purification of these children?

Collé: Truth be told, you cut me and stitched me twice. Twice. And you also buried my two children. When my Amsatou was being born, the woman doctor opened me up to here to let her out. These children requested protection. They'll get it.

Mother: You want our daughters to remain a “bilakoro” like your Amsatou.

Collé: Whoever crosses this rope will be punished by the moolaadé.

Collé’s reference to her physical body indicates that the form of circumcision practiced in the village is infibulation. As Collé concludes her warning to the “salindana” and village mothers, the women of her compound, including co-wives and daughters, emerge, standing behind her in solidarity. “Ardo, you are too subversive. I will have to neutralize your powers.” After the “salindana” and mothers depart, Collé, the women of her compound, and the four girls sing and dance in victory. The dance is interrupted when Hadjatou’s son arrives. His maleness not only interrupts the joy of the victory celebration, but also represents the male objection to Collé’s resistance. His gaze on the women is at once menacing and judgmental. Yet, Collé meets his stare with a defiant gaze of her own. The women soon disperse after several seconds of obvious discomfort and awkwardness. Hadjatou rejects her son’s plea to release the girls, indicating that she, too, is prepared to resist the patriarchy of the village to stand in unison with Collé’s decision to protect the girls.

In the following scene, the “salindana” meet to discuss combative methods against Collé, as Mercenary looks on. Their solidarity, steeped in tradition, is just as evident as that between Collé and her co-wives. A member contends, “Collé Ardo refused to have her daughter purified. Now she is harboring four girls in her house to keep them from purification. She thinks her powers are greater than ours. She wants us to give up our knives.” Another member asserts, “Collé is challenging us. I will destroy her powers.” She seeks to “destroy” Collé’s powers, not by a spell or magic, but by calling a meeting with the male elders. Without the men, she is powerless over Collé and the four girls. As the “salindana” enter the place of meeting, the village griot proclaims in

a loud, excited voice, “Women give birth to kings. They give birth to the poor. They also give birth to the valiant. I salute you, women. Like a man, a valiant woman deserves to wear the pants.” In the community, the “salindana” are valiant, while Collé exists on the outskirts of acceptance, a social space she seems to relish.

### **“A Minor Domestic Issue”: Masculinity, Modernization, and Female Circumcision**

When Dugutigi, the village chief, and his brother discuss the drum’s morning announcement, they respond apathetically:

Doucouré: I heard the drum this dawn.

Dugutigi: It’s about the girls’ purification.

Doucouré: Allah, be praised, a minor domestic issue.

Sembène signifies the male attitude towards circumcision. By calling the procedure “a minor domestic issue,” we are able to obtain awareness on the irrelevance of female circumcision to village men, though girls have died from it. Dugutigi contends, “My son is not going to marry a ‘bilakoro.’” Clearly, the uncircumcised female body is imagined as unclean and unworthy, most particularly of Ibrahima.

At first glance, the character “Mercenary,” is a womanizer, just shy of a “pimp” of wares, selling what Ibrahima calls “junk” at inflated prices. He remains a mystery until Amsatou ventures to his kiosk on an errand from her mother.

Mercenary: Amsatou, I’ll ask to have you as wife.

Amsatou: Marriage? I am already taken.

Mercenary: I’ll triple your bride price.

Amsatou: My fiancé is richer than you are. He works in Paris, France. You are nothing but a mercenary.

Mercenary: Do you know what that word means?

Amsatou: Mercenaries are people who will kill women, children, and they also do coup d'états. See, I too listen to the radio.

Mercenary: You sure are a smart cookie. (Incredulous.)

Amsatou: So long, Mercenary.

The veil of Mercenary's identity is ripped when Amsatou "reads" him. Sembène uses Amsatou as his mouthpiece to expose Mercenary as more than a vendor, but a man with a complex social history. This moment promises, perhaps, that Mercenary's role in the film will be more integral than the subtlety his role initially suggests, and also that Amsatou will continue to speak with authority.

Although *Moolaadé* opens with Mercenary's arrival, the arrival of Ibrahima excites the village even more. The village women lay colorful pieces of fabric at his feet to ensure his shoes do not touch the bare dirt. Songs welcome him, similar to Christ's on Palm Sunday. Though Collé's co-wives attend the party, Collé does not join them. Ibrahima wears shiny, leather shoes and a business suit amidst villagers (including his father) who are adorned in traditional African dress. The "son" is welcomed with words of acclamation and praise, similar to the declaration of God, who after Christ's baptism announces, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Says the village griot, "People, admire the valiant. Admire the son of the lion...proud heir to your ancestors. Heir to the throne, the people salute you...Women, the heir...is back with us. He is tall, strong, and as handsome as the rising sun." The villagers applaud as Ibrahima raises his hand to acknowledge the griot. He awards the griot and the songstress with crisp bills, openly sharing his wealth with the village as its "son" and perhaps, its future leader. The procession continues throughout the village towards the home of Ibrahima's parents. His father meets him in an embrace. The elation between father and

son is evident, Sembène's vision to illustrate the bond of family, but also the trace of difference between father and son; Ibrahima is dressed in a heather gray suit and tie, while his father is adorned in traditional dress for a village chief. Ibrahima, then, represents Western identity, while his father continues in the traditions of the village. The scene that is most understated, perhaps, is the image of Ibrahima's mother, who opts not to wipe away the tears of joy over her son's return. On a day so fueled with a masculine directive, Sembène chooses to zoom the camera's lens into this mother's eyes to illustrate her joy, which seems to be unnoticed by the crowd, as well as the lace of sadness behind her tears.

When Ibrahima inquires about Collé's whereabouts, his father and brother stare incredulously at each other, apparently disgusted and disrespected by Collé's decision to dismiss the welcoming party. This is perhaps even more alarming because Amsatou is to be married to Ibrahima. The celebration ends when two "loin cloths" are brought to the gathering. The two girls the village thought had gone to the city are discovered to have jumped in a well. Life cannot continue "as normal" when two girls have died to avoid being genitally cut. The villagers, however, do not consider the extremity of the girls' action: they would rather meet their death at the bottom of a well than be cut by the "salindana." The male elders claim instead, "Collé is at the root of the moolaadé and of the two girls' suicide." Collé becomes scapegoat, though Sembène would argue that the practice of circumcision and the fear associated with it is at the root of the girls' death.

Shortly after the girls are discovered to be dead, Balla, Hadjatou's son, asserts, "The women should not be allowed to listen to the radio. All their radios should be confiscated." Meeting Ciré when he returns from to the village after a journey, his brother

demands that he confiscate Collé's radio and that he immediately have Amsatou "purified" so she can marry Ibrahima. Ciré disapproves, saying, "Hamsatou, her daughter's namesake gave (the radio) to her." His brother asks, "What about your authority?" Ciré replies, "Tell Dugutigi we brought back good crops," before walking hurriedly away, in anger. Here we see Ciré's true sensibility. He defends his wife and daughter in their absence, and informs his brother to take note of what his labor has produced for the village: good crops. Though pressured by the village's masculine ideal, Ciré is not entirely brutal, but on the contrary, is perhaps lost in his own identity, ensnared between the "self" he is and the dictatorial, controlling patriarch his brother desires him to be.

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Though Ciré's masculine identity is an important dynamic in *Moolaadé*, he does not represent the village's progressive future, particularly its relations with modernity and technology. If the village is to realize a more forward masculine ideology, Ibrahima must become the "new face" of masculinity. Ibrahima possesses what other village men do not: capital—both money and the cultural capital of the West. In this vein, he fulfills the traditional masculine role of provider, but also critiques the local values of the village. During the morning after his arrival, Ibrahima sits with his mother, father, and uncle, wearing silk pajamas while drinking coffee and tampering with electronic tools he will use for electronic appliances he has brought from France. His uncle says to him, "You've honored your family. You paid for a whole building. You provided food during hard times." His mother acknowledges his "gift" to the women, the only occasion when she speaks in the film: "The women too send their blessings. You gave them a water pump

that improved their daily lives.” Arguably, Ibrahima’s deed of providing water pumps for the women illustrates Sembène’s diligence in reminding his audiences of the economic hardships of village life. Ibrahima nods in approval of his elders’ blessings, reciting, “Amen.” Yet when he discovers the male elders have revoked their wives’ radios, he comments in frustration, “Why deny them radios and TVs? Uncle, you can no longer silence these media. Today, everywhere in the world, radio and TV are parts of life. We cannot cut ourselves off from the progress of the world.” Here, Ibrahima attempts to be more than the voice of reason, but more importantly, the voice of the “world,” calling to the village to accept rather than reject technological advance, or risk being shut out from life in a global context. He not only encourages technology for the women’s sake, but for the sake of the entire village.

Shortly after this morning gathering, Dugutigi explains to his son, “I opposed your marriage because Amsatou is a bilakoro.” As Ibrahima stares at his father in astonishment, Dugutigi calls in Fily, an eleven year old circumcised girl who is also Ibrahima’s cousin. Ibrahima responds, “Father, I still do honor and respect you, but my marriage is my own business.” His father’s countenance becomes a frown as he curses his son: “Say what? You damned son! I am your father! You shall marry whom I want. If you don’t submit, I disinherit you. Take your TV out of here.” As his father curses him, Ibrahima glances toward his mother, who softly gestures her hand to her mouth, silently and gently commanding her son to silence himself, which she has apparently done throughout her marriage to his father. As Ibrahima exits, his father reminds him to pay the debts he owes to Mercenary; Ibrahima agrees, choosing to remain “dutiful son,” loyal to his father, though this allegiance does not endure to the end.

Sembène explains the characters Mercenary and Ibrahima in context of *Moolaadé*:

The whole film takes place inside a language, a culture, and its metaphors and symbols. We witness the arrival of two foreign elements. One is an ex-military man. He has, in the name of humanity, participated in all the peace-keeping forces. The other is an exile in Europe (for his own interests), who is the son of the village chief (Gadjigo 5).

As “foreign elements,” Mercenary and Ibrahima are symbolic of a modern system of cultural and socio-economic behavior patterns appropriated from the West. Their worldview, therefore, is not limited to village politics and modes of behavior, but extends beyond its borders, rendering them, to some degree, untouchable. In this aspect of culture and globalization, Mercenary and Ibrahima “speak the same language,” which is perhaps why, in the following scene, they judge each other. Ibrahima judges Mercenary as both a trickster and capitalist who uses his “petty wares” to exploit the villagers, whom he knows depend on him for basic necessities and even the slightest indulgences, like candy, lacy underwear, and colorful plastic pails. Mercenary, on the other hand, charges Ibrahima with pedophilia, a Western ideology that might not ordinarily correspond with local village ideals about marriage or sexuality, mainly because whether a woman is a “bilakoro” is privileged over whether she is age-appropriate for marriage and sex. Ibrahima arrives to pay a debt for someone in the village. Mercenary offers condoms as “a wedding present” to Amsatou, though ironically, a few days prior, he attempts to court her for himself:

Ibrahima: My marriage to Amsatou won't happen. My father is opposing it on the ground that she is a bilakoro. From a nearby village he summoned my uncle and Fily, his daughter. The elders celebrated and blessed

the marriage at the mosque.

Mercenary: He doesn't know you already laid her.

Ibrahima: I didn't; she's eleven.

Mercenary: No shit, eleven!

Ibrahima: Yes, but purified.

Mercenary: Francenabé, Fily is still being breast-fed! You, your father, and your uncle are pedophiles.

Ibrahima: Did you say pedophiles?

Mercenary: Yes!

Ibrahima: Fuck you! Now, let's talk about you. Why were you kicked out of the military?

Mercenary: That's ancient history. I participated in many UN military's peace expeditions in the Middle East and Africa. At a point, we the junior officers, noticed that the senior officers were stealing our earnings. I became our spokesman. We made so much noise that they hurriedly returned our money. But it was not to end there. I was especially targeted. Five years in the jug, and dishonorable discharge. In the media I was nicknamed Mercenary!

Ibrahima: It suits you well!

Mercenary: Let's come back to you. I have to speak to your father.

Ibrahima: No, I can speak for myself.

Mercenary: You shitty little fellow, your dad and uncle should be jailed for being pedophiles.

Ibrahima: (Silent, but extends his middle finger in Mercenary's face. He walks hurriedly away.)

Mercenary: Africa is a real bitch! (Murmured to himself.)

Mercenary castigates Ibrahima for not resisting his father more blatantly. Although Mercenary is a womanizer and capitalist, he is perhaps the only character in the film that can judge Ibrahima as a pedophile and Africa as a “bitch,” indicating its stagnant, counter-progressive customs, and the sexual abuse of children. Perhaps, in this scene, Mercenary is Sembène’s attempt to chastise his beloved homeland for its foolish preference of a young girl over an uncircumcised woman.

Though Ibrahima’s exchange with Mercenary is dynamic, perhaps one of the most tender scenes occurs between Ibrahima and the four girls at Collé’s compound:

Ibrahima: Is it you who refused to be purified? You will never have husbands.

Jaatu: Won’t you marry a “woman” bilakoro?

Ibrahima: (Laughing) A woman bilakoro! You do have a sharp tongue.

Jaatu: We listen to the radio.

Ibrahima: The radio! The elders prohibited all the women from listening to the  
radio.

Amsatou: How come?

Though Ibrahima does not answer Amsatou’s inquiry, he looks to her mother and Hadjatou admiringly, as if proud of her. He drinks the “welcoming water” she has brought him, a sign that he accepts her, despite his father’s disapproval. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the dialogue, however, is when Jaatu asks if Ibrahima will marry a “bilakoro,” indicating that even as a young girl, she looks to him as a representation of progressive masculinity.

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Violent masculinities, however, challenge progressive masculinities. Pressured by his elder brother, Amath, Ciré agrees to publicly flog Collé until she says the word that

will break the moolaadé. Ciré's countenance becomes worried as he contends in a fearful, hesitant voice, "I have never beaten a woman before. Not even my daughter." Amath glares at him astonishingly and commands, "On your feet. I am your elder. Do as I say." He unwraps a whip wound around his waist and thrusts it into Ciré's uncertain hands. Ciré surrenders and agrees to flog Collé before the assembled people, including the elders, village women, and the salindana. As the lashings intensify, Ciré cries, discernibly shaken by his brutality, commanding Collé to utter the word. Collé cries in pain as her husband who had confessed the previous night that she was his "favorite wife" brutalizes her body. After the lashings seem to pulsate with a dreadful beat all their own, Mercenary intervenes and seizes the whip from Ciré's grasp. It seems Ciré would have beaten his wife to death if not for Mercenary's intervention. When asked why he had interfered with the affairs between a husband and wife, Mercenary exclaims, "I cannot bear the violence," an exclamation perhaps marked by the brutishness of his former life as a soldier. His fate is doomed, however; his heroics save Collé's life, but damn his own. Late that night, as darkness shrouds the village, he is chased out of the village by torch-bearing vigilante men and murdered for interfering with Collé's beating. In a symbolic context, perhaps Mercenary's death occurs to indicate the power of the male elders. His heroic death, though tragic, may also serve as Sembène's attempt to vindicate the character that had previously, in some regard, oscillated between sadist and saint. In a larger context, perhaps Sembène hoped to illustrate that Collé, though a fearless, powerful woman, also needed "community" to intercede for her life and help her remain brave despite crude, brutal adversity.

**The *Moolaadé*: Power, Spirituality, and Collé as "Sacrificial Lamb"**

Collé's beating represents her willingness to sacrifice her life for the girls she is protecting, consistent with the image and life narrative of Christ. Collé's flogging by her husband, Ciré, parallels with Christ's flogging and his being erected on the cross. After the flogging, Collé's co-wives nurture her back to health. Just as Christ lay in the tomb for three days, Collé lays dormant, yet still holds the power because though sores are beaten into her back, she nevertheless does not utter the "word." Like Christ, Collé surprises her opposers by resisting their demands.

As Collé is flogged, Jaatu's mother, Salba, steals her from Collé's compound and takes her to the "salindana" to be circumcised, thus transgressing the moolaadé. Though Salba is acquainted with the moolaadé and the consequences of violating it, she takes the risk, certain that to circumcise her daughter is the best choice to ensure her future, particularly, a future husband. Initially, Jaatu is seduced by her mother's loving gaze, but screams when she realizes her mother's intentions. Subsequently, the girl dies. In village lore, the moolaadé might be said to be Jaatu's murderer because her removal from the compound is a direct violation of the moolaadé. However, Sembène offers a solution for this when the women gather at Collé's compound to honor her and to console Salba. The women speak of abolishing circumcision, saying explicitly that circumcision is the cause of death. By this time, the "death count" of the film is seven—a reflection of the seven salindana, Sembène's intent to portray them as "murderers"—including Collé's two children before Amsatou who cannot be born naturally; the two girls who throw themselves in the well to avoid circumcision; Jaatu and her sister before her, killed by the circumciser's knife; and finally Mercenary, who believes in neither the practice of circumcision nor in violence against women. For Sembène, there is no doubt to be made:

circumcision is the root of death in the village, even as the moolaadé must be acknowledged, respected, and revered.

### **Feminine Sorrows: Circumcision and Sexuality, Through Sembène's Lens**

After the village meeting between the “salindana” and the male elders, the “salindana” walk to Collé’s compound, hoping to intimidate her. Collé, however, is in the rear of the compound, while the four girls play in the front. When the girls see the “salindana,” they gasp in horror, as if witnessing a monster or ghost. Sembène translates their child’s imagination into a towering image of fear. In the scene, the girls see the “salindana” as adorned with ghoulish masks, while the sky behind them is dark and misty, an image taken from the script of a horror film; their appearance is frightful. Sembène’s choice to represent the “salindana,” the “face” of circumcision, as a morbid presence, highlights the girls’ fear and is perhaps a political act; he sees them as social terror. In *Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives*, Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf details arguments opposed to female circumcision that claim the practice violates the rights of children. She contends,

Female circumcision is seen as a ghastly form of child abuse since children have no say whatsoever about the practice. Girls have no ability to speak against undergoing it; whether they wish their genitals to be cut or not is not important from the adults’ point of view. In view of the absence of informed consent, female circumcision is seen as a violation of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child... (11).

Only after the girls call for Collé are the “salindana’s” faces de-masked. After the “stare-down” between Collé, her co-wives, and the “salindana,” Collé, with a smile, comments, “They are like vultures that smell blood.” Perhaps for the “salindana,” the shedding of

blood during and after circumcision purifies, while Collé might argue the preservation of life is pure in its own right.

Amsatou confronts her mother and asks, “Mother, why didn’t you have me purified? I would have given Ibrahima Doucouré the welcoming water.” Collé tenderly pulls her daughter towards her, as mother and daughter come face-to-face with cultural tradition and the effects of rebellion. Collé responds, “Allah is great. Feel no shame in being bilakoro. Hear me?” She turns to the four girls as she speaks to Amsatou and instructs, “Nafissatou, I am speaking for you, too. Your two older sisters died before birth. You owe your life to your doctor namesake. She tore me apart to deliver you. Genital mutilation is a bad thing. A bilakoro is a good wife, a good mother.” Her words, seemingly, penetrate neither Amsatou’s consciousness nor her heart, for she rips the photo of the handsome prince to whom she had been betrothed to shreds on her mother’s lap. The photo of the “prince” is set in France, the Eiffel Tower as his backdrop. Perhaps the girl is also ripping a future in France with him because she is a “bilakoro.” Collé is undaunted by the likelihood that to allow Amsatou to remain as a “bilakoro,” she would also lose acquiring an educated, wealthy son-in-law.

Dawn, which often represents calm and newness, comes with pain. A continuum of women’s pain is imaged when the camera’s gaze lands on Collé and Ciré’s bed. The sex is violent, as he thrusts into her. To cope with the pain, Collé bites her finger. There is no mistaking; she receives no pleasure from the act, and afterward we see a bloody rag in her hand. It remains unclear, however, if she feels pain because of the excision she received as a girl, or because of her husband’s merciless penetration. The circumcised

girl's body in pain and the circumcised woman's body in pain are made to be seen as consequent states of being.

Amsatou's hand takes away the figurative burden. She says in a quiet voice, "Mother, I will handle it." As the camera zooms into the young woman's hand taking the dripping, bloody rag from her mother, there is an undercurrent of understanding and forgiveness. Though Amsatou initially blames her mother for sealing her fate as a "bilakoro," she recognizes her mother's "body in pain." She continues to dip the water for her mother's bath. As she exits, Hadjatou enters. All the women in the compound seem to know what has happened; it seems a ritual that after a night of pseudo-intimacy with Ciré, the wife who shared his bed must be mended. As Collé sits in the bath, her elder co-wife, begins to "anoint" her wounds with a thick, white cream. Collé relaxes her head backward and surrenders to her co-wife's nurturing touch. The women join together in solidarity to promote Collé's sexual and vaginal healing.

**"No More Genital Mutilations": Technology, Experience, and Speaking Truth to Power**

In *Beyond the Black Atlantic*, Goebel and Schabio assert,

The rape of native cultures, their penetration by ship, train, or boat, make up the gendered tales of modernization, of technological mastery and its usually baleful human effects...such tales have themselves to be continually modernized and revised in order to come to terms with complex processes of exchange between Self and Other, transitional modes of identity formation and advanced appropriations of technologies which move deftly beyond any kind of anti-technological nostalgia...The translation of modernities and the development of modernist vocabularies can be difficult and even painful on the periphery, because experiencing new horizons of expectation and new transformations of

the self often leads to social alienation and cultural dissociation. Modernization's main catalyst is, of course, technology... (Goebel 5).

Sembène argues that modernization cannot be found in technology alone. However, the filmmaker is clearly making viable connections between technology and modernity, particularly as it relates to the radios and the circumcision debate within the village. This is particularly evident when Collé and her elder co-wife stand in solidarity against male elders and the “salindana.” The discourse issue is that technology, via the radios, provides a discourse of freedom, empowerment, “voice,” and knowledge. By understanding circumcision is not sanctioned by Islam, the women of the village are able to “talk back” to the male elders who condemn “bilakoros” for being uncircumcised because they are impure, unclean, and perhaps in their impurity, are not “good” Muslim women. When the men confiscate the women's radios, they are in essence resisting modernization because they are preventing the women in the village from accessing and believing in an anti-circumcision discourse. Clearly, the men do not want change, but perhaps as Sembène might argue, change and technology share a relationship.

Woman: Since you hang a lot around men, do you know why they confiscate our radios?

Sanata: Our men want to lock up our minds.

Woman: But how do you lock up something invisible?

Sanata: We are all ignorant. I am telling you.

The information the women gain from the radios becomes part of their personal discourse, which represents a transferal of power from the technology, or modernization, to the village women. Once the women apply their lived experiences—whether deaths of their children or pain resulting from circumcision—to the technology, a revolution ensues. Collé's radio survives. As the women gather at Collé's compound to console

Salba, Jaatu's mother, Collé brings out her radio, where a woman is speaking: "We are being told everyday that a bilakoro smells bad, and yet nothing can smell worse than a man who does not shower." The women laugh as a mother quietly states, "Collé, we honor your resistance," while Salba laments the loss of her daughter:

My Jaatu died in my arms. Jaatu's blood was dripping on my arms. Jaatu shouted her hate for purification. My Jaatu, my Jaatu. Collé, purification robbed me of my daughter.

Oh, my Jaatu! I can hear her screams. I want to follow my daughter.

Though she mourns for the child she has lost, Salba is given a renewed opportunity to be a mother when the mother of her godchild gives her the baby girl. As the male village elders exit the mosque, Salba leads a procession of village women to the place where the men sit, raises the infant above her head and exclaims, "This one will not be cut." One moment before this act of defiance, a male elder sets the radios afire. As the radios blaze, a unanimous, mournful, female cry hurls, as if from the radios. The women scream,

Khadjaratou: No girl will ever get cut.

Collè: No girl will ever get cut.

Chorus: No girl will ever get cut. No girl will ever get cut.

The men respond:

Elder #1: Why are these females still bitching?

Elder #2: They are aroused by Collé's resistance.

Griot: Do what they please, but no one will marry a bilakoro.

Chorus: Never. Never.

Other village women emerge, seeing their radios ablaze. On one side, stand the women who oppose circumcision, while women angry about their radios stand on the other, both glaring at the male elders. As the drama unfolds, the "salindana" enter. Upon their

entrance, an angry mother exclaims, “Some give birth, others kill! The child killers are here.” The women speak rapidly and angrily: “They will no longer cut anyone” and “Let’s end our genital mutilations!” As elder, Hadjatou advances and calms the women, while Collé exclaims, “No girl will ever get cut,” while Sanata adds, “Forever!” Collé demands the “salindana” to throw down the knives they use for cutting. When the “dean” of the salindana hesitates, Sanata steps forth with her machete, “Are you deaf? Throw your knife.” The “dean” allows her staff to fall. Hadjatou steps from the crowd and stomps it with her foot, symbolizing the end to circumcision in the village. The “dean” casts her knife, as other members repeat the action. Collé and Sanata celebrate by chanting, “No girl will ever get cut again.” Collé decides to confront the men, and is met with Khadjaratou’s approval: “Give it to them. Now or never, let’s put an end to female genital mutilations.”

As Collé gathers the knives, Sanata exclaims, “Hope gives birth to courage. Women’s hope.” Again, Collé places herself between tradition and the future of women’s rights. Her brother-in-law, Amath, attempts to command his brother once again, saying, “Brother, if you don’t subdue your wife, I’ll do it.” Ciré, however, is undaunted, and refuses to submit to his brother’s heinous tactics of controlling women, particularly his wife. Ciré responds, “Elder, Collé is not a newborn. If you touch her, I’ll deal with you!” Collé, however, does not require her husband’s protection. She asserts, “Brother-in-law, you already burnt our radios. But if you raise your hand on me, I, Collé Ardo, will set the village on fire and drown it in blood.” Her husband, Ciré, stares proudly at his wife in admiration of her courage.

A shift in power occurs when Sanata sings a praise song in honor of Collé's "she-roism," taking the power from the male griot who praises men. She sings as the griot stares incredulously, "My warrior has spoken. Admire my noble warrior. Collé Ardo Gallo Sy has spoken. Collé from Niani has spoken. Djerisso women, fasten your belts. You are more valiant than men." The male elders command Sanata to silence. Though she is silenced, Collé is not. Collé shouts, "You are scared of the radios. Fear also led you to murder Mercenary." A male elder asserts, "Collé Ardo, be reminded that purification is a legacy decreed by Islam." Collé retaliates, "Purification is not required by Islam. The Grand Imam said it on the radio. Each year millions of women go for pilgrimage to Mecca. All have not been cut." She is blasted as "Satan," but is not silenced. She exclaims in victory. The burning radios become a bonfire that the women dance around in victory, as Sanata throws the circumciser's knives into the blaze. Also, the smoke from the radios rises as a tribute to women's resistance, clouding both the anthill and mosque, challenging them as symbols of patriarchal control over women's lives, bodies, and sexualities.

As the women cheer, Ciré stands to his feet and commands his son to depart with him from the presence of the men. Despite his brother's exclamation that he is betraying his "menfolk," Ciré asserts, "It takes more than a pair of balls to make a man." Sembéne's lens focuses on the countenance of the elder who had ordered Mercenary's death; his face reeks of shame. As Amsatou approaches the men, Ibrahima attempts to walk toward her. Yet, his father resists him, forbidding their union because Amsatou is uncircumcised. Again, Ibrahima explains, "Father, my marriage is my own business." His father curses and strikes him hard on the shoulder with his parasol. Ibrahima,

however, has “caught the fire” of resistance, and as he chokes back tears, explains, “Father, it is easy to hit a son, but the era of little tyrants is over. Forever and ever. From now on, I’ll have the television on.”

### **“I Am and Shall Remain a Bilakoro”: Into the Future**

Admirers and scholars of Sembène’s work recognize his contributions to the formation of an African consciousness tainted neither by colonialist tradition nor neocolonialist exploits. Thiong’o contextualizes Sembène this way:

The whole enterprise of writers on the African continent—and in many ways symbolized by Ousmane Sembène—has been to give voice to those forces which have been struggling over the centuries to regain their voice, to regain their language. In other words to regain their space in the twentieth century...For the twentieth century is in effect a creation of two traditions. One is the imperialist—the colonial—tradition with its roots in slavery, slave trade, classical colonialism, and to today’s transnational type of neo-colonialism...The other tradition is the tradition of *resistance* against slavery, against classical colonialism, against today’s various forms of colonial control and various other forms of domination (54, 55).

Sembène “talks back” to the West and presents an African woman protagonist who is neither docile nor powerless, but uses her “voice” as a rallying cry, “no more genital mutilations,” that leads the village women to end female circumcision. As Sembène explains in *Sembène: the Making of African Cinema*, “Should we (Africans) live as whites wish us to? Or in an African way? But which Africa? That’s the dilemma! Like other societies, we need a mirror. A way to see ourselves. A black cinema for a black audience. And we need our own heroes.” Sembène provides what is needed.

Collé embodies “the power of African women to work with patriarchal/cultural structures that are liberating and ennobling while challenging those that are limiting and debilitating” (Nnaemeka 4). Likewise, her daughter’s declaration to Ibrahim, “I am and shall remain a bilakoro,” explains her autonomy; initially she is uncircumcised because of her mother’s choice, but she remains uncircumcised by her own decision.

While there is the presence of technology in the small village setting, the screen portrays African women working in solidarity and choosing an anti-circumcision ideology for themselves, without the presence of either Western organizations or Western people in general. Sembène illustrates that while some African traditions, such as belief in the spirit world, are sacred, those that are harmful should be eradicated.

### **Conclusion: The Future of Representation**

It’s a new Africa that’s being created, in a slow and difficult birth. People throughout the world know only the pictures of misery and suffering that are distilled on television by non-Africans. Those are real and serious, but there is another side of Africa—the Africa which is struggling every day and winning, the Africa fighting to reassemble an illustrious past that was stolen, an Africa not losing faith. Our Africa is not the one represented by our leaders; it is not a bum

begging around as they make the rest of the world believe. And we must get out and show them. Yes, we (artists) are self-appointed emissaries with the desire to represent the best, the worst, the great, and the meager of Africa. For me, it's a duty and a cultural tradition.

Ousmane Sembène, "Still the Fire in the Belly"

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I conclude my analysis with the voice of Sembène for many reasons: out of respect for his tireless pursuit to image Africa and Africans in a way that neither glorifies nor demonizes the continent nor its people, but presents the complexities of African societal attempts to become whole, after decades of forced servitude under colonialism; for admiration over the tenderness of his lens on the African female self; and finally, because of the brilliant, visual masterpiece of *Moolaadé* as a timely film that supports my stance that we are living in an age where borders simultaneously define and restrict identities, where regions dictate and liberate cultural practices, and representations are fueled, more than ever, on issues of power and powerlessness. Yet, according to Sembène, the docile image of Africa is being replaced with a continent emblazed with representing itself, on its terms, from its own perspective. I argue here as I have throughout, that cultures do not occur in a vacuum. Modernity has created a dynamic of shrinking borders where cultures blend and mesh together, not as a unified entity, of course, but as nations forced to contend with "the other," to look the "other" in the face and either dismiss or embrace. (It is perhaps needless to hint which we have often chosen.)

My goal in this project has been to instigate a transnational, diasporic perspective about female circumcision as a cultural practice that is longer contained within the borders of circumcising nations of Africa alone. I have illustrated that the most crucial

issues are not only how female circumcision is “discoursed,” but how the circumcised African woman, girl, and infant are imaged, and the implications of such imaging—that are too often negative—in enacting (and sometimes preventing) social change; in the “discourse war” of representation, the “self” cannot afford to be lost. The value of this project, then, is in its attempt to negotiate issues of place, race, culture, and the “self” as dynamics that shape the debate on female circumcision. As more researchers, scholars, artists, physicians, attorneys and policy makers invest in the female circumcision debate, hopefully, this project will serve as a model on how to ethically represent female circumcision as a cultural practice.

I propose, then, that transnational conversation shift from attacks on Alice Walker to the issue itself, not confined to Western feminist circles or African feminist circles, but rather, as participating in transnational feminist discourse. If transnational feminism portends to advocate transglobal sisterhood, it should have at its center how best to assist African women and their economic, social, and cultural needs. I also suggest that the West attempt to understand female circumcision from an African perspective and that the practice no longer be considered as “primitive,” but rather, as complex and multi-faceted. Finally, I ask that African women are given equal respect as her Western counterpart in international discourses, and thus, the Western tendency to display her as silenced, fearful, and weak be replaced with more considerate representation that paints the African woman, not as the West sees her, but as she is.

Finally, two of the most intriguing figures in this project—and in the female circumcision debate—are Walker and Sembène, both of whom castigate circumcisers as “murderers” and “child killers.” Because Sembène is African, it is perhaps more accepted

that he judges circumcisers this way. Yet, both Walker and Sembène hold the same opinion. Is one more right or wrong than the other? This convergence supports my claim that the lines of demarcation that signify the West as “anti-circumcision” vis-à-vis Africa as “pro-circumcision” are no longer distinguishable; this project, then, advocates new conversations about our identities, not only as individuals, but perhaps most critically, as nations.

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