6.
ALICE IN MOTHERLAND: Reading Alice Walker on Africa and Screening the Color "Black"

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> "Let the jury consider their verdict," the King said, for about the twentieth time that day.
> "No, no!" said the Queen. "Sentence first—verdict afterwards."
>
> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

In the imaginary worlds frequented by Alice, the sentence always precede the verdict. And so it is that when mother Africa, without due process, was arraigned in the international court of Euro-American opinion, mama could not be anything else but guilty and guilty as presupposed. Africa's fancied accuser was none other than the "Blameless Vulva,"[1] which was presumed innocent. I am, of course, referring to African American feminist writer Alice Walker's assault on Africans in the guise of an evangelizing mission to eradicate female circumcision in "Africa."[2]

In 1992, Walker published *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, a novel in which she purports to document the social practice of female circumcision in "Africa." The novel is presented as part fiction and part fact; one could call it "factitious." By the end of the book, however, there is no doubt that, for Walker, the story must be read not as a work of imagination but as a call to arms. In her final chapter, she addresses the reader and produces some "real" facts and statistics to undergird her tale of horror. Playing the evangelist, she even promises to use a portion of the royalties from her book "to educate women and girls, men and boys about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation" (Walker 1992:285). How much more reality-based can one get?[3]

Following *Possessing*, Walker collaborated with film-maker Pratibha Parmar on a film documentary accompanied by a book titled *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*. The book provides an account of the making of the movie, which depicts in a visual medium what is alleged in the novel. The objective of this paper is to interrogate Walker's representation of Africa in both *Possessing* and *Warrior Marks* (the book), examining the images of Africa presented and the strategies used to ground the picture. It is my contention that Walker's claim of consanguinity with Africans notwithstanding, she is best read within the context of Western imperialism in relation to Africa and the narcissism or navel-gazing of contemporary American life.

In the first part of the paper, I will show that Walker affirms the age-old Western tradition of inventing Africa, in the process, I try to discern what new contribution she is making. In the second part of the paper, I will unpack the concept of blackness and also the category of race, which is one of the tropes in these writings. Walker deliberately cultivates race as a central category and then problematizes it by her oppositional representation of Africans and African Americans. A thorough understanding of Walker's project, neuroses, and concerns requires an investigation of her positioning *vis-à-vis* "blackness" and motherhood.

From the outset, it should be clear that this paper is not about the social practice of circumcision in some African cultures, because I do not believe that this is Walker's primary interest. To introduce a cliché, if there were no female circumcision in some parts of Africa, Westerners would have invented it. Such a development would be nothing new; in the past, they have been known to create persons, events, and customs that affirms their voyeuristic and groin-centered preoccupations with Africa. Remember that from 1810 to 1815, Saartje Baartman (also called Sarah or the "Hottentot Venus"), a twenty-five year-old Khoi-San woman from Southern Africa, was exhibited in many parts of Western Europe; only her death in 1815 put an end to this spectacle. (Gilman 1985: 111-2) Saartje Baartman had been exhibited to present to European audiences a so-called anomaly they found riveting: her protruding buttocks. The alleged large size of her labia and nymphae, labeled the "Hottentot apron," was also of immense fascination in scientific circles. For most Europeans who viewed her, Saartje Baartman existed only as "a collection of sexual body parts." (Ibid:88)

In 1993, almost two centuries later, Walker collaborated with Parmar on a film to expose African women's genitalia as an anomaly. Walker's African woman, like her foremother Saartje, is nothing but a collection of sexual parts, this time mutilated to boot. It must be remarked that though Saartje was displayed for European consumption because her parts were *hyper-sexual*

from a Western perspective, the African woman today is displayed for the *hypo-sexuality* caused by her presumed missing parts. The bottom line (pun intended) is that whatever the realities of Africa and African bodies, they are liable to be exhibited to soothe the Western mind/body of its sexual predilections *du jour*. This course of events is nothing but a demonstration of the unequal power relations that have continued to structure the association between Westerners and Africans since the fifteenth century. Walker is just the latest writer in a longstanding Western tradition that employs stock images and ideas about Africa. These portrayals are not informed by African realities; instead, they reflect the mind of the writer and the Western culture of which she is a part.

The medium may have changed, but the mindset and concerns remain the same. Up until the 1920s, Africans were routinely exhibited in European zoos and natural history museums, as part of their "exotic" collections. By the 1920s, these exhibitions had been replaced by film. With the development of cinematic technology, exhibitors did not have to bring whole villages of Wolof or "Ashantee" to Paris and Vienna, as they had done in the past; now villages could just be filmed *in situ* and the images brought back to the West. (Gilman 1985:88) This is precisely what Walker attempts to do in *Warrior Marks* (the movie). The theme of the project is really Alice's Odyssey; focusing on the mid-life phase of her lifelong journey to find herself against the background of an American culture that is increasingly and unashamedly narcissistic. Consider this navel-gazing statement from *Warrior Marks* in which Walker is both the speaker and the addressee:

> Happy Birthday my little wondrous brown body that has its period and is trying to get through (or begin) menopause–hence my insomnia! You have carried my spirit well. I honor you and love you and vow I will continue to care for you with all the love I have found waiting for myself in my heart. (Walker 1993:50)

Clearly, the preoccupation is always with exhibiting bodies, whether it is African bodies or "my little wondrous body."[4] Precisely because Euro/American discourse of the social, is somatocentric in that what is believed to undergird social hierarchies, privileges, identities, and ultimately social interest derives from the body.

A well-known European custom prescribes that, at her wedding, a bride should wear:

I. something old,
something new,

something borrowed,
something blue.

My analyses of Walker's writings on Africa are inspired by the themes suggested in these couplets, although not necessarily in this order. The imagery of marriage invoked here draws attention to the marriage of convenience between Western imperialist traditions and the ideas of Walker, an African-American woman who belongs to a group that has borne disproportionately the brunt of these racist practices. The image of a marital union also highlights the unhappy marriage of feminists of different hues–Western feminists and those from Africa, Asia, and Latin America at one level; and, at another, the presumed alliances among a hodge-podge of women homogenized into the categories "Third World Women" and "Women of Color." These alliances are predicated on the idea that people with similar body parts and pigmentation must have a common interest. But a common biology is not a common interest. Humans are cultural beings and culture cannot be wished away in favor of biology. If this variety of people are homogenized, it is not their bodies which make them the same, but their common histories of colonial oppression. On the other hand, it could be the result of the Western cultural perception that they are as a group distinct from Europeans and are therefore homogeneously, systematically discriminated against. At yet another level, the allusion to marriage draws attention to the notion that in the United States children can now divorce their parents. In the writings that are analyzed here, we see Walker attempt to divorce both her real mother and her symbolic mother, Africa, on account of a perceived betrayal.

Something Old: Western Imperialist Traditions and the Invention of Africa

Africa has been central in Western discourses of difference and degeneration. For centuries, Europeans have envisioned and written about Africa mainly in terms of Otherness, a vehicle for articulating what the West is not. Of course the classic statement of this belief is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This intellectual tradition owes much to a vision of society as being a reflection of the physical bodies to be found in it. Because Africans were seen to be physically different from Europeans, who presented themselves as the norm, certain ideas and images were deployed to enunciate what Europeans perceived as the pathologies of difference. Africans were by no means the only group upon which Europeans pinned the badge of difference; European women, the urban poor, Jews, and Native Americans were similarly labeled. African

women in particular, however, appear to represent the ultimate Other, combining in one category a racial and sexual Otherness with a special role as the "Other's Other," at least from the point of view of the European males who authorized these images.

In this regard, Sander Gilman's work shows the various modes of figuration of Otherness[5]; they invoked, including the reduction of the Other to body parts along with projections of hyper-sexuality and bestiality. In the nineteenth century, for example, when Saartje Baartman was exhibited in Europe, she was in the charge of an *animal trainer* and was viewed as no more than a collection of sexual body parts. After her death, George Couvier, the dean of French biologists, dissected her genitalia; the remains are still on a shelf in the Musee de l' Homme in Paris. After a tour of the museum, historian of science Stephen Jay Gould observed that "no brains of women, ... nor any male genitalia grace the collection" (Gilman 1985:270). It is equally noteworthy that there were no European female genitalia in the collection; the three jars containing female genitalia were labeled *"une negresse, une Peruvienne, et la Venus Hottentotte"* (Ibid:20). Given the premise of genetic research, it is curious that no samples of European female genitalia were on display for comparative purposes. Feminist purveyors of global sisterhood–a sisterhood based on a common genitalia–would do well to note that even apparently similar body parts have different histories and locations. It is similar histories and common interests, and not body parts, that should be the focus of alliances.

Nancy Stepan explains the Victorian mindset that created the gory exhibits in this Paris museum:

> Of all the boundaries between peoples, the sexual one was the most problematic to the Victorian mind. In the area of racial thought, there had been since the earliest of times a prurient interest in the strange sexual customs of alien peoples, especially the African. Did African women, for instance, mate with the great apes who came out of Africa? Were the sexual organs of Africans larger than those of whites? Did a tropical climate encourage an unbridled sexuality that resulted in promiscuity? It was not surprising that anthropological accounts of strange peoples provided a surrogate pornography for Europeans. (Stepan 1985:104-105)

Walker's *Possessing* and *Warrior Marks* are best read within the Western imperialist tradition in which "the black whether male or female, came to represent the genitalia." (Gilman 1985:109) In that discourse, African female genitalia are also highlighted as proof of African sub-humanness.

In the nineteenth century, the newly emerging discipline of *anthropologie*

focused almost exclusively on the study of humans in their physical forms and the ways in which physical characteristics dictated human behavior. "In France more than in any country, anthropology took a definitive turn towards physical anthropology" (Cohen 1980:219). The setting of some scenes of Walker's novel *Possessing* in France is not accidental. Part of the French *mission civilisatrice* in Africa from the sixteenth century onwards, like Walker's evangelizing mission at the closing years of the twentieth century, was carried out in the Senegambian region of West Africa. Walker's indebtedness to French *anthropolgie* is quite apparent in the construction of her fictional characters and in her claims about Africans in general, African women, and the practice of female circumcision. In fact, one of the main characters in the novel is a French anthropologist whose apparent mission is to save Africans from themselves. He is presented as the missionary "Pierre, who has said he wants to be the first anthropologist to empower and not further endanger his subjects" (Walker 1992:230). This messianic, French anthropologist comes complete with the Western gaze. Tashi, the African woman, is hypnotized by his omniscient eyes and she alleges that, "it was those knowing eyes, with their appraising look, that, from as far away as an undergraduate dormitory at Harvard, saw into me. Even into my dreams" (Ibid:163).

Walker also employs an enduring trope in Western writings: the representation of Africans as animal-like. Consider our introduction to Tashi, the protagonist of the novel:

> Tashi was standing beside Catherine, her mother, a small swaybacked woman with an obdurate expression on her dark lined face, and at first there was only Tashi's hand–a small, dark hand and arm, like that of a monkey, reaching around her mother's lower body and clutching (Ibid:7).

Compare this to the observations of the French scientist Cuvier about Tashi's foremother Saartje Baartman more than a century and half earlier: "When she was alive, her movements were brusque and capricious like those of a monkey... I have never seen a human head more resembling a monkey's than hers." (Cohen 1988:239) Similarly, Berenger-Feraud, the chief medical officer of colonial Senegal, and a nineteenth-century French colonizer of Africa, asserted that "the angle formed by the pelvic bone or backbone of Wolof women is such that it looked more natural for them to be walking on all fours than to walk upright as bipeds" (Cohen 1980:241). Walker echoes this racist idea in her depiction of Tashi. In one of the sessions with her psychoanalyst, Tashi recounts that in her dream, "The first thing I drew was the meeting of my mother with the leopard on her path.... But I drew, then painted, a leopard with two legs, my terrified mother with four" (Walker

1992:54).

There is even a literary precedent for this interchangeability of Africans and animals. In 1863, a novel titled *Five Weeks in a Balloon* by Jules Verne, published in Paris, contained dialogue revealing the author's belief about the close resemblance between Africans and monkeys:

> "There was an attack!" said Joe. "We began to think we were besieged by the natives."
> "They were only apes, fortunately," replied the doctor.
> "At a distance the difference is not striking, my dear Samuel."
> "Not even when you are close," said Joe (Cohen 1980:243).

Walker takes up this bestial imagery using the depiction of the beast of burden arguably, the dominant image of the African woman today. Elsewhere (in this volume), I have argued that the belabored image of the overworked African woman complements the image of African men as lazy and indolent in traditional Africanist discourse. Walker works this image at various points in *Possessing,* but one of the most striking instances is in Tashi's description of her mother:

> And there was my mother, trudging along the path in front of me, her load of groundnuts forcing her nearly double. I have never seen anyone work as hard as my mother, or pull her share of work with a more resigned dignity... I studied the white rinds of my mother's heels, and felt in my own heart the weight of Dura's death settling upon her spirit, like the groundnuts that bent her back. As she staggered under her load, I half expected her footprints, into which I was careful to step, to stain my own feet with tears and blood (Walker 1992:16).

In *Possessing,* the representations of pathology are equally central. Olivia's observations about Tashi's state after the circumcision are telling enough:

> It now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days. She was incapacitated by cramps nearly half the month. There were premenstrual cramps: cramps caused by the near impossibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture as M'Lissa had left, after fastening together the raw side of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thorns and inserting a straw so that in healing, the traumatized flesh might not grow together, shutting the opening completely; ... There was the odor, too, of soured blood, which no amount of scrubbing, until we got to America, ever washed off (Ibid:65).

Of course, today no depiction of disease and sexual pathology would be complete without AIDS, a disease that is perceived to collapse together de-

generate people and degenerate behavior. The Olinkans, Walker's fictional Africans, are afflicted with AIDS, a disease which she believes is spread primarily through circumcision. Both AIDS and female circumcision, then, serve as convenient vehicles for articulating centuries-old European stereotypes about Africa.

A discussion of this image-making would not be complete without consideration of the rhetorical strategies used to put them in place. One particularly glaring strategy, like the images described above, does not originate with Walker. This strategy is what I call the villagization of Africa, the assertion of the powerful myth that Africa is a homogeneous, unitary state of primitivism in words and deeds. This myth is part of the traditional discourse of inventing Africa and over the years has proved undiscardable despite the diversity of African nations, cultures, and societies. African philosopher Paulin Hountondji appropriately named this myth Unanimism. Its primary assumption, he explains, is "primitive unanimity with its suggestion that in primitive societies–that is to say non-Western societies–everybody agrees with everybody else. It follows that in such societies there can never be individual beliefs or philosophies but only collective systems of belief" (60). Thus Walker in *Warrior Marks* writes condescendingly about this person /thing called Africa: "To be in Africa. To realize Africans are doing OK, basically, if they'd just stop hurting themselves. And that I love Africa. That Africans have time and space. . . Africans really should be able to be wise, not just clever or smart" (Walker 1993:50).

Similarly, in *Possessing* she miniaturizes Africa by stereotyping: "The Mbele camp was a replica of *an African village*" (Walker 1992:43). And yet another passage reads, "The operation she'd had done to herself joined her, she felt, to these women, whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman. *Completely African*" [my emphasis] (Walker 1992:64). What is a typical African village, and indeed who or what is this typical African that embodies Africanness, given a varied and various continent of peoples, cultures, and countries? It is this unanimist perception that enables this wholesale homogenizing and miniaturizing of such a vast and diverse continent. How and why does female circumcision, which is not practiced by many African cultures, become the defining characteristic of Africanness? Are the Luo of Western Kenya, for example, not African then because they circumcise neither males nor females? What about the two Ijo communities of Amakiri and Ebiama in southeastern Nigeria, in which both groups claim the ethnic identity of Ijo but only one group practices clitoridectomy? Consider this reaction of a group of Suku from Zaire to the idea of female circumcision as reported by an anthropologist:

> When I once mentioned to a group of Suku that in some parts of Africa women are "circumcised," the information was greeted with disbelief and hilarity. One person who had literally fallen on the ground with laughter, asked in jest whether women in these places also impregnated women (Kopytoff 1990:83).

Why should infibulation and clitoridectomy be lumped together as one cultural practice? Consider this discussion of female circumcision in Amakiri, where premarital sex is not frowned upon, and in which "before a girl finally settles down to a permanent partner and marital proceedings are initiated, she frequently bears a child" (Hollos and Leis 1989:124).

> Becoming an adult Ijo is *bound up with pregnancy* [my emphasis]. In Amakiri there is an added contingency to attaining adulthood—circumcision—which is avoided on Ebiama. In the former community, *women are circumcised in the seventh month of gestation*, which is the first step in the ritual process toward the attainment of full adult status, culminating in later life in a coming out ceremony (Ibid: 125).

Clearly, the practice as described for the Ijo has nothing to do with maintaining virginity; rather, it is a prenatal rite to ensure the safety of the child and the fertility of the mother and the earth. It is apparently unlike infibulation as it has been described for Sudan and Somalia, where it appears to be associated with the preservation of virginity, a tenet that is associated with adherence to the two world religions: Islam (in this specific case), and Christianity.

In researching socio-cultural practices, context-specificity is important. Interpretations of circumcision or any other issue, for that matter, cannot be generalized from one place to the other, because, although the practice may appear similar, its underlying meaning and function may be different. Consequently, using the Kikuyu[6] example or the Dogon[7] meaning of the practice to interpret other societies makes no sense whatsoever. The practice must be interpreted within the cultural and historical context of each society; we have to see how it functions and fits in with other institutions before we can begin to make any kind of assessment or judgment about its purpose or meaning. The point is that very little research on circumcision has been done within the whole cultural context of specific communities. Thus, many of the claims that are being made are based on Western assumptions and studies of a few groups, which are then applied to other African groups to prove Western ideologies. Such generalizations are baseless in reality and yield very little useful information.

Undoubtedly, the deployment of a unanimist perspective of Africa is exemplified by Walker 's insistence on creating an African language despite

the fact that there are at least one thousand African languages in use today; hers is a fictional language in which she blends the vocabulary of one language with that of another and even manufactures some more words. This creation of a supposed "African" language underscores the fictional nature of Walker's Africa.

Another method Walker employs to ground her misconceptions is what I refer to as a process of exceptionalizing. Used positively or negatively, it is the stock in trade of cultural outsiders; once the observer has made up her mind about a person, a practice, a group or phenomenon, nothing else changes the perception. Instead, all contrary evidence is made into the exception that proves the invented rule. The following passage from *Warrior Marks* about the "state of womanhood" in the Senegambia shows Walker's determination to paint only a negative picture.

> There's no such thing as a woman having a quiet moment on the beach alone. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Women are routinely followed, yelled at, harassed on the street. I can't help but connect this behavior to genital mutilation: the acceptance of domination, the lack of a strong sense of self one sees among women here. Or, conversely, there will be *occasionally* an extremely loud brash woman, like the one who pressed us to buy her wares with such vigor that she ran us out of her stall. *These are the women whose pent-up anger seems to be a powder keg* [my emphasis] (Walker 1993:53-54).

Likewise, Nancy, one of Walker's disciples in the film-making party, observes that Gambian women dress in beautiful, colorful fabrics, which she contends are a creative reflection of the women's pain (Ibid:10). Obviously, Gambian women, the object of this instance of negative exceptionalizing, cannot win. Because Walker and her group are bent on painting only a negative picture of Africans, they will create this negative picture regardless of what these African women say or do.

In contrast, Walker uses the method of positive exceptionalizing in *Possessing* not for Africa, but to maintain the civilization that Europe represents from her standpoint. She suggests that Marquis de Sade, the French man from whose name and behavior the word "sadism" was denied, is not representative of French culture. Pierre and his French mother Lisette discuss his uniqueness in French culture:

> "In France there are no instruments of torture beside the bed."
> "And the Marquis de Sade?" I asked.
> "Thankfully, only *one* man, she said, and thankfully not in *this century*. She laughed. And thankfully not beside *my bed*" (Walker 1992:140).

SOMETHING BORROWED: FEMINIST EVANGELISM[8] AND "VICTIMOLOGY"

Western feminists, as heiresses to the imperialist tradition of at once demonizing and saving Africa from itself, have been no less active in refurbishing the old images of Africa; they added new dimensions, including a more gender-specific elaboration of these myths about Africa. Imperial feminism had discovered its social mission. Walker has borrowed from this neo-Western feminist tradition in her project of "saving Africa." Although in her earlier writings Walker had articulated the concept of "womanism" (Walker 1985) derived from African-American culture as a black version of women's self-determination, her approach in relation to Africa offers no departure from the representation of African women in the larger Western feminist discourse.

The denial of female agency, better known as feminist victimology, is one of the hallmarks of feminist writing, and its foundations must be sought in the beginnings of Second Wave feminism in the United States. Because of feminisms connections to the Civil Rights movement, there arose a need on the part of liberal white women to exculpate themselves from the blame of having participated with their men in the ignominious historical processes of genocide, slavery, and colonialism. Claiming powerlessness and the status of victims, they could deny their own agency. However, the source of the lack of agency attributed to African, Asian, and Latin-American women is different. At the global level, the lack of agency attributed to women of these societies is a function of the unwillingness of Western women to accord them humanity. Instead, they have been reduced to chattel. A number of scholars have written about this ethnocentrism but none more eloquently than Marnia Lazreg when she writes on Algerian women. She admonishes researchers:

> To take intersubjectivity into consideration when studying Algerian women or other Third World women means seeing their lives as meaningful, coherent, and understandable instead of being infused "by us" with doom and sorrow. It means that their lives like "ours" are structured by economic, political and structural factors. It means that these women, like us are engaged in the process of adjusting, often shaping, at times resisting and even transforming their environment. It means that they have their own individuality; they are "for themselves" instead of being "for us." An appropriation of their singular individuality to fit the generalizing categories of "our" analyses is an assault on their integrity and on their identity (Lazreg 1988:84).

Walker's interpretation of female circumcision is founded on the idea that it is authorized by patriarchy for the benefit of men and for the sexual control of

women. Despite the dominance and centrality of females in performing the rites of circumcision as she describes it for Gambia, she insists that it is a "patriarchal wounding." She claims that her own "visual mutilation" helped her "to see the ways in which women are rather routinely mutilated in most parts of the world" (Walker 1993:267). One should ask the question, the routine mutilation of women by whom? It is curious that in the larger debate on female circumcision in the United States media, instances of mothers who take the initiative to circumcise their daughters despite the objection of the fathers, are not interpreted as examples of female self-assertion and/or defiance of patriarchal authority. Instead, such women are often projected as having succumbed to community pressure, the community of course being defined as male-created. It should be understood that, just like men, women are participants in the creating of cultures and in the constitution of community standards for good or ill.

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. 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. Often these categorizations function as yet another opportunity to elevate one group at the expense of another. It needs to be understood that representation cannot be on the bases of pigmentation or a common collection of body parts, but on the commonality of interests, recognizing that interests are dynamic and situational. It is a fallacy to think that common interests can be discerned just by color, and it is a mistake to act as if groups and group interests are cast in stone.

Many Western women continue to maintain their patronizing attitude towards different groups of non-Western women, upholding a "We've come a long way, baby"[9] posture to underscore what they consider their superior achievement in liberating themselves from the shackles of patriarchy. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the advantages enjoyed by Western women in the global system have nothing to do with womanhood, whatever that may be. Rather, these privileges are due to the benefits they enjoy as a racial group and to the dominance of their countries in the global capitalist system. When Walker declined to pay the Gambian woman film consultant her due, she defined herself as a black woman who did not have the same resources as her American compatriots who had earlier made a documentary in Gambia.

She writes, "Well, we are black women, and our resources are not the same as those of the American television network, which is upper-class white and male (even though a white woman had come to make the documentary)" (Walker 1993:41). Her claim is disingenuous because she conveniently forgets that, black or not, the fact that she is an American has contributed largely to her ability to engage in this kind of project in Africa. Walker may or may not have the same advantages as the white American male and female filmmaker (although I believe this to be debatable in this instance, at least), but, pigmentation notwithstanding, she is clearly not in the same position as the African women whose genitalia she insists on making the topic of discussion in American living rooms and coffee shops, and the victim *du jour* of some Women's Studies courses across the United States. In fact, she is simply exploiting purported racial consanguinity to practice capitalist exploitation American style.

On the issue of female victimhood and male agency, it is disturbing to see how African female prostitution is perceived in contrast to male prostitution. Walker registers her objection to female prostitution when she mentions a place in Dakar called "Le ponty, a place of prostitution. It looked like a very sleazy sandwich shop, and Deborah and I left after a few minutes. The thought of prostitution is always horrible, but the thought of genitally mutilated prostitutes was more than I could tolerate." (Walker 1993) She is, however, silent on male prostitution. Parmar, her collaborator, is more explicit. She claims that the young African prostitutes were eyeing Walker and her group and "suspected them of horning in on their territory. Their clients are white men, tourists who come to Africa specifically to have sex with African women. It is so sad that these women must resort to prostitution as a means of survival" (Walker 1993:143). Regarding, the same phenomenon amongst males, Parmar merely observed, "We have noticed many older white women tourists accompanied by young Gambian men. Interesting" (Ibid: 200). Clearly, for her, African male prostitution is acceptable. And just as clearly, this is a case of gender discrimination.

In contrast, a recent report on sex tourism in Gambia paints a disturbing picture particularly in regard to its prevalence. A white, female senior citizen from England who had had numerous sexual encounters with young Gambian male prostitutes had this to say:

> You don't ask for sex, but the men seem to know you want it. They say things like, "would you like to see the real Africa?" It's all very discreet. I had four different boys that holiday and the best sex I ever had. I came back a new woman. It was very empowering as a woman to be able to have my pick of a bunch of beautiful men (*Marie Claire* 1994:69).

I.

Walker had stated that one of her goals in doing the documentary was to explore "the likelihood of a connection between AIDS and female circumcision?" Clearly, prostitution fits very well into this theme. Why, then, does she not seize the opportunity of white men and women cavorting with Africans (male and female) to explore the transmission of AIDS transglobally? One cannot over-emphasize the role of prostitution in disease transmission when one takes into account the numbers of sexual partners encountered. Take, for example, the variety of European women encountered by a Gambian male prostitute, a veteran of the sex trade.

> I've fucked all sorts since then, all nationalities. The British like rastas, and they like to drink before they do anything. They're kinder than the Swedish, who just want to get a black man. The old women need you to like them; you have to fuss over them and spend a lot of time to give enjoyment. I don't like condoms because they leave no feeling. *I'm not worried about AIDS-I trust myself.* [My emphasis] (Ibid:18).

Between Walker's Africa, and the "Africa" unveiled by the male prostitutes, will the real Africa(s) please stand up? Both Parmar and Walker are silent about another very visible aspect of sex tourism in Gambia, the preying of white men on young boys *a la* Philippines and Thailand. For a person who is concerned about saving Africa's children and saving the continent from an alleged AIDS genocide, Walker's silence on this issue of male prostitution is deafening and suggest a sexist perspective which assumes that boys will be boys and girls will be victims. Females do not have a monopoly on victimhood, nor males a corner on agency. If salvation is indeed an issue, then all victimized children are in need of it.

In many feminist writings, the universe of female oppression is created by a failure to acknowledge the ways in which some societal institutions and practices victimize males. I am at a loss to understand why the periodic patriarchal blood-letting euphemistically known as civil wars, world wars, and regional wars which in many societies have victimized more directly the male population have not received adequate feminist attention and vituperation. Too often, feminist analysis of circumcision and other social practices fails to pay attention to how they may impinge on males and other social groups. For instance, one reason young male prostitutes in Gambia give for their line of work is that they are required to provide for their families despite the fact that there are no other jobs available.

Something New, Something Blue: Motherhood and the African-American Search For Africa

> Negro women, the doctor says into my silence, can never be analyzed effectively because they can never bring themselves to blame their mothers.
> Blame them for what? I asked.
> Blame them for anything, said he (Walker 1992:19).

Motherhood is an especially appropriate theme for the elucidation of Walker's mission in Africa. On the issue of motherhood, Walker sings the blues. Historically, many African Americans have portrayed Africa as the motherland. Africa is seen as mother, sometimes as the mother who allowed her children to be sold into slavery. Although by and large, her sin is, portrayed as one of omission, she remains the mother nonetheless. With regard to the other parent, the picture appears different in that America–the father–is presented as one who refuses to acknowledge Africa's children who have been rendered bastards as a result. W. E. B DuBois' elucidation of the two souls of black folks–the Negro and the American—echoes this theme of dual cultural parentage. Along the same lines, literary scholar Henry Louis Gates called America the surname in the appellation African Americans. (Gates 1992) In short, they are mama's baby, papa's maybe, to borrow a phrase from African American scholar, Hortense Spillers. One should note that in addition to being the symbolic father, in reality the slave master's institutionalized rape of black women during the period of slavery resulted in the reproduction of labor and capital in the form of unacknowledged children who were exploited as slaves. It is this tension between Africa as mother and America as the abusive patriarchal father that has been one of the central themes of the African-American experience.

Walker has, however, successfully reversed this formulation in her representation of Africa as the guilty, evil mother and America as the father who fell into sin because of her. "White is not the culprit this time," she writes in *Possessing* (Walker 1992:106). Walker readily identifies with the father in her portrayal of America and Africa in binary opposition of the Self and the Other, respectively. The America of *Possessing* is hardly recognizable as the place of pain and sorrow that many other African American writers through the years have projected in their accounts. Raye, the African American psychoanalyst, explains to Tashi, the troubled African woman in the novel, why she had asked her dentist to mutilate her gums as a way of empathizing with Tashi's pain of circumcision: "Don't be mad, because my choosing this kind of pain is such a puny effort, … in America this is the best I can do" (Ibid:132). Is this what America really looks like? In sharp contrast, let us look at Cornel

West's portrait of America, which he described as a nihilistic place characterized by "the collapse of the meaning in life" (West 1992:9). West further notes that "the tragic plight of our [American] children clearly reveals our deepest disregard for public well-being. About one out of five children in this country lives in poverty, including one out of every two black children.... Most of our children are neglected by overburdened parents and bombarded by the market values of profit-hungry corporations (West1992:12).

In yet another move to paint a rosy picture of the West in contrast to Africa, Olivia the young African-American woman in the novel lied that "nobody in America or Europe cuts off pieces of themselves" (Walker 1992). To the contrary, consider the observations of feminist scholar Kathryn Pauly Morgan on the prevalence of mutilations among American women:

> I believe we need a feminist framework to understand why breast augmentation, until recently was the most frequently performed kind of cosmetic surgery in North America ("New Bodies for Sale") and why, according to longevity magazine, 1 in every 225 adult Americans have elective surgery in 1989. We need a feminist analysis to understand why actual live women are reduced or reduce themselves to "potential women" and choose to participate in anatomizing and fetishizing their bodies as they buy "contoured bodies," "restored youth" and "permanent beauty." In the face of a growing market and demand for surgical interventions in women's bodies that can and do result in infection, bleeding, embolisms, pulmonary edema, facial nerve injury, unfavorable scar formation, skin loss, blindness, crippling, and death, our silence become a culpable one (Morgan1991:28).

Given the situation as described in the preceding quote, the label "mutilating culture" which Walker uses to describe African cultures is obviously applicable to North America as well. She did not have to go to Africa to find mutilation and pain, or even to find children in need of a savior, for that matter. What is remarkable also in Walker's account of pain is the emphasis on only physical pain as primary, as if this were the only dimension or even the most profound kind of pain. This unidimensional focus on the body speaks to the aforementioned somatocentricity in Western approaches to humanity and society.

In a most disturbing fabrication of history, attempting to apportion blame for the Atlantic Slave Trade and the oppression of slavery in the United States, Walker makes the claim that Africa had taught America about violence:

> Many African women have come here, said Amy. Enslaved women. Many of them sold into bondage because they refused to be circumcised, but many of them sold into bondage circumcised and infibulated. It was this sewed up

> woman who fascinated the American doctors who flocked to the slave auctions to examine them, as the women stood naked and defenseless on the block. They learned to do the procedure on other enslaved women; they did this in the name of science. They found a use for it on white women (Walker 1992:188).

These claims at best display Walker's abysmal ignorance of the history and sociology of slavery and of circumcision as a world-wide practice which did not exclude Europe and America.

Walker writes that her African foremother must have been sold into slavery because she refused to be mutilated. In her relentless efforts to force a marriage between incompatibles, she equates circumcision of women with slavery: "I recognized the connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of women in the world" (Walker 1992:139). She lumps slavery and circumcision together again in her interview with Parmar during the making of the film: "I want to ask them [African women] what custom made it possible for me to end up on another continent, in the USA? We have been separated by a custom similar to genital mutilation, a custom of slavery" (Walker 1993:280).

It is only in the light of the connections she makes between female circumcision and slavery that one can make sense of the nonsensical question that she poses to African American singer Tracy Chapman on Goree Island in Senegal. In the proverbial manner reminiscent of rearranging the deck chairs as the *Titanic* sinks, she asked the singer the following question: "Here we are sitting on the steps of what is called the House of Slaves, and I wondered what you have been thinking about and what you have been feeling about genital mutilation" (Walker 1993:345). The House of Slaves is a monument of remembrance to all the enslaved Africans taken to the Americas, whether they were men, women, or children. For many of these Africans, circumcision was not a custom, and for some it must have been. These facts notwithstanding; it was certainly not an issue at the "door of no return" to the motherland. From Walker's standpoint, Africa is the origin of slavery and even Western misogyny. In keeping with the time-honored Western tradition of demonizing Africa, diseases, pathological behavior, and all bad things in the West are supposed to have originated in Africa.

Still, Walker's gripe against the mother, her palpable anger and unhappiness with mothers, cannot be fully explained by the symbolism of Africa as motherland; at the heart of her pain and anger is the betrayal that she believes she has suffered by her own mother. For Walker, the personal is indeed political and then again personal. She connects her mission in Africa to the fact of a childhood accident which resulted in the loss of an eye, an accident for which she blames her mother. Regarding the accident, she explains,

> One day after the birth of my own daughter, I confronted my mother. My father had died, never speaking to me about what happened. After my injury, in fact, he completely withdrew. His own mother had been shot to death when he was eleven, by a man who claimed to love her; *maybe the sight of my injury pained him, maybe not* [my emphasis]. In any event, this is something I will never know (Walker 1993:16).

Even here, we see that she is willing to give her father the benefit of the doubt. But with regard to her mother, this is what she had to say:

> My mother asked me to forgive her. She and my father had of course purchased the gun that shot me. *It was she, in particular, who had been in love with "shoot-'em-up" Western cowboy movies* [my emphasis]. She hadn't considered the consequences of buying my brother's guns (Ibid:17).

Clearly, nearly four decades after the accident, and a quarter of a century after her mother begged for forgiveness, Walker has not forgiven her mother–if indeed an apology is the appropriate response.

But why is Walker so hard on her mother, and why is her father so easily exonerated? The answer may lie in the construction of black motherhood in American culture and the special relationship between mothers and daughters among African Americans. Audre Lorde, the late black poet, elaborates the importance of this mother/girl-child relationship in her discussion of a black woman who was grieving because of the death of her mother:

> "The world is divided into two kinds of people," she said, "those who have mothers and those who don't. And I don't have a mother anymore." What I heard her saying was that no other Black woman would ever see who she was, ... I heard in her cry of loneliness the source of the romance between Black women and our mommas. Little Black girls, tutored by hate into wanting to become anything else. We cut our eyes at sister because she can only reflect what everybody else except momma seemed to know–that we were hateful, or ugly, or worthless, but certainly unblessed. *We were not boys and we were not white, so we counted for less than nothing, except to our mommas* [My emphasis] (Lorde 1984:159).

In this light we can only imagine the devastating effect on Walker of her mother's supposed betrayal. Who was to give "poor Alice," the motherless child, any sense of worth? We are then not surprised at her denunciation of her mother. Walker readily admits that the unfortunate experience of losing an eye and the negative feelings about her mother's culpability motivate her. It is this personal experience that she projects and imposes on Africans, using it

to interpret the practice of female circumcision. Consequently, she collapses together female circumcision–a rite of passage often collectively experienced–with an aberrant personal childhood accident:

> Children place all their love and trust in their mothers. When you think of the depth of the betrayal of the child's trust, this is an emotional wounding, which will never go away. The sense of betrayal, the sense of not being able to trust anyone, will stay with the child as she grows up. I think that is the reason why in a lot of the cultures that we are talking about, there is so much distrust and dissension, and so much silence. (Walker 1993:274)

Apart from the narcissistic nature of her engagements, Walker's facile imposition of her American experience on Africans also stems from the misguided notions in regard to a homogeneous and ontologizing race that subsumes Africa under a regime of blackness. I do not to deny the fact that the enslaved persons who were brought to America were Africans or that many aspects of African values were retained by African Americans. Rather, I merely want to make the point that, despite their African origin, for African Americans, the specificity of the history of capitalist slavery, resistance, and the continuing struggle against racism in the United States are crucial to their self-definition. In their experience in the United States, "blackness" has become a trope for inscribing and describing their history and culture. Significant as it is, the experience of African Americans should not be projected as an essential black experience which defines Africans and all other peoples of African descent in the same way across time and space. Any such attempt constitutes, at best, African American solipsism and, at worst, a fabrication.

Above all, such homogenizing usage represents an unquestioned acceptance of Western biological determinism, which purports that social hierarchies, group interests, and solidarity are a function of genetic considerations. According to this line of reasoning, Africans and African Americans, because of their similar skin pigmentation–blackness–experience the world in the same way and have the same interests regardless of history, social situation, geographical location, and even the issue under consideration. It is not shared pigmentation, however, but shared histories and locations that actually undergird group interest and solidarity. Any assumption to the contrary is nothing but biological-foundationalist thinking which Cornel West has termed racial reasoning, i.e., "an understanding of the black freedom struggle as an affair of skin pigmentation and racial phenotype" (West 1993: 38). Elaborating on the meaning of blackness in the United States, law Professor Patricia Williams asserted that black is also a "designation of those who had no place else to go" (Williams:1991:124). This is hardly an aspect of blackness that one

can impose realistically on Africans; it amounts to self-dispossession if we embrace it. "Blackness" whatever the complexity of its history and meaning in the United States, is certainly not what being black means in Nigeria or many other African countries, for that matter; if anything, it has little meaning in terms of situating people in social hierarchies, and it has no predictive value whatsoever as to who goes to school or prison, who gets a job or who doesn't, who lives where, and even who marries whom, or who gets rejected. This situation may change in the future given the on-going racializing process of the global system; but it is not inevitable. Neither is the outcome going to be totally predictable, unidirectional or identical to the African American situation, as it has been commonly understood.

Walker throws history and culture to the wind when she situates female circumcision within the tortured relationship she shares with her mother–a filial relationship whose construction underscores the impossible expectations of African American motherhood in a racist society in which the mother is blamed for the sins not only of the patriarchal fathers but for those of "Uncle Sam" himself. The reality of female circumcision as it is practiced in some African cultures bears no resemblance to Walker's imaginings, which are motivated and shaped by a deep, personal crisis occasioned by her mother's perceived betrayal. The problem is heightened by racism–the bane of American society.

Moreover, it is a retrograde, self-defeating step for Africans to treat their skin pigmentation as something to be explained. In the United States, projecting "black" as a marginalized category of Otherness in relation to "whiteness," which is taken as the norm may be unavoidable. In most parts of Africa, black is the norm, white is the mark of otherness. African American Nobel laureate Toni Morrison (1992) reiterates the value of taking blackness for granted when she writes that she "got titillated" through reading African novelists like Chinua Achebe:

> They did not explain their black world. Or clarify it. Or justify it. White writers had always taken white centrality for granted. They inhabited their world in a central position and everything nonwhite was other. These African writers took their blackness as central and whites were the "other" (Morrison 1992:73).

The approach of these contemporary African writers is a natural outgrowth of living in a society where everybody looked like you. The following example reiterates my point. Mungo Park the British explorer of the river Niger recounts his visit to Bondou in West Africa. The royal women who had never seen a white person were fascinated by his appearance. According to Park:

> They rallied me with a good deal of gaiety particularly on the whiteness of my skin and the prominence of my nose. They insisted they were *artificial*... The first they said, was produced when I was an infant, by dipping me in milk. They insisted my nose had been pinched everyday till it acquired its present *unsightly* and *unnatural* conformation [My emphasis] (Davidson 1964:364).

For the Royal women of Bondou, black was the norm; therefore, Parks' white skin had to be explained and accounted for. In contrast, in the writings of many African Americans, blackness is represented as a "condition" that has to be examined and explained in an effort to normalize it. As DuBois noted, the major characteristic of the African-American experience is what he calls a "double consciousness... this sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (DuBois 1995:45). He was, in my view, also referring to an Othering and marginalization of the self. More recently, African American literary critic Henry Louis Gates articulates this problem of Otherness very clearly in his memoirs titled *Colored People*. He stated that "one of the most painful things about being colored was being colored in public around other colored people, who were embarrassed to be colored and embarrassed that we *both* were colored and in public together" (Gates 1994:xiii). In using "colored" as an adjective (colored people), Gates appropriately captures the lack of agency, and the loss of agency and self-definition that seem to characterize the African American experience. "Being colored in public"–this phrase succinctly shows that the active coloring process is in the hands of whites, not the black people who are being colored by a white (con)artist.

From my perspective as an African, the appellation "black" is the category created by the outsider looking in. It is a category of the "Other"; as such, it should be resisted as a term of African self-definition. Consequently, to use "black" to qualify movements, events, or processes on the African continent is to elevate Western visions and yield African self-definition to outsiders. Along these lines, Africa is Africa; the term "black" Africa, which is sometimes used to designate parts of Africa, is an aberration. This is so because Africa by definition is associated with people of a particular pigmentation; the "black" should be taken for granted as it is in much of the continent. Qualifications such as North Africa or Arab Africa or even white Africans should be introduced and used to describe other groups that have come much later to share a continent which in origin is associated with people of a darker pigmentation. Since it is still considered preposterous to talk about white Europeans, despite the historical and large presence of other racial groups in Europe, I do not see why black should be used to qualify Africans in Africa, their place of origin.

Thus, constructions such as "black women of Africa" are not acceptable.

Women of Africa are simply women of Africa, Arab women, and white women who claim Africa should be identified as Arab or North African and white African women, respectively. For African Americans, however, having had a different history, a specific type of racialized experience, being referred to as black now carries the undertone of inevitability and may indeed have other more positive connotations that are obviously made in North America. Black power as a defiant, resistant, and activist concept and movement comes readily to mind. The fact that blackness is the fundamental social identity of African Americans is a product of the American experience. During the period of European colonization in Africa, white was the category of Otherness. Whites are a minority on the African continent. The fetishization of color cannot be the starting point or end of African self-articulation.

Something Blue: Colorism, the Different Shades of Prejudice

Finally, let us turn to an analysis of what is new that Walker contributes to the genre of Western imperialist writing on Africa's "colorism." Even as she claims some essential consanguinity with Africans, she problematizes that connection in the way in which she uses the binary Self/Other framework to construct Africans and African Americans. She does this effectively in her deployment of color in a process that is best described as colorism. In an earlier essay, Walker herself decried this behavior in African American social life, as the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same race people based solely on their color" (Walker 1983:290).

The way in which every character in *Possessing* is color-coded suggests the importance of shades of blackness for Walker and indeed their role in putting people in their place in African-American culture. Let us begin with *Warrior Marks*, where Walker found it necessary to insert herself in this color scheme. On her birthday during the filming of *Warrior Marks*, she sends herself the congratulatory message quoted earlier in this essay: "Happy Birthday, my little wondrous brown body" (Walker 1993:50). Many of the people whom she encounters during this project are situated in a color scheme. Thus Efua Dorkenoo, the Ghanaian head of a London-based organization is described as "richly brown" (Ibid:26). The Yoruba priestess she meets in London came in "black and glowing" (Ibid: 28). Aminata Diop, the Malian woman, is said to have "bronze skin." The Ghanaian writer Ayi kwei Armah is described as "very dark, all African," whereas Julius an African American resident in Senegal is very light, African American. In describing a meeting with Ayi kwei Armah, she writes "into his tender black arms I went" (Ibid:68). Why the color of his arms is necessary to an understanding of the action is not clear at all, but Walker takes it for granted that such information is necessary. Moreover, the fact that she does not explain what brown, bronze, black, or light means shows that she assumes we are all privy to this African-Ameri-

can obsession. She is mistaken: dark brown, light, black black, and high yellow–relative to *what,* I must ask?

With regard to the fictional characters in *Possessing*, colorism as a mark of identity is significant: Catherine, Tashi's mother, has a "dark lined face" and Tashi herself has "a small dark hand" (Walker 1992:7). Olivia's skin is mahogany, whilst Tashi's is ebony (Ibid:23). Benny, Tashi's retarded son, is a "radiant brown" (Ibid:56). Raye, the African-American psychoanalyst, has "brown skin, the color of cinnamon." Did we need to know the shade of Raye's skin to judge her competence as a psychoanalyst? Need I go on? The fact that Walker's painstaking descriptions of color do not represent a mere description of the rich variety of shades of African complexions, becomes more apparent as she betrays her discomfort with blackness, by using it to separate Africans and African Americans.

Walker's obsession with color is very much in line with her identity as an African American and the negative images attached to blackness in American culture in spite of the heroic efforts captured in the 1960s slogan "I'm black and proud." Consider Audre Lorde's own experience of colorism:

> Somewhere I knew it was a lie that nobody else noticed color. Me, darker than my two sisters. My father, darkest of all. I was always jealous of my sisters because my mother thought they were such good girls, whereas I was bad always in trouble. "Full of the devil," she used to say… They were *good-looking*, I was *dark*. Bad, mischievous, a born troublemaker if there was one (Lorde 1980:149).

In what way does good-looking contrast with dark? In the African-American context, as we can gather from Lorde's experience, family members are routinely ranked and graded in a color scheme. Accordingly, Henry Louis Gates presents his maternal uncles:

> The Colemans were a colored people.... Uncle Jim or Nemo, was slightly reddish, ... Ed was lighter than Jim, still reddish ... Charles had dark skin, ... Raymond was a saturated reddish-brown color, ... He had the kinkiest hair and was the darkest, which was a source of pain for him for much of his life at least. And the Black is Beautiful movement didn't seem to help him all that much. David had the lightest skin of all (Gates 1994:58).

Acquaintances, community leaders, and indeed each person is located in a color hierarchy. Again, Gates gives a colorful description of the church leaders in his hometown of Piedmont in West Virginia; "Reverend Mon-roe's predecessor, Reverend Tisdale was tall and fat, greasy and black, and his highly powdered, light complected wife played the piano too" (Ibid:117).

> Reverend Mon-roe was a nice guy, medium-brown-skinned, with a not bad grade of hair, ... His wife was blue-black, actually kind of purple, ... I'd heard about blue-black Negroes and had never actually seen one up close till the Mon-roes came to our church. (Ibid:116).

Apparently, the "nice guys" are always brown or the brown guys are always nice.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Walker visualizes herself as brown. Similarly, she defines African Americans as brown in relation to Africans, who are said to be black. Witness the contrasting colorization of Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah, who is described as "very dark, all African," whereas Julius, an African-American resident in Senegal, "is very light, African American." Or the contrasting description of Tashi the Olinkan as ebony and Olivia as mahogany. This construction is not without deeper meaning, given that color is not to be taken lightly (pun intended); in African-American culture, it must be decoded in all its layers. The "improvement" of the race signified by the alleged browning /lightening/whitening of African Americans is what enables Walker to think that now they/she can play the role of saving Africans from whatever problems she so designs. Tashi, the protagonist of *Possessing*, understands the irony here, when she exclaims to the African American Olivia "And the nerve of you, to bring us a God someone else chose for you!" (Walker 1992:23).

According to W. E. B DuBois, the problem of the twentieth century is that of the color line, but for Walker and many of her compatriots, it is actually a problem of the color-shaded lines–many lines, many colors, not just black and white. From an African perspective, the problem with Walker and some of her compatriots, is that, as with their American Express cards, they do not want to "leave home without it."[10] It (racism) is one of their precious exports.

In this review of Walker's writing on female circumcision, the objective has been to tease out the intricate threads of underlying imperialist thinking. I have shown how she follows the traditional Western cultural imperialist patterns of objectifying, demonizing, and homogenizing Africa, and her debt in this regard to the racism of nineteenth-century French "*anthropologie*." I have also demonstrated how she combines this with the imperialist varieties of Western feminism and African American solipsism.

This elaborate edifice of imperialist writing is also articulated as a personal experience in her diatribe against her mother over a childhood accident. Unquenched by apologies made a quarter of a century ago, her anger is channeled under the guise of a perfectly legitimate and time-honored tradition of interrogating Africa about its role in the Atlantic Slave Trade, unleashed with a fury so blinding that it consumes all rational discourse. Thus she invents, exceptionalizes, pathologizes, and colorizes. At no stage does she, as a writer or self-styled explorer, remove from her eyes the scales of preconception.

The value of her work at the global level, however, is that it demonstrates the limitations of the categories of gender, race and color as common denominators within the struggle for African self-determination. It also teaches Africans to be wary of assumed consanguinity of purpose in a doctrinal sisterhood which does not respect diversity–not of bodies, but of history, social locations and group interests.

For Africa, ultimately, the issue is not Walker; if not Alice, it could be Leroi, Andrew, Peter, Paul, or Mary. The real issue is the unequal power relations between the West and Africa that is constituted by and makes possible the continued exploitation of Africa economically and psychically. It is this hierarchical relationship that enables the invented discourse of African primitivism to continue, especially in its latest highly sexualized and invasive form. I, for one, would admonish that Africans must continue to face Mount Kenya[11] and Kilimanjaro, not the Alps or the Rockies or even the Himalayas of Third Worldism. Genuine cross-cultural dialogue can only take place when different peoples have equal access to modes of production and the means of representation and constitution of knowledge.

NOTES:

1. The novel is dedicated "With Respect and Tenderness To the Blameless Vulva."
2. Africa is put in inverted commas to call into question the homogenization of the continent which is suggested by the usage. Female circumcision is not a continent-wide practice.
3. The first time I heard Ms. Walker read from her novel *Possessing* was at U. C. Berkeley, on April 23, 1992. It was at a benefit concert titled *Risin' Up Live*, staged to draw attention to incidents of genocide world-wide. She chose to speak about what she termed "self-genocide" (as opposed to genocide perpetrated by imperialists) and used female circumcision as the main example of such a practice.
4. For a documentation of American exhibition of African, see Ota Benga: The pygmy in the zoo by Phillip Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume. New York: St. Martin Press, 1992.
5. In April 2002, Saartje Baartman's remains were finally handed over to South African authorities for return and burial in South Africa.
6. In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta elucidates the institution as practiced by the Kikuyu in Kenya. Ngugi Wa Thiongo's account in *The River Between* is also based on the Kikuyu experience.
7. French anthropologist, Marcel Griaule recorded the Dogon meaning of the institu-