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From Theory to Practice in Postmodern Times: Female Genital Operations as a Catalyst for Interrogating Imperial Feminisms and Decolonizing Transnational Feminist Politics

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Female Genital Operations as a Catalyst for Interrogating Imperial Feminisms and Decolonizing Transnational Feminist Politics

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Introduction

An Overview of this Project and My Intentions

A reclassification has taken place: the local has become a global concern, "female circumcision" has become "female genital mutilation" (FGM), and a "traditional practice" has become a "human rights violation." Under that gaze of international attention, the issue of female "circumcision" has come to constitute a site for a number of emotionally charged debates around cultural relativism, international human rights, racism and Western imperialism, medicalization, sexuality, and patriarchal oppression of women, resulting in an onslaught of discussion and writing on the topic. Yet misunderstanding, confusion, and controversy over the complex dimensions of this issue have not been resolved.

- *Bettina Shell-Duncan & Ylva Hernlund*[1]

As a young woman of the 21st Century, an era of global politics and feminist diversity, I am privileged to witness and participate in a transnational and cross-cultural body of feminist politics that has made tremendous gains in recent history. This far-reaching women's movement has established a theoretical space that aspires to celebrate diversity as well as commonality, acknowledge heterogeneity as well as coalition, practice the politics of individual experience as well as intersectionality, address the local as well as the global, and work within as well as across borders. This field of contemporary feminist politics represents a vast diversity of beliefs and activisms and is influenced by past movements, future visions, and contemporary bodies of theory. It is ever fluctuating, is defined differently amongst different groups and individuals, and is comprised of a multitude of voices and ideals. Thus, there is not one "transnational feminist

perspective" of which we can speak, but a cacophony of voices and visions coming together to envision cross-cultural and transnational feminist projects.

These transnational feminisms have emerged from specific conditions of both feminist and international projects. Thus, transnational and cross-cultural feminisms and women's coalitions, though often perceived as recent phenomena of the global era, have an important history. In her book, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement*, Leila Rupp provides a detailed account of this history. Over a century ago, women's organizations throughout Europe were beginning to explore the international potential of feminist projects and cross-cultural women's coalitions. For example, the 1888 constitution of the International Council of Women declared itself to be a "federation of women of all races, nations, creeds and classes." The International Alliance solicited women of "whatever race, nativity, or creed." And, the Congress of Women at The Hague claimed to speak to and for "women of the world."[2]

Ideologically, these organizations embodied the noble ambition of unifying women of all nationalities, ethnicities, races, orientations, and beliefs. Unfortunately, while these goals inspired solidarity among *some* women, they also contributed to boundaries between women through practices of inclusion and exclusion, creating, more accurately, gatherings of elite women from Europe and North America who spoke English, French, or German and were financially independent or internationally prominent enough to obtain the funding necessary to undertake the expensive and distant travels to meetings, to serve as officers, and to participate in ongoing activities.

These boundaries of the early international feminist movement were established along the lines of class, ethnicity, language, religion, and age. They reveal drastic discrepancies between the ideological aspirations and the actual practices of the burgeoning transnational feminist movement. For example, from the holidays that were celebrated to the prayers that commenced the meetings, Christianity infused nearly every aspect of the women's movement. This reality is starkly contrasted by the ideology expressed in the movement's rhetoric. For example, the International Alliance journal, *Jus Suffragii*, made the following declaration about the vision for its 1913 conference,

> For the first time in the woman movement, it is expected that Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Mohammedan, Jewish and Christian women will sit together, ...uniting their voices in a common plea for the liberation of their sex from those artificial discriminations which every political and religious system has directed against them.[3]

Jewish and Muslim women were, however, virtually the only non-Christian women overtly recognized within transnational women's organizations and these women were subjected to specific discriminations. In 1931 and 1935, Christian women were sent on "peace missions" to Palestine and they repeatedly affirmed the narratives of "progressive" Jewish women and "oppressed" Muslim women, Muslim women who, in the words of Elisabeth Waern-Bugge, "have just begun to set their feet on the long path of experiences, on which the women of Western civilization – and of course the European and American Jewesses of higher standing in Palestine – have been progressing for ages."[4] Christian women assumed Muslim women to be victims of particularly backward and exotic cultures, were mystified by the veiled women of Palestine, and when

encountering the Jewish/Muslim divide during efforts to establish branches in Palestine, found it much easier, in this case, to organize with the seemingly more familiar Jewish women. While Huda Sha'rawi, an Egyptian feminist who served on the International Alliance Board, was perhaps the only Muslim woman in an especially visible role, other Muslim women continued to pursue participation despite their experiences of rampant oriental prejudice. While Muslim women encountered these specific discriminations, it is important to note that although they were more easily involved, Jewish women confronted extreme anti-Semitism both within and outside of the organizations. With the onset of the Nazi regime, the Christian women who dominated these organizations were often reluctant to extend their concern for women of the world to their persecuted sisters.

In addition to these limitations, the movement was dominated by women of older ages and, despite their longing for the inclusion of younger generations to secure the movement's future, the international women's movement tended not to attract young women, or, more accurately, women under the age of sixty. Perhaps this was because of the subject matter of these organizations, but it was more likely related to the financial barriers that permitted only older, financially secure women to partake.

As the movement continued into the early 20th century and struggled to overcome the boundaries of religion and age, ethnicity and language proved to be significant barriers dividing European and North American women from those of the rest of the world. The English, French, and German languages predominated publications and conferences and most international gatherings occurred in

Europe. Even women of North America had to bribe European women with excessive comforts and accommodations if they were to hold conferences in the United States or Canada. European women recognized these faults in their movement, but as they proposed strategies to further internationalize the movement, they often exposed their ignorant, imperial and oriental attitudes. For example, English women proposed to organize a chapter in India for Indian women, German women encouraged a Chinese woman living in Berlin to attend a conference and speak a few words in Chinese (even though it would not be translated for the audience), and Western men were taunted with threats that they would be considered "oriental" (like the men of backwards Eastern cultures) if they were not receptive to women's emancipation.

However, Indian women protested the English organization of themselves, informing their former colonizers that they were fully capable of speaking for and representing themselves; the Chinese woman responded in German that she would not be used and tokenized – would not degrade herself by entertaining Anglophone women with a language they could not understand; and women from Asia and Africa protested the racist representations of their cultures as exotic, backwards, and barbaric. European and American women caught on slowly, struggling to incorporate the languages of Latin America, Asia, and Africa in meaningful ways, inviting women from other nations to organize their own chapters and to work with Western women to bridge gaps between nations, and hosting numerous meetings and training sessions to recognize and amend their own imperial and racist tendencies. Thus, although imperial trends persisted and

certainly do to this day, the marginalized women's voices from around the world that gathered in resistance to Eurocentric feminisms provided hope that difference and disagreement could be productive in beginning to decolonize women's minds and in the process of slowly forging transnational relationships. As Rupp writes, these women "all called attention to the limitations of the universality of the women's international collective identity constructed within the transnational organizations. But by the very act of raising such challenges, women expressed confidence that the circle could be expanded."[5]

This feminist commitment to transnationalism and the creation of global feminist coalitions is of profound significance. Recent and contemporary transnational feminist activisms and projects have also achieved tremendous success. Global organizations and international communities are now recognizing a number of issues as they are specifically implicated in gender and women from diverse nations have played prominent roles in various global movements, such as those of temperance, socialism, and pacifism.[6] While a mere few decades ago it would have been unthinkable to embrace female leadership over that of men, women have lead and represented progressive grassroots movements around the world. As Johanna Brenner points out in reference to the late 1900's,

> At the end of the century, the managers of global capitalism, meeting at the Davos World Economic Forum, were forced to acknowledge a deep crisis of legitimacy in the neo-liberal order. Half-way around the globe, in Porto Alegre, the activists gathered at the World Social Forum sought to create a political agenda for the global justice movement that had put global elites on the defensive. The participation of women, as leaders and as representatives of grass-roots movements at Porto Alegre holds real promise; so also, does the involvement of feminist organizations in the organizational networks that constitute local "anti- globalization" forces.[7]

This surge of transnational feminisms has provided a long-awaited critique of male-dominated international forces, shedding light on international development policy and its impact on women's lives. For example, while organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have been known to implement economic development programs ignorant of women's realities and developmental needs, international feminist critique has revealed these programs as tools of exploitation complicit in increasing, rather than decreasing, the dependency of women. And, while development programs such as the United States' Agency for International Development have encouraged the adoption of programs in over-populated countries that aim to reduce women's fertility "by any means necessary," transnational feminisms have struggled to advance women's reproductive health and autonomy, acknowledging that improving women's health, economic status, and living conditions are efficient ways to combat overpopulation without policing women's reproduction.[8]

Finally, among the most important triumphs of transnational women's organizing is the creation of alliances between women across nations. Women around the world have successfully negotiated cross-cultural partnerships through similarity, difference, and strategic coalition. For example, the organization Hermanas en la Lucha (Sisters in Struggle) unites women from diverse communities and creates a space in which methods of resistance can be shared and topics of cross-cultural concerns discussed. This is a space in which the experiences of Latina women in the United States are carefully juxtaposed with the experiences of Mexican Zapatista women in Chiapas, thereby uniting women

across the Mexican and United States border, lending tactical cooperation to projects such a Pas Coopetik, a fair trade coffee initiative, and permitting strategic exchange of local resistance tactics.[9]

While transnational feminist accomplishments such as these call for celebration and inspire ongoing transnational feminist work, contemporary transnational feminisms at large are not without their discontents and have aroused criticisms from those who identify with them as well as those who do not. Imperial trends continue to undermine cross-cultural potential, women of all nations experience oppressions at various levels and from multiple locations - including each other, and relations between women around the world are plagued by tensions and implicated in hierarchies of power. Thus, the project of transnational feminism is far from being complete or deserving of unquestioned praise. Understanding the complexities of contemporary feminist politics, especially those seeking a transnational movement, requires an exploration of feminist histories, an acknowledgement of those philosophical movements that are emerging alongside of and intersecting with contemporary feminisms, and the envisioning of new transnational feminist political realities. With this introduction to transnational feminism established, I will now move into an overview of the content of this paper and my positioning of female genital operations within these discussions.

To begin, when I speak of the "West," I am referring to the Western industrialized world, primarily Canada, the United States, and Western Europe. We might best approach an understanding of how the dominant and mainstream

feminist movements of the West have erred in their transnational ambitions by revisiting Enlightenment ideologies and assessing a collection of these feminist discourses. Such an analysis reveals that these imperial feminist efforts are firmly rooted within ethnocentric ideologies of the Enlightenment era and operate within neocolonial frameworks of "universal truth," "moral reason," and "superior knowledge," hence reproducing colonial ideologies and impeding the establishment of transnational feminist alliances.

As feminisms of the West lament and fixate upon images of veiled Afghani women, unwanted female Chinese infants, sex workers in Thailand, Indian widows, and sub-Saharan African child brides, what emerges is typically anything but a productive recognition of historically and culturally contextualized women's experience and the complex local *and global* forces that have shaped these realities. And, rather than affirming women as actors and survivors, there is a powerful identification of non-Western women as victims and Western women as saviors. These feminist projects have not only perpetuated the notion of a universally oppressed woman by a universal patriarchy, but have positioned some practices as more barbaric, some women as victimized beyond consciousness, some men as more backward, and non-Western cultures as desperately awaiting the expert Western feminist to preach her moral superiority. In their attempts to export their ideals cross-culturally and transnationally, the dominant feminisms of the contemporary West have participated in a colonial production that has assumed a variety of forms while fixating on a collection of sensationalized issues, ultimately thwarting the development of transnational feminist alliances.

The rise of transnational feminisms and the surge of feminist attention to select global issues have transformed practices that were once confined to local knowledges into contemporary global concerns and prime international emancipatory projects. A topic that has recently received the international spotlight in several dominant feminist discourses of the West, and one that will be considered throughout this project, is female genital operations, most commonly referred to as "female genital mutilation." Female genital operations are practices that, when located within the specific local contexts in which they are performed, are highly valued, well respected, widespread, celebrated, and normalized. Immediately beyond these contexts, they are perceived as horrifying, incomprehensible, and unquestionably morally wrong, sexist, and oppressive. Hence, feminists from within the West have taken up the topic in an effort to define globally and redefine locally these practices as barbaric violence directed at non-Western (primarily African and some Asian women) and propagated by the patriarchal and traditional cultures of these peoples.

However, philosophical understandings of space and time, identity and activism, and culture and politics have shifted dramatically since the Enlightenment and these feminisms now persist in what is often thought of as the postmodern era. The postmodern era of which I will speak has challenged modern discourses and Enlightenment ideals of rationality, truth, identity, and scientific objectivity. It is marked by a deconstruction of the self and subjectivity, an absence of absolute truth or authenticity, a multiplicity of inter-produced meaning potentials, and situated knowledges.[10] Ultimately, the postmodern

feminist rejection and deconstruction of Enlightenment imperialisms enables the necessary critique of neocolonial feminisms and provides the foundations upon which a decolonization of transnational feminist theory might embark.

Furthermore, such a large disjuncture between the beliefs of those who endorse female genital operations and those who do not makes it especially challenging to reconcile postmodern aims of moral relativism with what are assumed to be obvious immoralities and oppressions. Thus, seeming contradictions such as this often result in an impasse, paralysis, and immobilization within which transnational feminist discussions are unable to progress beyond the theoretical realm into practice as well as inappropriate action on behalf of imperial feminisms. For better or for worse though, this topic has been irretrievably situated within the global sphere, and, as Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hernlund claim,

> On the levels of both action and discourse, the practice of female "circumcision" is currently undergoing rapid and dramatic change. This change, we argue, is irreversible. As one of us was once told in a discussion about attitudes toward the international campaign against FGM: "It is like when you mix water and sand and you get mud. You can never separate them into sand and water again." On the level of practice, there remains a diminishing amount of choice for communities and individuals whose traditions have become irrevocably situated in the public arena. On the level of discourse, silence on the topic no longer seems to be an option, and the choice that remains is between informed and noninformed discussion.[11]

Given the precarious position of this topic in contemporary transnational feminist discourse, contemporary feminists must ask whether the risk of not speaking is greater than the risk of speaking. I would argue that retreating from this difficult terrain surrenders the discussion to existing discourses that are largely composed of neocolonial feminist fetishishizations of the issue and to

critiques of these discourses that fail to identify productive suggestions for decolonizing the approaches and creating spaces for transnational feminist discussions and actions. This is not a satisfying option, and the need for decolonizing transnational feminist politics and bridging the gap between theory and practice demands attention. Because female genital operations invoke these hesitant, discomforting, and difficult conversations more so than other topics might, and because decolonizing transnational feminist politics requires localized, specified, and contextualized strategies, discussions of female genital operations and inquiries as to the place of culture and feminist politics in postmodern times are inseparable from each other.

Might we then mindlessly replace modernism with postmodernism, assuming that postmodern theory provides direct and clear solutions to complex debates within feminist politics and will immediately rectify Western feminist errors? No, there is nothing transparent or unanimous about postmodern theory, but I do believe that if Western feminists desire to contribute to, not dictate, transnational feminisms, they must commit themselves to the discomforting and challenging task of decolonizing their minds, theories, activisms, and approaches. Doing so necessarily entails an acknowledgement of imperial histories and contemporary neocolonial legacies, a welcoming of the diverse social positions, beliefs, and local realities of women around the world, and a rejection of imperial Enlightenment ideals.

Certainly not all modern feminisms influenced by Enlightenment ideals perpetuate neocolonial attitudes and actions, and similarly, simply labeling a

feminism as postmodern or incorporating postmodern philosophy into feminist theory does not necessarily imply an anti-colonial position. Anti-colonial feminisms have existed in the past and neocolonial feminisms persist in the present. In fact, labels themselves are not particularly important. However, it is important to situate theories and activisms within their conceptual, geographical, temporal, and cultural frameworks since neither feminism nor any other philosophy develops or operates independently of such factors.

Similarly, reading the practices of female genital operations in a postmodern light does not require an extreme cultural relativist stance. I am, without question, vehemently opposed to any medically unnecessary and dangerous operation as well as to the cultural pressures that entice women to choose such procedures. But, this does not mean that I spend my days burning *Cosmopolitan* Magazines and picketing outside of cosmetic surgery centers in the United States, or my nights strategizing more outspoken and alarming ways to raise more public awareness, inspire more public horror, and affirm the backwardness of "Third World" countries. It does mean that I think carefully about what it means for me - as a young, affluent, Western, and feminist identified female - to speak about various transnational topics of women and gender; to identify that which I have a responsibility to say and the point at which my words and actions become problematic; to critically recognize, confront, and challenge those feminisms that have predated me; and to consider how I can contribute to and participate in shaping those of the present and future. It means colonial histories and realities must be recognized and that the power hierarchies

and imperialisms between and among women across nations and cultures must be rectified. It means a rejection of grand feminist master-narratives and simplistic solutions to complex affairs, a recognition of diverse subjectivities and practices, and a commitment to dismantling each and every binary that has been constructed between the First and Third Worlds and the women and cultures of these nations.

Thus, a discussion of female genital operations and all of the ensuing issues is ultimately inseparable from and demands an analysis of the place of culture and feminist politics in postmodern times. Among the contested issues that these discussions raise are human rights discourse, international law, cultural autonomy within and across national borders, feminist approaches to immigration policy, asylum pleas, cultural and moral imperialism, intersections of gender and nationality, and claims of authority, authenticity and truth. These discussions necessitate a move away from colonial Enlightenment feminisms and towards a decolonization of transnational politics, a process necessarily implicated in and mobilized through the postmodern era.

I would like to explore these discussions and, through an examination of anti-colonial and transnational feminisms in a postmodern era, contend that postmodern, transnational feminist theory has enabled a cross-cultural and transnational feminist politics capable of transcending modern feminist discourses that have naively operated within a problematic framework of Western imperialism and thwarted the establishment of transnational coalitions or global feminisms. By examining female genital operations, the different methods and arguments that have dominated Western feminist discourses and activisms,

indigenous responses to these discourses and activisms, anti-colonial and postmodern critique of these discourses and methods, and a strategy for decolonizing transnational feminist politics, I hope to not only contribute to a postmodern, transnational approach to the topic of female genital operations, but to also offer creative suggestions for decolonizing transnational feminist politics at large.

Having indicated the focus of this work, I will say a little about this project's structure. This project is divided into two parts. The first is arranged in three chapters and is dedicated to historically contextualizing female genital operations, examining the imperial discourses of "female genital mutilation" that predominate the West, and introducing postmodern thought and its potential role in decolonizing transnational feminist projects.

In the first chapter, I will introduce female genital operations, mapping out a cross-cultural history of the practices and opposition to them. It will become clear, perhaps to the surprise of some, that female genital operations are not practices unfamiliar to Western countries, that Western feminists are not the first to exploit the issue, and that both the West and the non-West have assumed a variety of roles in both rejecting and accepting the practices. I hope to introduce the topic in a manner that complicates simplified understandings of cross-cultural practices of female genital operations of the past and present and encourages consideration of how cultural biases shape our understandings and discourses of this topic.

Chapter Two serves as a discussion of how dominant feminist discourses of female genital operations in the West function within philosophical frameworks of Enlightenment ideals, promoting discussions and activisms that reproduce colonial narratives and preach Western moral superiority, and creating an unproductive and dichotomous relationship between supposedly educated feminists of the non-practicing West and uneducated women and patriarchal men of the practicing non-West. The theoretical tropes of the Enlightenment will be discussed and several specific feminist discourses will be presented.

In chapter Three, I discuss the theoretical tenets of postmodern theory that respond specifically to those problematic ideologies of Enlightenment-informed feminist imperialisms. While it is far beyond the scope of this chapter or project to do justice to the diversities, distinctions, and disagreements among postmodern bodies of thought, it is necessary to overview the common themes of postmodernism as they might re-inform feminist transnational work.

I then move into Part Two of this project and chapters Four, Five, and Six are devoted to creative and suggestive exploration of decolonization strategies. Chapter Four focuses on abandoning transcendent Truth and recognizing a multiplicity of subjectivities, Chapter Five on specifically anti-colonial methodology, and Chapter Six on dismantling First/Third World binaries and understanding the manners in which female genital operations and the issues that they are implicated in transcend Enlightenment divisions between the West and the rest of the world.

In choosing which topics to present in my discussions and the manner in which to arrange them, I've attempted to be highly conscious of the simultaneous demands for commitment to participating in the shared telling of colonial histories and legacies as well active contribution to social transformation. As it is also important to relay my thoughts in a comprehensible and clear manner, I choose to focus on these concurrent tasks separately, in two parts and among six chapters. This is not to imply that I see the critique of imperialisms as separate from the practice of decolonization, but rather, that I envision a discussion that gradually grows in dimension, with each layer building upon previous points and creating links between sections, theories, and practices. It is thus that I choose to first historically contextualize my topic and then critique specific discourses before moving into a discussion of decolonization. Throughout all chapters, I have made a consistent effort to continuously integrate theoretical frameworks, ideas, and actions.

By the end of this project, I hope to have contributed to both the necessary critique of Western feminist imperialisms as well as the crucial task of decolonizing minds, theories, and practices. I hope also to link theory and practice, to identify how specifically anti-colonial and transnational feminist theory has been realized by various activisms and organizations and how it might manifest in future work, and to have engaged with the controversy over non-Western female genital operations in an informed and culturally sensitive manner.

Finally, I hope to gain a better understanding of my own location within these debates, and therefore, before beginning my discussion, I wish to say a word

about myself and my personal quest that is embodied in this project. This conversation, though undeniably necessary, is not an easy one as it inevitably confronts the confounding paradox of concluding the necessity of an anti-colonial feminist politics while recognizing this action is incapable of being generalized or tangibly defined. It incorporates terminology that has been invested with diverse, broad, and often conflicting meanings, and ultimately raises more questions than it provides answers. Furthermore, in producing what follows, I find myself, though hyperconscious and self-reflexive, attempting an endeavor that, if even momentarily careless or ignorant, could easily lapse into a replication of precisely those narratives that I intend to critique. In confronting these challenges, I deem it necessary to both locate myself in relation to these topics and define the terms I will be utilizing.

Geographically, I live in a Minnesota metropolis, in the St. Paul and Minneapolis Twin Cities. The Twin Cities are host to several immigrant and refugee populations, and the cultures and societies of my geographic location have thus been profoundly shaped by this diverse peoples and communities. From the restaurants, grocery stores, and music scene to rallies for immigrant rights at the capitol and high demand for culturally sensitive services that meet the needs of the all of the Twin Cities residents, it is often easier to engage with cultures foreign to my Western upbringing by knocking on my neighbor's door or spending an afternoon walking through downtown than it is read ethnographies and perform research.

I bring up my geographic location because, certainly, the non-Western forms of female genital operations discussed in this project exist not only in non-Western countries, but also throughout the West itself. While the West has its own native forms of these operations, as will be discussed in Chapter One, immigrant and refugee communities often bring cultures and practices with them, and, once situated in the West, elements of these cultures may become controversial. Female genital operations are one of such practices and cultural elements. Therefore, while it is necessary to locate myself subjectively within this project, it is also important to understand, physically, how I might be located in relation to these practices. Expanding on this point in Chapter Six will highlight some ways that Western feminists might situate their discourses and activisms within Western borders rather than directing their efforts always across geographic borders at a practice that is mistakenly perceived as only occurring "over there."

Also, I must position myself as a young, Western female who is passionately interested in thinking about and acting within transnational and postcolonial feminisms. I have been fortunate that throughout my studies in women, gender and sexuality, I have been strongly encouraged to problematize, question, and contextualize all knowledge claims, theories, and texts. I have spent a great deal of time considering my own positionality, epistemologies, and beliefs. I have found this introspective and careful approach to my studies especially beneficial in attempting to situate all beliefs and activisms within complex structures of power dynamics in an effort to understand the shifting and

intersectional nature of oppressions, ideas, theories, and practices. Yet, I am approaching the completion of my undergraduate studies and remain troubled by feelings of apprehension and paralysis that I find often accompany discussions of a postmodern, postcolonial, and transnational feminist politics.

Within these discussions, vocabulary is specialized, disclaimers become routine, criticisms accumulate, nearly everything is problematized, and, somewhere along the way, critical awareness and productive caution give way to fear, apprehension, silence, and an inability to speak or act. Attempts to initiate conversations beyond these intimate and academic circles seem to require not only courage and a patient audience, but also a great deal of difficult translation. Rather than celebrating postcolonial and transnational feminist visions and potentials, I fear that many individuals become tongue-tied and self-silencing. While awareness of colonial legacies, hyper-sensitivity to heterogeneity, and recognition of one's position within and contribution to power structures should always be practiced, conversations must be initiated, nurtured, diversified, contested, celebrated, and expanded beyond feminist circles and academic realms. Criticisms should be productive in nature and be voiced by those who resist aspiring to dominant status and consider themselves to be contributors to a network that is larger than any one person, organization, or belief system of on-going conversations. Though perhaps an amateur in my studies and activisms, this is my attempt to situate myself within, explore, and contribute to these discussions.

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[1] Shell-Duncan & Hernlund 2000, page 1

Part 1

- Historically and Culturally Contextualizing Practices of Female Genital Operations,

- Critiquing the Imperial Nature of Dominant Feminist Discourses of the West,

- And Introducing Postmodern Thought as it Responds to Problematic Feminist Enlightenment Heritages

Chapter 1

An Introduction to and History of Female Genital Operations

Some women undergo breast reduction for some of the reasons that some young girls undergo clitoridectomy – to be more attractive, desirable, and acceptable. For the women in areas where clitoridectomy is performed, beauty is inextricably linked with chastity and motherhood. The crucial questions we must ask are: For whom are these operations undertaken? For whom must women be desirable and acceptable? Women's inability to control their bodies is not country-specific. Abuse of the female body is global and should be studied and interpreted within the context of oppressive conditions under patriarchy.

- Obioma Nnaemeka[1]

Sex is much more than a physical act driven by "natural" biological processes. Sex is a social phenomenon, and that makes it a mysterious interaction everywhere. No culture has a "perfect" view of how sex fits into society, how much sex is normal, or even what sex really is.

- *Elizabeth Boyle*[2]

Typing the phrase "female genital operations" into one of the most frequented websites, the Google search engine, yields an impressive variety of articles, advertisements, and website links. The first two results are bracketed by proclamations such as "*A New Beginning, a New You,*" have names such as "*Liberty Women's Health,*" and assure prospective patients of their expertise in vaginal rejuvenation, vaginoplasty, labioplasty (labial reduction), and hymenoplasty (hymen repair) surgeries. They advertise, *"clean, comfortable, ultra-modern, and private offices*" and proudly flaunt their ability to *"repair and tighten the vagina to a smaller, more normal-sized opening,"* to remedy *"enlarged, hypertrophic, or asymmetrical labia minora*" and "*disrupted hymen,*"

to produce labia that are "*sleeker, thinner, and more appealing in size and shape with typically excellent, very natural-looking results*" that are "*prettier, like the women seen in magazines or in films,*" and to "*repair and tighten the hymen to a more intact, virgin-like state*" because "*sometimes, for cultural or other personal reasons (for example, an upcoming marriage), a woman would like to restore a more intact, tighter hymenal ring.*"[3]

Whether the procedure is solicited for the purpose of increasing male sexual gratification through tightening the vaginal opening and canal, in pursuit of more "normal" or aesthetically appealing genitalia, or for cultural reasons, such as returning to a premarital virgin-like state, the integrity of these procedures is procured by portraying the operations as desirable opportunities, associating such surgeries with female independence and liberty, citing the testimonies and defenses of these procedures from women who have undergone them, and assuring that these women will be attended to by highly skilled, experienced, and respected practitioners.

These operations are presented as, rather than accommodating the demands of a misogynistic culture, freeing women from their own defective, unattractive, stretched out, penetrated, abnormal, and unnatural genitalia. No where do these websites warn of the potential dangers associated with such surgeries, speak of the medically unnecessary nature of such procedures, recognize the irony and irrationality of the concept that, through surgical modification, one can obtain "natural" genitalia, acknowledge that notions of what constitutes "pretty," "normal," and "more desirable" genitalia are culturally

and socially prescribed, associate the idea that a woman might undergo such a procedure for the sole purpose of male sexual gratification with the patriarchal nature of our society, or suggest that such operations, while masquerading as female elected and endorsed surgeries that socially, culturally, and personally benefit the women, might be better revealed as widespread female oppression that has become so pervasive that women have internalized such ideals and become "falsely conscious victims" of an oppressive and patriarchal culture. One, however, cannot expect such critiques from within the currently fastest growing plastic surgery sector of the medically advanced United States.

The following websites do, however, offer plenty of criticisms of other, non-Western forms of female genital operations.[4] In moving from the previous websites to these ones, images of the Statue of Liberty and independent, confident, and smiling white women are replaced by maps of Africa and simple sketches of a nude African child and woman, all in black and white except for the profuse bright red blood that gushes forth from their damaged genitalia. The setting changes from the ultra-modern and sterile medical room of the West to the dark huts and cutting tools of Africa. When contrasted with the respected and skilled surgeons of the West, the experienced and honorable practitioners of Africa become wicked old women with crude knives, the patients become victims, and finally, while the Western woman who underwent pre-marital "hymen repair" and "vaginal rejuvenation" graciously utilized the freedom granted by her technologically advanced society, the African woman whose vaginal opening was reduced through infibulation is now the wounded prey of a

backwards and primordial culture. These websites denounce not only the operations themselves, but also the reasons for which they are performed, the manner in which they are performed, the practitioners who perform them, and the cultures and individuals who endorse them. The women who choose to undergo these procedures are certainly not portrayed as women at "liberty" to make informed and autonomous decisions, but are described as helpless and silenced victims. These female genital operations have previously been and are currently grouped and homogenized within Western discourses by the catchall phrase of "female genital mutilation."

Within Western feminist discourses and activisms, the phrase "female genital mutilation" refers to a variety of genital operations occurring in predominantly African and a few Asian communities and has become, by far, the most common description of such practices.[5] This phrase has also been internationally adopted by a vast number of organizations, such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund. Most writers and speakers will briefly distinguish between the three most common types of operations near the beginning of their discussion and then use the phrase "female genital mutilation" throughout the remainder of their discussion to refer to any and all types of female genital surgeries.

The operations are generally divided into three types. The first type is referred to as Sunna circumcision and involves the pricking, splitting, or removing of the prepuce (the clitoral hood) and is commonly compared to male circumcision. The second type, excision or clitoridectomy, involves the removal

of the clitoris and some or all of the labia minora. The third type is described as excision and infibulation (also less commonly known as pharaonic circumcision), entails the removal of the clitoris, labia minora and parts of the labia majora, and is followed by the stitching shut of the vulva in a manner that preserves a small opening for the excretion of urine and menstruation.[6]

Within practicing communities, however, a variety of terms exist for these practices. For example, the terms "tahara," "tahur," and "bolokoli" are used in Egypt, Sudan, and Mali, respectively, and connote purification and cleansing. In literature from Sudan, practices are typically distinguished as either "Sunna" or "Pharonic circumcision." Literature produced in French speaking Africa frequently speaks of "excision," and literature produced in English speaking Africa tends to use the term "circumcision." In contrast to the Western attempts to advance this practice as a horrifying human rights violation through the word "mutilation", a term synonymous with defacement and destruction and associated with torture and abuse, indigenous terminology used amongst practicing communities invokes the respect and celebration associated with this important stage of a girl's life.[7]

Similar to the assortment of indigenous terminologies, several variations of these surgeries are practiced. For example, Sunna Kashfa translates as uncovered sunna and involves the cutting of only the top or half of the clitoris.[8] In Sudan, an intermediate form of infibulation is practiced that involves the stitching of only the anterior two thirds of the outer labia to leave a larger posterior opening. "Sealing" is yet another form of surgery practiced in West

Africa in which the clitoris is excised but the blood is allowed to coagulate in a way that forms an artificial hymen.[9] Ultimately, just as the people who practice these operations are diverse, there are many variations of the surgeries and far too many to account for in any paper or book.

In establishing the terminology of my own discussions, I intend to avoid demonizing practicing communities, misleading readers with ambiguous terminology, imbuing my language with glamour or moral judgment, and homogenizing diverse practices. When discussing specifically located practices, I will provide indigenous language and meanings associated with the practice and will describe the type of operation performed. When referring to these practices at large, I utilize the phrase female genital operations, a name coined by ethnographer Christine Walley in her attempt to escape misunderstandings such as the ideas that female circumcision has the same implications as male circumcision or that families and communities intend to "torture" or "mutilate" their young females.[10]

Within discussions of female genital operations, it is typically assumed that the speaker is referring to practices that originated in Africa, have been historically practiced, and continue to occur in non-Western, developing nations, primarily in certain African and Asian countries. However, this is a simplified and false account of the complex history of female genital operations that is easily contradicted by Western repressions of female sexuality and practices of clitoridectomy, excision of the clitoris.

Western clitoridectomy was first performed in Germany in 1822 by Dr. Graefe, a French Doctor, to treat a fourteen-year old girl's "excessive" masturbation. Shortly thereafter, excision of the clitoris was being explored on American grounds. In 1859, Charles Meigs published a study entitled "Woman: Her Diseases and Remedies," in which he proposed clitoridectomy as a cure for certain female diseases and in 1897, Thomas Allbutt, in *A System of Gynaecology*, diagnosed the cause of nervous disorders as an enlarged clitoris in need of amputation.[11] And, if clitoridectomy wasn't "enough" to cure the symptoms, Dr. Battey, an American doctor who practiced clitoridectomy, proposed ovatiectomy (female castration) as another means of further "normalizing" female sexuality.[12]

These practices were then later adopted by American and European turn-of-the century doctors who performed clitoridectomies for various medical reasons including hypertrophy, tumors, excessive masturbation, and nymphomania. Isaac Baker Brown, for example, was a 19th century doctor who founded the London surgical home for women and, during the debates as to whether the clitoris has any role in female sensation during sex, promoted the removal of the clitoris as a harmless operational procedure. Brown produced a theory that masturbation resulted in hysteria, epilepsy, idiocy, and even death and could be cured by removing the clitoris with chloroform and scissors. Brown's theories were largely accepted in the West.[13] Impressed with Brown's work, the Church of England supported the procedure and encouraged religious clergy to bring this issue to the attention of physicians. As late as the 1940's and 50's, physicians in England and the United States have preformed clitoridectomies for

the treatment and prevention of masturbation and its related "deviant behaviors," especially on women in psychiatric institutions[14]

Despite its own past and present forms of female genital operations, the West has long been preoccupied with non-Western forms these surgeries. In the early 20th century, Western missionaries were working to Christianize Kenya and denounced sodomy, polygamy, dancing, and female genital operations. In 1937, Reverend William Arthur demanded that female genital operations be immediately discontinued and threatened to excommunicate all members of his congregation who failed to sign a pledge refusing to operate on their daughters. However, The Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta, was suspicious of the Reverend and the missionaries, associating the demands to abandon female genital operations with colonial attempts to undermine Kikuyo culture. The Kikuyo, in defending their autonomy and resisting the mission, refused to sign the pledge.

Though he intended to abolish female genital operations, the Reverend's mission backfired, causing many Kenyans to adopt a stronger sense of nationalism and resistance to interference. Female genital operations thus became a political tool to be used against the British in creating a sense of nationalism and these operations, which had been consistently decreasing in popularity and practice before 1930, were revived.[15] So, while Kikuyo women received the operations under specific orders from Kenyatta, they were barred from the education institutions established by the colonial and missionary powers. Comparable laws regarding church membership and access to education were

enacted within the same time period by colonial administrations and missionaries in Burkina Faso and Sudan. These actions, similarly, only provoked anger against foreign intervention and colonial authority,[16] and it is thus that African women's bodies became the sites upon which imperial powers acted. As Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka writes,

> The Christian/colonial missionary crusade against female circumcision in Kenya and in other African cultures where it is practiced constitutes an arrogant denigration of the people and their existence. The campaign against the practice did not express concerns over women's health or their sexual rights and enjoyment. The focus was more on the various communal activities, particularly the dancing that usually accompanies the practice, and how they conflict with the European sense of community. The colonialists saw the Africans as having no values of their own, they were "clean slates" upon which to write Western culture in its entirety for the Africans' "own good." Their actions and pronouncements were therefore designed to belittle and ridicule anything emanating from the colonized cultures that appeared substantive or symbolic enough to threaten their self-imposed mission. The unrelenting patriarchal overtone of colonialism is reflected in the fact that the missionaries banned female (not male) circumcision because it is "sinful." Since male circumcision is sanctioned in the Bible, to declare it "savage" would be to damage the integrity and the implied superiority of the colonialist culture. Consequently, women became the convenient and safe site for the manifestation of imperial power.[17]

During the 1940's, however, cultural relativism was gaining prestige largely due to the extreme cultural relativist era of anthropology. In their aspirations to avoid the prejudices imposed through colonial and oriental representations of non-Western cultures, Western anthropologists strove to abandon valuations in hopes that observing unfamiliar practices from an ethnically neutral vantage point would allow them to transcend their own internalized cultures and practice anthropological objectivity. When confronted with morally challenging issues, anthropologists would often avoid the topic or skim over it. Thus, anthropological accounts of female genital operations emerged in the 1940's but were confined to simplified comments about "female

circumcision" that lacked physical detail and provided desexualized accounts of, not the women or the practice, but the cultural functions these operations served. In this manner, "culture" was revered and interference scorned. Additionally, male anthropologists were unlikely to establish the relationships necessary with the women performing and receiving the operations to gain any insight.

In a similar vein of relativism, the World Health Organization refused to honor the United Nations Economic and Social Council's 1958 request that it study "female genital circumcision." The WHO claimed that it was beyond the scope of their work because it regarded the practices as issues of society and culture and not of cross-cultural medical concern. No practicing nations had requested the WHO to investigate and the WHO had a policy of not intervening in local affairs unless invited to do so by the state.[18]

However, within two decades, this cultural relativism was rarely realized in international politics or feminisms, and those relativist ideals that had penetrated Western societies were quickly abandoned. After the colonial period, Europe began to confront the issue on its own territory as postcolonial immigrants to Britain and France brought their customs with them. As Eloise Briere writes, "Suddenly the African 'other' was no longer situated 'out there' in the 'Dark Continent,' but located squarely in the heart of the French or British capitals."[19] Thus, in the 1980's, several European countries began legislating the illegality of the operations.

Towards the end of the century, in the mid-1990's, the international community had become so involved that Amnesty International began to

incorporate private abuses into its country reports, referring directly to the practice of female genital operations. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank imposed aid stipulations on practicing countries and demanded reform efforts. And, the WHO, along with three other international governmental organizations, produced a collective statement in condemnation of the practices.[20]

Simultaneously, the French women's movement became involved in the discussions of these non-Western operations. The French feminist Benoite Groult explored patriarchal expressions and suppression of women's sexuality across cultures, linking the oppressions of France with those of African countries. Awa Thiam, a Senegalese sociologist then published, in France, a book composed of African women's experiences with a variety of issues. Shortly thereafter, the non-Western practices of these operations became sites of feminist critique within the United States and other European countries.[21] As will be demonstrated in the following chapter, the growing feminist concern with these practices soon exploded into an international obsession, with feminists themselves resembling 19th and 20th century missionaries and colonial officials and feminist ideals implicated in the colonial rhetoric and philosophy.

The previous examples of clitoridectomies performed in the West and Western missionary efforts of the past serve as reminders that the West has participated in both the practice of these operations within its own borders and in efforts to eradicate the practices transnationally. Examination of a mere three decades of recent history has revealed how non-Western female genital operations

transitioned from their previous existence as local practices to their explosion into the international sphere. Finally, contemporary parallels were drawn between Western female genital surgeries and non-Western female genital surgeries not for the purposes of comparing and contrasting or to trivialize non-Western female genital operations, but rather, to acknowledge the wide range of female genital operations that are performed around the world and to bring attention to the unquestioned Western practices and the quick, racist, and insensitive condemnation of non-Western practices that will be discussed in the next chapter. While contemporary Western practices of cosmetic genital surgery are certainly not the same as non-Western practices of clitoridectomy and infibulation, reflecting upon Western relationships to, and often acceptance, internalization, or justification of, practices that are embedded within Western cultural oppressions will become increasingly important throughout this discussion and will be extensively addressed in later chapters in regard to decolonization strategy.

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[1] Obioma Nnaemeka 1994, page 314, as quoted in Korieh 2005, page 120
[2] Boyle 2002, preface x
[3] http://www.libertywomenshealth.com/index.php and http://www.centerforvaginalsurgery.com/
[4] http://www.nocirc.org/symposia/first/hosken.html This website retrieved its images from Fran Hoskin's Universal Childbirth Picture Book
[5] As indicated by Nahid Toubia (1995), the only Asian countries that can be traced to these operations are India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In the Daudi Bohra community, a small ethno-religious sect in Western India, clitoridectomy is practiced and, in Pakistan, is practiced to the extent that members of this group move in and out from India. Indonesia has a history of practicing female genital operations, but all practices have been abandoned in favor of symbolic rituals. Some writers mention Malaysia, indicating that some Malaysian Muslims practice a form of these operations, but there have been no official reports or any documenting of whether or not this is true and whether the practices are physical or symbolic.
[6] http://www.fgmnetwork.org/intro/fgmintro.html
[7] Rahman & Toubia 2000, pages 3-4
[8] Lightfoot-Klein, 1989, 33
[9] Shell-Duncan & Ylva Hernlund 2000, pages 4-5

[10] Walley 2006, page 335 - Isabella R. Gunning, 1992, is another author who attempts to create a culturally unbiased terminology. She refers to female genital operations as "culturally challenging" practices of "genital surgeries." She uses the phrase, "culturally challenging" to describe any practices that someone from outside a particular culture would view as negative primarily because the outsider is culturally unfamiliar with the practice and "genital surgeries" to neutrally address such practices. This approach not only avoids a problematic categorization of these operations, but also addresses the "outsider" position that many feminists who write on this topic have occupied.

[11] Korieh 2005

[12] Lionnet 2005

[13] Greunbaum 2001, pages 9 & 12

[14] Korieh 2005

[15] Anton 1995, page 255

[16] Rahman & Toubia 2000, page 9

[17] Ajayi-Soyinka 2005, 62

[18] Boyle 2002, page 41

[19] Briere 2005, 168

[20] Boyle 2002, page 41

[21] Ibid.

Chapter 2

Colonial Legacies and the Imperial Feminist Discourses that Dominate the West

The West has acted as if they have suddenly discovered a dangerous epidemic which they then sensationalized in international women's forums creating a backlash of over-sensitivity in the concerned communities. They have portrayed it as irrefutable evidence of the barbarism and vulgarity of the primitiveness of Arabs, Muslims, and Africans all in one blow.

- *Nahid Toubia*[1]

Replete as they are with pedestrian broadsides, tensions, and contradictions, some radical Western feminist efforts against circumcision are likely to reenact mistakes of the past. These efforts do not only run the risk that their legitimacy and effectiveness will be undercut, they also run the risk of tragically erecting walls, instead of bridges, as well as the risk of burning nascent bridges. Rather than locating their campaign against the practice, the stalwarts of the problematic efforts tend to arrogate to themselves patronizing prerogatives that divert attention from the reality at issue.

- *L. Amede Obiora*[2]

The West moistens everything with meaning, like an authoritarian religion that imposes baptisms on entire peoples.

- *Roland Barthes*[3]

In 1810, Saartjie Bartman left her South African home for London where she would make her first appearance as a traveling exhibit showcasing her steatopygious buttocks, what the Europeans regarded as the abnormal and enlarged buttocks characteristic of the Khoikhoi and Bushman people. Saartjie was re-named as the Hottentot Venus and spectators who paid extra were allowed to touch her. Saartjie's genitalia were also of great interest to the Europeans who

were busy trying to prove their theories that African people were uncivilized savages and evolutionarily similar to apes. Five years later and at the age of twenty-five, Saartjie died and her body was promptly dissected by Georges Cuvier. Her brain and genitalia were preserved and put on display, and, until five years ago, remained on display at the Musee de l'Homme in Paris.[4]

Nearly two centuries later and in Wamba, a small Kenyan town, Stephanie Welsh edged her way through women who protested her presence and photographed the circumcision of sixteen-year-old Seita Lengila. Lengila's nude photographs were then published in twelve American newspapers and submitted for numerous contests, winning Stephanie Welsh the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography and a money award of $3000. Though separated by nearly two hundred years of social progress, these two happenings are perhaps more similar than different, testifying to the long-standing Western preoccupation with African women's genitalia and the visual and written exploitation of it.[5]

As documented in the previous chapter, opposition to particular, non-Western types of female genital operations has an extensive history in the West and demonstrates an obsession recently and currently sustained by the dominant, mainstream feminisms of the West. Hence, this chapter seeks to explore the manner in which non-Western female genital operations have become a feminist concern in the West as well as the ideological forces that have informed and shaped these prevailing feminisms. It is my argument that these feminisms bear striking resemblance to those missionary and colonial actions of the past and operate within an Enlightenment framework of universal truth, moral reason,

subjectivity, and superior knowledge. These colonial reproductions have severely impeded the establishment of transnational feminist alliances around the issue of female genital operations and decolonizing transnational feminist politics requires that these imperialisms be exposed and amended. To better understand the theoretical framework within which these dominant feminist discourses of the West are situated, I will begin by briefly establishing the theoretical tropes of Enlightenment philosophy. While this project does not allow for a detailed or comprehensive discussion of Enlightenment philosophy, I will attempt to outline those tenets within which leading feminist discourses of female genital operations are implicated.

Jurgen Habermas, a prominent theorist of modernity, approaches the topic from three directions. The third topic of Habermas's discussion, the "project of modernity," most accurately characterizes the Western feminisms that will be discussed shortly. The project of modernity originated in the 18th century with the attempts of Enlightenment philosophers to develop "objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic," to accomplish the "rational organization of everyday social life." Study of the arts and sciences was expected to promote human control of natural forces and understanding of morality, justice, happiness, and the self and world. In accordance with developments seeking this form of rationalization, the distance between the culture of the experts and that of public life expanded and specialized knowledges seldom penetrated the realm of daily practice.[6] The Enlightenment subject was the primary unit of these Enlightenment ideals. This subject was

thought to maintain a fixed, stable, and centered core that reveals itself while the person develops, resulting in a coherent identity and sense of self. It is through this unity of mind that the subject is capable of rational and reasonable thought and activity.[7]

However, to understand how Western feminisms have adopted this ideology, Enlightenment philosophy must be further contextualized. Who were these Enlightenment subjects, where was this Enlightenment philosophy developing, and who was it referring to as its constituents? In his chapter, "The Fall of the Legislator," Zygmunt Bauman provides a globally-minded articulation of the implications of modern Enlightenment thought for the perceived relationship between the West and the rest of the world. Bauman characterizes the Enlightenment as a period of extreme self-confidence on behalf of the enlightened European elite. This self-confidence, though, was not confined to this elite social-sector, but was also projected onto those of similar kinship, thus distinguishing both educated and uneducated Europeans from all other races and cultures. The culture of the educated elite comprised the benchmark from which all other existences, past or present, were measured.

> The many competing conceptualizations of modernity, invariably associated with a theory of history, agreed on one point: they all took the form of life developed in parts of the Western world as the 'given', 'unmarked' unit of the binary opposition which relativized the rest of the world and the rest of historical times as the problematic, 'marked' side, understandable only in terms of its distinction from the Western pattern of development, taken as normal. The distinction was seen first and foremost as a set of absences – as a lack of the attributes deemed indispensable for the identity of the most advanced age.[8]

Reason, science, ultimate truth, correct knowledge, critical reflection, and rationality were promoted as inherently Western and used to distinguish

Europeans from other lesser existences that operated upon emotion and animal instinct, religion and magic, prejudice, superstition, uncritical existence, and affectivity. Hence, reason and rationality, above all else, were defined and claimed solely by the West. The West believed to have achieved a state of mastery over nature that allowed the rational and productive organization of everyday life. Furthermore, this period of modernity was assumed to be irreversible and superior, open-ended, ongoing and unfinished, all-encompassing, without the potential for perspective from outside of itself, and signaling the annihilation of any alternatives.[9]

When I speak of feminist discourses founded in Enlightenment ideals then, I am referring to those discussions that use the specifically Enlightenment notions of universality, absolute truth, rationality, identity categories as transcending difference, and academia as objectivity to distinguish between Western and non-Western moral authority - claims such as those made by Philippa Foot that a "definitional criteria of moral good and evil" with an "objectively true or false" discourse surrounding it exists,[10] or, as proposed by Thomas Nagel, that "moral reasoning" is "practical reasoning" and is therefore open only to "rational consideration."[11] Whether claiming universal patriarchy, aspiring to ultimate moral truth, or rationally assessing inequalities, many past and present feminisms of the West are embedded within this Enlightenment framework. Some specific discourses, such as those of female genital operations, have become especially invested in this ideology.

The internationally controversial topic of female genital operations began receiving widespread and critical Western attention during the United Nations Decade for Women, from 1975 to 1985. While specific moments of this decade will be discussed in later chapters, for now it suffices to say that these discussions and depictions of the operations were tailored to an international audience, were removed from their socio-cultural contexts, and constituted a discourse of monolithic patriarchy and an oppressed Third World woman. Though Western women anticipated praise for their activism, African women and women of color criticized the leading Western feminist approaches to the issue and demanded recognition of the power dynamics between both the Western and developing world and between Western and non-Western women.[12] While the United Nations Decade for women concluded in 1985, non-Western female genital operations continue to be fetishized throughout Western discussions and among feminisms of the West.

There are several themes of the dominant discourses of female genital operations in the West. Harsh language is employed to invoke violence and fear, practices are re-named, notions of global patriarchy and universal female oppression are believed to transcend local subjectivities and differences between women, female genital operations are perceived as a primitive tradition among the uneducated and as evidence of the savage "Third World Patriarch" and victimized "Third World Woman," and non-Western women's genitalia are objectified and subjected to Western spectatorship. Each of these methods perpetuates dangerous neocolonial ideologies by reifying the "First World/Third World" dichotomy,

portraying non-Western cultures and peoples monolithically and homogenously, and aspiring to moral superiority and transcendent truth.

Claims to empirical knowledge, moral superiority, and transcendent truth arise immediately when writers frame their discussions and choose their vocabulary. Most writers strive for a catchy and persuasive introduction, and for those participating in imperial discourses, violent and strategically authoritarian language gets them off to great start. Discussions frequently begin by immediately re-naming and homogenizing a diverse collection of operations, replacing indigenous names and erasing important distinctions with the catchall-all phrase, "female genital mutilation," or "FGM." Rather than speaking to locally specific practices as they are indigenously named and signified, these feminisms re-name the surgeries to connote their own, supposedly more accurate, interpretations of the practices. These feminists thus assume positions of morally superior and rational consciousness, expressing confidence in their enlightened capabilities to convey the absolute Truth or Reality of these practices.

"Mutilation" is a term a term synonymous with defacement and destruction and one commonly associated with torture and abuse. It suggests that practicing communities intend to torture and mutilate their female youth and projects the Western feminist categorization of these practices as mutilation onto the true intentions of practicing groups. It categorizes a practice that is arranged and paid for by loving parents acting out of genuine concern for their daughters' welfare as child abuse, a concept that is not only used to define specific actions but one that also invokes a sense of the "abuser's" brutality, inadequacy, and

inhumanity. It suggests that these parents cruelly torture their children and distance themselves from their daughters' fear and pain, an idea clearly promoting the Enlightenment association of non-Western peoples and practices as barbaric and inhuman. Rather these parents worry about their daughters throughout these procedures, care for them post-surgery, and nurture their recovery similar to the manner in which Western parents and parents around the world worry about their children's medical procedures and care for them afterwards.[13]

Hence, the choice vocabulary of these feminisms is directly linked to the authors' attempts to portray the operations as brutal and primitive practices. Most writers and speakers will adopt this phrase without question, explanation, or acknowledgement of its artificiality and Western creation, using it from the beginning to the end as if it is, self-evidently and unquestionably, the most natural and appropriate phrase. Nonetheless, some will recognize and defend the strategic use of this language, linking their consciousness of this language to their consciousness of the "true nature" of the practices. For example, Mary Daly introduces female genital operations as the "unspeakable and barbaric rituals and atrocities" that are "only the beginnings of the horrific lives of African women," qualifying this description with a footnote that reads, "I have chosen to name these practices for what they are: barbaric rituals/atrocities."[14] Introductions such as this prescribe to the reader, prior to even presenting the material, an ethical framework in which the forthcoming information is to be understood. Both the authoritarian nature of such statements as Daly's and the silent adoption of

colonial phrases discourage ponderings of the vocabulary being used, strategically coaxing the uniformed, cooperative, or passive readers and thinkers into assuming moral criteria that instinctively register the practices awaiting discussion as appalling, brutal, and primitive. The consistent use of this language throughout mainstream texts and discussions serves to further naturalize the associations of these practices with barbaric torture.

After introducing the topic, perhaps justifying their right to speak, and attempting to captivate, shock, and horrify their readers, most authors will go on to produce some "statistical" information about the prevalence of female genital operations. Loretta Kopleman establishes that 80 million living women have had the surgery and an additional 4 to 5 million girls undergo it each year.[15] Rahman & Toubia write that 130 million girls and women have undergone it and claim that two million per year are at risk of receiving some form of the procedure.[16] Jane Wright cites that specifically in Africa, where the majority of operations occur, numbers range from 30 million to 100 million.[17] In fact, I have yet to encounter any two authors who have arrived at the same calculations.

With statistical discrepancies of 50 million or more individuals, it is quite bewildering that anyone, much less the majority of speakers on the topic, would claim statistical truth. However, doing so assures readers of the pervasiveness of these practices. Unfortunately, in attempting to arrive at numerical truth, women and girls with diverse experiences and operations are, once again, converted into a homogenous group of mutilated genitalia for the purposes of inaccurate statistical citations in Western scholarly texts. When coupled with the horrific prelude to

the topic, such numbers introduce all women of practicing cultures as victims of ideologically and physiologically identical operations, female practitioners as wicked perpetrators, and men as barbaric enforcers

Throughout discussions, offensive languages continue to be employed. For example, many authors will discuss female genital operations, or "FGM", as a public health concern and a practice that must be immediately "eradicated." The language of eradication regards important and celebrated elements of rich cultures as meaningless things to be eliminated. As Sandra Lane explains, this language is especially dehumanizing given the contexts in which "eradication" is typically advised.

> Western authors have identified female circumcision as a custom that should be eradicated. The public health language of 'eradication' is most often associated with germ theory and worldwide campaigns against infectious diseases like smallpox, malaria, and polio. Female circumcision, however, is not an organism to be rooted out and killed with antibiotics, prevented through immunization, or managed with vector control, and it is especially important that we proceed with high regard for the beliefs and concerns of the cultures where it is practiced.[18]

In addition to the Western germ theory approach that stems from public health campaigning, Western categorizations of female genital operations as a public health concern are also particularly problematic when approached as an isolated concern. For Loretta Kopleman, rationally refuting the belief that these operations promote health and cleanliness is a simple citation of all of the medical complications and health problems that can occur. By and large, Kopleman fails to consider how her Western projections might distort indigenous experience. For example, the idea that while the health concerns regarding female genital

operations might be alarming to Western feminists, for many poor indigenous women, unsanitary drinking water, lack of nutritious food, absence of medical facilities, and inadequate shelter are far more immediate, pervasive, and critical health issues. Kopleman doesn't consider the global acceptance of medically unnecessary surgeries, from operations on infant genitalia that don't fit rigid standards of male and female to surgical alterations of any body part imaginable for purely aesthetic purposes. Additionally, Kopleman quickly refutes the belief that altered genitalia is more hygienic and clean than unaltered genitalia as primitive and medically preposterous.[19] Interestingly, these beliefs appears far less barbaric when packaged in the form of feminine hygiene sprays, douches, and scented tampons and displayed attractively and neatly on the shelves of nearly every Western grocery, department, and drug store.

I do not mean to imply that approaching this topic from a public health perspective is unreasonable; certainly, these operations entail an assortment of health risks, and globally, transnational feminisms ought to challenge all forms of unnecessary and unhealthy alteration of the human body. But, if one wishes to speak about public health, a variety of health concerns particular to indigenous women must be taken into account. Often, female genital operations are included in this discussion while issues such as lack of sanitary drinking water, shortages of nutritious food, and limited medical resources are not. This is not to imply that all women affected by female genital operations are also impoverished, but many are. For these women, is it any wonder why the Western preoccupation with

female genital operations and lack of attention to the daily lives and realities of women struggling to ensure their family's survival is a source of great hostility?

Without a holistic approach to realities and concerns of indigenous women, female genital operations are posed as the matter upon which women's liberation and Africa's development hinges. Complex experiences are reduced into a sweeping generalization and entire nations and cultures are perceived as awaiting salvation via Western intellectual reason. Interestingly, Walker points out in a side note that most of the places she traveled to throughout Africa didn't have accommodations for showing film or "barely, sometimes, drinking water. None that we foreigners could drink."[20] Unfortunately, Walker doesn't consider the drinking water in her discussions of public health, only in lamenting the inconveniences she encountered. As Alois writes in response to this issue specifically,

> With excision, Walker's viewers are given a key to understanding Africa: it is suggested that excision is the only tool we need for understanding poverty, underdevelopment, postcolonial tyrants, neocolonial dependency, disease, and so on. Remove excision – it is suggested – and Africa will catch up to the rest of the world.[21]

Another common approach within dominant feminist discourses of female genital operations that similarly simplifies complex experiences and intersections is through establishing meta-narratives of global patriarchy and the universal subjugation of women. Authors commonly list off other fetishized practices, such as Chinese footbinding, Indian Suttee, dowry violence, and the veil, and will then position female genital operations as yet another form of this overarching, global patriarchal violence. Daly, for example, describes woman as the "primordial,

universal object of attack in all phallocratic wars." Her chapter, "Female Genital Mutilation: The Unspeakable Atrocities," conveniently follows chapters on Indian Suttee and Chinese footbinding. All three of these practices are discussed by Daly as "Sado-Rituals". Daly claims "there are some manifestations of the Sado-Ritual Syndrome that are unspeakable – incapable of being expressed in words because they are inexpressibly horrible."[22] After introducing the topic as such, Daly goes on to write that this patriarchal force is often disguised, because in practicing cultures, the operation is typically performed by women and encouraged by mothers, leading to the idea that women are perpetuating their own oppression. Additionally, it is often viewed as similar to male circumcision, a belief that trivializes the gravity of female genital operations. Global patriarchy, Daly argues, is also disguised in the name of cultural relativism.

> Erasure of all this on the global level occurs when leaders of 'advanced' countries and of international organizations overlook these horrors in the name of 'avoiding cultural judgment.' They are free from responsibility and blame, for the 'custom' must be respected as part of a 'different tradition.' By so naming the tradition as 'different' they hide the cross-cultural hatred of women.[23]

Using rhetoric of universal patriarchy, similar to that of Daly, Alice Walker initiates her film on female genital operations in Africa, *Warrior Marks*, with a discussion of her own "patriarchal wound." She explains that her brothers were all given air rifles for Christmas and one of them shot her in the eye, permanently blinding that eye. Walker reasons,

> My own visual mutilation occurred when I was 8 and it led me to a place of great isolation in my family and 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 that you take a little child off and tell her that she's going to visit her grandmother and on the way, you divert her attention from the trip to the grandmother's and you instead hold her down and relieve her of the clitoris and other parts of her genitalia and basically, you leave her to heal from this as best she can. Everyone else is making merry. 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 to that...What I had, I realized only as a conscious adult, was a patriarchal wound. It was my visual mutilation that helped me to see the subject of genital mutilation.[24]

It is thus that Walker imagines herself symbolically connected to African women and speaks of her experience, and theirs, as the infliction of patriarchal wounds. Whether the women she speaks of perceive their experiences as such is overlooked and whether they would agree that Walker's experience makes her less of an observer is ignored. Furthermore, it is doubtful that many of the "mutilated" women with whom Walker claims sisterhood, who are themselves mothers of operated daughters, would thank Walker for her supposition of their insensitive, unsympathetic, and "calloused" response to their daughter's pain. To the unfamiliar reader this is a claim of great gravity that portrays all parents of practicing cultures as arriving easily at the decision for surgery and sheds all of the parents who worry about their children, cringe at the thought of their pain, and tenderly care for their daughter's post-surgery (as indeed the vast majority, if not all, do) in an especially inhuman light.

Because feminists such as Walker and Daly portray practices of female genital operations as mere symptoms of globally transcendent patriarchy, a patriarchy supposedly common to all women, they therefore justify the Western criticism of non-Western practice. Women, they imply, are unified by virtue of shared sex. This is a dangerous claim through which important oppressions and

power abuses between and among women of the world, as well as their significant differences and localized experiences and realities, are ignored.

Furthermore, despite the "connections" that these discourses establish between women locally implicated in the realities of these practices and those geographically or socially distanced, sharp distinctions are drawn between the validity of cultural beliefs. This typically results in a Western critical condemnation based on a Western rational assessment of culture, custom, and tradition of non-Western nations by feminist discourses that dominate the West. Cultural beliefs are devalued on the basis of Western standards of reason and presented as remnants of a pre-modern tradition.

For example, in her discussion of female genital operations and ethical relativism, Kopleman explores the controversy of intercultural disputes over the morality of female genital operations. Kopleman states that because we have cross-culturally agreed upon "how to distinguish good and bad methods and research in science, engineering, and medicine, and what constitutes a good or bad translation, debate, deliberation, criticism, negotiation, or use of technology," we can evaluate moral judgments from one culture to another through these shared standards. Through using cross-culturally agreed upon methods of "discovery, evaluation, and explanation," Kopleman claims, it can be empirically proven that condemnations of female genital operations have, and indigenous defenses lack, moral authority. Despite her failure to clarify who the cross-cultural "we" that has agreed upon certain measurements of rationale is and what these measurements are, Kopleman proceeds to "empirically" assess the

statements given from within practicing cultures in support of female genital operations to determine their validity and ultimately conclude that practicing cultures do not deserve to participate in the debate.[25]

Walker asserts that individuals who support female genital operations are "kept ignorant," and, after "informing" one woman that removing sexual organs lessons sensation and decreases female enjoyment of sex, Walker's interviewee asserted that her sex life was "perfectly satisfactory". Following this comment Walker writes, in parenthesis, "How would you know, though, I thought."[26] Similarly, Daly discusses female genital operations as a cultural tradition that has persisted amidst the modernization processes of many practicing countries. She argues that the introduction of modern medicine and hospitals has simply replaced the tools of village women and their unsanitary practices with surgical gloves and gowns, disinfectant, anesthetics, surgical scissors, and sometimes, penicillin. The "barbaric tradition," as she refers to it, however, remains in tact.[27] Thus, Daly believes the women of practicing cultures to be falsely conscious and the women who perform the operations, she refers to as "mentally castrated." She writes,

> There are some manifestations of the Sado-Ritual Syndrome that are unspeakable – incapable of being expressed in words because inexpressibly horrible. Such are the ritual genital mutilations – excision and infibulation – still inflicted upon women throughout Africa today...Those who have endured the unspeakable atrocities of genital mutilation have in most cases been effectively silenced. Indeed this profound silencing of the mind's imaginative and critical powers is one basic function of the sado-ritual...mentally castrated, these women participate in the destruction of their own kind – in womankind – and in the destruction of strength and bonding among women. The screaming token tortures are silencing not only the victim, but their own victimized Selves.[28]

Through these discourses emerges a homogenous illustration of the "Third World" and a monolithic representation of the women in these nations, what Chandra Mohanty refers to as the archetypal "Third World Woman."[29] African women are regarded as oppressed victims of patriarchy and ignorance without agency or rationality; they are depicted as victims of false consciousness and confusion who are incapable of speaking or thinking for themselves. The cultures and traditions to which these women belong are habitually portrayed as ahistorical, meaningless remnants from a pre-modern era while development is assumed to be synonymous with the introduction of Western technology and living patterns.[30] This homogenization of the "Third World" and women's experiences in it is fully realized in Walker's shameless explanation of why she traveled to Mexico to write her book, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. "I needed to be in a Third World country, where I could feel more clearly what it would be like to have a major operation without anesthetics or antiseptics, because that is what happens to little girls when they are genitally mutilated."[31] For Walker, simply being in Mexico, a fellow "Third World" country, linked her more intimately with African women and their experiences of female genital operations. Even more troubling is the idea that Walker benefited from the underdeveloped elements of Mexico, comfortably capitalizing upon the creativity that others' poverty and misfortune inspired.

Finally, through their discussions of these practices and attempts to educate the public and raise awareness, those dominant feminisms of the West frequently objectify the bodies of non-Western, and primarily African, women. It

is not uncommon for writers to insert visual images of African women's genitals in various stages of "mutilation." Feminists and female anthropologists have been known to actually pay for the operations of girls in Africa so that they will be allowed to watch the procedures, and, hopefully capture a few timeless photos of nude girls and women and their exposed genitalia. These images of black or brown genitals are made to represent, once again, all forms of female genital operations despite their stark differences. Furthermore, the exotic and unfamiliar images of this type of surgically altered genitalia come to represent the entire African woman, her reality, her experiences, her incomplete sexuality, her abused body and, most importantly, the ultimate source of her oppression and proof of her barbaric culture.

Thus, while feminists such as Walker and others discussed in this chapter engage in consciousness-raising, missionizing, and teaching from an "enlightened" and "superior" position of supposedly culture-free and inherently reasonable Western rationale, valued and respected non-Western cultural practices are posed as barbaric traditions existing only among perpetually backwards and uneducated non-Westerners. As these paternalistic and ignorant Western discourses circulate and perpetuate neocolonial notions of the primitive nature of the relationship between the patriarchal "Third World Man" and the "victimized and silenced Third World Woman," indigenous efforts are ignored or discredited, dichotomies between the Western First World and the non-Western Third World are reified, non-Western women and non-Western cultural practices are homogenously and monolithically represented, unequal power relations

between the Western and non-Western woman emerge, and imperialism thrives while postcolonial transnational feminist efforts are thwarted.

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[1] Toubia 1988, page 101
[2] Obiora 2005, Pages 193-194
[3] Barthes 1982, page 70
[4] Abrahams, Yvette 1998
[5] Korieh 2005, pages 122-123
[6] Habermas 1981, page 103 – The other two aspects of modernity that Habermas discusses are aesthetic modernity and the neoconservative discontents with modernity. He characterizes aesthetic modernity as time consciousness and embracing the spirit of the avant-garde's constant attempts to conquer the unknown and venture into the future; this effort, Habermas claims, indicates the desire for a stable and pure present and illustrates that "modernity revolts against the normalizing function of tradition; modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative." Habermas then briefly addresses the neoconservative discontents with modernity as dissatisfaction with processes of social modernization. These attacks on modernization propose that economic and industrial growth have severely disturbed the social and communicative infrastructure.
[7] Hall 1992, page 275
[8] Bauman 1987, page 129
[9] Ibid. pages 130-133
[10] Foot 2001, page 193
[11] Nagel 2001, page 242
[12] Walley 2006, pages 343-344
[13] Lane 1996, page 9
[14] Daly 1978, page 156
[15] Kopleman, 2001
[16] Rahman & Toubia, 2000
[17] Wright, 1996
[18] Lane 1996, page 9
[19] Kopleman 2001
[20] Walker and Parmar 1993, pages 81-82
[21] Briere 2005, page 170
[22] Daly 1978, page 355
[23] Ibid.
[24] Walker and Parmar, 1993
[25] Kopleman 2001, pages 309-314
[26] Walker 1993, page 44
[27] Daly 1978, page 170
[28] Ibid. page 164
[29] Mohanty 2003
[30] Walley 2006, pages 344-345
[31] Walker and Parmar 1993, page 268

Chapter 3

Exploring the Potential Foundations of a Transnational Feminist Politics through the Philosophical Frameworks of Postmodernism and Postcolonialism

Until the lion has a voice, the tales of the hunt will be only those of the hunter.

- Eritrean Proverb[1]

While rooted in modernity, and carrying forward the modern feminist project, postmodern feminist politics transcend some of the problematic dichotomies of modern feminism and offer new ways of dealing with difference. They place a new importance on the self-creation of moral and ethical frameworks by individual and collective actors, and they offer a radical critique of the negative and dangerous attributes of modernity. Above all, they occupy the terrain of the cultural, and enact a deconstruction and transformation of gender categories which begins in the real, everyday lives of women and facilitates the creation of new identities. Without grand plans or systematic theories, and never claiming to express the 'Truth', a postmodern feminist politics plays with existing possibilities and opens up new ones.

- Sasha Roseneil[2]

I have established, as the intent of this conversation, that to avoid the paralysis often associated with theoretical visions, the space between theory and practice must be bridged. Hence, having introduced the topic of female genital operations, briefed Enlightenment philosophy, and specifically critiqued and demonstrated the colonial nature of Western feminist discourses of female genital operations, I will now put aside the topic of female genital operations for a moment to discuss the potential decolonization of imperial feminisms through postmodern (and, to some extent, postcolonial) theories and methodologies. This

will enable us to move from the theory-focused discussion of the first part of this project to the praxis-oriented second part, integrating transnational feminist theory of a postmodern era with decolonization strategy. The foci of this chapter are the theoretical tenets of postmodern and postcolonial theory that respond specifically to those problematic tropes of Enlightenment-informed feminist imperialisms. While it is far beyond the scope of this project to do justice to the diversities, distinctions, and disagreements among postmodern bodies of thought, it is nevertheless necessary to overview the common themes of postmodernism and postcolonialism as they might re-inform feminist transnational work.

When I speak of postmodern theory, I am referring to a conceptual shift away from the modernist notions of universality, totality, rationality, reason, ultimate truth, and the coherent subject. I am not speaking of a precise historical shift per se, but rather a way of thinking that has been developing in specific response to Enlightenment ideals. In this sense, the modern and the postmodern can be distinguished theoretically but cannot be temporally separated as they exist simultaneously and dependently with one another, and, though postmodern thought destabilizes the tenets of modernity, modern ideals continue to persist in the contemporary, or postmodern, time. This thinking is in line with postmodern theorist Ihab Hassan who acknowledges that postmodernity, as a fairly young philosophy that is often theoretically similar to other unstable terms, lacks a consistent definition and is difficult to historically locate.

> Modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or a Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future...Thus a 'period' is generally not a period at all; it is rather both a diachronic and synchronic construct. Postmodernism, again like

> modernism or romanticism, is no exception; it requires both historical and theoretical definition. [3]

Postmodern theory, in its broadest sense, is a reaction against the modernist notions of universality and totality. It arises in specific response to these Enlightenment ideals of modernity, challenging the metanarrative approach so common among those previously reviewed feminist discourses of non-Western female genital operations with local narratives that operate upon historical and social contingencies.[4] Rather than affirming a transcendental truth or absolute rationality, such as the idea that there is some ahistorical, acultural, and omnipotent vantage point from which moral standards emerge, postmodern theory approaches reason as historically and culturally specific, as situated and diverse.[5] Attempts to discover an absolute Truth are replaced with partial and situated knowledges, the notion of authenticity is deconstructed by a de-centered politics of plurality, and difference and uncertainty, not uniformity and order, are embraced. Direct participation rather than representation by others and non-institutional forms of political action are emphasized, locally-positioned politics are situated in a global context, communications are facilitated across geographic space, and the modern impulses of justice, equality, and citizenship persist.[6]

Postmodernity, Bauman believes, provides a broader philosophy that signals the end of the search for a universal and ultimate Truth, an erosion of the idea of objectivity, and, perhaps most importantly, a self-awareness of the imperialism inherent in modern thought.

> This wisdom re-arranges our knowledge of modernity and redistributes the importance assigned to its various characteristics. It also brings into relief such

> aspects of modernity as went unnoticed when looked upon from the inside of the modern era simply because of their then uncontested status and consequent taken-for-grantedness; which, however, suddenly burst into vision precisely because their absence in the later, postmodern, period makes them problematic. Such aspects, first and foremost, are those which bear relation to modernity's self-confidence; its conviction of its own superiority over alternative forms of life, seen as historically or logically 'primitive'; and its belief that its pragmatic advantage over pre-modern societies and cultures, far from being a historic coincidence, can be shown to have objective, absolute foundations and universal validity.[7]

Hence, postmodernity is also importantly characterized by a lack of self-confidence and an acceptance of an infinite condition of uncertainty, "a life in the presence of an unlimited quantity of competing forms of life, unable to prove their claims to be grounded in anything more solid and binding than their own historically-shaped conventions."[8] This conception of postmodernity requires a recognition that modernity established an unquestioned hierarchy of values that assumed and operated upon the overriding belief that the West, the white, the civilized, the cultured, the sane, the healthy, the man, the normal, more, riches, high productivity, and high culture were superior to the East, the black, the crude, the uneducated, the insane, the sick, the woman, the criminal, less, austerity, low productivity, and low culture. Each of these binaries has been challenged in the realm of postmodernity and it is now apparent that these were not separate oppressions but all manifestations of the same power structure and that although it may still persist, was and continues to be supported specifically by modern ideologies of the Enlightenment era.[9]

Furthermore, as demanded by theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Abdul JanMohamad, the modern reliance upon a rational, coherent, conscious, stable, and free-willed individual that enables the colonial notion of

fundamental oppositions between self and other, subject and object, and identity and difference, must be abandoned.[10] Rather, the postmodern critique of the self suggests that the subject lacks a coherent identity and that subjectivity must be reconfigured as a social production of one's understanding of his of her relation to the world. The individual is locatable as one node in a web of power relations, as a simultaneous effect of society and actor from within.[11]

Postcolonialism, like postmodernism, is another contemporary philosophy that, though often confined to literary realms, provides insight into how a new vision of transnational feminist politics might emerge. Postcolonialism also lacks a stable definition. Robert Young, for example, defines postcolonial critique as the product of resistance to colonialism and imperialism. Throughout his discussion, he refers to postcolonialism as a historical marker, as literally postdating colonialism. I propose, as has been done by contemporary writers such as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, that postcolonialism, like postmodernism, is not marked by any historical time period per se or produced by an identifiable historical shift, but is instead characterized, broadly, by resistance to colonialism and imperialism.[12] I insist on this conceptual framework as a means of acknowledging that colonialisms, neocolonialisms, and imperialisms continue to persist within contemporary discourses and actions; I also acknowledge that postcolonial efforts have existed in the past.[13]

Postcolonial studies demands an acknowledgement of histories and enduring legacies of colonialism in an attempt to undo them and understand the far reaching implications of Western imperialism. This includes the recognition

that Western knowledge has its foundations in the colonial study of "the Other" and that this politics of dominance continues to shape contemporary practices and knowledge claims. Importantly, postcolonial studies must not be approached as merely an intellectual venture, but as an active transformation of these power structures. As Schwarz argues, postcolonial studies is,

> not merely a theory of knowledge but a 'theoretical practice,' a transformation of knowledge from static disciplinary competence to activist intervention. Postcolonial studies would be pointless as a mere intellectual enterprise, since Western intellectual enterprise itself is fundamentally dependent on Europe's conquest and exploitation of the colonial world...Postcolonial studies at its best changes the world, providing interpretations that have practical consequences.[14]

Furthermore, postcolonialism contextualizes and indigenizes conflict, and hence avoids presenting history as a sequence of monolithic colonizing routines.

> Postcolonial studies invites us to examine these reasons in empirical detail and with theoretical precision, recognizing that the world is an integrated ensemble of historical and regional processes, and that particular times and places can rarely be separated out from larger patterns if we are to make interpretations capable of producing change. The reverse is also true: large historical patterns only take on meaning when they are shown at work in specific contexts.[15]

Ato Quayson, in his contribution to a postcolonial studies volume, attempts to bring postcolonialism and postmodernism together as mutually reinforcing theoretical inquiries, claiming that, "both are thought to be second-order meditations upon real (and imagined) conditions in the contemporary world and are to be taken seriously as contributing to an understanding of the world in which we live."[16] In this sense, both provoke questions of temporality as they are responding to modern and colonial traditions, but nonetheless exist

simultaneously amidst persistent colonial legacies and continued forces of modernity. Hence, both are dedicated to understanding the forces of modernity and colonialism, recognizing their past and present effects, and replacing meta-narrative explanations with marginalized and ignored experiences from the periphery.

So then, what do I hope to achieve through juxtaposing postmodernism and postcolonialism and incorporating these philosophies into a decolonization of transnational feminist politics? By employing both postcolonialism and postmodernism throughout this inquiry, I am not attempting to fuse the two, ignore their differences, or inflate their similarities; nor am I ignoring their critiques. I am, however, choosing to focus on the realms of compatibility of the two and the manner in which they might collaboratively contribute to a new form of feminism that is capable of acting against the colonial impulses of previous activisms of the modern era. In fact, I am much intrigued by and drawn into the autocritiques of each realm as well as the critiques that each provides of the other. After all, constant self-questioning and cross-critique will continue to shape each of these disciplines in productive directions and will internally guard against the dangers of unquestioned confidence.

Nevertheless, these philosophies, as well as their critiques, tend to circulate within scholarly circles and rely upon an ever-increasing vocabulary of academic, post-ism jargon. And, because of the fluctuating and intangible nature of these disciplines, these theories of postcolonialism and postmodernism are at risk of remaining elusive and inaccessible beyond the realms of academia and

theory. Therefore, might one not become immobilized within the frenzied realm of postcolonial and postmodern debate, and might we not ask, to what end? Who, if anyone, is benefiting from these debates; and, how can these theories, while remaining sensitive to their "works in progress" nature, be productively mobilized? After all, postmodernism has already been criticized extensively as yet another elitist stage of Western consciousness. For example, Nigerian theorist, Denis Ekpo, passionately expresses this position.

> The crisis of the subject and its radical and violent deflation – the focal point of postmodern critique – are logical consequences of the absurd self-inflation that the European subjectivity had undergone in its modernist ambition to be the salt of the earth, the measure and master of all things. For cultures (such as ours) that neither absolutized, i.e. deified, human reason in the past nor saw the necessity for it in the present, the postmodern project of de-deification, de-absolutization of reason, of man, of history, etc., on the one hand, and of a return to, or a rehabilitation of, obscurity, the unknown, the non-transparent, the paralogical on the other hand, cannot at all be felt like the cultural and epistemological earthquake that it appears to be for the European man. In fact, it cannot even be seen as a problem at all...When such a being settles for the indeterminate, the paradoxical, the strange and absurd, it is probably because he bears no more resemblance to the man as we know him, especially here in Africa; he is a post-man whose society, having overfed him and spoilt him, has delivered him over to irremediable boredom. Nothing therefore, stops the African from viewing the celebrated postmodern condition a little sarcastically as nothing but the hypocritical, self-flattering cry of the bored and spoilt children of hypercapitalism.[17]

For anyone excited about the possibilities inspired by postmodernism and eager to remedy modern imperialism from within this new framework, Ekpo's response to postmodernism certainly serves as a critical, but necessary, reality check. One can only wonder how long a theoretical discourse can circulate in the absence of practical application and progressive materialization before it will be criticized and discarded as another round of elitism. Postcolonialism, I am afraid,

though it often relies on this same critique in an attempt to separate itself from postmodernism, is also at risk of this denigration.[18]

It is my view that little progress can be realized by discarding these philosophies. Rather, one must take charges such as those of Ekpo seriously, hoping that the un-finished and self-questioning nature of postmodernism is capable of responding to such reasonable and potentially crippling criticisms. This response, as I am arguing, must be grounded not in a self-perpetuating critique confined to the realm of theory, but must consist of productive applications that can be utilized by individuals seeking to produce tangible effects around the globe. Only then can it be expected that non-Western nations and peoples receive these theories as anything but the "logical consequences of the absurd self-inflation that the European subjectivity had undergone in its modernist ambition to be the salt of the earth, the measure and master of all things."[19] Thus, I am not challenging the theoretical conversations and criticisms of postmodern and postcolonial theorists; but rather, I am seeking to validate my attempts and those of others, who, when finding ourselves confronted with legacies of modern and colonial discourses and actions, put theories into action and decolonize imperial activisms.

More specifically, I speak to postcolonial feminism as implicated in and arising within the postmodern era, particularly in Jean-Francois Lyotard's destabilization of absolute truth and metanarratives of existence, Kwame Anthony Appiah's discussion of postmodernism and postcolonialism's shared critique of modern humanist ideals, Donna Harraway's call for "situated subjectivities" and

"cyborg feminism" in which the category of "woman" disappears, and Gayatri Spivak's acknowledgment of subaltern knowledges and the desire to transcend structures of global oppression.[20] In doing so, I do not wish to suggest that postcolonialism is a subcategory of postmodernism or that postcolonial feminism is a subset of postcolonialism or postmodernism. Rather, each is positioned horizontally and is always already embedded in the others; notions typically discussed within the rubrics of these individual frameworks should be understood as implicated in each.[21]

Western feminists, though, are often reluctant to incorporate these philosophies into their discussions and activisms, proclaiming that postmodern theory destabilizes pragmatic and necessary feminist attempts to produce knowledge about gendered lives and realities of experiences in a manner that inspires social change.[22] In particular, the postmodern deconstruction of the subject and essential identity has been accompanied by the critique that feminist politics are thereby rendered impossible. A frequent claim is that without categories such as "woman," or a "universal goal of women's emancipation," individuals are incapable of uniting around common causes and particular agendas. Feminists such as Nancy Hartstock, Kate Soper, and Jane Flax argue that the deconstruction of truth and subjectivity is especially destructive because women have just recently begun to claim subjectivity as a source of agency and to create a liberating feminist Truth.[23] As Soper argues,

> Feminism, like any other politics, has always implied a banding together, a movement based on the solidarity and sisterhood of women, who are linked by perhaps very little else than their sameness and 'common cause' as women. It this sameness itself is challenged on the ground that there is no presence of

> womanhood, nothing that the term 'woman' immediately expresses, and nothing instantiated concretely except particular women in particular situations, then the idea of a political community built around women – the central aspiration of the early feminist movement – collapses.[24]

Similarly, in her article "Challenging Modernization: Gender and Development, Postmodern Feminism and Activism," Mridula Udayagiri argues that postmodernism is "politically bankrupt" when removed from an academic context because it is incapable of confronting the moral foundations of modernization, development policy, and various programs of encouraging education and establishing health facilities. Udayagiri goes on to explain how she believes that essentialism is being attacked without any awareness as to how it might actually be affecting women's lives, claiming that anti-essentialism must be confined within the boundaries of political pragmatism.[25]

These debates are thoroughly explored by Ramazanoglu and Holland in a sincere and productive attempt to educate students about feminist methodologies. After presenting modern ideals and postmodern theory in a personally distanced manner, examining the disagreements and critiques circulating among and between these philosophies, and highlighting positive and negative aspects of both, the authors leave their readers to ponder their own positionings within the debates. In their conclusion, Ramazanoglu and Holland remind readers that this is a theoretical crisis primarily relevant to the West, writing in their final paragraph that,

> For many women around the world, caught up in struggles to survive, raise children, cope with poverty, natural disasters, corrupt regimes or varieties of social exclusion, resources for thinking about thinking are irrelevant luxuries...but for those who have the resources to do so, thinking about how and

> why feminists can justify their claims to knowledge has significant political and ethical implications.[26]

I do not wish to critique Ramazanoglu and Holland, as I respect their intentions to produce an objective and educational discussion so that they might inspire students themselves to reflect upon these important issues. Nonetheless, I do believe that their conclusion echoes the passive receptivity often attributed to Western feminism - that is, the idea that Western feminists should concern themselves with theoretical debate simply because Western intellectualism and academia invites them to do so and that their conclusions should either reject or accept theoretical propositions, allowing or prohibiting conditions, be they Enlightenment or Postmodern, to shape feminism.

However, there is an important difference between those women most preoccupied with these debates and those women around the world who aren't, and it is a more significant difference than simply who has "the luxury to think about thinking" and who does not. Those "women around the world, caught up in struggles to survive" have never attempted to speak for other women, have never envisioned a single movement that could emancipate all women, have never aspired to a reasonable evaluation of which stories are better than others, have never attempted to author a transcendent narrative of women's oppression, and have never found it necessary to establish "universal Truth of patriarchy." Yet these women, whether in manners acknowledged by the West or not, have always known the importance of alliances with other women that arise out of common experiences of struggle, and they have always known gender to be only one element of multi-faceted injustices and gendered oppressions, expressions of

larger social conditions. It took Western feminists until the Third Wave to acknowledge these intersections and we are still struggling to comprehend this. Furthermore, though perhaps not as quickly or radically as the dominant feminists of the West might desire, women around the world who have not entertained Enlightenment ideals have experienced victories and have witnessed success, both now and in the past.

Once again, there is a more central reason than simply "having the luxury to think about thinking" as to why Western feminists should engage with these debates. Western women have attempted to speak for other women, have envisioned a single women's liberation movement, have attempted to rationally evaluate women's stories to weed out those deemed morally inferior and threatening to Western visions of emancipation, have attempted to establish transhistorical and transnational truth of women's oppression, and continue to rely upon notions of universal patriarchy and meta-narratives of women's subjugation. Western women do not simply have the "luxury" of thinking about thinking, but they have the responsibility to do so in order to understand how their dominant Western feminist methodologies have relied, gratituitously and dangerously, upon their Enlightenment inheritance.

Furthermore, I do not believe that feminism must either passively receive or actively reject political or philosophical conditions and propositions, but that feminism can and should engage with these debates to actively shape these conditions. In essence, postmodern theory need not present itself to feminism as either a threat or a solution. Rather, feminism can engage with postmodernism,

which is in itself an elusive and flexible conceptual framework, in order to productively direct and create the conditions of postmodern feminism

Even with this explanation, some might still ask, why do anything? In a postmodern era, where is the impetus for international activism, or activism at all? This is a good question, but I would ask instead, how can postmodern theory inform activism in a postmodern era? Though postmodern theory does not demand activism, neither did modernity. More importantly, postmodern theory does not prohibit activism; it simply stipulates that each effort is an expression of situated and subjective beliefs. So, I would ask, why not pursue activism in a postmodern era? Why not take advantage of the radically anti-colonial space for activism that might arise within postmodernity?

By positioning postmodern theory in relation to modern feminist discourses, it becomes clear that the postmodern turn has much to offer contemporary feminist theory, specifically, as it critiques the problematic notions of a "transcendental Woman," universal oppression, and absolute Truth that have infused modern feminist discourses. It rejects modern feminist claims of universal patriarchy and the "globally oppressed Women" by challenging anthropologists such as Michelle Rosaldo, who announces the "subordination of women in all contemporary societies," and Mary Daly, who describes woman as the "primordial, universal object of attack in all phallocratic wars."[27] Postmodernism deconstructs the binary of either an *a priori*, absolute essence of woman, or the collapse of feminism.

Furthermore, the postmodern critique of essential identity need not imply an absence of any identifications around specific struggles and might instead be understood as enabling a realization of diverse social positionings. As articulated so elegantly by Chantal Mouffe,

> It is only when we discard the view of the subject as an agent both rational and transparent to itself and discard as well the supposed unity and homogeneity of the ensemble of its positions, that we are in the position to theorize the multiplicity of relations of subordination...We can then conceive the social agent as constituted by an ensemble of 'subject positions' that can never be totally fixed in a closed system of differences, constructed by a diversity of discourses among which there is no necessary relation, but a constant movement of overdetermination and displacement. The 'identity' of such a multiple and contradictory subject is therefore always contingent and precarious, temporarily fixed at the intersection of those subject positions and dependent on specific forms of identification.[28]

What Mouffe is proposing is that the denial of an essential connection between subject positions does not stifle the realization of historical, variable, and contingent links. Instead, although each subject position is situated within an unstable structure and any permanent social identity is impossible, subjects can and should continue to gather amidst strategic identifications within frameworks of partial, fluctuating, and diverse identities that intersect at various nodes. Ultimately, she embraces the idea that identity is irreducible and can never be fixed or essentialized, arguing that attempts to do so pose the ultimate threat for feminist potential.

For feminists who are committed to a political project whose aim is to struggle against the forms of subordination that exist among many social relations, and not only those linked to gender, an approach that permits us to understand how the subject is constructed through different discourses and

positions is certainly more adequate than one that reduces our identity to a single positioning – be it class, race, or gender. This type of democratic project is also better served by a perspective that allows us to grasp the diversity of ways in which relations of power are constructed and helps us to realize the forms of exclusion present in all pretensions to universalism and claims to have found the true essence of rationality. This is why the critique of essentialism and all its different forms – humanism, rationalism, universalism – far from being an obstacle to the formulation of an anti-colonial feminist project, is indeed the very condition of its possibility.[29]

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[1] Nnaemeka 2005, page 33
[2] Roseneil 1999, page 177
[3] Hassan 1987, page 149
[4] Giroux 1990, pages 9-10
[5] Pierre 2000, page 9
[6] Plummer 1995, page 149
[7] Bauman 1987, page 135
[8] Ibid.
[9] This theory recognizes postmodernity as an attempt to address modern ideologies, especially those imperial in nature, as historical errors that stand to be rectified. It is threatened by particular claims circulating within the realm of contemporary theorists of modernity and postmodernity that modernity is yet unfinished and should be pursued from contemporary perspectives. Perhaps best known for this assertion and discussed previously for his philosophy of modernity, is Habermas (1981), claiming that the project of modernity is incomplete and that rather than surrendering to postmodern, anti-modern, or pre-modern criticism, we should learn from previous misconceptions and create an everyday praxis that operates upon the unrestricted interaction of the cognitive, moral-practical, and aesthetic-expressive. Continuing the project of modernity, from Habermas's point of view, would involve re-appropriation of expert culture by the life-world and the linking of modern culture with everyday praxis. In response to this proposal, and in consort with Bauman's assessment of the postmodern abandonment of modern ideals in hope of moving beyond their inherently imperial nature, I am of the belief that claims such as Habermas's, that speak of the "incomplete" project of modernity and call for a reformation and resurgence rather than abandonment of modern ideals, should be cautiously regarded and ultimately rejected. Arguments of this type develop around the crisis of confidence and fear that the failure of the project of modernity threatens to dismantle the power structures promoted and held intact by modern ideology; hence, Bauman's parallel between the fall of the legislator and the crisis invoked by postmodern discourse.
[10] Said 1979, Bhabha 1994, and JanMohamad 1985
[11] Pierre 2000, page 19
[12] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989
[13] Olaniyan 2000, page 280

Part Two

Rejecting Imperial Discourses and Decolonizing Transnational Approaches to the Topic of Female Genital Operations

As for the inevitable "where do we go from here?" question, I am tempted to say: "You built it, you figure it out." But I am not as hard at three in the morning as I am at noon. I never used to think that apologies were important until wrong doers refused to give them. Now I understand the import. Someone has to research, interpret, acknowledge, and apologize for non-Indigenous women's oppression of Indigenous peoples. Perhaps owning the history of oppression and taking responsibility for the shared telling of that story is an excellent way to own and begin to set the stage for apologies, amends, and reparations...This is not about blaming; this is about being able to name the layering of racism and sexism that blankets us in colonial times. This is about reclaiming the past that belongs to us but which has not been told or which has been told but has not been heard. This is about taking responsibility for anti-colonial education – and you cannot educate people about how not to repeat the mistakes of the past unless the mistakes are identified and the past revisited.

- Tracey Lindberg[1]

Having overviewed female genital operations, demonstrated and critiqued the colonial nature of the Western feminist discourses of non-Western forms of these practices, located these discourses in relation to the Enlightenment ideology of modernity, and introduced the potential role for postmodern theory in decolonizing transnational feminist politics, we are ready to begin creatively exploring strategies for decolonizing transnational feminist politics, both with

specific regard to non-Western female genital operations and beyond. The following chapters constitute the impetus for my project and are truly at the heart of what I hope to accomplish - the unification of theory and practice through the reconstruction and decolonization of transnational feminisms. One cannot however, as Tracey Lindberg points out, simply implement decolonizations or voice the desire to partake in anti-colonial movements without first accounting for imperial histories and legacies and participating in the "shared telling of that story." I hope that I have productively interpreted and told parts of that story and wish to continue my engagement with the "where do we go from here?" question.

In the structure of this paper, I have deliberately separated my critique of feminism's Enlightenment inheritance and my decolonization suggestions. In practice, however, these tasks are inseparable and simultaneous. Because critiques of imperial discourses and the decolonization of transnational feminist politics are so intimately implicated in each other, the critiques discussed Part One of this project invoked the strategies that will be discussed in Part Two, and the ideas explored in Part Two continue to refer to the critiques of dominant Western discourses of female genital operations discussed in Part One. Thus, any critiques that emerge throughout the following discussions stem from those already explored, and they are further examined through their direct links to decolonization strategies.

Additionally, just as I have situated the ideas and actions of specific activists and authors in relation to the theoretical frameworks and imperial tendencies that have been discussed, I will continue to illustrate my discussions

with the works of those who have contributed to these discourses and activisms. To organize, act, or write effectively and respectfully, we must always be aware of those who have contributed to the discourse of focus, and, while those writings that have been examined thus far frequently refer to each other, the most important voices – those of the people intimately linked to the topic – are absented.

Rather, these voices must be prioritized and all local efforts and activisms, whether validated by dominant bodies of feminism in the West or not, must be recognized in full. Without the invitation of those peoples directly linked to these operations, there is little that culturally foreign individuals and organizations can do to productively and respectfully engage with the issue. Whether these locally informed activisms are widespread, successful, and unified in vision or scattered, sparse, and diversely opinionated, women from across cultural borders might ally themselves with women from within these activisms and initiate conversations through which they will learn of local beliefs and strategies, forming critical coalitions. Without this gentle, culturally-sensitive, and friendly approach, any transnational attempt to intervene in local affairs risks being received as arrogant, neocolonial, and severely distanced from localized realities. Therefore, throughout the following chapters, I will present the work of these individuals and organizations as they might speak to, inform, and represent the decolonization strategies and visions of an anti-colonial and postmodern informed transnational feminist politics.

Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, a postcolonial and transnational feminist politics is implicated within those postmodern notions previously discussed - the decentered subject, lack of absolute truth, abandonment of metanarratives of existence, and recognition of situated knowledges. Feminists from various locations in the world and with diverse disciplinary expertise comprise a category envisaged as transnational feminism, which, though not always self-defined as specifically postcolonial or postmodern, engages with concerns, subject matter, theoretical endeavors, and political agendas that lend themselves to a rejection of the imperial trends of modernity and the decolonization of transnational feminist politics. These writers, Lucy Sargisson, Chandra Mohanty, Cherri Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, Sara Suleri, Gayatri Spivak, and Donna Haraway, attempt to transgress imperial and colonial discussions through theoretical and praxis-directed approaches to transnational feminism in a postmodern era. Similarly, organizations and activisms around the world demonstrate fruitful ways of engaging with the topic of female genital operations and illustrate the ways in which practice might embody the theoretical decolonizations to be discussed.

Thus, in the following chapters, I will juxtapose theories that inform transnational feminisms, my suggestions for decolonization strategies in specific reference to those colonial trends already recognized, and the practices of and responses to organizations that have actively and productively engaged with the topic. I am approaching this upcoming discussion with an open mind and hope that my readers will join me in creatively exploring an assortment of ideas that are

flexible and suggestive in nature. I hope to envision a variety of decolonization strategies that might replace some of the problematic existing discourses of female genital operations and lend themselves to a diversity of contemporary and future transnational issues of women and gender. I have divided Part Two into three chapters that address, respectively, the abandonment of transcendental Truth and celebration of multiple subjectivities, transnational feminist methodologies and the importance of language, and deconstructions of First/Third World binaries and the importance of understanding national and social boundaries as permeable.

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[1] Lindberg 2004, pages 351-352

Chapter 4

Abandoning Pursuits of Transcendent Truth and Celebrating Multiple Subjectivities

There are many people who consider Third World dwellers marginal, intrinsically wicked and inferior...Such a Manichean attitude is at the source of the impulse to "save" the "demon possessed" Third World, "educating it" and correcting its thinking according to the savior's own criteria. The savior can never relate to the Third World as partners, since partnership presupposes equals, no matter how different the equal parties may be...Thus "salvation" of the Third World by the savior can only mean its domination.

- Paulo Freire[1]

Filters from other groups are important to the degree that they can advance our own particular agendas. To the degree to which those filters can subsume and alter our own vision, they are less useful and can sometimes be categorized as destructive. The feminist filters are useful to the degree to which they support the Indigenous women's agenda: recognition of our civil, political, and legal rights. However, there are many Indigenous nations with many women and many different political concerns. Feminisms, as homes to ideological theories, understandings, and beliefs, cannot encompass and further that which they do not understand – that which they cannot experience.

It is also quite evident that the tools, skills, arguments, and political clout that we as Indigenous people can borrow from feminisms are useful ones. However, like all restoration projects, we have to start with our own foundation and materials and complement and reinforce the same with our tools that we choose. In some instances, the tools will be exclusively our own. In others, we may have to borrow the tools of homeowners to learn how to build our own tools. Still in other projects, we may have to borrow the tools of others in similar or comparable circumstances to aid in the restoration. However, we must always return them. They are not ours.

- Tracey Lindberg[2]

To begin a discussion of decolonizing transnational feminist politics and discourses of female genital operations, I would like to propose that transnational feminisms ought, first and foremost, to acknowledge the diverse pluralities of beliefs and burgeoning coalitions, abandoning all attempts to establish

transcendent truth or speak from positions of superior moral reasoning. Recall briefly, however, the feminist skepticism that we have already discussed regarding the existence of sustainable feminist politics and activisms within a postmodern era; this is a topic that deserves closer inspection. Feminisms of the West tend to respond to postmodernity anxiously and fearfully, maintaining that postmodernity threatens the feminist claim to Truth that is necessary to justify feminist demands, thereby preventing women from gathering and identifying collectively in response to an Oppression common to Womankind.

Interventions and activisms certainly involve personal beliefs, claims of legitimacy, and attempts to establish truths through an individual's or a group's reasoning. Likewise, each approach regards itself as morally justified, and thus, unavoidably believes dissenting beliefs to be morally unfounded. This, it seems, is the nature of speech, argument, and action. These beliefs, rationales, and truths, however, must be understood as existing among diverse, and sometimes competing, beliefs, rationales, and truths. As long as each approach acknowledges itself as asserting contingent and individually proposed truths, none have overstepped their boundaries. But, when one approach aspires to hegemonic status and asserts itself to have objectively arrived at "Universal Truth" by the means of superior moral reasoning, colonialism is resurrected and master narratives, such as those of imperial feminist condemnations of female genital operations, are circulated.

This is a significant distinction that is enabled by the postmodern critique of "Universal Truth." By rejecting transcendental Truth, master narratives of

existence are dismantled and hence, specificities of experience emerge. Despite Western feminist discomfort with this idea, new forms of decolonized and transnational feminisms might flourish. After all, the rejection of universal Truth mandates the important distinction between claims that attempt to transcend difference and establish universal Truth and the exploration of truths that arise from subjective and situated experiences. It is thus that through rejecting universal Truth, postmodern theory need not be interpreted as eliminating the existence of multiple and contingent truths, but as prohibiting the establishment of any one claim as the ultimate Truth.

Only once we acknowledge the creation of truths in local settings can we begin to envision the ways in which we can participate in anti-colonial activisms. For example, perhaps one of the simplest explanations for why these operations are practiced is that surgically modified female genitalia are considered normal. Granted, many women are aware that the practice of female genital operations is not universal, but many rural women are unfamiliar with the idea that some individuals, groups, or cultures might not engage in this practice and express shock, confusion, and discomfort when they encounter women, most often in the form of female "researchers" and "activists" who have not undergone some form of the procedure. For some women, it is unclear how such a woman could have married and why a mother would neglect such an important stage of a girl's life. To such women, the Western horror and regard of these operations as traumatic is puzzling.[3] Therefore, confronting these women with extensively planned

"eradication" strategies from beyond local borders is not only intimidating, but is culturally insensitive and likely unproductive.

Instead, the first step should be initiating conversations, opening communications, and turning to indigenous women for information regarding beliefs and practices. If indigenous women are receptive and invite these discussions, then Western women are given the opportunity to learn from local communities as opposed to assuming the right to preach to them. The various belief systems of those who are directly involved in the practices must be recognized as situated at diverse locations and as engaging in a variety of political approaches to the issue of female genital operations. The only manner through which non-local women from around the world can familiarize themselves with these specific and localized realities is by developing friendships and establishing allies with these women. Such relationships acquire the potential to thrive above and beyond political differences and varied beliefs. Only after transnational feminists have developed and sustained this intimacy with the cultural realities of local women might they begin to carefully consider their approaches to the issue of female genital operations.

> Evading the dubious position of arrogant perceiver requires the capacity to conceptualize culture as complex, competing, dynamic, and historicized. Rigorous interrogation of the particulars of culture enables the development of sophisticated contextualized analyses while allowing for critique with careful specificity.[4]

Those feminisms critiqued in Part One are wrought with abstract criticisms of a massive collection of non-specified and falsely homogenized practices. In such discourses, contextualized realities are ignored, diverse beliefs

and experiences are silenced, and localized experiences are undermined by meta-narratives. These discourses are inherently flawed, bound to misrepresent, and likely indigenously resisted and mistrusted.

A perfect example of such discourses is Kopleman's "rational assessment" of justifications and refutations of "female genital mutilation." Establishing moral criteria from which female genital operations can be condemned, which Kopleman attempts to do, simplifies a wide range of diverse practices and demonizes them based on a culturally dislocated "rationale." Kopleman's rational assessment is better understood as a projection of Western reactions to these operations onto the individuals experiencing them. For example, Kopleman speaks of the psychological trauma that accompanies female genital operations.[5] However, in Sudan, for example, the majority of women lack economic power, rarely hold jobs, and are legally prevented from owning property. Hence, marriage is necessary for survival. As Lightfoot-Klein notes, "to fail to circumcise one's daughter is to practically ensure her ruination. Among the populace, no one would marry an uncircumcised woman...to call a man 'the son of an uncircumcised woman' in Sudan is to insult him in the most shameful way possible."[6] Thus, most Sudanese girls are psychologically distressed at the thought of not being pharonically circumcised and are known for requesting their own operations if their parents do not do so quickly enough. Furthermore, after giving birth, Sudanese women are known to demand re-suturing to ensure their husbands' approval and to sustain their marriages, which is their only sure means of maintaining custody of their children and avoiding economic ruination.

Lest our imaginations begin to wander towards ideas like those of Walker, who envisions a horrifying culture in which parents trick their child into thinking she is going to visit her grandmother and then heartlessly pin her down for the barbaric operation, indifferent to their child's suffering,[7] Lightfoot-Klein explains that girls are informed of the operations and their reasons for being performed at a young age. These girls typically welcome their "circumcisions" and understand their future importance. They describe the age of their surgeries as the year in which their families did it for them, not to them.

> All of her fear tends to be mitigated by the fact that in the period preceding their circumcision, girls are the center of all attention – heady stuff for someone so small! A joyous, festive atmosphere prevails. Loving relatives, some of whom have traveled great distances in her honor, are with the girl constantly, supporting her, encouraging her, focusing her attention away from the anticipated ordeal, and in the direction of the acceptance, love, empathy, and good will that is radiating toward her from all sides. She is given many desirable and valued presents. Her hands and feet are painted with henna, a privilege that only brides and married women are given, and that all girls appear to yearn for. Often, she is circumcised along with her sisters. She is never alone during the entire time. At the circumcision itself she is surrounded by loved and loving faces that weep for her pain and offer sympathy and encouragement. Whether the child is able to perceive this at the time is a moot point, but I have been in anterooms while circumcisions were taking place, and have seen the personal torment women were undergoing, the frantic weeping and wailing that took place as shrieks of terror and pain issued from the other room. When it is all over, the girl is soothed by gentle hands and is watched over constantly.[8]

This example demonstrates that it is nearly impossible, from a Western perspective, to predict or hypothesize about the psychological responses of individuals in non-Western cultures to practices that are, in their own cultures and communities, common, respected, and socially institutionalized. While some women vividly recall painful operations and psychological distress and others remember little and appear psychologically appreciative of having received the operations, nearly all women speak of the psychological trauma, often resulting

from the social and economic consequences, of refusing to receive the operation. While Western readers might experience extreme psychological discomfort at the thought of such operations, in communities in which the practice is a survival necessity or ideologically valued, girls who forgo the procedure are socially stigmatized, are ridiculed, and experience psychological relief from receiving procedure and psychological trauma without it. In Kenya, for example, girls celebrate their operations and experience relief once they have received the surgery. Girls of the Kikuyu Tribe sing the following song:

> The knife cut down the guardian of the village today.
> Now he is dead and gone.
> Before the village was dirty,
> But now without the guardian it is clean.
> So look at us, we are only women and the men have come to beat the tam-tam.
> They have phalli like the elephants.
> They have come when we were bleeding.
> Now back to the village where a thick Phallus is waiting.
> Now we can make love, because our sex is clean.[9]

I do not raise these examples to justify these practices or to imply that I personally condone them. Rather, I raise these examples to show the ways in which local understandings of these operations and their significations must be at the forefront of any activism around the issue. Local knowledges, experiences, and cultures must inform and shape any strategy. As Obiora writes,

> There is no substitute for the involvement of the women who provide the pillar for the practice. A crucial dimension of collaborative schemes and viable strategies entails developing a rapprochement with the affected population, tapping into the indigenous perspectives about the rhythms of change, and conceding the local women the right to take the lead in identifying their needs and formulating their solutions. If female circumcision is an everyday reality or province that they control, it is inconceivable that it could be eradicated without their input. Radical approaches that covertly and overtly shun them bode ill for enduring change and reduce reformist efforts to little more than intellectual masturbation.[10]

While "intellectual masturbation" is an apt description of the leading feminist contributions of the West, activisms arising out of indigenous knowledges and cultural intimacy tend to express a keen awareness of local reality and crucial insight into how activisms might productively and realistically engage with it. Consider, for example, the approaches of two individuals who are working for social change from within Sudan, Jubara Ibrahim Ibed and Sister Battool Siddiq, and the increasingly popular Kenyan practice of "circumcision through words".

Jubara Ibrahim Ibed, a doctor at the Abdal Galil Health Center, emphasizes his position as being one of both practicing his medical expertise and promoting healthy living in his community. Though genital operations are only one of many issues of his concern, he uses his medical knowledge to educate those who seek information regarding both male and female genital operations. Ibed has, from a decidedly medical perspective, opposed female genital operations. He has given lectures to various male and female groups at schools, finding that men are often receptive to the idea that female genital operations are unnecessary and dangerous and should therefore be discontinued. Ibed's lectures have even resulted in several young men's refusal to marry women who have undergone genital operations. These marriage refusals have in turn significantly altered this community's acceptance of operations.[11] Yet, though delighted by these responses, Ibed is aware that his efforts can only go so far and he recognizes the boundaries of his activism. Despite public health campaigns and widespread education about the medical risks of these operations and the medical myths

surrounding them, social norms are firmly rooted in cultural traditions and beliefs, and, while his efforts have reaped admirable results, traditions change slowly.

> No matter how clever the public health education message on the hazards of female circumcision or how authoritative the religious source that says it is unnecessary, parents know it is necessary if it is the prerequisite for their daughter's marriageability and long-term security. Although it is desirable for medical and public health experts to step forward to take a level in reform, many parents are well aware of the medical risks and accept them, even if reluctantly. The religious authorities could speak unequivocally, however, and perhaps place this issue higher on their social agendas. But even when both medical and religious objections are voiced, it may not be a sufficient reason for parents to take the risk of not circumcising their daughters.[12]

Another individual, Sister Battool Siddiq, a renowned circumciser in Wad Medani and beyond, attempts to use her powerful position to persuade those seeking operations to opt for less medically dangerous initiations. Siddiq believes that she has been paramount in the changing dynamic and debates surrounding female genital operations. Where she works, immediate abandonment of the operations is fantasy and change occurs slowly. While she will perform the requests of her clients, she has found that encouraging women to refuse harmful clitoridectomies has resulted in many more women requesting a less damaging procedure, for example, one invented and promoted by Siddiq herself. This is a procedure in which only a small portion of the clitoral hood is removed, leaving the erectile tissue intact, preserving all sensation, and eliminating nearly all of the health risks. This procedure is praised among various Islamic movements that promote the importance of sexual desire between a husband and wife. Often these groups endorse a particular form of female genital operation, which they refer to as Sunni. They define this procedure as the removal of the clitoral hood; its purpose is to actually increase women's sexual sensitivity and sexual desire. This

procedure, once again, has parallels in the West as it has long been used as treatment for women who are unable to reach orgasm.[13]

Finally, an indigenous abandonment strategy that is becoming increasingly popular is replacing actual operations with an alternative, but equally celebrated and signified, cultural event. Various groups have begun reducing the symbolic importance of genital operations and exploring alternative rites of initiation. An instance of this strategy is promoted by the Kenyan national women's group, the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization, and is described as "circumcision through words." This rite consists of the gathering of appropriately-aged girls for a week of secluded education during which girls are taught important cultural traditions concerning women's roles, women's hygiene, reproductive matters, communication issues, self-esteem, and peer pressure. At the end of the week, the girls return to the community and their initiation concludes with a public celebration affirming the girls' transition into adult status.[14]

Through these illustrations, we learn that, in many communities, the operations function as a rite of passage into adulthood and signify that a girl has become a woman capable of marrying and bearing children. Girls are socialized into cultural values, and through this tradition, become intimately connected to the community, family, and previous generations. Thus, individual girls are socialized into cultural values and community traditions and cultural identity is preserved.[15] In other communities, it is common for girls to receive the surgery when they are young, sometimes as young as four years old. In these instances, operations aren't typically viewed as rites of passage, but are usually celebrated as

important occasions and viewed as a natural event in girls' life courses. In some areas, the operations are routine and common while in others they are rare or practiced only within some families.

What seems clear, though, is that those families who choose the operations do so as an expression of a personalized and internalized cultural ideology, because of personal and community belief systems. Hence, in practicing communities, the pressure to undergo such operations is immense and a girl's marriage prospects are often dependent upon having received the surgery. In societies in which marriage is a prerequisite for adequate living conditions, these operations are part of a survival strategy and refusing the surgery results in social isolation and stigmatization that jeopardizes a female's future.

These locally informed activisms operate within intimate understandings of these local beliefs and practices, attempting gentle and gradual persuasion. Unlike the dominant efforts of the West that proclaim the Truth of universal human rights and pass harsh and abrupt judgment while lacking awareness of women's realities and struggles, these efforts maintain cultural sensitivity and profound respect for individual autonomy. They recognize that, despite the most powerful activisms and social movements that have resulted in significant shifts toward rejecting female genital operations, the individual realities of women often require them to undergo such a procedure.

These activisms also demonstrate a profound recognition that gender is only one element of these women's experiences and that concerns, discussions, and activisms surrounding the issue of female genital operations as well as all

activisms targeting gender issues and women's rights at large should be situated within larger struggles for social justice, human rights, and equality. As Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, the leader of the Sudanese Women's Union, argues, genital operations are not the cause of a problem, but are rather the result of a situation that must be viewed at large as women's oppression, a situation that is being altered by a gradual movement towards women's rights and social justice rather than by fetishizing one aspect of women's oppression and demanding immediate eradication.[16]

This awareness of the larger struggle for social justice and women's rights has been embodied by the activisms of TOSTAN, a Senegalese NGO that encourages African peoples to take charge of their own developments. TOSTAN has addressed female genital operations throughout Senegal and its programs are becoming increasingly successful and popular in other African countries such as Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Mali. TOSTAN's programs reduce female genital operations, and have indeed led several communities to abandon the practices entirely, precisely because the programs do not attempt to "eradicate" "FGM" but emphasizes a holistic approach that enables communities to direct their efforts and materialize their ambitions, choosing which issues are most important to them and what conditions need attention before practices of female genital operations can be abandoned. Because TOSTAN's ambitions speak to larger political issues such as human rights, health, and development, the programs aim to create the social foundations for productive change so that abandoning practices of female genital operations becomes part of a larger movement that recognizes the many

dimensions of people's lives and realities, that recognizes that "each 'cultural practice' is a link in a chain whose demise may depend on a surgical removal of the link but, rather, on adjusting the other links to which it is attached."[17]

TOSTAN's methodologies are fully committed to embracing locally informed direction and integrated perspectives, understanding that individuals of practicing communities are those best equipped to determine what issues need to be engaged and how. TOSTAN hosts a basic education program that consists of six modules of learning: problem-solving skills, health and hygiene, preventing child mortality caused by diarrhea or lack of vaccination, financial and material management for all types of village projects, leadership and group dynamics, and how to conduct a feasibility analysis to predict whether projects will result in net gains. Additional modules are also frequently offered. Each module is composed of twenty-four two-hour sessions that occur over the time span of two months. TOSTAN trainers help prepare local villagers, who are chosen by the community of participants, to facilitate the modules. Former learners become new facilitators and often transfer the program to new villages. Furthermore, TOSTAN pedagogy emphasizes local cultural elements and learner-produced material, for example, proverbs, stories, songs, games, poetry, and plays.[18] Gerry Mackie explains the importance of this approach in the following:

> The basic education program is nondirective. Villagers first look at what they or other villagers are doing now and understand why they are doing it. Next they receive new, relevant and often technical information presented in a form they can comprehend. Then they work as a group to discuss the information and to decide whether it is relevant or useful. Often several steps using diverse participatory techniques are involved on a single topic. People are never told what to do. The nondirective approach is essential for success...It also expresses a proper respect for others. It has been observed that Europeans and Americans are peculiarly selective in expressing concern about the public-health

> efforts in Africa such as prevention of infant diarrhea, vaccinations, and so on...It is comforting that the TOSTAN program provides a background of skills and information that facilitates autonomous and multiple improvements in health, education, and welfare.[19]

While these efforts and the matter of this chapter thus far illustrate the importance of contextualizing the operations in specific places and moments in history, it is also important to contextualize the objections to these operations. How did the topic of female genital operations happen to intersect with feminisms of the West, and how did issues at the heart of Western feminisms shape the way that the concept of female genital operations was and is understood?

For example, recall the mission efforts throughout Africa in the 19th century. Interestingly, these efforts to abolish female genital operations paralleled the extensive developments of Western doctors and scientists who were simultaneously proudly proclaiming the medical importance of excising the clitoris because of the procedure's ability to cure everything from epilepsy to hysteria to "excessive" masturbation.[20] Noting peculiarities and hypocrisies such as this makes claims such as former Kenyan President Kenyatta's that Western missionaries were using opposition to these surgeries as a guise, masking their true agenda to undermine Kikuyo culture and autonomy, all the more convincing. We must question to what extent these Western movements to emancipate non-Western women served as tools in Colonial agendas. As Ajayi-Soyinka writes,

> The popular saying in many African cultures that 'the white man came with the bible in one hand and the sword in the other, and while the Africans' eyes were shut in prayers, he took all the land" illustrates that there is really no difference between the missionaries and the colonial establishment.[21]

And, as Leila Ahmed writes,

> What was created was a fusion between the issues of women, their oppression, and the culture of Other men. The idea that Other men in colonized societies beyond the border of the civilized West oppressed women was to be used, in the rhetoric of colonialism, to render justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized people. Whatever the disagreements of feminism with white male domination within Western societies, outside their borders feminists turned from being the critics of the system to being its docile servant. Anthropology, it has often been said, served as the handmaid of colonialism. Perhaps it must also be said that feminism, or the idea of feminism, served as its other handmaid.[22]

Furthermore, particular conditions in the West, namely emerging sexuality studies that began to recognize the clitoris as an important component of female sexual response, likely impassioned outrage at the notion of surgically removing or altering the clitoris. Chima Korieh makes this argument, noting that Western knowledge of what would come to be known as "female genital mutilation," predates the feminist sensationalization of the topic. She mentions that anthropologists, as early as the fifties, were exploring these genital surgeries and alterations. The studies, though, passed without judgment in the name of cultural relativism.[23]

In 1966, however, Masters and Johnson published the *Human Sexual Response*, discrediting Freud's theory of the mature vaginal orgasm and exposing the import of the clitoris. From this point on, feminisms throughout the West have rallied around the clitoris and the empowerment of women through sexual self-determination and fulfillment.

> In a period that saw the growth of radical and separatist feminist politics, the acceptance of lesbian sexuality, and the growing body of criticism of aggressive and sexist male behavior, symbolized by the phallus, "the clitoris came to symbolize female sexuality and feminist concern." As a result, feminists, particularly in the United States linked their aspiration for autonomy and self-

> determination with control over their sexuality and rejected notions that women's genitals were shameful, ugly, and dirty.[24]

Perhaps these developments in Western feminisms have led some women to focus more on their own outrage at the idea of removing or altering the female clitoris than on the realities of the entire female body and its requirements for survival, much less satisfaction, and systems, rather than symptoms or elements, of oppressions. For example, some feminists have become blind to the complexity of women's sexuality and many assume that women who have received genital surgeries are incapable of orgasm or sexual pleasure. They thus try to "inform" these women of the Truth of what they are missing, of how their sexual experiences are immature and incomplete, and how they should also rally around the notion of liberating women's sexuality.

For example, Kopleman claims that women who are part of practicing cultures believe the genital surgeries to be a practice that honors women just as circumcision honors men, are shocked by the comparison of the clitoris to the penis, and do not believe a woman capable of sexual pleasure with or without a clitoris. Essentially, Kopleman claims that the millions of women who receive these operations are sexually numb and indifferent, and that the millions of men and women who endorse these practices are exceedingly medically, psychologically, and sexually uneducated.[25] Such claims are so insulting that they are immediately problematized as soon as one remembers that we are talking about human beings - intelligent, sexual, thinking and feeling, human beings. Certainly, there are more dimensions to a woman's sexuality, whether she be African or Caucasian and live in Europe or East Asia, than her clitoris.

Furthermore, there are numerous manners of controlling women's sexuality, practiced across cultures and within both Western and non-Western borders, whether through cultural ideologies or physiological operations. Nonetheless, women everywhere, retain sexuality, and at some level, acknowledge themselves as sexual beings.

Despite her rocky start during which she writes of her astonishment upon finding out that genital surgeries are practiced not only among "primitive tribes of the bush," but widely throughout various nations and communities,[26] Lightfoot-Klein, through discussing female sexuality with women in Sudan, learns to become more open-minded and attuned to the complexities of women's experiences and sexuality. Lightfoot-Klein begins by interviewing several women about their operations, sex lives, and marriages. She initiates her interviews under the assumption that Sudanese women, many of whom have received the most extensive operation, Pharonic Circumcision, experience little or no sexual pleasure. Conversely, the majority of the women she interviewed elaborately described their sexual gratification, their desire for sex and seduction strategies for their husbands, and their orgasms in manners that made it clear that they certainly are sexual beings. In fact, their discussions of orgasm are likely indistinguishable from those of Western women. For example, when describing how often they achieve orgasm, women state the following:

> We have intercourse every two or three days. I never have an orgasm during the first time, even though my husband maintains an erection for 45 minutes or an hour. When we have intercourse a second time about an hour later, I am able to reach orgasm.

> With my first husband I almost never had any pleasure, and I had orgasm only a handful of times. It was an arranged marriage, and although he was a kind man, and good to me, I did not love him. The marriage to my present husband is a love match, and I always have strong orgasm with him, except on rare occasions, when I am too tired or one of the children is sick.[27]

Additionally, these women describe their orgasm experience colorfully, in a manner universally understood.

> I feel as if I am trembling in my belly. It feels like an electric shock going around my body – very sweet and pleasurable. When it finishes, I feel as if I would faint.

> All my body begins to tingle, then I have a shock to my pelvis and in my legs. It gets very tight in my vagina. I have a tremendous feeling of pleasure, and I cannot move at all...and I seem to be flying...then my whole body relaxes, and I go completely limp.[28]

One woman, in response to Lightfoot-Klein's question of whether she was able to enjoy sexual intercourse, erupted into uncontrollable laughter, began slapping her thighs, and fell from her seat to the floor where she continued to laugh. When the woman regained enough control to speak, she exclaimed that Lightfoot-Klein must be "completely mad" to ask a question like that because "a body is a body and no circumcision can change that! No matter what they cut away from you – they cannot change that!" Lightfoot-Klein recalls,

> It was a sobering experience in that it reminded me to remain aware at all times that I was interacting with real human beings with real lives and real relationships with a multitude of dimensions, not simply with female genitalia in various states of mutilation. I earnestly attempted to hone my sensitivities as a consequence and began to revise a lot of my questions in the interviews and conversations that followed.[29]

These "real lives" must inform our efforts so that the meta-narratives of the Enlightenment might be replaced by cultural and historical specificity. Donna

Haraway, in her theory of "cyborg feminism," envisions hybrid subjectivity that embodies the many dimensions of an individual's being and challenges every binary, including the dominant First World/Third World dualism.[30] In her introduction, Haraway explains two aims of her book, the first being the "breakup of versions of Euro-American feminist humanism in their devastating assumptions of master narratives deeply indebted to racism and colonialism." The second is to "remain attuned to specific historical and political positionings and permanent partialities without abandoning the search for potent connections."[31] It is thus that Haraway speaks to a postcolonial and transnational coalitional feminist politics in which each individual is hybrid and partially positioned within a temporary coalition of transnational feminism while Western feminist master narratives are replaced by historically and politically situated allied efforts.

This process of recognizing hybridity is comparable to what Gayatri Spivak argues is the necessary reclamation and historical and cultural contextualization of subaltern experience.[32] She emphasizes the writing of historiographies and recognition of suppressed subjectivities, asserting that envisioning transnational activism and postcolonial feminist politics requires an awareness of diversity and an account of the realities of those peoples who have previously been and are currently suppressed, a recognition of those accounts that have been either un-represented or misrepresented. She speaks of retrieving a subaltern subject-effect in a manner that avoids both the problematic representation through a Western lens and the reification of an authentic "Third World experience" by utilizing a conceptual framework that locates each

individual within a network of power relations as both an acting and existing subject and as a symptom of society. Spivak explains the subject-effect as follows:

> That which seems to operate as a subject may be part of an immense discontinuous network of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language, and so on. Different knottings and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous determinations which are themselves dependent upon myriad circumstances, produce the effect of an operating subject. Yet the continuist and homogenist deliberative consciousness symptomatically requires a continuous and homogeneous cause for this effect and thus posits a sovereign and determining subject.[33]

Thus, to truly dismantle binaries between the First and Third world as well as the hierarchies between and among the women of these worlds, we cannot be content with Lightfoot-Klein's revelation of complex subjectivity and avowal to continue her "research" of the "Other" in a more sensitive manner, but we must re-consider our ideas of collaboration, alliance, and participation. This work is necessarily implicated in a rejection of Enlightenment master narratives of patriarchy and homogenized women's experience, and is enabled through postmodern celebrations of multiple realities, multiple truths, multiple voices, and, ultimately, multiple subjectivities. As mentioned in the previous chapter, postmodernity demands that we dismantle transcendental Truth and absolute rationality, abandoning the idea that there is some ahistorical, acultural, and omnipotent vantage point from which moral standards emerge. Rather, we ought to understand reason as historically and culturally specific, as situated and diverse. Through this work, imperial attempts to reveal absolute Truth are replaced with partial and situated knowledges

Furthermore, this task involves not only hyperawareness of indigenous women's complex realities and diverse positions, but an equally important reflection on the positions of those from beyond cultural intimacies who hope to contribute to these discussions and actions. We ought to reflect upon our own positionalities and placements within a collection of discourses and activisms, considering, for example, how and why we become involved in this work, from where our passions arise, and what we hope to obtain from our efforts. After all, we can only begin to understand our positions in relation to each other once we have come to know our own subjectivities

Moraga and Anzaldua's book,[34] *This Bridge Called My Back* is a collection of writings by diverse women of color that embodies this politics of experience, diversity, and positionality. Each woman testifies to her situated experiences and struggles, and each testimony is positioned in relation to the others and contributes to the collaborative process of forming this book and bridging experience. Ultimately, these women have created a coalitional network capable of transcending transnational structures of oppression while acknowledging and respecting difference. They have begun the process of building and transgressing bridges. As Anzaldua writes,

> Not all of us have the same oppressions, but we empathize and identify with each other's oppressions. We do not have the same ideology, nor do we derive similar solutions. Some of us are leftists, some of us practioners of magic. Some of us are both. But these different affinities are not opposed to each other. In El Mundo Zurdo I with my own affinities and my people with theirs can live together and transform the planet.[35]

Understanding this process of dismantling imperial master narratives and abandoning transcendent Truth is accomplished by embracing a multiplicity of realities and beliefs as linked to individuals who are positioned within complex networks of practices and experiences. This firmly roots our work in contextualized knowledges and positions localized realities in relation to global discussions. Having established the importance of this task reinforces the theory of the previous chapter and will facilitate the discussion of specific methodological approaches in the next chapter.

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[1] Freire 1970, page 213
[2] Lindberg 2004, page 345
[3] Lane 1996, page 6
[4] James 2001, 1037 - This quotation uses the idea of arrogant perception that has been put forth by Isabelle Gunning (1992), whom James speaks of in his article.
[5] Kopleman 2001
[6] Lightfoot-Klein 1989, page 69
[7] Walker 1993
[8] Lightfoot-Klein 1989, page 73
[9] Ibid. page 71
[10] Obiora 2005, pages 195-196
[11] Gruenbaum 2001, pages 180-182
[12] Ibid. page 192
[13] Ibid. pages 184-189
[14] Ibid. pages 195-196
[15] Rahman & Toubia 2000, page 5
[16] Ibid. page 178
[17] Nnaemeka 2005, page 40
[18] Mackie 2000
[19] Ibid. pages 259-260
[20] Korieh 2005, Greunbaum 2001
[21] Ajayi-Soyinka 2005, page 56
[22] Ahmed 1992, pages 154-155
[23] Korieh 2005
[24] Ibid. pages 113-114, in this excerpt, Korieh quotes Hetherington 1997
[25] Kopleman 2001
[26] Lightfoot-Klein 1989, In her introduction, Hanny Lightfoot-Klein lures readers' attention by recalling a discussion with an American man who had traveled throughout different parts of Africa. When describing his visit to Sudan, he reflected upon his experiences with Sudanese prostitutes and sighed, "Those poor women." Lightfoot-Klein quickly realized that he was referring to their "mutilated" genitalia, not their occupation, and remembers her response, "but surely they do this only among very primitive tribes in the bush."
[27] Ibid. page 85

Chapter 5

The Importance of Methodologies and Significations of Languages

To combat female circumcision, we must first diagnose the problem; and to do that effectively, we must ask questions (lots of questions); we must have a sense of history; we must have the humility to learn (not to teach); we must have the capacity to listen (not to preach. In "dialogues" between Africa and the West, one party is listening and not speaking; the other party is garrulous and deaf. Not only do such "dialogues" not promote social change, they undermine attempts to bring genuine social transformation.

- *Obioma Nnaemeka*[1]

Descriptions of cultural practices, values, and beliefs convey the data, and the understandings of those data, collected by a researcher in a specific temporal and spatial context. Such characterizations can be useful only if the use is strictly anchored in specific circumstances...Cultural descriptions are also always made within a specific context and for a particular purpose. Thus, even if well described in relation to a particular context, the unanchored use of cultural descriptions creates a sense of knowledge of the "Other" to which a false precision and completeness too often is attached. The result is that knowledge of other cultures is always contingent, tentative, and incomplete.

- *Sandra Lane*[2]

Assuming the role of researcher, activist, or writer is accompanied by large amounts of power: the power to frame a discussion in a particular way, the power to represent those voices and subjects incorporated into the project, and the power to project meanings. With power comes the inevitable potential for abuse, and, as we have seen, this potential has been realized throughout the dominant feminist discourses of the West. However, as long as feminists are producing knowledge, activists are acting, and writers are writing, the existing

methodological tools will remain available to projects of both domination and decolonization. Thus, the power to speak and act must be accompanied by thoughtful reflections and critical questions.

We might ask, how does one methodologically approach her work? Is she reflexive about this approach and cognizant of its implications? What are the implications for her claims to knowledge, truth, authority, objectivity, authenticity, and representation? These are necessary inquiries and the answers to these questions demystify the author's intent, agenda, and understanding of herself and her ideas in relation to her readers, to other women, to other feminists, and to those women implicated in the issues of which she speaks.

We might question, for example, the use of film and the production of documentaries as these are powerful feminist tools and textual strategies. Furthermore, an analysis of film and the role that it might play in transnational feminist politics speaks to issues of truth, representation, authority, and reality. Film, and in this discussion, the documentary, has been productively explored by specifically anti-colonial projects as well as abused by those imperial in nature. For example, we might ask what functions documentary serves in Parmar and Walker's discourse of "female genital mutilation." Documentaries are often naively associated with nonfiction, truth, and reality and mistaken as sources of objective and accurate knowledge. Therefore, the documentary approach might appeal to those who wish to mask their agenda and disguise their material as an honest representation of reality. This seems to be the precise reason why Walker

chose the documentary, to reveal the horrifying "truth" of "female genital mutilation."

However, as Jude Akudinobi points out, the documentary's truths are always mediated, framed, and edited.[3] Rather than representing an objective reality, meaning is constituted at multiple levels; it is created in the representations of the subjects of the film, in the editing and framing of the film producer, and in the interpretations of the viewers. When presented as a source of Truth and representation of reality, the documentary becomes yet another device of exploitation and abuse. Walker's interview methodology clearly reflects this misuse. She chooses what questions to ask, what parts of the answers to include, what conversations to omit from her film, and how to frame these conversations. Walker and Parmar do not choose their questions out of a genuine desire to learn or discuss shared experiences with women in practicing communities, but rather to invoke specific responses that can be edited and framed to promote their agenda. For example, Parmar reflects upon a disappointing interview with Madame Fall.

> After all the waiting, the interview turned out to be a great disappointment. In our previous conversation, Madame Fall had spoken of the joys of sex, how important it was to her, how circumcision took this pleasure from women. She had laughed, had been informative, entertaining, persuasive. None of this occurred in our filmed interviews, and none of our promptings produced what we were looking for. Instead, she talked about her "leader" and the political party she belonged to. Fortunately, the interviews with the two sisters were inspiring. One of the sisters said, "You cannot ever come to terms with pain."[4]

From *Warrior Marks*, we can tell that Walker and Parmar knew "what they were looking for" and unfortunately, that was a monolithic and one-dimensional demonization of "female genital mutilation" and the peoples whose

lives it touches. Walker and Parmar were not interested in "politics," and therefore when that is what Madame Fall spoke about, the interview was dismissed as disappointing and unsuccessful, and most importantly, omitted from the documentary. This strategy is illustrative of several problematic elements of the Western campaign against female genital operations that Nnaemeka identifies as, "the unequal power relations between the West and the so called Third World; the reduction of the myriad issues facing African women to female circumcision; the disregard of the complexity and integrity of African women; the obsessions, prejudices, and deafness of the West."[5] In response to Parmar and Walker's documentary specifically, she writes,

> Parmar and her group came to Africa in search of Africa. Their documentary was already made before they set foot on African soil. Any African who's interests, concerns, and priorities ran contrary to the group's already-made documentary (in their heads) was irrelevant and what he/she had to say was worthless. African women see and live their lives in ways that are much more complex than the obsessive one-dimensional and one-issue-oriented depictions that appear in books and films about female circumcision.[6]

On the other hand, video cameras and documentaries can be particularly successful tools of anti-colonial activisms. CPTAFE, La Cellule de Coordination Sur Les Pratiques Traditionelles Affectant La Sante des Femmes et des Enfants, the Guinea affiliate of the Inter-African Committee for the Prevention of Harmful Traditional Practices, is the most prominent organization campaigning to end female genital operations in Guinea.[7] Despite its unapologetically explicit "anti-FGM" position, CPTAFE has been warmly received and praised throughout practicing communities in Guinea, a country in which female genital operations

are widespread and practiced more often than not. I believe this success is a product of CPTAFE's commitment to supporting positive traditional practices, promoting girls' education, and spreading information on sexually transmitted infections and AIDS prevention as well as its creative approaches to the topic of female genital operations.

A community-based communication and participatory film project that CPTAFE and C4C teamed up to facilitate is particularly impressive. Video equipment was gathered and community members received training on how to use the equipment to produce videos while participating in discussions about how film might support health, human rights, and social change. Participants then separated into five teams and dispersed themselves throughout Guinea's four regions and Conakry, the capital, to engage their community members in discussions and collaborative video productions. Mini-dramas, documentaries, poetry, and music were filmed and communities featured playbacks followed by further discussion. Because the communities themselves were directing, producing, and creatively shaping their projects, unique approaches tailored to specific audiences and local realities emerged. For example, one of the films produced in Dalaba featured former excisors who, when choosing whether to continue their careers as practitioners or abandon their work and income in the name of social change, collaborated with women's groups to create and join gardening cooperatives as alternative sources of income.

Throughout these projects, participants were thoughtful about their language, always speaking and filming in local languages, and, upon completion,

choosing to name the finished project *Video Sabou et Nafa.* "Sabou" and "nafa" are words shared by all three of the key languages spoken throughout the regional teams, Malinke, Poular and Soussou, and translate as "opportunity" and "benefit," signifying the opportunities that local video presents and the beneficial changes that it can inspire. From its first success in 2002, this project has since created over thirty local-language videos as well as a documentary for the American Refugee Committee on gendered violence prevention, international response, and legal aid activities benefiting refugee women. This film was presented during a United States Congressional briefing on gender violence in conflict settings.

This careful attention to language illustrates another important methodological element of discussions and activisms and has not been mirrored in the mainstream feminisms of the West, feminisms that advertise themselves as promoting and speaking in a language of global "sisterhood." Of this concept of "sisterhood," Tracy Lindberg writes,

> It must be painful to hear it, and I am certain that it is not easily accepted. You are not our sisters by virtue of gender. Gender does not address our spiritual and cultural obligations...The fact that we reflect each other physically does not eradicate the issue: how can I call you sister when you were oppressor first? Sisterhood is the ideal, I think. It is perhaps not an achievable one. We are supposed to be able to get to that place where we are able to trust each other and treat each other as sisters. Share secrets. Tease our brothers. Compare shared experiences.
> We do not have the same shared experiences.
>
> We do not have the same relationships with our men.
>
> Our secrets are not the same as yours.[8]

In this passage from "Not my Sister: What Feminists can Learn about Sisterhood from Indigenous Women," Lindberg refers to the catalyst for her

discussion, the day that a female co-worker, inattentive to the relationship between Lindberg's First Nation identification and the histories of colonization enacted by non-indigenous women, the co-worker's ancestors, began referring to her as "sister." Lindberg explains,

> Indigenous sisterhood involves shared knowledge and experience. An awareness at a restaurant, shared by other indigenous women at the table, that the restaurant's staff is being overly solicitous of the non-indigenous men at the table. A shared understanding in the auditorium at a grade school, that "parenting responsibilities" mean something entirely different to a parent only one generation away from the horrendous truths of some of the residential schools. The communal fear that there will not be enough this time to feed everyone. The shared collective shudder when the phone rings late at night. The same evident weariness on the face of one just like us who has also run herself ragged by cooking for her third funeral in two weeks. These women are my sisters.[9]

The language of sisterhood strikes discord not only with Lindberg or First Nation women whose histories and realities are too often unacknowledged by non-indigenous women in Canada, but with women around the world who are discomforted by Western women's claims of global sisterhood and angered by the manner in which this language invokes an already present and cross-cultural bond between all women regardless of the lacking shared experiences and the oppressions inflicted by Western women. This specific situation serves as an entry point to Lindberg's discussion of how language is inscribed in relations of power and how strategic or colloquial uses of particular languages are often ignorant of the connotations invoked that render these languages problematic or oppressive.

Furthermore, as Lena Dominelli points out, language constructs the ways in which experiences are articulated and validates specific ways of knowing or

understanding a particular occurrence. While the same languages might not be used homogenously by all to identify their experiences, when particular discourses and languages become dominant, certain understandings and ways of knowing these experiences become privileged as well.

> Although there are dominant discourses (or even one hegemonic one), there are others at any particular historical conjuncture. The multiplicity of discourses at any given time means that one discourse (even the dominant one) competes with over issues of truth and authority. This conflict over meaning involves struggles for power, the power to determine which meanings hold sway. Hence, discourses represent attempts to control meaning by establishing particular claims to truth and knowledge. Thus, discourses become a means of regulating knowledge and meaning. Language is directly implicated in these struggles; and, ironically, language is used to both challenge and (re)assert this struggle. No individual, group, institution or organization can ignore these power dynamics and the struggles over what is accepted as legitimate ways of knowing and being.[10]

Certainly, the viability of a transnational movement is implicated in communications, discussions, and debates that cross geographical and cultural borders. If cross-cultural communications are to be initiated and sustained, they must be sensitive to language's embodied histories and realities of oppression as well as how the meanings of words are mutable and subject to different interpretations by different peoples.

When critiquing how language has been used to exclude or manipulate women's voices, exploring the differences in how men and women use language, or theorizing a women's language that resists language's embedded androcentricism, this concept is anything but foreign to Western feminisms. However, these same feminisms seem to forget or overrule the significance of language when articulating their feminist readings of cross-cultural practices. The discourses of non-Western female genital operations that dominate the West have

exploited the practice through insensitive and violent languages. Discourses of "mutilation," "eradication," and "public health" all relay problematic Western interpretations of non-Western female genital operations and constitute the hegemonic international understandings these practices. For example Sandra Lane writes,

> Members of the Arab and African cultures who practice female circumcision have experienced colonialism and other types of continued imperialism by Western governments. They experienced and continue to experience racism and various forms of discrimination. The extreme language used by Western authors to describe female circumcision is perceived by Arab and African people as a continued devaluation of themselves and their entire cultures. To put the matter quite bluntly, if we care about the genitals of the women in these cultures, we need also to care about their feelings.[11]

To move away from these discourses and begin to understand female genital operations as a transnational issue that might benefit from postcolonial coalitional strategies, we must reject the category largely known as "female genital mutilation" and instead speak to the diverse geographic locations, meanings, and politics in which genital operations are entrenched. We must make ourselves aware that practices and procedures vary. Speaking of the "eradication" of "female genital mutilation" by means of "global sisterhood" is not only unproductive, but is outrageously demeaning and homogenizing. Certainly, even beginning to address the issue demands a preparedness to approach the many diverse practices and their significations with many equally diverse and locally tailored strategies. How might the reworking of dominant languages of female genital operations fit within decolonization strategies?

First, decolonizing the language used to speak about female genital operations is more complicated than simply replacing terminology. Harsh

languages have been strategically, not absentmindedly, adopted to invoke urgency and violence, to capture international attention, and to demand immediate action, a process that Obioma Nnaemeka has called "renaming to misname."[12] Recall Daly's footnoted justification of her language. "I have chosen to name these practices for what they are: barbaric rituals/atrocities."[13] In this one sentence, Daly claims moral authority and establishes a transcendent definition of female genital operations. The fact that this definition is specific to a select group of individuals, many of whom have little lived knowledge or experience of the practice, and that it is certainly not shared by the practicing populations that these discourses and activisms are supposedly targeting, is unacknowledged. The fact that Daly is demonizing her most important potential allies and their cultures seems of no significance. Who gave Daly the right to label and condemn, to gaze omnipotently upon a practice that is foreign to herself and define the Reality of it? As Nnaemeka writes,

> Westerners are quick to appropriate the power to name, while remaining totally oblivious of and/or insensitive to the implications and consequences of the naming. In this name game, although the discussion is about African women, a subtext of barbaric African and Muslim cultures and the West's relevance (even indispensability) in purging the barbarism marks another era where colonialism and missionary zeal determined what "civilization" was, and figured out how and when to force it on people who did not ask for it. Only imperialist arrogance can imagine what Africans want, determine what they need, and devise ways to deliver the goods.[14]

Perhaps to many who have pondered this topic, "mutilation" accurately represents their own interpretation of the practice. I can imagine feeling abused, mutilated, and tortured if I were to undergo any form of these surgeries. However, I recognize that these feelings arise from a particular cultural location

specific to myself and others who identify with similar socio-cultural positions, positions that are tremendously distanced from the realities and significations of those intimately linked via geography, family, culture, and society. Recognizing this specificity of interpretation and these varied levels of cultural and social intimacy, it is reasonable to expect that multiple languages will be used to discuss practices of female genital operations.

Importantly though, we must remember that some of these languages are especially embedded in power relations and cultural imperialism while others are not. For example, Egyptians choosing between "tahara," "tahur," and "bolokoli" or Sudanese using "sunna" or "pharonic" illustrates differences in languages and conveys different meanings that are reflected in the purposes that these different groups of people believe the operations perform. Furthermore, these names are by no means arbitrary. Certainly, when the cultural importance of these names is revealed by the ceremonies and practices held to mark them, Western re-naming is highly demeaning.[15]

However, these differences in local languages do not attempt to manipulate local interpretations, project meanings from afar, or describe transcendent reality. Terms such as "mutilation," "torture," and "abuse" do. Certainly, anyone, including Western feminisms, can use whatever languages they want; however, if the project is to establish alliances, inspire conversations, and create productive transnational relationships, we must abandon our rights to use language carelessly and develop a language for discussing female genital operations that is culturally sensitive and does not seek to homogenize all

experiences, grasp an ultimate reality, or project "morally superior" interpretations. This requires complete disposal of overarching discourses of "female genital mutilation," "eradication," "torture," and "abuse." If these concepts arise within conversations, they should arise in a way that makes it clear that these interpretations are specific to the individual speaking them; they must arise in a manner that inspires everyone to articulate their individual interpretations, a process that might productively open dialogue about why such violent language is oppressive.

Some individuals and organizations have been sensitively attentive to these issues in ways that can poignantly inform the development of anti-colonial alliances, organizations, and activisms. For example, those who have spoken about this topic in languages of "genital surgeries," "genital cuttings," and "genital operations" inspired me to neutralize my own language. An organizational example is, once again, TOSTAN. The word "tostan" translates literally as "the breaking of an egg" and is connoted as "breakthrough" in the Wolof language of Senegal. Part of TOSTAN's success lies in its attention to the local significations of these practices, local languages of speaking about these significations, and the languages that the organization should adopt in an effort to be respectful and successful.

For example, TOSTAN refrains from speaking of "eradication" for culturally specific reasons. In the Ivory Coast, female genital operations are one part of an initiation rite that takes place in village huts. In the hut, though, the girl also receives sex education and learns important lessons about hygiene and life.

Thus, when outsiders have protested and called for eradication of "FGM" and "destruction of the hut," villagers relentlessly protested. These villagers, however, as will be demonstrated in subsequent discussions of TOSTAN, are actually quite receptive of debating and discussing female genital operations and their future, or lack of it, in their communities. But, the hut represents an important cultural process that facilitates the transformation of girls into women through education, a process that happens to take place in the hut. TOSTAN thus speaks of abandonment rather than eradication, recognizing the significance of language and its role in bridging or fracturing communications, and many villagers have welcomed ways in which they can *abandon* one element of their cultural context, the operations, without eradicating the entire context, the hut.[16]

Further issues arise in regard to language as well. Establishing cross-cultural communications and collaborating on activist efforts also requires that we acknowledge another type of language barrier - There will be no one language in which these discussions are spoken. Throughout practicing communities, discussions will have to accommodate local languages and indigenous dialects. Depending on the situation, this might mean translation, that outsiders will learn local languages, or that native speakers will facilitate discussions. Whenever translation is used, conscious efforts must be made to ensure that voices are not edited, exploited, or later misrepresented in efforts to recall the conversations or describe them to others.

Furthermore, when choosing the form of activism, one might ask with whom and for whom is this work being done. Hopefully, that answer will be

"local women." The question then becomes an exploration of the forms that the work might take. Activisms must be locally accessible and expressed in manners familiar to local communities. For Western women, this requires that we think beyond the realms of the Western academy or mass media. Regardless of how anti-colonial, scholarly, and persuasive one's writing is, it accomplishes little in largely illiterate communities. Who are Daly and Lightfoot-Klein writing for? - Certainly not the indigenous women who are engaging with local struggles on local levels.

Similarly, local resources must be accounted for. For example, in communities that are not equipped with media, a film or documentary project is irrelevant. As Walker points out, "While planning the film, I had dreams about taking it from village to village, but by now I've visited many African villages, and there are absolutely no audio-visual facilities. Barely, sometimes, drinking water. None that we foreigners could drink."[17] I needn't ask for whom Walker is filming as she makes it clear that it is not for those women with whom she claims to ally herself. As Nnaemeka writes, "there is a huge difference between writing and filming about African women, on the one hand, and writing and filming with/for African women, on the other. That difference may determine the success or failure of the campaign against female circumcision."[18]

How might this follies be avoided? Rather than using foreign tactics, foreign languages, or offensive languages to approach indigenous issues, local cultures, customs, and arts can provide important tools of social change. Indigenous customs such as story telling, dance, theater, art, poetry, and music are

powerful, accessible, and familiar means of instigating discussions and exploring issues surrounding female genital operations. Joy Keshi Walker of Nigeria, for example, organized a group of Nigerian painters and sculptors to adopt female genital operations as the subject matter of their art. Together, the artists produced eighty pieces of art - oil paintings, watercolors, copper etchings, and sculpture. Each of the works is accompanied by information in local and European languages about the artist and context. The art was displayed in the Goethe Institute in Lagos in November 1998. Additionally, the museum traveled throughout Nigeria, making it accessible to those who would have been unable to travel to the city. Walker speaks to the use of art as a dialogue across difference.

> The arts can more easily conquer the barriers of language and cultural diversity in Nigeria, a country of 120 million people, with over 250 languages. Because words can sometimes be offensive or judgmental, in order to avoid emotional stand-offs, a visual medium that transcends ethnic sensitivities is preferred.[19]

When Walker traveled to Indianapolis for the "Women in Africa and the African Diaspora" conference, she met Dr. Tobe Levin, the president of FORWARD – Germany, an African directed NGO campaigning against female genital operations. Over the next six years, FORWARD had the artwork shown throughout Germany and in Switzerland and Italy. The show later made its debut in the United States at the Brandeis University Women's Studies Research Center where Professor Shulamit Reinharz affirms the artwork's importance, not as providing simple critiques and "clear-cut answers to the questions the art poses," but as "raising new questions and motivating viewers to want to learn more."[20]

Clearly, both TOSTAN and Walker's Nigerian Art Exhibit demonstrate the importance of understanding female genital operations in a broader context of local realities, avoiding oppressive languages, overcoming language barriers, and incorporating a range of expression. There is much that feminisms of the West might consider emulating from these methodological choices, especially if they wish to be well received beyond Western borders. After all, projects that originated in African nations, such as the Nigerian art exhibit and the C4C film project have achieved tremendous local triumphs and have successfully crossed geographic borders, making their way into Western art museums and congressional briefings.

Ultimately, what these examples demonstrate is that keen attentiveness to methodological choices will enable us to ensure that our anti-colonial sensitivities and decolonization strategies are not simply written on paper or expressed in the mission statement of an organization, but that they are thoroughly reflected in our methodologies. If we intend to pursue a postmodern and anti-colonial reconceptualization of transnational feminist theory, our methodologies must also diverge from modern trends of inflated self-consciousness and authority. We should adopt self-reflexive, situated, culturally-sensitive, and inclusive methodological approaches to our work by being reflexive about how our personal beliefs and subjectivities frame our discussions and actions and by carefully fashioning the manner in which we interact, debate, or support other individuals' or groups' beliefs, theories, and activisms, both those with which we agree and those with which we do not. The nature of anti-colonial work requires

that we do critique imperial projects and clearly demonstrate how and why their methods are flawed. However, we should attempt to do so in a fashion that allows us to contribute our ideas and concerns to a discussion that they have initiated or participated in. We need to express clearly why we find problematic what we find problematic and why we disagree with what we disagree, but must refrain from assuming authority and superiority. Our work ought to be suggestive and not prescriptive, flexible and not regulating, creative and not confined. I have attempted to realize these tasks throughout this project and hope that this discussion of methodology will shed light on the ways in which we might methodologically work to decolonize of transnational feminist politics.

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[1] Nnaemeka 2005, page 38
[2] Lane 1996, pages 8-9
[3] Akudinobi 2005
[4] Walker and Parmar 1993, page 207
[5] Nnaemeka 2005, page 36
[6] Ibid.
[7] www.c4c.org, All of the information about C4C and its film project is derived from this website.
[8] Lindberg 2004, pages 347-348
[9] Ibid. page 343
[10] Dominelli 2004, page 517
[11] Lane 1996, page 9
[12] Nnaemeka 2005
[13] Daly 1978, page 154
[14] Nnaemeka 2005, page 34
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid. page 36
[17] Walker and Parmar 1993, page 81-82
[18] Ibid. page 39
[19] 2006 exhibit catalogue
[20] Reinharz in the 2006 exhibit catalogue

Chapter 6

Dismantling 1st/3rd World Binaries and Understanding National and Social Boundaries as Permeable

Colonial discourse and the current feminist discourse on female circumcision assume the same binary trajectory of a civilized, emancipated, and autonomous Western woman, and the oppressed and backward non-Western woman bound by tradition, superstition, and male suppression on the other. Such binaries are possible only with the Western subject as the primary reference point.

- Chima Korieh[1]

The project of decolonizing transnational feminisms insists, in addition to the practice of careful historical and cultural contextualization and the adoption of specifically anti-colonial methodology, that these binaries of which Korieh speaks be completely dismantled and the dimorphic notion of "us" who do not practice and "them" who do, deconstructed. Transnational and anti-colonial feminisms demand acknowledgement of the power dynamics and hierarchies that have been established between and among women and hyper-awareness of the racial, economic, national, religious, and sexual positions that intersect with gender. We must destabilize the notion of pure oppressors and victims in an attempt to understand how each of our actions and words might contribute to another's oppression. Rather than ranking oppressions, we must re-envision new categories of race, class, and gender as distinct, yet intersecting structures, and acknowledge a diversity of experiences that are denied in an oppressor/oppressed discourse. This chapter seeks to explore the tasks that this project entails and its specific requirements, as theoretically established in Chapter 3, that we actively reject the

"universal Woman" and reification of "Third World difference" that collaboratively produce the monolithic "Third World Woman,"[2] that we dismantle the colored/colonized and non-colored/colonizer dichotomy that fails to acknowledge the infusion of imperialism and manifestation of hierarchy among women of color,[3] and that we ask why, when female genital operations and other violences against the female body are occurring around the world, it is that African, and a few Asian, nations are the foci and Western feminisms the authority of this "global" feminist concern.

Just as *This Bridge Called My Back* creates a global network of transnational female experience and solidarity that transcends borders and structures of separation, Gayatri Spivak,[4] in her discussions of planetarity and subaltern consciousness, proposes a theory of planetarity that she explains as a defamiliarizing of the natural or familiar, a disengagement from the structures of globalization, and an acknowledgement of the interpenetration of the self and other that inevitably deconstructs any structure of binary oppositions and transcends the self/other binary. She claims that there is no ontological truth or essential subject, contending that identity is unfixed and that hegemonies exert themselves precisely when they understand the other to be known or knowable. Ultimately, Spivak destabilizes global structures, proposing that a theory of the planet is capable of surpassing these structures that oppress and separate, a theory of "planetarity" through which global structures are transcended and subjugated knowledges and experiences are recognized in a manner that avoids both the Western production of a "Third World Woman" and the authentication of a

monolithic Third World voice. Spivak's ideas provide the theoretical groundwork for theorists who have envisioned what this planetarity might entail and how the space of vulnerability and discomfort that arises when we defamiliarize the familiar, or in this case, decolonize the colonial and acknowledge ourselves as positioned within the network of oppressed *and* oppressors, might productively disengage with imperial structures of feminist thought and action, welcoming, in their place, a transnational feminist politics of multiplicity and strategic coalition that operates at local and global levels, but most importantly, outside of the framework of global divisions while remaining attuned to the ways in which these global structures have shaped realities.

Mohanty is among these theorists who engage with the work of deconstructing dichotomous relations between women across cultures and is well known for her criticism of colonial productions of the singular "Third World Woman."[5] Mohanty maintains that denouncing this construction is necessary to understand how Third World feminisms challenge and resist colonial feminist discourses as well as how transnational foundations might be established to enable strategic coalitions across race, class, and national boundaries. Western feminists must examine the manner in which feminist scholarship, which is inevitably inscribed in relations of power, both resists and implicitly supports these hegemonic power dynamics and hierarchies, especially through its attempts to represent the "Third World Woman" and reduce her to a simplistic token. Western women are called upon to recognize the diversity and historical and cultural specificity among non-Western women. They must move beyond

benevolent discussions with or actions towards non-Western women and into an uncomfortable realm of examining their own ethnocentrisms and challenging global power relations.

> First World feminists must enter the hard work of uncovering and contesting global power relations, economic, political, military, and cultural-hegemonic. Questions of location are historicized and politicized as postcolonial feminists enter the terrain of the reflexive that we call theory. The investigators' identities and places of speaking are marked by hybridity, in-betweeness, and hyphenation; pure and authentic 'origins' are rendered dubious; their intellectual trajectories are crossed with histories of arrival; the autobiographical turn, in anthropology for instance, is seen as specifically feminist. When 'Third World Women' speak in the voices of these feminists, it is to repudiate otherness, tokenism, stereotyping, exceptionalism, and the role of "native informant."[6]

The process of avoiding tokenization and learning from and about other cultures is far from uncomplicated, especially when Western feminisms have and continue to "study" the "other" out of mere fascination and "good intentions." In her discussion of imperialism and sex in Africa, Nawal Al Saadawi speaks of how well intended conferences or meetings about African culture, in efforts to promote multiculturalism and cultural education, become themselves neocolonial productions.

> Sex in Africa can be discussed as a cultural or multicultural issue. The imperialists are experts in separating sex from economics, politics, and power relations. In the name of diversity and cultural differences, they fail to recognize the danger in organizing conferences on African culture, in which they watch African dances, listen to African music and songs, gaze at black female flesh, and enjoy sexual liberation in African brothels. Sex, culture, multiculturalism, African festivals, and conferences become an exhibition, a spectacle for the pleasure of imperialists to see, to consume.[7]

And, as Korieh writes,

> Such knowledge production suppresses the heterogeneity and historical particularity of non-Western, "non-modern," and "non-integrated" women, while simultaneously reproducing the prevailing notion that they are

> voiceless, passive, and unable to speak truthfully or objectively about themselves. Thus, the image of a Third World oppressed woman exists in universal, ahistorical splendor, setting in motion a colonial discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, encoding, and maintaining existing First/ Third World dichotomies. To a large extent, the invention of "Third World" woman by Western/ized feminists is tantamount to recolonization at the level of knowledge production.[8]

How might we avoid these dangers? Mohanty contends that a transnational feminist politics must be "attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes."[9] This might be accomplished through her notion of solidarity, which she defines as "mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities."[10] Rather than focusing on common experiences or universal oppression, solidarity is achieved through a body of individuals who choose to work and struggle together amidst diversity and difference. Through these practices, a borderless feminism that is founded upon decolonized knowledges might be realized.

These borderless feminisms thus emerge through commitment to the "micropolitics of context," the ways the female genital operations operate at local levels, and the "macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes," the ways in which the female body is exploited and abused across cultures and geographies. This means that we must understand that borderless feminisms might operate at multiple levels and in regard to topics as they are both locally and globally situated. Attempting to do so at the 1980 mid-United Nations Decade for Women conference in Copenhagen, Nawal Al Saadawi and other women from Africa suggested that female genital operations are a borderless phenomenon, that they "have nothing to do with Africa or Islam," but everything

to do with the ways in which the patriarch operates cross-culturally and manifests distinctively in specific places and moments. When they mentioned that these operations were not imported into the West by recent waves of Third World immigrants and that it is common knowledge that clitoridectomy was practiced by white men and on white women of the Western world for decades as a way of controlling women's sexuality, wantonness, and psychosis, the conference at large responded with heated resistance.[11]

I suspect that the anger, resistance, and impassioned disagreement between women of African and other developing nations and Western women that characterized this specific United Nations Decade for Women moment and much of the decade at large were, on the part of the Western women, expressions of insecurity in response to the threatening notion that the "macropolitics" of patriarchy refers not to a welcomed and easily-recited list of third world abuses (FGM, veiling, suttee, footbinding, dowry...) but rather to the ways in which these issues have existed and continue to thrive across geographic and cultural borders, including the developed West, the supposed home of feminist superiority and women's emancipation in all its glory. Furthermore, if Western women recognize their own vulnerability, those qualities of "other" underdeveloped cultures in their own cultures, they then must also come to terms with the ways in which they have contributed to the oppressions of women around the world through their assumptions of enlightened status, a task that I believe to be paramount to the mobilization of transnational, or borderless, feminisms and certainly implicated in any attempt to deconstruct global structures of oppression.

Perhaps now we can glance back at all of these moments throughout the United Nations Decade for Women and recognize them as missed opportunities - all of the times non-Western women spoke only to be met by deaf ears, all of the times Western women preached only to further distance their so-called "sisters," all of the times disagreements emerged, global connections were drawn, and Western women shied away behind curtains of anger and elitism because engaging in those disagreements and recognizing those links would have exposed their vulnerability; would have destabilized their own feminist identifications, confidences, and ideologies, thrusting them into the grips of a humbling postmodern crisis; and, most importantly, would have forced them to admit the interpenetrations of the self and other - to admit that the other, that was previously projected onto those oppressed women, those underdeveloped nations, those ancient traditions, those backwards cultures, those barbaric men, exists in themselves, in their own insecurities, in their own countries, in their own cultures, in their own movements, in their own men.

However, recognizing these instances as missed opportunities entails recognizing the parallel opportunities of the contemporary era. This task is so easily materialized and profitable to Western women as well as women around the world that I am appalled that so few women of Western feminisms have assumed it. Even in the midst of a Third Wave, Women of Color, and transnational feminist revolution, why is it that these promising feminisms pursue the question of how Western women can unproblematically contribute to non-Western women's liberation but fail to ask the critical question of how non-Western

women can contribute to the emancipation of Western women? The lives, experiences, and activisms of women around the world provide valuable perspectives and promising models from which Western women can consider their own strategies. The insights and knowledges of women around the world provide valuable resources from which Western women can choose and approach their battles. Most importantly, the women around the world provide valuable sources of friendship and alliance that Western women can solicit to alleviate local patriarchal manifestations in the West. Ultimately, we must reject the positioning of non-Western women as sites for transnational feminism efforts and instead welcome them as active contributors to transnational feminisms.

Sara Suleri, however, warns against careless attempts to "include" the "Reality" of non-Western women. She is frustrated with the positioning the "Third World Woman" as authenticity, as an icon for transnational feminisms, or, as mentioned above, as the site of postcolonial feminism from which the subaltern experience is articulated. Suleri challenges the manner in which these efforts might fall prey to romanticizing difference, claiming authenticity, and valorizing personal and lived experience. Suleri writes,

> Current feminist discourse remains vexed by questions of identity formation and the concomitant debates between essentialism and constructivism, or an uneasy selfhood to a voice that is best described as the property of 'postcolonial Woman'. Whether this voice represents perspectives as divergent as the African-American or the postcolonial cultural location, its imbrications of race and gender are accorded an iconicity that is altogether too good to be true.[12]

So, while Mohanty has provided a critical assessment of Western feminist attempts to represent the Third World Woman, Suleri critiques how this type of

discourse might ultimately result in homogenizing diverse subjectivities and oppressions through the notion of an "authentic Third World voice," a production that is equally dangerous. Thus, keeping both critiques in mind, it becomes all the more clear that a postcolonial feminist politics must be hyper-aware of these trends while allowing a productive space for the collection of diverse individuals around a given struggle. This means that attention directed to the micropolitics of experience must refrain from projecting an authentic voice onto a woman or group of women from within this locality. Diversity, as it exists globally, exists locally as well. Sharing the same country, or even 30-mile radius, as the following example will illustrate, does not mean that women will have similar views or experiences. These local diversities emerge through thoughtful communications and dialogues. A particular TOSTAN experience in Malicounda illustrates this point.

One of the TOSTAN programs in Malicounda encountered a dilemma in a module on women's health when a facilitator from the Wolof ethnic group, a group that does not practice any type of female genital operation, brought up the topic. Participants of practicing communities became upset at this outsiders attempt to "impose" on their experiences, refused to participate, and began speaking in Bambara. However, after several days of persistent attempts to open communication, the women from practicing communities began engaging with the questions among themselves by comparing their own experiences. In speaking with other women about a previously private topic, similarities arose and connections were made between medical consequences and complications of the

surgeries. As the women began sharing their experiences, they realized that many of them had encountered the same negative health consequences that had been, by their health professionals and communities, attributed to other causes; learned that many women had understood their personal experiences with complications as isolated because these consequences were never publicly disclosed; and realized that these results were avoidable when one of the women, a former practitioner, revealed that she had stopped performing the surgeries because her daughter's life was threatened by complications and encouraged other women to question the assumed necessity of the procedures.[13]

These women, who were free to choose whatever type of village project they wanted to pursue, made reducing female genital operations a priority and involved their larger communities in critically thinking about and discussing the practice that was so common among them but, up until that moment, predominantly privately experienced and interpreted. The village imam became involved and ruled that the practices were not religiously mandated, revealing that his own daughters had not received the surgeries. As people began speaking with each other about their private beliefs and telling their personal stories, the locally shared experiences that emerged contributed to a sense that these experiences should be understood as avoidable, not normal or common. As Gary Mackie comments in regard to this process, "the nexus of causal information, private experiences and attitudes made public, and the larger context of the education program, precipitated the critical mass who then went on to persuade others in the village.[14]

Thus, attention given to not merely local experiences, but to the diversity of local realities and the ways that they are known, is necessary. Additionally, what this TOSTAN encounter also invokes is the ways in which power relations among Africans must be accounted for. So, while Mohanty recognizes the ways in which relations and representations among "First" and "Third," women, "colonizer" and "colonized," and Western and non-Western must be reconstituted and Suleri is wary of the ways in which attempts to do so might ultimately reify an a monolithic "reality of authentic Third World Experience," what about the multiple inter-workings of power and privilege, even among and between women of color, that are often overlooked or ignored by mainstream Western feminisms. As Sandra Lane writes, "taking account of contemporary and historical relationships of power and privilege are essential first steps toward arriving at a sensitive and nuanced approach to engagement,"[15] and certainly, colonial legacies are more complicated than a simple binary of non-colored/colonizer and colored/colonized. As Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka writes in regard to power and imperialism,

> Charges of imperialism have been made almost exclusively within a colored/colonized and non-colored/colonizer dichotomy. Often indicted are white women whose association with class and cultures of the race of colonizers gives them a privileged status over other oppressed women and men. They are accused of reinstitution and perpetuating the structures and privileges of imperialism, even within women's coalitions. Not much attention has been paid to investigating the possibility of power hierarchy even among women traditionally marginalized by colonization. Obviously, there are manifestations of power hierarchy *among* women of color.[16]

I must admit, part of me is highly discomforted by speaking about imperialisms among women of color, likely because as a middle-class Caucasian

American, I have come to know that the politics of my individual location are always implicated in the role of the colonizer, are always constituted as the standard, and will always, at least to a certain extent, encourage me to invest in my privilege rather than denounce it. However, I have been speaking about imperialisms among women of color throughout this project and would be a coward to avoid this direct conversation. After all, Walker and Parmar, two individuals whose work I have centered in my discussions of imperial feminisms, are both women of color who identify strongly with their ancestors' oppressions and see themselves as, to a large extent, insiders in the debates about female genital operations.

What does it mean to claim this "insider" authority? For Walker, it means that, via her great-great grandmother's enslavement, she will always be linked to the oppressions of Africa's peoples. Her "patriarchal wound" (recall how her brother's air rifle permanently blinded her in one eye) confirms her link to oppressed women of the world, and in this case, oppressed women of Africa.[17] For Parmar, an Indian woman born in Kenya and raised in London, this project is understood as linked to women's suffering globally, suffering that has manifested itself in Parmar's nation of India. For Parmar, simply knowing that Indian women are burned for failure to produce enough dowries is confirmation enough that she should be engaging with the topic of female genital operations in Africa.

I am certainly in no position to determine which connections are valid and which are not, but I would ask, connections to what end? Connections used to star oneself in a documentary about "oppressed African women" and to assume a

position of authentic authority? Connections to dismiss the voices and knowledges of African women as uninformed or misinformed, naive and ignorant? Connections to privilege one's own vision of emancipation and timeline for liberation? Connections to exempt oneself from actually committing to the difficult and discomforting work of forming these connections in the first place because they are, supposedly, by the color of one's skin and ancestry, already there? Connections that need not be validated by the women with whom one claims intimacy, because, after all, those women can't possibly understand that what they perceive as imperialism is, in reality, benevolent attempts to "save" them? These seem to be the "connections" implied throughout Walker and Parmar's identifications with the African women of their documentary.

Ajayi-Soyinka identifies the positions of individuals such as Walker and Parmar as ambivalently negotiated. For example, African American missionaries, she writes, "find themselves in ambiguous relationships. Linked by way of a 'fragile source of identity' to their potential converts, yet members of the white converting team, they vacillate between holy righteousness and racial apologia."[18] Walker parallels this remark all to well when, as those of us who have read *The Color Purple* know, she introduces "Africa" to her readers via a missionary family. Ultimately, while individuals such as Walker and Parmar assume and strategically exploit their connections with the African women that they film, what this discussion indicates is that we *all* must always understand identity as "fragile" and identifications with women across cultures as produced through

anti-colonial work and negotiated across similarity and difference, never as given or obvious.

Finally, I would like to suggest that the project of dismantling binaries of imperial feminisms is necessarily implicated in understanding national and social boundaries as permeable and the issue of genital operations as transnationally approached and approachable through, for example, African debates, Western discussions, African immigration to United States and Europe, Western legislation regarding asylum pleas, and medically unnecessary genital operations on intersex infants born in the West or Western adult women requesting cosmetic genital "reconstruction."

One important element of understanding national boundaries as permeable is to examine the manner in which Western feminists, rather than simply exporting our efforts and ideologies to Africa, might consider assessing the politics that female genital operations are implicated in within Western borders. While I have already discussed important parallels between Western and non-Western practices of genital operations, in the upcoming discussion, I choose to devote careful attention to American refugee and asylum politics in an effort to closely examine one of the ways in which recent immigration has transported non-Western female genital operations to the West as well as the ways that feminisms of the West might contribute to the discussions and legislation surrounding these practices in specifically anti-colonial manners, demonstrating potential transnational feminist manifestations within Western borders. Because female genital operations are implicated in a larger framework of violence against women as well as feminist

injustice towards specific women and groups of women, connections to these issues will be made in an effort illustrate the larger, international political network that female genital operations are positioned in and the ways in which asylum politics engages a discussion of female genital operations with consideration of how these operations are strategically incorporated into asylum court, often in damaging manners and without regard for these larger realities or women's experiences.

Within recent years, asylum and refugee legislation has directly impacted the lives of many non-Western women seeking refuge from practices such as female genital operations. Refugee legislation was formally adopted post-World War II to accommodate the populations fleeing from Nazi Germany. The distinction between refugee and asylee is a clarification of when the plea is issued. Those granted refugee status file their applications prior to entering the United States while those classified as asylee file after their arrival. However, up until 1980, the United States operated within the ambiguously defined "well-founded fear" to predominantly define refugee. This legislation was adopted to accommodate persecuted populations fleeing from communist regimes during the Cold War. It was not until the 1980 Refugee Act's implementation of national standards for assessing refugee and asylum claims that those seeking refuge from non-communist persecution became regularly accepted. A refugee is currently defined by the United States as,

> any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country on which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of

> persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.[19]

The Geneva Convention internationally established the refugee legal definition, and the 1967 Protocol is the basis for national legislation. But, because the international legislation is blind to gender specific persecutions and the gendered dimensions of refugee and asylum politics, legislation adopted at the national level must assume responsibility for recognizing gender-based persecution and ensuring that women have equal protection under national law as well as access to asylum processes.[20] While neither national nor international protocols have officially incorporated the language of gendered persecution into written legislation, governments have informally acknowledged gendered persecution claims and adopted guidelines for assessing such pleas. Within the last decade, the entrance of women seeking Western refuge from practices such as female genital operations has been facilitated by the introduction of such gender-based persecution guidelines. Included in the collection of gender-based persecutions are female genital operations, forced marriage, honor killings, domestic violence, coercive family planning, and other repressive social norms.[21] Hence, for the increasing number of women attempting to currently utilize such legislation, assessing Western asylum and refugee politics is now, more so than ever, crucial.

Fortunately, some Western feminists have assumed this responsibility. Unfortunately, many of them have done so through especially problematic tactics as asylum law is an area that feminists have gained access to by working within flawed political structures and utilizing the political tools, however imperfect they

might be, available to them. With the urgent needs of current and potential refugee women at stake, attempts to critique the asylum system at large and the power dynamics at play have been neglected in favor of directing feminist effort towards establishing a space of visibility and voice within asylum politics. In doing so, Western feminists have promoted the easily consumed dichotomous ideology of Western protectionism and non-Western helplessness, have relied upon notions of transhistorical and transcultural female subjugation, and have thus homogenized women's experiences of oppression within framed and simplified categories.

Recall for a moment the earlier discussion about the much-feared collapse of feminism within postmodern times and the concern among Western feminists that replacing grand feminist agendas with postmodern feminist politics of subjectivity will incapacitate feminist action. This idea, that operating within a postmodern critique of the system itself prevents one from transforming the system from within, results in overwhelming tension between feminist activisms and postmodern politics and the problematic disjuncture between theory and praxis. These debates are especially relevant to gender and asylum law, and, through situating feminist discourses of gendered persecution within the postmodern era, such feminist approaches to refugee law and their severe implications for women attempting to escape female genital operations or other gender-based persecutions become enmeshed within the same types of neocolonial frameworks that have been interrogated throughout this discussion. The boundaries of postmodern feminist politics, as well, are challenged when

confronted with the many dimensions of feminist approaches to asylum law that demand both cultural sensitivity and immediate transformations.

Western feminists have identified the need to acknowledge gender-based persecution, and incorporating gendered persecution within refugee law has been monumental to those women seeking asylum or refuge on the grounds of female genital operation. However, feminists have accomplished this awareness through presenting a pitiable and monolithic representation of the victimized, vulnerable, helpless, and silenced non-Western women. They have established a state of desperation by exoticizing a handful of specific practices, such as "female genital mutilation," honor killing, and forced marriages, and then associating such practices with the universally backwards and barbarically patriarchal cultures and religions of the non-Western world. This image was quickly digested by refugee law and has now become the gold standard by which women's please are adjudicated. Women who are seeking asylum are encouraged by their attorneys and other asylum officials who are "acting in their best interest" to tell stories that fit within prescribed categories of exotic harm and portray themselves as utterly feeble and in need of protection. After extensively reviewing numerous asylum cases and interviewing several female applicants, Connie Oxford confirms such practices.

> Asylum seekers are legally responsible for articulating a narrative of harm that is satisfactory to asylum officers and immigration judges. Those who do not conform to an acceptable legal discourse of persecution may jeopardize their chances of gaining asylum. Therefore, it is always in the interest of an individual asylum seeker to conform to the hegemonic narrative of persecution. The reward for asylum seekers is considerable – protection against deportation and the frightening possibility of violence and death. However, this conformity has serious consequences for reproducing a structural dynamic of inequality

> through the subordination of subversive stories to hegemonic narratives of gender and persecution that may undermine gender justice.[22]

The narrative of an assertive woman who bravely escaped her husband's nearly fatal beatings provides one example of such occurrences. She independently fled to the United States to claim persecution and seek asylum and initially wrote on her application that, if forced to return to her country, she would kill her husband. After her attorney's extensive editing and coaching however, her final application read that if forced to return to her country, her husband would kill her, and despite conclusive evidence of persecution, such as photos of the gun that her husband kept between them in bed, images of her tortured body post-beating, and beating induced permanent deafness in her left ear, the asylum process required that this woman's anger, vengeance, agency, and courage be replaced by feeble victim status.[23]

Oxford also explains how essentialist and monolithic ideas of cultural practices shape understandings of harm. Female genital operations are often exploited through cultural essentialism and, regardless of their expressed motivation for fleeing and though their own accounts of persecution do not speak of female genital operations, many women are encouraged or forced to discuss such practices as a basis for their asylum pleas. Thus, exoticized practices of female genital operations become hypervisible while women's experiences of persecution for political activism, torture, and detention are concealed. Additionally, the concept of gendered persecution becomes synonymous with women's persecution and it is commonly assumed that women, and not men, experience gender-related persecution. This theme is clearly articulated in the

Immigration and Naturalization Service's (INS) memorandum that *women* may have "asylum claims based wholly or in part on their gender." This process serves to "intensify a gendered regime in which immigration attorneys and service providers become protectors of women faced with exotic harm and create a new gendered victim based on a cultural act that the asylum seeker may not consider to be persecution."[24] Meanwhile, women's experiences of religious, national, political, and racial oppression are discounted. For example, in one of her interviews, a woman who was seeking refuge from the torture that she experienced in Ethiopia as a member of the Eritrean minority, though she discussed the torture, jail time, and rapes that she endured because of her nationality, was coerced by immigration officers into discussing her genital surgery. This woman told Oxford,

> In my tradition, it's normal, it's private; we don't talk about it. When they told me I had to talk about it, I said okay, if it helps me. I was shy about it. It was embarrassing. It was hard for me. But I had done so much to get here [the United States] so I did it."[25]

This woman's account exemplifies how privileged narratives of persecution force women to assume positions that are inconsistent with their own self-views and confounds and inhibits their ability to articulate and validate individually and culturally specific experiences of persecution. Such women are denied the opportunity to relay contextualized experiences of race, nation, sexuality, class, and ability. The results of these practices are echoed by claims such as Mohanty's that, "defining women as archetypal victims freezes them into 'objects who defend themselves,' men into 'subjects who perpetuate violence,'

and every society into powerless (read: women) and powerful (read: men) groups of people,"[26] and Spivak's criticism that "white men are saving brown women from brown men."[27] Hence, race and gender are associated in a manner that produces racialized and gendered protectors and victims, and, in the case of asylum law, gender and race are implicated within notions of citizenship and nation that portray white men as protecting female non-citizens of some "other," non-Western nationality, from non-citizen and non-Western "Other" men.

Not only does this system re-victimize female asylum seekers, silence them, and strip them of agency, but it results in a practice that might be characterized as "fighting sexism with racism."[28] Only after vilifying their culture and pitting their gender against their race were these women's claims acknowledged. Hence, rather than being portrayed as survivors of persecution, seeking refuge in the West, the narrative becomes one of passive and helpless "Third World Women" seeking the protection of the superior, refugee-receiving, First World from the backwards, refugee-producing, Third World.[29] The relations between the refugee-receiving West and the refugee-producing Third World are ignored and the role played by Western embargos, the International Monetary Fund and strategic "development" plans, apathetic Western responses to genocide, and the support (in monetary or weapon form) provided to various groups to sustain violence against other groups in the production of refugees is disregarded. It is thus that Woman is pitted against culture and the simplified First World/Third World binary is reproduced.

Finally, yet another method by which Western feminists have inserted women into asylum law is by emphasizing women's social positions in the private sphere. The logic behind this approach is that notions of women's agency and private harm propose a fundamental difference between private and public harm that results in the trivialization, de-legitimization, and invisibility of private sphere oppressions. An example of this might be a woman who is fleeing from a genital operation to be performed by her grandmother. In addition to raising awareness of such private forms of oppression, however, feminists have contributed to an idea that all of women's oppressions occur in the private sphere and have thus facilitated the emergence of a public/private dichotomy that warrants little attention to the wide range of oppressions that women experience, both public and private.

While it is of great importance to acknowledge that many of women's oppressions do occur in the private sphere and demand our attention, it is no less important to acknowledge that women also have political opinions, racial presence, and religious beliefs; that they experience persecution of such natures; and that men, hence, do not "own" the public sphere and all categories of oppression that are not specifically "genderfied."[30] Furthermore, dichotomizing the public and private realms conceals the profound interconnection between the two and forgoes an analysis of the political, social, and economic structures of the public sphere as they maintain gendered, classed, and racialized power relations in both public and private persecutions.[31]

Clearly, as Western and/or transnational feminists concerned about the plight of non-Western women who are confronted with practices such as female genital operations, we must remember to interrogate the Western participation in such oppressions and the Western structures that directly converge with these women's lives. Doing so highlights the immediate and urgent demand for reform within Western borders themselves. Our obligation to address such issues will not cease until asylum processes refrain from homogenizing and exoticizing the experiences of persecuted women and cross-cultural female oppressions, cease to force women to vilify their culture, grant non-Western women the right to retain autonomy and agency, recognize the wide range of oppressions experienced by women as well as the manner in which they embody complex experiences of race, religion, nation, ability, sexuality, politics, of which gender, is only one, and finally, allow women to speak of their individually situated and contextualized experiences, to tell their stories rather than someone else's, without jeopardizing their asylum fate. This task will not be completed as long as Western feminisms replace sexism with racism and oblige a patriarchal and racist system rather than challenging the system itself. Western feminists must ask why refugee law excludes women and how this might be changed, an answer that will never arise as long as they are asking instead how women can be quickly inserted into refugee law. As Oswin writes,

> Feminist approaches to refugee rights have, to a large extent, sacrificed context-specific, accurate representations of refugee women's diverse experiences to accommodate liberal rights structures which require specific rather than fluid subjects. But, the already inadequate legal structures which feminists have taken such pains to insert the experiences of refugee women into are slowing, but unmistakably, becoming increasingly ineffective. As such, little tangible

return has resulted from the discursive and material damage of reifying the subject "refugee woman."[32]

I have closely examined asylum politics because assessing the manner in which asylum law - an issue geographically located in the West - intersects with female genital operations - practices perceived as occurring beyond Western borders - reveals an important space in which transnational feminists can work towards decolonization on Western grounds and through targeting Western institutions. Certainly, there are several such spaces. Health care, for example, is another. Imagine yourself as an infibulated woman living in the United States. Where would you go for gynecological exams or with reproductive health concerns? You would likely go without, for even if you are fortunate enough to have health care, you are probably not lucky enough to live near a doctor knowledgeable enough about the physiological, medical, and cultural elements of your surgically altered genitalia to provide you with adequate care. Perhaps even if you desire to be un-sutured or to give birth, you will turn to a friend for assistance and hope for the best, resorting to the culturally ignorant Western medical institution only when emergency gives you no other choice.

Perhaps feminisms of the West should encourage Western medical facilities and staff to respond to the needs of their local communities and potentially non-Western neighbors. Therefore, if these communities might include women who have received some form of non-Western genital surgery, Western feminisms ought to work to organize and provide the medical and cultural knowledge necessary to care for these women in non-judgmental and highly professional manners and to make these services visible and readily

accessible. The African Women's Health Center, located within the Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital, has done so. Its mission is to "holistically improve the health of refugee women who have undergone female genital cutting," by providing "access, understanding and community to refugee women who have long-term complications from this tradition and who seek access to improved reproductive health care." The health center attempts to address the concerns of immigrant and refugee women nation-wide who have experienced a non-Western form of genital operation and are uncomfortable seeking medical services from Western doctors who are unfamiliar with the physiological and cultural elements of altered female genitalia and are therefore incapable of providing adequate care in a medically advanced, professional, non-judgmental, and culturally-sensitive manner. The AWHC was founded in 1999, and, to my knowledge is the first and only African medical center in the United States that explicitly focuses on providing care to these populations.[33]

Ultimately, whether working to improve the health care of these women, to defend their autonomy and right to represent themselves successfully in asylum court, or gathering in other types of coalition with the women and women's needs of non-Western cultures, identifying these potential spaces of anti-colonial and transnational feminist work is necessary in understanding how practices of female genital operations, as well as other topics of transnational feminist debate, are never contained in one geographic location and are always implicated in international relations and cross-cultural institutions and politics, that there are always callings for transnational feminist work within Western

borders, both in response to non-Western practices and Western practices, both for Western women and non-Western women.

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[1] Korieh 2005, page 116
[2] Mohanty 2003
[3] Ajayi-Soyinka 2005
[4] Spivak 2003, page 97
[5] Mohanty 2003, page 18
[6] Rajan & Park 2000, page 54
[7] Al Saadawi 2005, page 25
[8] Korieh 2005, page 117
[9] Mohanty 2003, page 223
[10] Ibid. page 7
[11] Nnaemeka 2005
[12] Suleri 1992, page 246
[13] www.TOSTAN.org
[14] Mackie 2000, page 260
[15] Lane 1996, page 8
[16] Ajayi-Soyinka 2005, page 49
[17] Giddings 1992
[18] Ibid. page 56
[19] Germain 2000, pages 9-10, in Oxford 2005
[20] Bloch, Galvin, & Harrell-Bond 2000, page 170
[21] Oxford 2005, page18
[22] Ibid. page 35
[23] Ibid. page 32
[24] Ibid. page 29
[25] Ibid. page 27
[26] Mohanty 2003, page 24
[27] Spivak 1985, page 121
[28] Razack 1995, page 72 In Oswin 2001
[29] Oswin 2001, page 352
[30] Macklin 1995, page 258, In Oswin 2001
[31] Oswin 2001, page 351
[32] Ibid. page 355
[33] www.brighamandwomens.org/africanwomenscenter/

Conclusion

Lucy Sargisson has written of transgressive utopianism, the idea that utopian vision might powerfully inform feminist critique of the present. Sargisson discusses transgressive utopianism as internally subversive, flexible, resistant to order, accepting of its own termination, and purposefully utopian. It illuminates an alternative and transformative perspective and is "open-ended, slippery, and glorious."[1] From embarking on this project to writing its final words, I have thought of my work as transgressively utopian. It is motivated by productive discontent with the present conditions and, without referring to an absolute vision of perfection, operates as the impetus for my desire to contribute to transnational and coalitional feminist efforts. Transgressive utopianism, in the sense of this project, challenges existing paradigms through a temporary, flexible, and coalitional multiplicity that attempts to work with and be conscious of difference as it encourages interdisciplinary conversations among diverse perspectives. It addresses the urgent impulses to attempt change and to imagine the infinite potential that this work might produce. It entails confronting and challenging dominant paradigms such as Enlightenment-informed imperial feminist thought and reconstructing, in its place, anti-colonial transnational feminisms.

In this project, I have demonstrated the importance of historically contextualizing non-Western forms of female genital operations within both Western and non-Western practices and histories, the primacy of examining Western feminist Enlightenment heritage and the neocolonial manner in which it

shapes the presently dominant feminisms of the West, the significance of participating in what Lindberg identifies as the shared telling of colonial legacies, and the import of envisioning an anti-colonial transnational feminist politics capable of addressing the topic of female genital operations and other issues within the Western and non-Western world. These tasks require that Enlightenment feminist master narratives of existence be abandoned; productions of a universal, singular, and authentic "Third World Woman" denounced; histories of subjugated experiences acknowledged; diverse subjectivities recognized; global structures of oppression transcended; and transnational coalitional efforts premised in diversity, hybridity, temporality, and politically and historically situated subjectivities in collective action.

We who are attempting to envision and make ourselves available to anti-colonial and transnational coalitional feminist discussions and activisms do so through awareness of established local realities, conscious avoidance of imperialist tendencies, examination of our positions in relation and contribution to others' oppression, and recognition that women are of diverse opinions, beliefs, and experiences. We are willing to partake in temporary, flexible, and unfixed alliances and to render ourselves vulnerable. We acknowledge that the issue of transnational coalitions around the topic of genital operations, though traditionally directed at "the Third World," should begin with recognitions of and activisms within the struggles of our own nations.

We embrace hesitancy and discomfort, recognizing that no opinion should be labeled as illegitimate, ignorant, or uninformed just as none can be regarded as

superior, enlightened, morally correct, rational, reasonable, or True. This is not to say that opinions cannot be had, or that we must refrain from inhabiting any political stance. Certainly, I have voiced many opinions and taken several stances within the pages of this project. We do so, however, in a manner that is respectful and aware of diverse positions, never claiming to understand the experience of or have transcendental knowledge of what is right or wrong for another individual. We remain flexible, motivated, and open-minded. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we continue to dedicate ourselves to this difficult discussion and the ceaseless task of decolonizing feminist politics, building transnational and anti-colonial coalitions, and appreciating the diversity of every individual and the specificity of every experience. In this way, we envision the endless potential of transnational feminisms and encounter the rewards that are reaped by cooperating, debating, and uniting across difference. As Anzaldua proclaims,

Caminante no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar.[2]

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[1] Sargisson 2000, page 1

[2] "Voyager there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks." Anzaldua 2002, preface to *This Bridge Called My Back*

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Abstract

While centered in a critique of Western feminist discourses of non-Western female genital operations and motivated by a desire to envision decolonization strategy, this project explores what it means, given histories and realities of imperialisms and long-standing hierarchies between and among women, to speak about transnational topics of women and gender. This project considers how we might participate in the shared feminist responsibility of recognizing colonial histories and realities, rectifying imperialisms between women and across nations, rejecting feminist master narratives, celebrating diverse subjectivities, and dismantling each and every binary that has been constructed between the "First" and "Third" worlds.

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