Alice Walker's Africa: Globalization and the Province of Fiction
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The practice of female genital mutilation has lately been very much in the news. Drawing the attention of concerned experts and groups ranging from anthropologists to political activists and health organizations, the practice foregrounds a number of issues of cultural, medical, and legal importance. Alice Walker’s novel Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992) launches an uncompromising attack on both the practice and the tendency—rooted sometimes in weak relativism, at other times in plain sexist culturalism—to justify the oppression of women by resorting to the alibi of “tradition.” In the novel Walker raises crucial questions about nationalism and the intersection of, or tension between, cultural identity and gender. The novel stakes out a universalist position that valorizes a basic, transcultural category of the female body, especially as and when that body is subjected to disfigurement on account of patriarchal ideologies. For her, the practice of genital mutilation serves to contain women sexually and socially; above all, it is a violation of each woman’s right to the integrity of her body. Consequently, the practice should, in its various forms and cultural contexts, be held as a human rights violation, one that can be repudiated on the grounds of a universal ethical standard.

In a climate where the world has, as they say, become a village, Walker’s position is bound to be controversial. If one has any doubts that the issue of genital mutilation is topical and popular, a cursory trip on the world wide web should settle the question. For instance, I did a quick search for the phrase “female circumcision” using the Netscape search engine and turned up 581,830 websites. A similar search for the phrase “genital mutilation” yielded 23,090 websites. Contemporary discussions about genital mutilation often suggest that the Western world is just now “waking up” to this “atrocity.” In her campaign against the ritual

1 Since the practices of clitoridectomy and infibulation are actually not analogous to male circumcision, the term “female circumcision” is evasive; genital mutilation appears therefore to be more accurate. In this essay, I will be using “genital mutilation” and “excision” interchangeably. For a sketch of the various forms the practice takes, see Annemarie Bean (335), Walker, Warrior Marks 367, and Dorkenoo.

2 Henceforth I will be referring to the novel simply as Possessing. The term “weak relativism” draws on Alasdair MacIntyre’s discussion of relativism and the challenge of translating or formulating value judgements across cultures. See MacIntyre. See also notes 8 and 13.
Alice Walker gives this impression and has turned to more than one forum to pursue her case. In addition to the novel, she co-produced a documentary movie entitled Warrior Marks, as well as Warrior Marks. Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women, a memoir/travelogue of the experience of making the documentary. To be sure, Alice Walker’s efforts derive from a sound ethical commitment, but it is also important to note that the “West” has always been interested in this ritual. Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s novel The River Between (1965), set in the first half of the last century, explores the consequences of such interest, including a clash between Christian missionaries and their converts on the one hand, and Gikuyu traditionalists on the other. As Sander L. Gilman has shown in his work on the case of Sarah Bartmann (also known as the “Hottentot Venus”), lurid speculation about the African woman’s genitals is not unheard of in Western pseudo-scientific or popular discourse—historically, or even now (Gilman; see also Ann duCille 54-56).

At the least, both the fascination with Sarah Bartmann at the turn of the twentieth century and colonial interest in African tribes’ ritual of genital cutting indicate that there hasn’t been a shortage of discourse—of voices raised in judicious or opportunistic clamor—regarding the black woman’s body. In the same way that poverty, disease, and primitive wars have become signifiers of the Third World in the print and electronic media, genital mutilation (like the purdah and the veil in the Arab world) persists as a sign of the otherness of Third-World womanhood. In this instance, the social processes we designate with the shorthand “globalization” do not portend epochal transformations in human consciousness and our mechanisms of intercultural understanding. Indeed, the resilience of familiar orientalist presuppositions, even amidst unprecedented globalization in economic interaction and intercultural information exchange, suggests that we may be more open to new ways of doing business in the external, “worldly”

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3 In this and all other instances where I use such terms as “the West,” “Europe,” or the “Third World,” I claim no substantive theoretical basis for these designations. Recent work in cultural criticism has alerted us to the reifications they imply, as well as the simplistic conceptions of culture they name. I use them here to designate broad geographical areas and the cultural/epistemological connotations they conventionally—most often by reflex—elicit. See Kwame Anthony Appiah 137-57.


5 That excision can be deployed as a spectacular signifier of African womanhood in ways that become pathetic but instructive is illustrated in the blaxploitation thriller Shaft in Africa. In the movie, the hyper-masculine detective John Shaft is recruited for a mission in Ethiopia. The female character who provides the all-important sexual titillation is an African princess who is just months away from being put through the ritual of “circumcision.” After experiencing sexual intercourse with the hero, the princess announces that she will not go through the act. Politically and morally, of course, there is a world of difference between the cynical swagger of John Shaft “saving” an African princess from excision, and Possessing’s feminist engagement with the practice. Yet the fact that in the representation of excision, the motif of rescue in the name of “natural” sexual fulfillment turns out to be shared by a sexist action flick and Walker’s sincere and moving novel is worth remarking.

6 For a provocative discussion of the connection between culture and globalization as a socioeconomic process and state, see the debate between Immanuel Wallerstein and Roy Boyne (Featherstone 31-65); see also Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” (Featherstone 295-310).
domain (transnational corporatism and the triumph of consumer culture) than we are to a fundamental reordering of who we are at the level of the internal self—that is, at the level of subjectivity and the psyche, where the innermost self dwells, made dizzy by the onslaught of the external world. And so, whether in exhibiting its fleshly extravagance (as in the case of Sarah Bartmann), or easily denouncing its "primitive" brutalization and curtailment (as so often happens in popular discourse around genital mutilation), we may in fact simply be remanding in discourse the black woman's body and sexuality. Some commentators have accused Alice Walker of perpetuating this trend because of the way she set about portraying Africa in the novel and the documentary. In what follows, I take for granted the sound ethical basis of Walker's stance towards genital mutilation, although I am also persuaded that the explicit ethical-universal stance of the novel and her documentaries on the subject come with significant costs, one of which is the evacuation of the African woman's agency. I want to suggest, however, that Possessing the Secret of Joy tells us more about subjectivity and female agency than Walker appears to intend.

Walker's novel raises questions such as the following: is it possible to represent in fiction an "alien" cultural practice or belief system without violating the inner logic—the self-understanding—of the culture itself? And to what extent is it defensible to represent a cultural practice as simply cruel and misogynistic over and beyond the way the culture itself understands and rationalizes it? Set against such questions, Possessing the Secret of Joy may elicit two opposing reactions. On the one hand, one may see the novel as a replication of a discredited missionary arrogance—that is, as a case of the enlightened Westerner saving poor black women from their husbands and fathers. On the other hand, it is equally possible to defend the novel as a laudable effort driven by a vision of female emancipation and community. Here, the liberal-humanist—indeed, missionary—candor is its positive contribution. What is so wrong, one may then ask, with liberals saving black women from their husbands and fathers, or exposing the plight of such women, if indeed their husbands and fathers mutilate them in the name of tradition?

7 See Annemarie Bean, specifically, 327-29. Bean's critique is directed at Walker's novel as well as at the documentary and travel memoir she devotes to her activism against genital cutting. This is not to suggest that any discussion of the issue is guilty of discursive colonization. For an informative and politically engaged discussion of the practice from the perspective of medical health and social work, see Dorkenoo.

8 See Bean; see also Dawit and Mekuria. To quote from the terse summation of the film by Dawit and Mekuria: "Ms. Walker's new film 'Warrior Marks' portrays an African village where women and children are without personality, dancing and gazing blankly through a stranger's script of their lives. The respected elder women of the village's Secret Society turn into slit-eyed murderers wielding rusted weapons with which to butcher children." Committed to ending the practice, theirs is a strong relativism, materialist and tuned to results and strategy. "Genital mutilation," they write, "does not exist in a vacuum but as part of the social fabric, stemming from the power imbalance in relations between the sexes, from the levels of education and the low economic and social status of most women. All eradication efforts must begin and proceed from these basic premises" (Dawit and Mekuria).

9 This formulation borrows from Gayatri Spivak's memorable articulation of one version of the debate around the practice of widow-burning in nineteenth-century Bengal. See Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" I discuss this essay later in this article.
I have set up the issues in these rather simplified terms in order to pose the problematic of Possessing the Secret of Joy as starkly as possible. If the controversy that surrounded The Color Purple or the recent removal of some of her writing from high school reading lists indicate that this prolific author is not new to the sorts of hostile reception that amount to censorship, Possessing raises her status as taboo-breaker (or insensitive scribbler) even higher. What I wish to do is to engage the novel she has written in order to abstract lessons from it that both admit and transcend her overt authorial claims. In his essay on the novel, Ikenna Dieke has remarked that the controversies that have surrounded Walker's writing may distract us from reading Possessing as closely as the text demands (“Fragmented”). I agree with Dieke, and one of my aims in this article is to read Possessing with due respect to the specificity of the novel as a genre with compositional pressures. These generic pressures account for certain aspects of the novel that complicate the terms of the novelist's straightforward demonization of the perpetrators of genital mutilation. The overt moral conviction of the novel is neither questioned nor diminished by the reading I pursue in this essay. Rather, it is more complexly nuanced, that is to say, enriched.

I want to read this novel the way I teach it. Those who read the novel are either of First-World origin or people who have for historical reasons partaken of the Eurocentric apple, so to speak. Confronted with college students, most of whom are white or black Americans, trying to come to terms with a novel that purports to speak about and in the service of brutalized African women, how might one read Possessing in a way that recovers from the text the irreducible humanity and agency of the Africans thus textualized? If authorial intention in the novel is one-dimensional and unambiguous, the details of the narrative are not at all one-dimensional. What the novel offers is an enactment of one inescapable factor of representation as such, namely, that the work itself can yield meanings and perspectives that transcend the original intentions of the narrating subject. I want to examine Possessing the Secret of Joy as a text that acts out and meditates upon the making of texts and people, or what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, quoting Mark Seltzer, has called “embodied subjects and personification” (19).

Although the ostensible subject is the story of one African woman, the novel intrinsically takes us back to the location of Alice Walker herself as an American of African ancestry. In what follows, I want to show that the protagonist of the novel is as much Alice Walker as it is Tashi, and that the quest for wholeness explored in the novel is at once Tashi's and that of her creator. At the level of overt theme and content, this relationship primarily illuminates authorial investment. However, it parallels a second kind of relationship, namely, that between the literary text as a self-contained artifact and the novelist’s “extra-textual” state-

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10 On the controversies that have surrounded Walker’s novel The Color Purple and at least two of her short stories, see Walker, Alice Walker Banned, Intro. Patricia Holt. See also Ikenna Dieke, "Introduction," and Lillie P. Howard, "Benediction." In addition to the work I cite in the course of the discussion to follow, I have benefited from discussions of the novel by the following: Alyson Buckman; Dieke (“Fragmented”); Giulia Fabi; Angeletta Gourdine; and Levin (“Activist”).

11 On the sense in which academic cultural critique can usefully operate as an investment in pedagogy, that is, in the way we read and teach our students to read literary and social texts, see Gayatri Spivak, “Marginality in the Teaching Machine.”
ments about her fictional creation. In other words, the character/author relationship parallels the relationship between the novel's intrinsic contents and the author's view of those contents. In this way, Walker's novelistic campaign against genital mutilation turns out to be as much about the right to the black woman's discursive voice in America as it is about the right of victimized Third-World women to their bodies and sexuality.

Let us begin by briefly recapitulating the novel's plot. The central character, Tashi, originally from a fictional African nation called Olinka, undergoes the ritual of excision in order to show her allegiance to the political cause of national liberation and cultural self-determination. Her best friends Olivia and Adam Johnson, both children of an African-American missionary family, advise her against undergoing the ritual, but she does anyway. Complications resulting from her excision make her adult life very traumatic. Married later to her childhood friend Adam, she finds that she cannot enjoy sexual intercourse, and childbirth becomes an unbearably painful ordeal. This traumatic history leads to bouts of depression and insanity, and it takes the intervention of psychotherapy and Jungian archetypal analysis to bring to her consciousness the roots of her suffering. Two important figures in the process of Tashi's cure are the European father-figure Carl, and Pierre, the product of her husband's adulterous relationship with Lisette, a French woman. On the strength of this aspect of the novel, the issue of the enlightened foreigner saving benighted Africans from themselves clearly rears its head. Carl and Pierre are the pre-eminent cerebral figures in the novel. Tashi fondly refers to Carl as Mzee, "teacher." For his part, Pierre decodes Tashi's recurring dream that she is trapped in a gigantic tower, locating in the dream a cross-cultural symbolization of women's entrapment by patriarchal structures. Helped by Carl, Pierre, and her international circle of friends, Tashi regains her sanity by recognizing and naming the source of her suffering. With Carl's therapy, Tashi realizes that the "boulder blocking [her] throat" (p. 81) is the repressed memory of her sister Dura's death as a result of excision. The vehicle of her rehabilitation, then, is in part the talking cure: "I knew what the boulder was; that it was a word; and that behind that word I would find my earliest emotions" (p. 81). Tashi subsequently resolves to murder the woman who performed the surgical excision on her. She is tried for murder and sentenced to death.

In Postcolonial Representations. Women, Literature, Identity (1995), Francoise Lionnet discusses the complexity of the problem of genital mutilation and the inadequacy of liberal-humanist responses to it. For her, the practice of genital mutilation is a powerful test-case for feminist postcolonial criticism because it sometimes involves the woman's "voluntary" choice. Lionnet analyzes some French legal cases concerning immigrant women who seem (or claim) to have willingly put their female children through the ritual, in violation of French law protecting children from abuse. Lionnet reads excision as a ritual by means of which the cultures concerned discipline the female body by excising the clitoris—that is, the part of female genitalia that is construed as being anatomically and subjectively analogous to the penis. Excision is in this reading an inscription of culture on nature, a denaturalization of the body that thereby subordinates it to the
imperative of socialization. At the same time, Lionnet argues that only by recognizing that excision is structurally analogous to practices of policing the female body in Western societies can the cultural critic adequately represent and critique the practice without undermining the subjectivity and agency, the sense of self and human dignity, that would make an otherwise normal and loving mother put her daughter through the procedure, even in violation of French law.\footnote{In Lionnet’s words, “[W]hat does appear to be ‘universal’ when we carefully examine the whole cultural contexts within which the debate is situated is the way in which different cultures, for better or for worse, impose similar constraints on the bodies of their members, especially when those bodies are already marked by the sign of the feminine” (166).}

A related concern with the subjectivity of the subaltern woman governs Gayatri Spivak’s justly celebrated essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” which reads the contending discourses of European imperialists, on the one hand, and Indian culturalists, on the other, on the practice of sati or “widow-burning.” Spivak argues that both contending patriarchal discourses efface the specific subjectivity of the sati herself in a way that makes the tracing back of that subjectivity in academic discourse impossible—so long as the recovery is posed as restoration of some unmediated native subjectivity. For her, the clash in the logics of the discourses that either admire the woman who self-immolates or seek to save her from ignorance bear out Jean François Lyotard’s concept of the \textit{differend}—that is, “the inaccessibility of, or untranslatability from, one mode of discourse in a dispute to another” (Spivak, “Subaltern” 300).\footnote{A revised version of this essay can be found in chapter 3 of Spivak’s \textit{A Critique of Postcolonial Reason} (244-311), in which Spivak clarifies her position by quoting Lyotard’s definition of the \textit{differend}. The full citation reads: “As distinguished from a litigation, a differend \textit{[differend]} would be a case of conflict, between at least two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments. One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy” (Spivak, \textit{Critique} 294; Lyotard xi). Alasdair MacIntyre’s “Relativism, Power, and Philosophy” (cited in note 2) offers a similar account of what he sees as the strong version of relativism. But since he is not satisfied with such poststructuralist accounts as Lyotard’s (and by implication Spivak’s), MacIntyre attempts to sublate the logic of untranslatability. I in turn find Spivak’s use of the logic of untranslatability more convincing as a way of relating to (and deconstructing) an alien cultural norm we find disagreeable, especially when it involves patently inhumane practices like widow immolation or genital mutilation. To say a practice is “untranslatable” is not to say such a practice is “good” and should continue. In fact, we don’t need to represent genital mutilation in post-Enlightenment moral language, or the language of modern-industrial-individualist subjectivity, to be able to agitate for its abolition. See Lionnet and Rajan.}

For Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, however, the “choice for the concerned feminist analyst . . . if formulated as Gayatri Spivak does, as one between subject-constitution (‘she wanted to die’) and object-formation (‘she must be saved from dying’), is a paralysing one” (19). She proposes two moves that need to be taken to pay due respect to the humanity of the sati as agent, rather than simple victim of tradition or abstract object of discourse. First, she suggests that greater attention should be given to the practice as a signifier of pain, suffered and endured for cultural reasons, by real people who feel and think. Such a move enables a second shift, namely, the shift from viewing the sati as victim, to viewing her as active bearer of a particular, context-specific, subjectivity. This allows criticism to avoid situations where, in her words, “‘victim’ and ‘agent’ are adopted as exclusive and excluding labels for the female subject,” or where “victimhood is equated with helplessness and agency with self-sufficiency” (35). For Sunder Rajan, “Sati, rape, and genital mutilation
mutilation, for instance, are forms of oppression different in kind (if not in degree) from wearing the veil or getting a divorce: questions of choice may be inserted in our understanding of the female subject and her social context in the latter instances, when to do so in the former would be regressive as feminist politics” (35). In other words, Sunder Rajan is urging that we view pain in the sati as a discursive affect by means of which she is subjectified. To the extent that the subject is never fully in control of her determinations, the issue of her “voluntary” accession of the pyre is ultimately beside the point. Yet, it is within the predication of this subjectivity—with its inevitable misrecognitions—that the individual thinks, feels, and acts. Oppression is in this instance interlinked with agency. The condition in which the subject becomes a person and inscribes her agency is both enabled and constrained, delimited by the terms of the oppressive cultural order.

These feminist discussions provide a useful conceptual context from which one can draw to explore Walker’s novel. In the first place, what they each make visible is that subjectivity—which here designates individual consciousness and self-knowledge—is filtered through prior and ongoing textualizations of reality and experience. We can see this in the way the novel figures consciousness as being based on what we might call a textual web. The novel’s form is itself a structure of alternating or composite points of view: the story unfolds by means of the inner thoughts and private letters of the main characters—a narrative choice that corroborates Barbara Christian’s observation that the novel’s form is in line with the metaphor of quilting made famous by Walker (see Christian 3-17). The novel is obsessed with prior texts and their power to orient, determine, or challenge consciousness. The title is taken from a book entitled African Saga (1982), by Mirella Ricciardi, and towards the end of the novel, Tashi and Mbati reflect on the origins and implications of that title. In Tashi’s voice, the novel tells us:

In the evenings she [that is, Mbati, Tashi’s friend] reads aloud passages from books for us to puzzle over or enjoy. Tonight she reads from the book of a white colonialist author who has lived all her life off the labor of Africans but failed to perceive them as human beings. “Black people are natural;” she writes, “they possess the secret of Joy, which is why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them.” (p. 269)

Tashi is enraged by this passage. She reads it as an example of a colonialist and racist denigration of Africans. “These settler cannibals,” says Tashi, “why don’t they just steal our land, mine our gold, chop down our forests . . . devour our flesh and leave us alone. Why must they also write about how much joy we possess” (p. 270). As if to calm her down, Mbati promises to one day present to Tashi the “definitive secret of joy” (p. 270), and at the very end of the novel, just before Tashi is executed by firing squad for the murder of M’Lissa, Mbati fulfills her promise:

Mbati is unfurling a banner, quickly, before the soldiers can stop her. . . . All of them [Tashi’s friends and family] Adam, Olivia, Benny, Pierre, Raye, Mbati—hold it firmly and stretch it wide.

RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY! it says in huge block letters. (p. 279)

Whereas Ricciardi’s book mystifies “the Africans” to a point where complacency and resignation in the face of hardship become their unique gifts, Tashi comes
to the realization that resistance, not accommodation, is the definitive condition of joy. We might say, then, that the novel's ending rewrites a disabling colonialist construction, encountered through Ricciardi's text, and replaces that construction with a dynamic and politicized one.

If the novel's rendering of Carl and Pierre sets them up as figures of enlightenment, their enlightenment is at another level shown to be situated and specific. The narrative reveals that the curative knowledge ascribed to both Carl and Pierre can be delimited and historicized. Thus, the novel lays bare the specific conceptual apparatus that undergirds the supposed enlightenment of both Carl and Pierre. Where the characterization of Carl is inspired by the figure of Carl Gustav Jung, we are told that Pierre "discovers" his racial self by reading the African-American authors Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin. The book that gives Pierre an insight into the cultural misogyny that has victimized Tashi is Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemméli.* By setting Carl and Pierre within recognizable texts and traditions of thought, Walker's novel makes clear a crucial part of the formation of both characters.

Carl emblematizes the novel's yearning for universal fellow-feeling. Though white and privileged, he is admitted, so to speak, into the progressive camp in the novel because he uses his knowledge in good ways and transcends the limitations of his cultural formation. As he confides in a letter to his cousin, the black sufferers he encounters (Tashi and Adam) bring him "home to something in myself" (p. 84). This self is an "ancient self that thirsts for knowledge of the experiences of its ancient kin. Needs this knowledge, and the feelings that come with it, to be whole . . . A truly universal self" (p. 84).

The universalism that the text poses as an ideal is at crucial narrative points achieved by a turn to ethnography (see Angelatta Gourdine). In recalling the role of Tashi/Evelyn in his life, Carl claims to have been revivified by his encounter with her, very much as the ethnographer enriches him/herself by mastering the other in discourse: "I am finding myself in them" (p. 84). We also see the novel's deployment of the ethnographic gaze in the way Tashi's cure is narrated. She is able finally to pronounce the death of her sister Dura as murder and thereby articulate the cause of her own psychic breakdown. She achieves this not just through verbal language, but through visual metaphor. She paints an intimidating cock to represent patriarchy and the violence it perpetuates on women (p. 78). She is brought to this point by a silent film made by Carl in Africa.

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14 In her note of acknowledgements appended to the novel, Walker explicitly mentions the influence of Jungian analysis in the novel and in her own life: "I thank Carl Jung for becoming so real in my own self-therapy (by reading) that I could imagine him as alive and active in Tashi's treatment. My gift to him" (p. 285).

15 *Conversations with Ogotemméli.* An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas (1965) is a translation of Marcel Griaule's *Dieu d'Eau* (1948), a record of the religious beliefs and rites of the Dogon people of West Africa, as explained by an old sage Ogotemméli to the French ethnographer Griaule. See Griaule. For a thirty-year-old but still relevant critique of the epistemological structure he calls "unanimism," see Paulin Hountondji's *African Philosophy. Myth and Reality.* According to Hountondji, Griaule's book constitutes a slight improvement, but only a very slight one, on the genre of writing that imposes a collective ("unanimist") and static view of the world on traditional African peoples, ostensibly in the name of recovering for them an indigenous discursive integrity, an "ethnosophy." See also Appiah 85-106.
ethnographic documentary unearths the repressed memory of her sister’s death and her own mutilation. As she discloses to Adam and Carl, the circumcisers “did not know I was hiding in the grass . . . They had taken [Dura] to the place for initiation; a secluded, lonely place that was taboo for the uninitiated. Not unlike the place you showed us in your film” (p. 81). Carl’s response is a pointed statement of recognition and vindication: “Ah, said Mzee” (p. 81).

The novel relies on a legacy of the silent documentary, emblem of colonial anthropology, and simultaneously mounts an attack on male-centered representations of so-called African culture by colonial-educated Africans. If the urge to present a “positive” image of African culture is accepted as a good thing, Walker forces us to ask just what a positive representation entails. One of the things Tashi comes to reject after her therapy is the uncritical reverence she used to have for the nationalist leader who led the decolonization movement in fictional Olinka. For students of African history, this unnamed leader cannot but recall the figure of the Kenyan leader Jomo Kenyatta (c. 1890-1978). Like Kenyatta, the “Leader” in Walker’s novel was jailed for a while by colonial authorities and becomes a god-like figure to the masses. Like Kenyatta, too, he is associated with armed insurrection, rather like the “Mau Mau” (Kenya Land and Freedom Army) rebellion that led to Kenya’s independence. Most importantly, the unnamed leader follows Kenyatta in advocating that clitoridectomy is crucial to the traditional way of life. In his classic text Facing Mount Kenya. The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu (1938), Kenyatta insists that only a detribalized African will marry an uncircumcised woman, and his account of the ritual stresses its high cultural valence in traditional Gikuyu culture. Facing Mount Kenya is thus an exemplary text of nationalist ethnography. In writing it, Kenyatta appropriates a weapon of colonial control—anthropology—in order to advance an anti-colonial cause.16

Kenyatta’s apologia for genital cutting displays a limitation that current criticism has identified in the anti-colonial discourses of Third-World nationalism in the heady days of the post-World War II era. To defend the colonized culture against Eurocentric denigration, the nationalist text reifies the culture into an undifferentiated unity, invariably marginalizing woman by casting her in the role of reproducer. Against this background, Tashi’s rejection of cultural-nationalism is a rejection of a masculinist ethnography that enlists her body in the service of a cause that is male defined. As feminist work on male-authored African literature and cultural-nationalism has argued, a “positive” representation that marginalizes women or freezes their role in culture must be contested (Cobham, Ogunyemi). In this sense, Walker’s critique of masculinist ethnography, even when it serves a cultural-nationalist cause, reinforces current arguments in cultural criticism that seek to combat the marginalization of women and make

16 Kenyatta trained as an anthropologist at the London School of Economics, where he studied with Bronislaw Malinowski, who ultimately wrote an introduction to Facing Mount Kenya. Malinowski’s introduction offers in itself an interesting drama of the vagaries of cultural translation and knowledge production. The renowned Western anthropologist’s encounter with the work of a politically “radical” native researcher focuses, not on the accuracy of Kenyatta’s account, but on the rhetoric of its presentation. The “truth” here is not a matter of the objectivity of the object, so to speak, but of the adequacy of Kenyatta’s presentational rhetoric. See Kenyatta vii-xiii. The encounter between Kenyatta and Malinowski on Gikuyu culture thus dramatizes an intertextual corroboration of Tashi’s skepticism regarding ethnography.
femininity an active subject of cultural thinking and transformations.

Let us turn, then, to Walker’s foregrounding of African womanhood in Possessing. In a recent essay, Hortense Spillers has staged an encounter between psychoanalysis as it is deployed in current cultural criticism and the problematic of race in black diasporic as well as African-colonial contexts. Arguing against the tendency to dismiss psychoanalysis out of hand for being “Eurocentric,” Spillers suggests that, as critical tool, it can be purged of the limitations inherent in its founding cultural context and narratives. Properly qualified and appropriated, psychoanalysis can, for Spillers, shed light on the constitution of raced selves in society:

Is it not, then, the task of a psychoanalytic protocol to effect a translation from the muteness of desire/wish—that which shames and baffles the subject, even if its origins are dim, not especially known—into an articulated syntactic particularity? This seems to me a passable psychoanalytic goal, but perhaps there is more to it than simply a nice thing to happen. At the very least, I am suggesting that an aspect of the emancipatory hinges on what would appear to be simple self-attention, except that reaching the articulation requires a process, that of making one’s subjectness the object of a disciplined and potentially displaceable attentiveness. (Spillers 107-8)

While I recognize that the psychoanalysis put to work in contemporary literary and cultural studies is not the Jungian version at the heart of Possessing, Spillers’s claim does speak to an important dimension of Walker’s novel. I want to pull out two ideas from it. The first is the idea of “translating” mute desire into individuated articulation, the second, that of “making one’s subjectness the object of a disciplined and potentially displaceable attentiveness” (my emphasis). Clearly, Possessing is about giving voice to what Walker perceives as silence, of translating “desire/wish” into language about what Spillers calls “self-attention.” The text is also centrally concerned with the “subjectness” of its main character. Here, subjectness appears as a broader, more self-consciously worldly and materialist concept than subjectivity. Subjectness names subjectivity in action; it names the meanderings of the subject in concrete reality. We have seen the sense in which Possessing dramatizes the textual web that constitutes the ground and engine of subjectivity. We can now add that in the characterization of Tashi and M’Lissa, Walker attempts to narrate the subjectness of the victims of excision, such that both women become metonymic of woman in culture.

M’Lissa is the tsunga, the midwife who performs the operation of excision on little girls in the novel. She is presented as an old and psychologically damaged woman, her very physical appearance testifying to the evil and destructiveness she embodies. On her way back to Olinka (to murder the old woman), Tashi encounters her picture in a copy of Newsweek magazine:

In the photograph M’Lissa smiled broadly, new teeth glistening; even her hair had grown back and was a white halo around her deep brown head.

There was something sinister, though, about her aspect; but perhaps I was the only one likely to see it. Though her mouth was smiling, as was her sunken cheeks and her long nose, her wrinkled forehead and scrawny neck, her beady eyes were not. Looking into them, suddenly chilled, I realized they never had.

How had I entrusted my body to this madwoman? (p. 148)

Alongside the pathological ambience the text gives M’Lissa, it also portrays her as a complex product of culture and individual history. We see this distinctly as
Tashi bides her time, waiting for the right moment to murder the old woman. In spite of itself, the novel casts M’Lissa as at once a stereotypical evil witch and a subject with a mad, altogether human, integrity. Thus, she narrates to Tashi her own experience of excision, and how she has tried to cope with the pain and the duty of socializing young girls by perpetuating this ritual.

Indeed, Tashi’s killing of M’Lissa is pre-empted by the latter’s foreknowledge and what Walker presents as the ancient logic of Olinka culture. According to Tashi,

One day, as I was washing carefully between her clawlike toes, she informed me blandly that it was only the murder of the tsunga, the circumciser, by one of those whom she has circumcised that proves her (the circumciser’s) value to her tribe. Her own death, she declared, had been ordained. It would elevate her to the position of saint. (p. 204)

Later, Tashi writes: “I killed [M’Lissa] all right. I placed a pillow over her face and lay across it for an hour. Her sad stories about her life caused me to lose my taste for slashing her. She had told me it was traditional for a well-appreciated tsunga to be murdered by someone she circumcised, then burned. I carried out what was expected of me” (p. 274).

Tashi’s relationship to M’Lissa is thus not simply that of a vengeful daughter getting rid of an evil ancestor. At the same time that the novel seeks to present the relationship in convenient good-versus-evil terms, it inscribes a richer, more interesting drama of transition and supersession, wherein every new generation has to immolate its predecessor in order to fulfil a self-defined historical mission. Read this way, Tashi’s murderous rebellion becomes a necessary moment in the self-unfolding of Olinka history. She claims her place as a true product-victim of M’Lissa’s midwifery precisely because of that rebellion. And so, M’Lissa anticipates her death at Tashi’s hands. She welcomes it and is indulgently amused that Tashi does not recognize this ancient wisdom:

I know what young people can’t even imagine or guess. That when one has seen too much of life, one understands it is a good thing to die. [...] The very first day she came I could see my death in Tashi’s eyes, as clearly as if I were looking into a mirror. (p. 205)

M’Lissa in fact sees the passing of her era mirrored in Tashi’s eyes, but Tashi comes to a deeper understanding of her own identity and historical location as a result of M’Lissa’s prompting, in response to her challenge. This occurs when M’Lissa insists that Tashi describe to her what an American looks like: “To Tashi I have posed the following question, and she has failed so far to properly answer it: Tashi, I have said to her, it is clear that you love your adopted country so much; I want you to tell me, What does an American look like?” (p. 206). It takes some hard thinking for Tashi to arrive at an answer that satisfies and leads her to a new dimension of clarity: “An American looks like me” (p. 208).

By this time, Tashi (renamed Evelyn) is on her way legally to becoming an American citizen. Tashi therefore recognizes herself as quintessentially American by looking into a mirror held up by the old woman. Although it is for different purposes and to different ends, each woman becomes a mirror for the other’s cognitive advancement, either towards spiritual fulfillment (M’Lissa) or worldly self-knowledge (Tashi). The “me” in “[a]n American looks like me” refers to Tashi, but it also refers to a collectivity: “an American looks like a wounded per-
This collectivity would include the author herself, while “hidden” wounds and the idea of “America” emerge as enabling conditions of the narrative’s passion. In this way, Tashi’s adopted country, America, emerges as a sub-textual protagonist. As Tashi views this country, it is a country of people with hidden wounds. To the extent, then, that anyone with hidden wounds embodies the idea of America, the country emerges in the novel as the true home of the universal. This is most explicitly suggested when Tashi casts the United States as a true democracy that honors citizens’ freedom of speech. Recounting her first encounter with Tashi while testifying at her trial, Mbati tells the court that Tashi “explained to me that where she lived, in America, people make signs and buttons for everything they want to say, and no one ever arrests them for it” (p. 107). By contrast, the political culture of Olinka is characterized by political intimidation and dictatorship: “Half the people in prison in Olinka are there for expressing their discontent with the present government” (p. 107). Clearly, Olinka as a postcolonial state is not a model of political tolerance. We shall return to this aspect of the novel at the end of this article.

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak argues that the very fact that the cultural critic has the training and the institutional means to represent the subaltern is a sign of the former’s discursive privilege. Among other things, this privilege is an index of class location. At the moment of representation, then, gender-identity is criss-crossed by class location and the ubiquity of the economic. In line with Spivak, Lionnet and Sunder Rajan also suggest that collective identity is never unitary and undifferentiated. These theorists are of course writing specifically of the feminist cultural critic, but their insight can be applied to Walker’s representation of womanhood, for it cuts directly against the identitarian universalism of the novel. The novel presumes a fundamental commonality of experience and social location in women. As I indicated earlier, the knowledge and sensitivity of Carl sets Tashi on her way to recovery and self-knowledge. But the character who finally completes that knowledge is the African-American female psychotherapist Raye. Tashi identifies her as “a witch, not the warty kind American children imitate on Halloween, but a spiritual descendant of the ancient healers” (p. 131-32). Though a professional black woman, Raye is thus figured as an archetypal African witch, a being whose spirit Tashi intuitively recognizes: “In my heart I thanked Mzee [Carl] for her, for I believed she would be plucky enough to accompany me where he could not. And that she would” (p. 132). While the text admits Carl as an agent of positive transformation, then, Tashi’s rehabilitation is ultimately attributed both to Tashi, herself, and to the “pluckiness” of Raye, a mystical, intuitive quality that enables her to “accompany” her black sister “where he could not.”

On the other hand, the old woman M’Lissa is figured as an archetypal Scheherazade figure who for days stays her murderer’s hand by telling stories. On one occasion, which we’ve already touched upon, when she informs Tashi that her murder “would elevate her to the position of saint,” Tashi refrains from killing her: “This confession, or lie,” Tashi explains, “stayed my hand for many a day” (p. 204). On another occasion, M’Lissa seizes the opportunity of Tashi’s
discovery of an old wound on her thigh to recall her own excruciating experience of mutilation: “touch it, my daughter, she exclaimed . . . It is the mark, on my body, of my own mother’s disobedience” (p. 211). Mesmerized by this invitation to the old woman’s story, Tashi again delays killing her: “she was remembering, and I had not completed her bath. Trapped, I listened” (p. 211). The text’s recourse to the Scheherazade motif thus establishes a commonality of experience and identity between M’Lissa and Tashi. And since both women are inventions in the service of Walker’s story-telling, the latter herself becomes the originary Scheherazade. The circle is complete and inviolable.

In the account of her experience, M’Lissa is rendered as archetypal woman whose emotional numbness is a way of coping with old and unrelieved pain. Describing her feelings as she left the hut after she was excised, the old woman resorts to the third-person to refer to herself as a young girl. She confides in Tashi: “You know I left her there bleeding on the floor, and I came out. She was crying. She felt so betrayed. By everyone. They’d severely beaten her mother as well, and she blamed herself for this . . . I couldn’t think of her anymore. I would have died. So I walked away, limped away, and just left her there” (p. 218). At this point, Tashi’s voice takes over the narration: “M’Lissa paused. Her voice when she continues is a whisper, amazed. She is still crying. She’s been crying since I left. No wonder I haven’t been able to. She has been crying all our tears” (p. 218). At this moment, M’Lissa’s and Tashi’s experiences of genital mutilation converge. The text signals the convergence in the way their two voices become fluid and indistinguishable as each confronts her pain. In the paratactic flow of the passage, the pronoun “she” is progressively distanced from a fixed and isolatable antecedent. For instance, in these two sentences—“She is still crying. She’s been crying since I left”—the pronoun’s referent (that is, M’Lissa as a bleeding little girl) becomes arrested in time, static and abstract. In effect, “she” becomes every little girl that has passed under her surgical knife: “She’s been crying since I left.” But M’Lissa the old woman is also one of the crying “girls.” As old woman, she is numb because she surrendered the capacity to feel, to cry, to her young self—the self she left bleeding on the floor of the ritual hut: “She’s been crying since I left. No wonder I haven’t been able to. She has been crying all our tears” (p. 218). In spite of her feelings of hate towards M’Lissa, then, Tashi is confronted with her “self” in an earlier generation, just as Mbati—the young African woman who testifies for the prosecution at Tashi’s trial—is Tashi in a later generation. In dialogue with M’Lissa, Walker figures Tashi as archetypal woman in dialogue with archetypal mother, who is therefore her potential cultural self. The operative conceptual category here is woman—across race, class, or time itself. As Tashi tells Olivia, “I am sick to death of black and white. Neither of those is first. Red, the color of woman’s blood, comes before them both” (p. 199).

Our analysis so far has in part been devoted to establishing the ways in which Walker’s novel figures its main characters as products of fields of textualization. She foregrounds specifically the location of women in the oppressive structures that cultures, invariably male dominated, invent and reproduce. Woman thus becomes in Possessing a conceptual category defined by her subjection to a
common foe, namely, patriarchal culture. The novel pointedly refuses to exonerate postcolonial African societies from this critique. Black or white, hegemonic or colonial, traditional or modern-capitalist, all societies over time come under severe censure.

If there is a way out of this situation, it is figured in terms of a return to the simple beauty of nature and its pleasures. Unacquisitive and eternal, "nature" and the natural become the antidote to the cruelties and deadness of culture. The persistence of animal allusions and imagery—for example, the parable of Lara the panther (pp. 3-5), or the flashback references to the leopard who lost her cubs to fur-seeking hunters (pp. 20, 24)—signal the novel’s privileging of the natural over the cultural. Because of the violence perpetrated on her in the name of culture, Tashi is unable to have a "natural," that is, unaided, birth: "The obstetrician broke two instruments trying to make an opening large enough for Benny's head" (p. 57). Later, holding Benny in her arms after the ordeal, Tashi thinks of ways to soothe her newborn's traumatic birth, one that results in an unnaturally shaped head, "yellow and blue and badly misshapen" (p. 57). "I held Benny close," Tashi writes, "gently and surreptitiously stroking his head into more normal contours (work I instinctively felt should be done with my tongue)" (p. 60). Here she is figured as a threatened maternal animal, hiding out to nurture her young. Her "instinctive" nurturing feeling directs her to use the tongue, flesh soothing flesh, safe from the brutal accoutrements of culture.

Walker’s privileging of nature at the expense of culture raises an important issue that complicates the novel's overall profile. To begin with, we may contrast the use of animal imagery in Possessing with that in Toni Morrison’s Beloved. In Morrison’s novel, animal imagery works specifically to figure the evil of the culture of slavery, or more appropriately, chattel-slavery as a mockery of the concept of culture. Morrison uses animal imagery to work out a powerful critique of culture’s self-mystification. Of the many instances of this in the novel, let me focus briefly on the event at the heart of the novel, namely, the protagonist's murder of her own child, aimed at preventing her return to an enslaved status. As is well known, Sethe participates most aggressively in culture, since a cultured mother loves her child, when she paradoxically attacks her children to preserve them from enslavement. In this sublime tangle, Sethe commits an "unnatural" act in order to achieve the eminently cultured end of saving her children from the barbarism, the animalism, of slavery.

But animals do eat their young sometimes, as Morrison takes care to emphasize at the beginning of the novel, when Denver's flashback tells us of Sethe's unflinching gaze at a sow devouring her litter (p. 12). Untamed in its state of nature, an animal can both preserve or devour its young. The question Morrison forces on the reader, then, is the following: is a mother’s murderous love for her offspring natural or cultural? The novel’s "answer" (which is actually a critical challenge) is radically unnerving: when she kills her own child, Sethe is being most natural while also being most cultural. In other words, to be so "animalistic" as to love a child intensely enough to kill becomes natural and cultural. The trope of the maternal animal here disintegrates as a self-evident metaphor for "nature." In this way, Morrison questions a simple opposition of nature to cul-
ture, and dares us to pursue its implications in our interpretations of cultures we know and those we don’t, selves we can recognize or identify with, and those we can’t. No such radical, truly unnerving questioning is to be found in Possessing. With a self-satisfied return to melodrama, Possessing keeps the conventional opposition intact and settles on the priority of the natural over the cultural.

The deconstruction of the nature-culture polarity in current criticism has enabled a critique of one of the founding categories of Enlightenment rationalism. With specific reference to sexuality and the ways bodies have meaning imposed upon them in society, the critique of the self-evidence of the natural in current criticism equips us to recognize that Walker’s reconstitution of the nature-culture binarism succumbs to what is perhaps the oldest false dualism invented by culture. Walker is moved to privilege the (so-called) natural over the (so-called) cultural because what her text undertakes is to narrate a vision of global womanhood, using genital cutting as the unifying metaphor. In this sense, it is accurate to say that the text performs a version of the maneuver attributed to Ricciardi’s *The African Saga* and criticized by Tashi for its mystification of, and condescension towards, “natural,” fun-loving Africans. As we indicated earlier, Walker through Tashi, criticizes Ricciardi for stressing the African’s sheer love of life. If at one level Walker’s novel criticizes this construction, the solution it offers as resistance to patriarchy is a return to nature conceived as the bodily, the sensuous, the pre-discursive. We see this in countless ways: in, for instance, Pierre’s “pan-sexual” Hawaiian lover (p. 178) who defies all conventional sexual identities and “could come against the earth itself if it rose a bit to meet her” (p. 176), or in the image of the doll carved in an eternal bliss of self-awareness and masturbation (pp. 196-98, 270-71). At this level, what Walker’s text urges is a truly global community liberated from the brutalities and constrictions of masculinist culture. And yet, by figuring bodily pleasure and sexual sufficiency as one goal of its vision of emancipation, the novel inflates individual ecstasy to such an extent that it substitutes for libidinal energy at the level of collective politics. Without meaning to, the novel cancels out politics by conflating it with personal rapture.

Even as it insists on relentless political engagement with the world, the novel retreats from that world into a metaphysics of nature as a site of conflict-free fulfillment. The novel consummates this double discourse in its description of

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17 On this point, see Judith Butler 1-16, esp. 4-11. For a cautionary statement on some versions of this critique, one whereby culture is simply installed as the privileged category, see Mark Seltzer’s “The Love-Master”: “The rule-of-thumb that has guided much recent criticism might be restated in these terms: when confronted by the nature/culture opposition, choose the culture side. This criticism has thus proceeded as if the deconstruction of the traditional dichotomy of the natural and the cultural indicated merely the elimination of the first term and the inflation of the second. Rather than mapping how the relays between what counts as natural and what counts as cultural are differentially articulated, invested, and regulated, and rather than re-considering the terms of the nature/culture antinomy and the account of agency that the antinomy entails, the tendency has been to discover again and again that what seemed to be natural is in fact cultural” (145). For Seltzer, the task is to displace the antinomy altogether by attending to the ways it has been activated and deployed in contexts—that is to say, “how the relays between what counts as natural and what counts as cultural are differentially articulated, invested, and regulated.” My argument with regard to Possessing is that the overt meaning of the novel preserves the nature/culture dichotomy in order to inflate and mystify “nature,” but that the inner-logic of the novel can be read as just such a politically motivated deployment of the nature/culture polarity.
Tashi’s execution by the state of Olinka. She resolves to look beyond the guns and see farther than the moment itself: “I will refuse the blindfold so that I can see far in all directions. I will concentrate on the beauty of one blue hill in the distance” (pp. 276-77). Just as she is about to be shot, Tashi glimpses the imagined “blue hill” in the distance, away from the firing squad that constitutes the inescapable material fact of the moment (pp. 278-79). The color blue reminds us of the association with beauty and futurity that the text had earlier established in reference to the colors of the Olinka flag: “Blue for the sea that laps our shores, filled with riches and the wonders of the deep; blue also for the sky, symbol of our people’s faith in the forces of the unseen and their optimism for the future” (p. 108). As Tashi strives to “locate and focus on a blue hill,” it is replaced by a group of women holding their female children aloft in a show of solidarity, and a banner—unfurled by Tashi’s friends—that proclaims the novel’s title and implies that “resistance” (in the form of group solidarity) is necessarily prior to the attainment of the “blue hill” in the distance. But we can also read the same passage as saying that “resistance” is seeing beyond the specific moment and fastening upon the blue hill in the distance. Tashi dies joyfully, figured by a metaphor of flight, “as if the world cracked open and I flew inside” (p. 279). Her death emerges as a kind of emancipation: “I am no more. And satisfied” (p. 279). Certainly, Walker is working here with the conventional, folksy apprehension of mortality as a form of liberation from earthly longing. But isn’t this particular apprehension of death a specific compensatory mechanism? We do not have to settle on a single reading of the novel’s closing passage to make the point I am after, namely, that two potentially contradictory rhetorics are deployed in Walker’s text. The first we can characterize as one of escapist naturalism, the other of political engagement and collective resistance.

In the terms of the reading I’ve offered so far, there are aspects of the novel that might be read as escapist. But if the form of that engagement, that is, Walker’s recourse to the idiom of narrative fiction, permits such an escape, Walker’s novel does not seem to want it to happen. Thus, she appends a “Note to the Reader”

18 In this sense, Possessing reenacts the sort of retreat Bell Hooks identifies in The Color Purple. “Unable to reconcile sexuality and power,” writes Hooks, “Walker [in The Color Purple] replaces the longing for sexual pleasure with an erotic metaphysic animated by a vision of the unity of all things, by the convergence of erotic and mystical experience. Ritually enacted as Shug initiates Celie into a spiritual awakening wherein belief in God as white male authority figure, who gives orders and punishes, is supplanted by the vision of a loving God who wants believers to celebrate life, to experience pleasure” (288-89). Possessing is certainly a pagan text, pantheistic and opposed to the one God, however construed. But the very paganism thus installed becomes a no less poetic mystification. The question the novel cannot consistently pose (but cannot not dramatize) is this: why is it that the traditional African culture which maims Tashi is itself pantheistic and pagan—as the text demonstrates with the little carved dolls that Christian missionaries suppress but that become the fetish of liberation and pleasure at the end of the novel? Why, in other words, is it that the same culture that violates Tashi’s and M’Lissa’s natural being also imagines in its art a figure in a transcendent gesture of precisely that natural sensuality? My argument in this essay is that although the novel does not pose this question, it ends up dramatizing it. The novel does not pose this question because of its melodramatic celebration of the natural as antithesis of the cultural. However, to pose such a question is to be better placed to recognize that the contradictory mutilation and worship of the natural, corporeal body in Olinka culture indexes a permanent coordinate of all cultures. Looked at this way, Olinka, as a culture that practices genital mutilation, immanently contains the parameters for the critique of the practice.
(pp. 281-83), where she talks about genital mutilation and her fight to end it, and where she promises that part of the proceeds of the novel will be used to help educate the concerned parties about the dangers of genital mutilation. She also adds a “Thanks” piece (pp. 285-86), where she acknowledges her debts, citing particular texts that have influenced her, and thereby bringing her own text into the web of texts on this practice. In this way, Walker shows that for her the work of fiction is not an escape from the world, but an intense self-immersion in that world.

In closing, I should like to return to the issue I raised at the beginning of this article, namely, the politics of Walker's representation of fictional Olinka, its people, and the culture of excision. My purpose in the preceding passages has been to engage Possessing in a way that reads through and beyond the novelist's demonization of the practitioners of genital mutilation. I sought to get at complexities of culture and gendered subjectivity that the novel intrinsically exhibits, despite itself. These complexities are precisely what may get subsumed under the novel's overt rhetoric of global womanhood and First-World avant-gardism. Walker's representation and repudiation of excision on abstract-universal grounds derives from a standpoint of First-World normativity, one that does not consciously thematize its own ideological mediations. But to read her novel immanently, that is to say, from the inside out, is to make visible the mediations lurking powerfully beneath the surface. It is to show that Walker's universal “woman” is actually quite situated and particular. Possessing thus presents us with a provocative cluster of contradictions, a valuable occasion for teaching. Walker's use of fictional narrative as a weapon in her campaign against genital mutilation offers an opportunity to reflect upon what fiction, under the sponsorship of ideology, can and does do. As we have seen, if her moral position towards specific characters is clear and unambiguous, the narrative itself complicates the picture, such that M'Lissa emerges with greater complexity than the binary rhetoric of good and evil otherwise suggests. And if the didactic aspect of the novel celebrates political engagement, the pressure of melodrama that sustains much of its rhetoric transgresses that ideal, turning instead to romanticism and escapism. In the final instance, we are left with a novel that lives a life of its own, beyond the reach of earnest but restrictive authorial claims.

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