

## „Highly valued by both sexes“: Activists, Anthr/apologists and FGM By Tobe Levin

Review of Hernlund, Ylva and Bettina Shell-Duncan, Eds. *Transcultural Bodies. Female Genital Cutting in Global Context*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2007.<sup>1</sup>

On the back cover of *Transcultural Bodies. Female Genital Cutting in Global Context*, Richard Shweder praises the volume for taking “us a huge step beyond the global activist and first-world media (mis-) representation of FGM” that fails to acknowledge “genital surgeries ... [as] highly valued by both sexes.” Strongly implied is that the “highly valued” is, in fact, worthwhile. This characteristic complicity with a decidedly harmful traditional practice makes the book ineffectual for activists; of limited use for journalists; and downright dangerous for intellectuals who already prefer passivity. In an attempt to condone, Shweder points out, where genitals are altered, most people approve.<sup>2</sup> *But of course*, in ethnicities that cut, the majority conforms. Who knows this better than NGOs do?

Yet this book, assigned to students, goes beyond a single (possibly forgivable) instance of ‘talking-down’ to activists: its designated adversary is “the global movement to ‘eradicate FGM’” (1). Were you aware, for instance, that “the global eradication campaign itself ... violate[s] several human rights” (26)? Perhaps sensing the fragility of such a charge, the editors warn us not “to draw up overly simplistic dichotomies between ‘Western activists’ on the one hand and ‘African women’ on the other – as such identities often coincide – nor to trivialize the powerful and committed engagement of ... ‘insiders’ with a true stake in the practices who are working for their elimination” (26). Seemingly apposite, on deeper reading this passage reveals a perilous distinction between the “insider” stake holders who can only hail from FGM-practicing cultures [“insiders’ with a true stake in the practice”] and other volunteers whose fervor is nourished by empathy alone. Such a triage can only be based on ignorance (or worse, deliberate suppression)<sup>3</sup> of anti-FGM work as not only honorable but indispensable.

Yet, the recurring dismissal of courageous efforts by African, African-American, Afro-European and European activists *together*, however deeply disturbing, is still only a hint of what is wrong with the tone of this collection. More serious are repeated expressions of disdain for (most) NGOs that oppose FGM; consistent misunderstanding of the challenging relationship between advocacy and journalism;<sup>4</sup> and, ultimately, the gauntlet thrown to activists by that portion of the academy in anthropology departments, mainly and significantly based in North America, who claim the issue for their discipline as best suited to pontificate about it. Let me be clear: writing this review during a teaching stint in China, resident in Germany, active in Europe, I see in this volume a U.S.-based export that has already had a corrosive influence on some European

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<sup>1</sup> The editors’ first volume dealt with the issue in Africa. Shell-Duncan, Bettina and Ylva Hernlund, eds. *Female “Circumcision” in Africa. Culture, Controversy, and Change*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000. Levin’s review together with a modified version of this essay will appear in December 2010 in *Feminist Europa. Review of Books*, special issue on FGM. See [www.ddv-verlag.de](http://www.ddv-verlag.de). Click on Feminist Europa.

<sup>2</sup> Michelle C. Johnson notes that “After nearly ten years of working with Mandiga in Guinee- Bissau, I have not yet met a Mandiga woman who opposes female circumcision” (210). This statement is intended to defend if not to ennoble the preference.

<sup>3</sup> Search in vain in *Transcultural Bodies* for the watershed Bamako Declaration, a key manifesto issued by the Inter-African Committee in 2005 that insists the term “female genital mutilation” be consistently deployed – emphatically *not* cutting, circumcision, surgeries or modification. Failure to acknowledge this document amounts to dismissal of its authors and strikes me as an egregious lack of respect, for it is impossible that a competent peer-reviewer would not have brought its absence to the editors’ attention. And note the omission of the real name of the big day. The editors attended in “2004 [the] USAID-sponsored Washington, D.C., conference commemorating the first anniversary of “Zero Tolerance Day” (ix). It is officially, and deliberately, called International Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation Day, the reason being to ‘enforce’ as far as possible acceptance of the idea that clitoral amputation and infibulation are, despite denials, medically mutilating acts. Later in the text, the real title is given, but only after the editors have rejected the wording.

<sup>4</sup> Well aware of pitfalls in speaking to the media whose interest naturally lies in sensationalism – if it bleeds, it leads --, activists often attend workshops designed to circumvent negative reporting to the extent that it can be done. The EU DAPHNE Program, for instance, included media training for EuroNet members.

university approaches to the subject (fortunately less so in Africa). Close textual analysis reveals a consistent unhelpful undercurrent: the issue is too fraught to touch! Such a hands-off message paralyses the academic conscience and may well end in depriving NGOs of active support and research funds.

“Oh, dear,” you may think by now, “this book has reached the unintended reader.” Perhaps. Not an anthropologist, I have little patience for co-opting (and subordinating) FGM to illuminate “wider discourses and ensuing debates” (Johnson 203) on allied topics, an approach shared by these essays. But I am credentialed: an Associate of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University and a thirty-two year veteran in advocacy to eradicate FGM, my activism embraces the EuroNet FGM, FORWARD-Germany,<sup>5</sup> and *Feminist Europa* (Heidelberg) which, since 1998, has carried my reviews of books on FGM published in German, French, Italian and Spanish.<sup>6</sup> The dearth of attention in U.S.-based writing to other-language sources deserves mention, for Africa and Europe offer alternative approaches. Finally, a pioneering collection of essays co-edited with University of Ghana’s Augustine H. Asaah called *Empathy and Rage. Female Genital Mutilation in African Literature* (Oxfordshire: Ayebeia, 2009; distributed in the U.S. by Lynne Rienner) shows that **what *Trans-cultural Bodies* refuses to do can indeed be done: advocacy and academia can join hands IF we want to see FGM end. This, however, is not what *Transcultural Bodies* aims to achieve.**

Despite lip-service to hopes of the rite’s demise, hardly a chapter in the Rutgers UP publication is likely to speed eradication (a word, by the way, that its editors dislike). From terminology that refuses to see the amputation of girls’ genitals as a mutilation to multiple framings of the issue that neglect international consensus on human and children’s rights, the book reveals the serpentine nature of its discourse in seemingly acceptable (if repetitive) statements such as this by contributor Aud Talle: “Writing about female circumcision cannot be anything other than a blend of rigid scholarship and ‘sympathy’ writing” (Hernlund and Shell-Duncan 106). But “female circumcision” is not the issue! “Circumcision” means surgical removal of the clitoral prepuce, hardly the kind of ablation to which most girls are prey.

THIS is what FGM victims confront:<sup>7</sup>

As soon as the circumciser began cutting her flesh, the [fourteen or fifteen year old Maasai] girl started to fight back. ... The women [who thronged around her] ... did not manage to hold her down. Finally, the elder brother and guardian ... told the women ... to use ropes to bind her. ... The operation had to be executed immediately because the cattle were restlessly waiting to get out to ... pasture[], and all the guests who had gathered were eager to begin ... feasting. (94)

As a result, the assistants attempted to lasso “the [girl’s] ankles [as she] ... tried desperately to kick ... off [the restraints]. The struggle continued for a while before [she] tired” enough to permit bondage. But without room in which to wrench her thighs apart, the actors needed outside intervention. It was soon forthcoming. “One of the men watching the scene ... and waiting for the women to ... finish[] ... approached the house to offer his [help. He] forced his stick through the mud wall..., made a hole, and pulled out one of the rope ends. The other rope was fastened to a roof beam at the entrance to the house” (94-95).

This narrative, not yet at its climax, covers one entire page in Talle’s chapter, for attention is deliberately diverted from the action by interventions explaining each step from the perpetrators’ point of

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<sup>5</sup> Modeled after one of the world’s premier NGOs, FORWARD – UK (founded 1983) by Efua Dorkenoo, O.B.E.

<sup>6</sup> Typically, U.S.-based academics betray little or no awareness of studies published in German. With regard to Germany and Austria the deficit is particularly grave, as each energetically debates the issue and, since 1977, has been pioneering ways to deal with FGM. Although it is now outdated, I recommend for historical background Tobe Levin. “Female Genital Mutilation: Campaigns in Germany.” *Engendering Human Rights: Cultural and Socio-economic Realities in Africa*. Ed. Obioma Nnaemeka. NY: Palgrave Macmillan at St Martin’s Press, 2005. 285-301. At present the nation hosts more than thirty NGOs against FGM, most united in INTEGRA which maintains a committee consisting of federal government (ministry) representatives, state and municipal envoys and NGOS. It is perhaps not inappropriate to remind readers of Germany’s present influence on both the European Union and, by virtue of its place in the global economy, on the world.

<sup>7</sup> In some instances the brackets contain quotes from the text that I have rearranged to improve narrative flow.

view, so that what is happening shall not appear to be what it is: violence, and quite specifically a form of violence criminalized by most nation's laws and international covenants. But to get to the point:

At last, the circumciser could proceed with her work. With tiny movements she carved away the clitoris and the labia minora, while the women in loud voices instructed her how to cut. The blood rushed forward, and for us outside the actual scene, it was as if the excited voices of the women and the heavy breathing of the girl would never ... end. (95)

Wait a moment. If the observer is outside, how does she know about these "tiny movements"? How can she discern what's cut? In fact, she "peeped through [an] opening in the roof that the women had made beforehand to lighten up the room" (95). Spying with her are any number of children of both sexes as well as the volunteer male who is "all the time holding tightly on to the rope [while gazing] into the narrow room to check that the women did a proper job" (95).

By this time, you, too, feel your stomach clench and, as intended, your sympathies may well have shifted from the teen to the anthropologist who, almost by accident, has found herself ethically compromised. I respect the integrity that leads Talle to admit:

The smell of blood and sweat forced itself through the wall and incorporated us into what was happening inside. My own pulse beat more quickly than normal. Instantly, I understood what a personal challenge anthropological fieldwork could be. I was witnessing 'torture', [*distancing quotation marks glaring in the original*] and the fact that I remained standing with the others outside somehow sanctioned what happened inside the house (95).

My point exactly, with one proviso: anthropologists don't "somehow sanction" such an event. They give legitimacy to it and thereby vitiate activists' urgent appeals. For FGM IS torture – *sans* quotation marks. And even when performed in clinics under general anesthesia, the amputations remain medically pointless and a violation of human rights.

More than a few authors in the collection sustain similar distortions, with Talle singled out for being so typical of much that is dubious here. If, admittedly, some chapters rely on objective data and even contain intriguing new data on sexuality after FGM, many also share faults with the above passage where emotional withdrawal abrogates scientific rigor. For example, Talle scripts like a creative writer in attributing thoughts and motives she could not possibly know to various actors and, in her effort to mediate the violence, abandons objectivity. She notes that "the nervousness of the women who executed the operation [*how does she know they feel nervous?*] had spread to the observers [*who, we have been told before, were, if anything, hungry*], and it was as if we sought support in each other's glances and presence" (95). Support? Why? Is there something untoward going on? Something, perhaps, thought to be *wrong*? Procedurally, certainly, as the victim was expected to cooperate, but by now she has been subdued and the usual ululations are, presumably, covering her screams, notwithstanding the "heavy breathing" curiously audible despite the reiterated loudness of in-hut attendants. Given our common understanding of the English language, the author can only be projecting her own malaise, -- her own sense that indeed, she is witness to a crime--, onto those whose behavior shows no sense of wrong-doing whatsoever. Yet, in the end, like others in the guild, the anthropologist holds to a creed that pardons what she sees.

Evidence of the author's ambivalence and thereby her honesty is, to her credit, shared with us, emerging from a repeated disclaimer that prefaces this scene: her Maasai informants told her that this time, things "did not proceed 'normally'" (93) and she wishes her readers to believe this too – despite a dearth of scientific data in support. The research question is: given a statistically relevant sample of girls subjected to the cut, how many buck? How many grit their teeth in silence?<sup>8</sup> While told what is supposed to happen, what actually takes place, and how often, we simply don't know. And while I, too, lack the hard facts, having read

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<sup>8</sup> A good number of first person narratives in English, German, Dutch and French are not short on rebellious victims. One well-known example is P.K. from Awa Thiam's *La Parole aux Négresses* (1978), popularized in Alice Walker's *Warrior Marks* (1993). Please note the time lag.

testimonies and talked to victims, I have good reason to believe that girls' opposition is hardly uncommon. They do fight back.<sup>9</sup>

Before the *halaleiso* had even touched her, Yurop cried out. At once, one of the women slapped her. ... The general consensus held that this was no time to exercise forbearance ... but in Yurop's case [nothing] quiet[ed] her down. She went right on screaming so they [gagged her with the cloth] ready for that purpose. ... [And when] it was Ifra's turn, ... like all the others, she [too] lit out of there. ... So first [they] had to catch her and, with fanatical violence, threw her onto the box. Then, repeat performance: Ifra screamed and tried to free herself, and again the women fought and gagged her. And so it went with Fatma, Muna, Suleiha and Nasra. All shrieked, all were gagged, the *halaleiso* never slowed down. Between girls she wiped blood off the box and with her foot kicked sand over the puddle on the floor. And now there was only one left, and that was me. (173-174)

Nura Abdi, in this excerpt from *Tränen im Sand*, presented as *Desert Tears* in the last chapter of *Empathy and Rage*, is, admittedly, not scientific. We see only five girls who resist but in ways that seem both believable and representative.

Representing the challenge that anthropologists face when confronting scenes like the above, Talle has come to terms with an early admitted distaste she eventually sheds. Because “female and male circumcision” were “the order of the day,” as a

cultural phenomenon [they] no longer raised feelings of anxiety or indignation. In Geertzian terms I could remain ‘experience-distant’ to that sort of bodily intrusion (Geertz 1983). Particularly when confronted with this piece of ethnography, it felt safe to repose in the cognition of cultural differences (93).

Such a monumentally *unsafe* stance – vulnerable to ethical scrutiny – makes even the editors queasy. Hoping to shroud complicity, they evoke a “dual” among “FGC” scholars who oppose “rights and culture,” enabling them to mediate by applying a “prorights anthropology” and Marie-Bénédicte Dembour’s “pendulum” theory. As Hernlund and Shell-Duncan present her, Dembour sees in universal human rights one ‘extreme’ influence on society and in cultural rights (including misogyny) an equal and opposite ‘extreme’. These concepts mark two ends of an arc. However, once one tendency ascends, the pendulum swings back toward the other.

Agreeing that human rights and cultural rights signify extremes, Hernlund and Shell-Duncan write:

It is our ambition that this volume add to the growing number of voices in the field of FGC studies and activism that call for a move ‘to the middle’. (2)

If you are, like me, unsure of what “the middle” means when the topic is ablation of a five-year-old’s genitals, the editors clarify by quoting Elvin Hatch, an “extremist” with whom they disagree. He exemplifies the ‘questionable’ tendency to see excision as a “test case” for the limits of cultural relativism by “group[ing] FGC with political executions, genocides, and honor killings as ‘situations in which ethical relativism is untenable’” (Hatch 1997, 372 qtd. in Hernlund and Shell-Duncan 7).

Now, am I correct to understand that whereas political executions, genocides and honor killings really are ethically reprehensible, FGM is not? And if FGM is not reprehensible, that is because the non-anthropologist fails to distinguish among more harmful and less harmful, that is, not reprehensible, types? The answer is yes.

While some scholars “wrestl[e] with ... alleged and real health effects of FGC” (1) others “casually lump together under the label FGM/FGC/FC ... diverse practices with varied consequences,” thereby causing “confusion” with regard to “the effects that FGC can indeed have on health and well-being” (2). Yes, as this wording suggests, more than a few contributors imply that some forms of FGM aren’t all that bad, an

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<sup>9</sup> Acknowledgement that girls resist is easily deduced from often cited reductions in age of cutting and elimination of womanhood instruction. We see this resistance in *Moolaadé* as well.

argument whose legitimacy should, at the very latest, have ceded to the *Lancet* whose findings have *not* guided editorial choices but have merely been acknowledged in a footnote about “the World Health Organization[’s taskforce] ... on female genital mutilation and obstetric outcome [that] released a six-country study” (44). The first such investigation based on a statistically relevant sample, it “did find that women with [any form of] FGM, compared to uncut women, experienced an elevated risk of certain complications such as postpartum hemorrhage, stillbirth, or early neonatal death (WHO 2006)” (44). One can, I think, conclude, supported by the impeccable authority of one of the world’s leading medical journals, that reducing risk of “postpartum hemorrhage, stillbirth, or early neonatal death” means FGM is not a good idea for anyone.

Now, in June 2006, when *Lancet* appeared, “the manuscript was going to press,” so that, we are given to understand, it was too late for changes. Untrue! After all, the footnote is there. Decisive for inaction was rather the fact that *Lancet*’s results make invalid not only considerable amounts of text but even entire chapters based on the idea that FGM’s damage to health had not yet been measured and hence could not be known. Or as Shweder would have it, “lack of evidence of harm is equivalent to evidence of lack of harm” (14). So why not err on the side of those who cut? Granted, adapting the text to new knowledge would have been a Herculean task, but allowing misinformation not only to remain but keep its place at the heart of the project vitiates the credibility of the book as a whole by revealing it to be even more strongly in thrall to ideology.

More important, though, than the medical journal’s inconvenient timing is the option the editors neglected that could have avoided this embarrassment altogether. *Had they only relied on activists*, and in particular the study’s principal collaborator Efuia Dorkenoo, they would at least have known the work was underway and what it intended to uncover. They then could have anticipated outcomes. This is not to say that Dorkenoo wasn’t discrete; even when speaking with insiders, confidentiality was strictly observed. Nonetheless, simply talking to her or another of the activist investigators, one of whom is at Harvard Law School, might have prevented faulty scholarship<sup>10</sup> occasioned by the *idée fixe* that cultural majorities are, if not somehow in the right on this specific issue, also not entirely wrong.

As to the ethics here, if ending the practice brings clear advantages, continuing it does not, a state of affairs recognized by Ousmane Sembène, the pioneer Senegalese cineaste, whose *Moolaadé* prefigured *Lancet*’s findings. In 2004 in Cannes, the movie took first prize in the category “un autre regard,” and both Sembène and starring actress Fatoumata Coulibaly<sup>11</sup> told me in private conversations that, without a doubt, it is against FGM. Nonetheless, in another egregious example of its sleight of hand, *Transcultural Bodies* reads *Moolaadé* quite differently – as not primarily about FGM at all.

Really? Here’s our synopsis of the film:

The storyline revolves around Collé Gallo Sy, an excised mother, who had freed her only daughter from the so-called purification rites, or ‘salindé’, organized every seven years. In this particular season, [six] little girls run away; [two drown themselves in the well while four others] seek protection – called Moolaadé – from Collé, whose defiance is known. She protects the children but [in doing so] revolts against her husband, his family, and the village as a whole. In conflict are the right to [protection] and attachment to tradition that approves excision. For her opposition, Collé is subjected to a brutal public whipping, her enraged husband trying to [compel] her to recant. His efforts elicit rapturous applause. ‘Break her! Break her!’ the crowd shrieks. But the forces of change are too strong. Increasingly, women join Collé to triumph over male-authored repression symbolized by the edict to burn all radios, a source of enlightened ideas. (Empathy v)

This quote, from Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana’s dedication in *Empathy and Rage*, honors Sembène for being the first to produce a “full-length feature film contesting FGM” (v).

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<sup>10</sup> Suspect scholarship is also involved when, for instance, in a volatile field like this one, a wildly outdated U.N. document from 1986 is cited (see p. 12).

<sup>11</sup> I attended three events at Mt. Holyoke in the fall of 2004 with Sembène, who showed his film and, one afternoon, participated in a podium discussion about FGM with Nawal el Saadawi who had been a guest at Smith that semester. I spent an evening with Fatoumata Coulibaly at Mali’s national holiday celebrations on 21 September 2007 in the Embassy of Mali in Berlin, both of us guests of the Ambassador, Fatoumata Siré Diakité.

Now, in her contribution to the Hernlund and Shell-Duncan volume, L. Amede Obiora provides further evidence of the book's ideology-driven perspective as she takes Sembène and vitiates his forthright message. Interpreted not as a film against FGM, in Obiora's hands, its

Important lesson ... is that to respect the autonomy of individuals and the significance of their membership in local cultural worlds is to empower them to engage in critical deliberations of their positioning and commitments. This lesson is, arguably, subverted by the tenuous but relative expansion of the menu of options achieved for African immigrants by promoting female circumcision as evidence of persecution in the U.S. immigration process. (71)

According to my *explication de texte* this means, (a) 'female circumcision' should not be construed as persecution; and (b) should not be (mis)used by women to gain asylum in the United States because (c) doing so counters Sembène's main purpose in *Moolaadé*, to (d) reveal through a chronotope<sup>12</sup> that break-through need not be imposed from without but can emerge from within. This, in turn, is important, as (e) a "fresh alternative" for all of us activist outsiders in our "narratives that typically construe the practice as overdetermined [sic] by the vested interests of the elite and portray African women as monolithically condemned to slavish conformity" (Obiora 70).

Now, I agree that Sembène wanted to show what Obiora saw – the positive deviant deploying indigenous options -- but did not wish to exclude what she covers up. When she writes that he "referee[d] the struggles surrounding female circumcision" (70) the reader automatically places him at neutral, as referees must of necessity be. At risk of redundancy, this is not so. The film and film-maker oppose FGM, even if the means to do so, as Stephen Bishop argues in *Empathy and Rage*, draw on an "oppositional narrative" that works from within the culture. For Obiora, the fact that an opponent is permitted to emerge at all --and, presumably, is merely thrashed, not killed-- trumps all else. She extols "women ... act[ing] as change agents" (70) in contrast to an asylum discourse that reduces them to passive victims. This activity, in turn, is what counts, making the object of protest – FGM – almost superfluous:

... the film best animates the possibilities for change that inhere in a culture and illustrates the reality of indigenous transformative paradigms that often lie latent, even as arguably less efficient and effective reform aspirations are pursued. At once depicting culture as a surrogate for oppression and culture as a spontaneous zone of empowerment and resistance, the film extols knowledge as power, tracing how the culturally competent deploy the rich repertoire of cultural knowledge to fund radical change. (70)

Now, in light of my discussion with Coulibaly, herself an activist who suffered from excision as did the character she played, I'm disinclined to limit the protagonist to one of the "culturally competent deploying the rich repertoire of [indigenous] knowledge" (70), especially because the thematic shift in popular opinion, from women supporting to women opposing the 'rite', reaches fruition only once their catalyzing radios are ordered burned, and these had urged that excision be stopped.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in language better suited to the cinema screen, what Collé does is fight FGM; reveal the disfigurement resulting from numerous crude C-sections occasioned by her genital wounds; nearly amputates her finger by biting it in pain following a symbolic superimposition of FGM on intercourse, and shows enormous courage in not succumbing to the lash.<sup>14</sup> That Obiora defends these several scenes of torture – both by failing to censure them and by ennobling them under the mantle of culture – is, to say the least, ethically suspect.

A heavy charge, I know, given that, like most contributors to this volume, her aim is not only *not* to oppose FGM but to attack its critics who (a) perpetuate negative stereotypes of Africans, (b) supply "demonizing narratives" (73), (c) present "circumcision-as-persecution," (d) "ratif[y] ... Orientalist discourses

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<sup>12</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin coined the term "chronotope," meaning a simultaneous time-space whose combined dimensions facilitate a leap forward, in this case rebellion exploding from the culture's heart.

<sup>13</sup> The radio's influence on the change of heart in *Moolaadé* cannot be over-emphasized, and it should be openly acknowledged: commercials and programming designed by local NGOs are frequently funded by international associations. Sini Sanuman in partnership with Healthy Tomorrow in Mali is a good example.

<sup>14</sup> When I complimented Coulibaly on her acting in the thrashing scene, she explained that of course the duration was cinematically manipulated but the pain of the lash was real.

[that] ultimately subvert a paradigm of inclusion sensitive to multiculturalism and [(e)] reinforce reactionary gatekeeping [sic]" (73). To my companion militants in the European Network and the IAC, I say: take heed!

Lest I give the impression that direct interaction with activists takes place nowhere in this text, that isn't the case either, but activism's possible successes are explained away. For example, when visiting the London Black Women's Health Action Project, Aud Talle spies *FGM* [female genital mutilation] *is a worldwide issue*, a pamphlet that provides the occasion to communicate her feelings about its terms:

[Because] the publication uses "FGM" in the title, [she] commented to Sarah that [she] preferred the more relativistic "circumcision" for the practice. Sarah turned against [her] and said, "But *it is* mutilation!" Her sharp answer surprised [Talle who] could do nothing but agree. [99-100]

This leads the author to consider the relationship between anthropologists' *Weltanschauung* and Sarah's concrete situation. Sarah, she notes, had been against FGM even before she left Somalia. In a British environment that values resistance, Sarah is assumed unable to comprehend a relativistic point of view. So, for the time being, Talle refrains from trying to convince her.

Talle continues, however, trying to convince herself that relative values remain valid. One informant, for instance, proud of the courage she showed as a girl, now admits that the *schmerz* "came afterward, when she married and had children. 'This was an experience of agony', she added" (101). And goes on

without bitterness that she had suffered "in vain," while she pointed to her four-year-old daughter, noting that she "at least" should be spared from being "sewn." This woman had an unusual clarity when she spoke; it was as if she had been exposed to a sudden revelation – as if her present resistance had just waited to be awakened. (101)

Had Talle read Nura Abdi, she would not have been taken by surprise. This type of epiphany does indeed take place.

In Abdi's chapter called "Am I even a woman?" the Somali has asked for asylum in Germany and spends the first few weeks sharing housing with other refugees where "nothing" in the experience "rocked [her] as much as learning that not all women in the world are circumcised" (260). The discovery, to be sure, is far from amusing. A rumor having been set in motion that Nura "was the only one who wouldn't sleep around," an Ethiopian friend challenges her:

"What's the matter with you? Why don't you have a boyfriend?" Hanna wanted to know. ... Then she looked at me as though a light had turned on and said, "Oh, right, you're Somali." I was taken aback. "What do you mean by that?" "You're circumcised," she said. An awful premonition shook me. "And you're not?" I asked, doubt in my voice. ... So out it came.

And I learned that there are two kinds of women. (260)

Soon the asylum colony, composed of pre-fabricated 'containers' housing newly-arrived Afghanis, Africans from East and West, Balkan refugees and Iraqis, was, despite the language barrier, abuzz with the news.

And from all sides I was met by shocked, disbelieving, pitying glances. Above all the Yugoslavian women couldn't contain themselves. "How can anyone do a thing like that to such a pretty girl?" they wailed, shook their heads and felt obliged to offer comfort. As for me, I'd fallen into a nightmare. It appeared that not even the Afghan women had been circumcised! O.K., Ethiopians are Christian, I thought, so that might be [why]. But Afghanis are Moslems like me, and they don't do it? I felt myself hurled into hell.

But the worst of it was, they appeared to consider me a cripple, half a woman incapable of any feeling. They behaved as though I had been the victim of a crime, as though it were shameful to be circumcised -- whereas I had always believed, circumcision made me clean!

I wasn't going to stand for that. It came to verbal blows between Hanna and me. "You're running around with all your filth," I hammered into her, "and proud of it?! Maybe you think it's better to stink like the uncircumcised? At least ... I don't smell!" I was angry. "Aren't you ashamed to be like a whore down there?" And Hanna, scornfully: "You're as smooth as a wall between your legs. They killed your sensitivity. They've destroyed you." I was shaking with rage. "Look at me!" I screamed. "I'm every bit as much a Mensch as you are! I have feelings just like you! And I'll bet I can love even better than you can!" ... Didn't I *have* to defend myself?

But to tell the truth, I didn't know what I was talking about. As a matter of fact, I knew nothing at all. Nothing about my body and nothing about sex. I'd wound up in a situation [unimaginable even] in my worst nightmare. In Somalia you talked about *gudniin* in lovely language, as you would about good fortune. Yet here I was, surrounded by people who reacted to it with horror. But putting two and two together, I drew the same conclusion as everybody else: There was something wrong with me. I became foreign to myself. (260-263)

Like Fadumo Korn in *Born in the Big Rains. A Memoir of Somalia and Survival*, Nura brings to exile her pride in purity, only to discover that what she prized was scorned, and what she scorned is praised – the canonical experience of the 'circumcised' woman in Diaspora. Fortunate to meet a gynecologist sensitive to the infibulated woman's needs, she begins to explore her body, and when her mentor tells her, "What you've suffered affects not only your body, but also your soul" (299) she accepts his counsel. After long delays, she seeks defibulation, recovers a kind of wholeness, and concludes: "Circumcision is barbarity, mutilation without anesthesia, and we should put an end to it. Of course not in my wildest dreams did I ever think I'd write a book about it. But I often thought I'd someday want to help other women [prey to the practice]" (347).

What is my point in offering this lengthy excerpt? To refute charges against us activists. Contrary to Hernlund and Shell-Duncan's viewpoint, advocacy rarely lacks context nor deals in stereotype. Nor does it fail to acknowledge that, indeed, facing up to the loss of both genitalia and value is a trial of considerable magnitude. As the Bamako Declaration regrets, at least one generation – those cut and then displaced, literally or ideologically – will have it hard, as Abdi and Korn, among others, do. Yet their voices, though rare, are also representative. They do not, in sum, fit the description of campaigners readers find again and again in *Transcultural Bodies* portrayed as creators of "hegemonic FGM discourse" (Talle 101), fomenters of "moral panic" (Johnsdotter 20), authors of "traveling narrative [that] is thoroughly fetishized, in both Marxian and Freudian senses of that term" (Piot 164), "borrow[ing] racist, imperialist and missionary images of Africa that are centuries old" (Piot 164), or – by far the most serious charge – not only ineffective in ending the practice but responsible for slowing its demise by raising the issue in public at all. Why all the fuss, some contributors ask, if the 'rite', at least in Europe, is dying of its own accord? Talle and Johnsdotter, among others, hold this view.

The answer is simple: too little research shows this to be so. It wasn't until September 2007 that primary investigator Efuia Dorkenoo released, at a ceremonial occasion in the House of Lords, the very first epidemiological study of FGM in England and Wales. Similar studies in other European countries are rare, with figures generally extrapolations based on estimated numbers of migrant daughters from excising cultures. And just as France proves with *Exciseuses*<sup>15</sup> that operators have either been flown in or are resident in Europe, a German hidden camera in 1999 (*Schlaglicht*) showed an Egyptian physician's willingness to perform a clitoridectomy. The doctor, disbarred but never prosecuted (as no crime took place), admitted he knew it would have been against the law but, among us, you know, we'll keep it all hush-hush. Waris Dirie, in *Desert Children*, a book all about the mutilation of African girls in Europe, also sees mutilation going on, as does the EuroNet.

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<sup>15</sup> Linda Weil-Curiel, Natasha Henry. *Exciseuse. Entretiens avec Hawa Gréou*. Normandy: CityEditions, 2007. To appear in English as *The Exciser. Hawa Gréou Speaks Out*. [working title] Trans. Tobe Levin. Frankfurt am Main: UnCUT/VOICES Press, 2010.

Hernlund and Shell-Duncan, however, and, above all, Johnsdotter, a major proponent of the self-vanishing school, claim to have more reliable sources to argue that not only is the number of affected girls diminishing – *in spite of* FGM advocacy -- but will likely continue to do so without any public attention at all. Just look at Israel, Johnsdotter points out. The Beta Israel have stopped. Indeed they have, but theirs is a very special case based on immigrants' desire to be Israeli and specifically not to preserve but to shed the 'culture' of their homeland in which their very name– Falasha, or stranger – meant they did not belong. This motivation is decisive and not shared by other migrant groups who have unwillingly left.

Unwilling migrants do indeed tend to honor aspects of culture that preserve rather than dilute identity, and FGM is indisputably one of those practices. Yet Johnsdotter, in one of the contributions which, I admit, angers me most, generalizes from her dissertation based on interviews conducted with an interpreter among fewer than 100 Somali immigrants in Malmo that the practice has as good as disappeared. The implication is, therefore, that national governments, the EU, NGOs and private donors are wasting their money funding advocacy groups to fight a phantom. How does she know it's an apparition, FGM performed in the EU? Because Sweden, as well as most other nations, has yet to prosecute even a minimal number of charges.

In a few [trials] there was a possibility that illegal female circumcision had been performed but no way to prove it. The large share of unfounded suspected cases shows that the level of alertness is high in Sweden. It is unlikely that there is a substantial, but hidden, incidence of female circumcision, since most cases handled by the authorities turn out to be groundless. (132)

Here the abyss between academics and advocates appears at its most chilling. Activists know why this is so, because the problem lies at the very heart of advocacy work. Not because the charges are unfounded do cases escape the purview of the law, but because we NGOs wring our hands, clutch our hearts, and tax our minds when faced with the two untenable options: denounce parents and alienate communities – but go to court, or plod along in educational efforts that strive to include, not alienate, immigrant communities while at the same time risking girls' health and ourselves being charged with facilitating mutilators. In meetings lasting hours and hours, activists dissect these options to reach what is anything but a globalized, hegemonic response and, I admit, I resent the presumed superiority of ivory tower ideologues who research and report but far less often ACT.

As you can see, this anthology has, to risk being unacademic about it, gotten my goat, and the screed you have just read is, in fact, the first negative review I've ever written, preferring in most cases to let unhelpful books simmer in silence.<sup>16</sup> But here I felt the gauntlet had been too clearly and insistently hurled, and, if anything, I regret not having penned this sooner. For Martha Nussbaum is right:

We should keep FGM on the list of unacceptable practices that violate women's human rights, and we should be ashamed of ourselves if we do not use whatever privilege and power that has come our way to make it disappear forever. (qtd in Hernlund & Shell-Duncan 26).

By this time you know what Hernlund and Shell-Duncan have to say about this. They ask, "Who exactly is 'we?'" Quite! *We* are dedicated activists. *They* are not. Instead, they denounce "denunciations of foreign traditions as morally retrograde," (26) a quality that the traditions, in turn, are obviously not. Or are they? You decide.

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<sup>16</sup> I have passed up at least two requests for this reason: *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, after publishing an article of mine in 1980, asked for a write-up on Esther Hicks' *Infibulation* which I refused to do once I understood the author was not advocating against the practice, and the second concerned a good friend's edited volume. After wringing with my conscience, I knew that the friendship meant more than whatever 'rewards' might follow a diplomatic but therefore less than honest review.