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## SITUATING A CRITIC IN HER DISCOURSE: A Conversation

by Leslye Obiora, Julia Hall, and Monica Jardine

Leslye Obiora

Following an introductory vignette that I used for a workshop on female circumcision, Monica Jardine expressed sincere exasperation over what she discerned as a reductionist approach that ultimately conceptualizes the issue in terms of racial politics. This is a quite poignant and well taken observation. In fact, the extent to which it is facile to hoist race as a shield against scrutiny when a grave, even if unflattering, matter is at issue cannot be overemphasized. Ideally, female circumcision is not a Black-White issue, or even a North-South issue. As a cultural practice which, if popular press is anything to go by, is decimating the female population, particularly in Africa, female circumcision is a core concern for the human race; it merits attention on scores that transcend trite territoriality.

Given that Professor Jardine's remark was provoked by my presentation, it is important to clarify the record by mentioning that the vignette which I narrated at the workshop was not intended to polarize the debate over female circumcision in arbitrary terms. It was more in the order of a parable that was intended to illuminate the shortcomings of a "minimalist" approach to a complex and deeply embedded problem; it reflected the expedience of analyzing the practice within the totality of its context. The subtext for the parable was *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, a best selling novel by Pulitzer award winning writer, Alice Walker, which has generated animated discussions about female circumcision. Prompted by what she perceived as the parallels between the throes of her visual mutilation and the experiences of circumcised women, Walker vividly portrays the ravages of this practice. By virtue of the novel and its successful appeal to an extensive audience, Walker has been catapulted to center stage as an ace crusader against the practice which she prefers to call genital mutilation. My parable alluded to Walker's novel and the fury that it precipitated to underscore the subversive potentialities of sensationalism.

To the credit of decades of concerted feminist agitation and action, gender matters are increasingly being recognized as deserving of political intervention at global and local frontiers. In spite of the relative force of feminist initiatives, however, it is not often that women's issues, let alone African women's issues, are fervently featured as the focus of a corrective campaign. In so far as these issues have been imbued with such salience, the efforts that have engendered the campaign are noble. To my mind, nonetheless, there is more to the efforts than the commendable.

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I sound this not to register a caveat. The crux of this caveat lies in the irony that the corrective campaign against female circumcision is characterized by certain disturbing aspects. I have articulated a critique of the epistemological limitations of the campaign in another work.<sup>1</sup> In the present context, I will briefly delineate the adverse implications of the problematic features of the campaign which pose a threat to grassroots mobilization. I argue that without grassroots support, the compelling (and often emotive) campaign against the hazards of severe female circumcision is an exercise in futility. Consequently, it stands to reason that it is high time that interests which have been summarily relegated to the periphery and the demonstrably elitist campaign be addressed. To do otherwise would be to accommodate vanguardism, even if benevolent, for its own sake, not minding that the choices of the putative benefactors of the vanguardist intervention remain informed by their allegiance to the traditional obligations and by certain underlying material conditions which necessitate circumcision.

The limitations of the circumcision campaign do not run along lines which are racially or geographically specific. After all, the manifestations of the pen as an instrument of oppression knows no arbitrary boundaries. Couching it more broadly, vanguardism (or imperialism for that matter) is typically a function of power asymmetry. Power, whatever its trappings, is not evenly distributed in any given society. Alice Walker, whose projections came into question during my presentation at the Baldy Center workshop, happens to be black. However, that is probably as far as the race element goes. The pigmentation of Walker's skin does not exempt her works on female circumcision from critiques that seek to question certain assumptions and approaches of the anti-circumcision campaign. Walker's works are just as equally implicated as the works of Mary Daly and Gloria Steinem, to name a few, or the "expert" claims of Fran Hoskens. By the same token, works such as Awa Thiam's are conceded no special immunity from critical evaluation because they originate from Africans.

The truth of the matter is that Walker and Thiam, like most Western feminist-influenced anti-circumcision campaigners, are late-comers to the circumcision controversy. Indeed, the issue predates the renaissance of the feminist movement in the West. Interestingly, from the days of the ill-fated missionary prohibition campaign (which culminated in mass rebellions in places such as Kenya in the late 1920s) to contemporary times the impetus for the aversion to circumcision has come from resistance movements within the practicing cultures, not from outsiders. To paraphrase Nahid Toubia, veteran African women have been making their voices heard, it is the world that is only just learning to listen. Granted, the voices of these women have been varied in focus, strength and dominance, but they most certainly have been active. The range of voices is not limited to the radical views which celebrate extremity, concede no redeeming value to "tradition," and have little reservations about "throwing out the baby with the bath water" vis-à-vis female circumcision. The range of voices include the more moderate viewpoints of those who regard the matter holistically and counsel a cautious enactment of change.

Female circumcision is a particularly sensitive and potentially volatile issue for a number of reasons. One such reason behooves mentioning here. The practice involves some people who, betrayed and disconcerted by their abiding marginality in a global economy, may be willing to fiercely defend familiar terrain and the "safe haven" of culture and tradition which find expression in practices such as female circumcision. Diametrically opposed to this stance are situated angles

<sup>1</sup> See L. Amede Obiora, *Bridges and Barricades: Reorienting the Circumcision Debate*, in *AFRICAN WOMEN AND IMPERIALISM* (Obioma Nnaemeka & Oyeronke Oyewumi, eds., 1995). See also L. Amede Obiora, *The Little Foxes That Spoil the Vine: Revisiting the Feminist Critique of Female Circumcision* (Unpublished Manuscript).

of vision which, nihilistic of female circumcision, construe it as the relic of a savage past and as a signifier of the oppression of women. Curiously enough, these polar views mutually seek to further the interests of women, although they disagree on approaches and their polemics tend to undermine the very interests they purport to protect. To illustrate this point, let us consider, for instance, the local groups that arrange circumcision sessions involving infant girls for the benefit of propaganda-savvy Western broadcasting corporation's camera crews who wish to document the graphic details of the operation. Even if the group's agenda is to capture and communicate the perils of the practice, in light that will instigate nothing short of reformative indignation and compassion for young children, their strategy is not without fault. On account of their complicity in what can be described as gratuitous sensationalism, at least one more severe circumcision is recorded in the annals of health and history. To optimize the sensational value of the broadcast, it is not far fetched for the worst case scenario, which by definition is a deviation from the norm, to be orchestrated for recording. If this is the case, the group may have achieved its aim to shock and scandalize. But at what cost? Was the benefit worth the burden of jeopardizing the life of the poor child pawned and victimized in the transaction? It is conceivable that such child was certain to be circumcised independent of the group's influence. Nonetheless, in the scenario under consideration, the group is inculpated and the health sequelae proliferated by its involvement is, for practical purposes, equivalent to that which it attributes to the myopia of pro-circumcision reactionaries.

As it turns out, prohibitionists and conservatives have had varying and historically contingent degrees of success in mustering international support for their causes. Claude Welch has chronicled the evolution of female circumcision from earlier in time, when it enjoyed a status comparable to pseudo-sovereignty, to today, when it is castigated as a human rights violation. Meanwhile, the moderate category of voices remain eclipsed or selectively silenced by the sensationalism infused into some anti-circumcision rhetoric articulated in international forums. Unlike those who politicize female circumcision as the hallmark of identity, or those who reduce it to a question of "the innocent vulva," as Alice Walker calls it, the moderates situate the issue in a broader context. To this extent, they echo the sentiments of the ordinary members of the affected population who, cognizant of the cyclical or web-like nature of their every day realities, seldom assess genital surgeries in isolation of politics, economics, religion and the like.

These lay persons are the ones who shoulder the brunt of the ripple effects of the laissez-faire capitalism and its political economy. They realize that the economic marginalization of their societies leads to the contestation and reification of cultural practices in ways that may adversely transform their significance; they realize that economic triumph may translate into options that make certain cultural practices obsolete. All things being equal, few women will, in the face of modern science and technology, and if offered the alternative of affordable maternal care, dabble into or gamble with the risks inherent in the drastic forms of circumcision on account of a rationale which espouses the practice as an avenue for circumventing maternal death.<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, it has been reported that some people are resorting to circumcision to ensure chastity as a prophylactic against the AIDS epidemic.<sup>3</sup> In a sense, this response reflects misguided hysteria. In another sense, it demonstrates the length people will go when they have incorrect,

<sup>2</sup> Preventing infant and maternal mortality is cited as a reason for circumcision. For an examination of indigenous justifications for female circumcision, see L. Amede Obiora, *The Little Foxes That Spoil the Vine: Revisiting the Feminist Critique of Female Circumcision* (Unpublished Manuscript).

<sup>3</sup> See *Recent Developments: Empowering Women to Stop AIDS in Cote D'Ivoire and Uganda*, 6 HARV. HUM. RTS. L. J. 210, 215.

inadequate, misleading or no information about a particular phenomenon. This response further underscores the precarious existence of women in conditions of underdevelopment. Just as improved access to education and health care is a promising means to properly inform women who believe that circumcision prevents maternal mortality, these same variables will probably explode the myth of the chastity-circumcision-AIDS triad.

It is against this backdrop that I recapitulate the moral of the parable that led to this rejoinder. Essentially, the parable relates the recriminatory insights of a child. Apparently skeptical of the agenda of some solipsist, the child called for greater candor. More elaborately, the parable began with an account of the enigmatic reaction of a certain character named Over-Zee who mourned the destruction of a beard by a fire more than the concomitant death of its bearer. The parable proceeded to report a series of subsequent events which culminated in an inquest of the propriety (or lack thereof) of Over-Zee's conduct. At that occasion, Over-Zee's attempt to rebut the allegations against her was challenged by the child who suggested that the problem may derive from Over-Zee's tunnel vision. An irate Over-Zee scurried to set the child straight. In a bid to enjoin temperance, a third party urged her to recognize the dilemma that even some of the fingers she intended to wag at the child were inverted as if indicting herself.

The destroyed or burnt beard is a metaphor for the "innocent vulva" and the deceased bearer is conceived as a metaphor which denotes the existential realities of women in cultures that practice circumcision. Over-Zee is a pseudonym for radicals and reactionaries alike; the child is a type for moderates. The third party represents autonomous "umpires" who, unpersuaded by emotional broadsides, insist that discourses concerning female circumcision invariably proceed on a "win-win" note for the interests of women in their entirety. From a perspective like the third party's, an anti-circumcision champion, such as Alice Walker, would have ample opportunity to ensure that the pains of her physical visual mutilation neither skews her analysis of differing experiences of other women nor interfere with the potential gains of her endeavors on their behalf. Even if she identifies patriarchy as a determinant for both her individual plight and the circumcision of women, she would acknowledge that patriarchy is not a monolith, that it does not operate in a vacuum, that it may manifest in different ways in different contexts, and that she may be overemphasizing its explanatory power. By and large, a conscientious anti-circumcision campaigner ought to realize when to distinguish a symptom from a cause, when to intone reconciliation as opposed to blame, when to lead and when to follow, when to speak and when to listen, and when to revise a strategy which may prove to be self-defeating in the final analysis.

A beard which is intact has no relevance for a dead person. In a similar vein, rallying to preserve the integrity of the clitoris of women, most of whom are languishing in abject poverty, is somewhat akin to putting the cart before the horse. History suggests that it is not a coincidence that no one is randomly tampering with the clitoris of women whose objective conditions are quantitatively enhanced. Not too long ago in the West, before the birth of feminism as we know it today, women were subjected to all manner of mechanisms supposedly to control or augment their realities. It has taken greater socioeconomic reform and accountability to ameliorate this situation. Among some segments in Africa, female circumcision is gradually losing its legitimacy. The variables for change in this context have not been unlike those precipitating change in other loci. Women are rational beings and their choices, within the specificity and confines of their situations may well be rational. An extension of the emphasis, so far primarily dedicated to rescuing the clitoris, to incorporate a concern for the general welfare of women is bound to have a domino effect.

Over and again, Africanist activists have elaborated the causal relationship between altered perceptions, material empowerment and social change.<sup>4</sup> Their analyses give credence to the argument that at the end of the day, the structures that induce the very threshold of hunger pangs are not that different from those that perpetuate practices such as severe circumcision. All too often, we are confronted with the false distinction between "humanitarian" concerns and "human rights" concerns. According to conventional wisdom, the former borders on the question of discretion while the latter demands more urgent and sustained intervention. A classic illustration of this mindset comes from none other than Alice Walker, the ace crusader herself. It is interesting that in the campaign against circumcision in Africa, a person of the stature of Alice Walker would trivialize the request of the women to whose cause she professes commitment. I am alluding to that infamous incident catalogued in "Warrior Marks," where an indigent women's cooperative solicited Walker's assistance for the acquisition of a refrigerated truck with which to market their produce; Walker countered their petition with the retort that she could afford a tire or so.<sup>5</sup> While Walker was not obligated to assist these women, it is instructive that she did not choose to dispose of the matter in a less flippant, more constructive manner and that she chose to remain blind to a crucial element of the reality she avidly opposes. As the child in the parable reminded Over-Zee, "the matter calls for total vision."

Julia Hall

*Geckos are small, fluorescent pink and green reptiles remarkable for their long, rolling tongues. Defined as "insectivorous," they roamed the upper walls of my Bangkok apartment at night preying on mosquitoes, flies, ants and other indigenous bugs. Frequently, a gecko would take a detour across my forehead. Perhaps it was this unwelcome bodily intrusion -- obviously experienced by other tenants in my building -- that led the human occupants therein to call for exterminating the geckos. Before the geckos were expelled, the insects were a nuisance. After the geckos were uprooted, the bugs virtually ran the place. Insecticides were useless, netting proved claustrophobic and failed to mute the sounds of the real occupiers of my apartment. "Sleep" became a term associated only with deprivation. All this because the humans failed to comprehend the indispensable role the gecko played in the ecology of household maintenance and comfort.*

Monica Jardine responded to Leslye Obiora's introductory vignette with a critique of its potential for promoting a reductionist approach to the debate over female circumcision. That is, Professor Jardine encouraged a more nuanced examination of the roles of a variety of actors -- individual persons, authoritarian classes, international institutions, and grassroots organizations -- in the circumcision debate. Avoiding East-West, North-South, and black-white dichotomies is certainly imperative. However, allow me to reinfuse the female circumcision controversy with a bit of my own reductionism. I intend to put a simple "spin" on this debate by reclaiming -- for those of us loyal to indigenous development models -- the much-maligned term "appropriate technology."

Leslye Obiora contends that "a beard which is intact has no relevance for a dead person." In the context of female circumcisions and material deprivation in Africa, the obvious analogy to Obiora's assertion is that a clitoris which is intact has no relevance for a girl whose body is bloated by hunger, wracked by disease, and exhausted by labor that produces little sustenance. Thus,

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Achola Pala; & AAWORD.

<sup>5</sup> See Alice Walker & Pratibha Parmar, WARRIOR MARKS.

Obiora asserts that the corrective campaign against female circumcision is subverted by certain "incorrect elements." Overzealousness and a narrow understanding of the consequences of eliminating the practice of female circumcision absent the implementation of safeguards for the material well-being of girls and women distinguish this mistaken approach. Obiora promotes a framework for evaluating and eventually eliminating female surgeries as necessarily characterized by a "total vision" of the nature and meaning of circumcision. In another piece, Obiora argues that customary law in traditional cultures is not static, but dynamic and ever-changing with some rules easily discarded, new customs created or borrowed, and many practices reevaluated for efficiency and utility.<sup>6</sup> Given this dynamism, what conditions obtain in Somalia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Southern Egypt, and other African countries that allow female circumcision to continue? What is the proper approach to its elimination; one that respects the ecology of these societies, comprehending the totality of relations between the women and girls who live within them and their material environments?

I do not think of Obiora's argument as one in favor of cultural relativism. As I understand it, "total vision" promotes a more complete, perhaps more gradual, approach to the cessation of female genital surgeries that comprehends both the immediate and long-range effects of its eradication. Nor does the promotion of an "appropriate technology" for the elimination of harmful traditional practices pay undue deference to elites in developing countries who employ western ideas to effect material change in their own lives while decrying the same influences' potential for transforming the lives of girls, women and the rural poor.<sup>7</sup> Appropriate technology, correctly applied, is an approach to cessation that respects traditional culture while recognizing that the agents of necessary change must come from within the culture as they comprehend best the nature and consequences of contested practices. Thus, the most radical and potentially promising approach to the cessation of female genital surgeries must engage the efforts of the women who currently condone and employ the practice.

Although a tertiary meaning, technology can be defined as the totality of the means employed to provide objects necessary for human sustenance and comfort. Appropriate technology became a catchall phrase in the international development community in the late 1970s. It came to signify the process by which aid and development agencies assessed "what a country needs," and, allegedly working with local authorities and communities, developed technology "appropriate" to a geographical area's environment, cultural and religious practices, and existing economic base. The unfortunate reality was that aid agencies, in concert with international lending institutions, failed miserably at assessing the needs of developing countries often causing harm to the environment, angering communities by insulting culturally embedded practices (such insult only further cementing loyalty to these practices), and miscalculating a

<sup>6</sup> See L. Amede Obiora, *Reconsidering African Customary Law*, "THE LEGAL STUDIES FORUM, Fall 1993, in which Obiora argues for the "possibilities for transformation and manipulation of tradition." *Id.* at 238.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Donnelly notes that:

Arguments of cultural relativism are far too often made by economic and political elites that have long since left traditional culture behind. While this may represent a fundamentally admirable effort to retain or recapture cherished traditional values, it is at least ironic to see largely Westernized elites warning against the values and practices they have adopted...Arguments of cultural relativism regularly involve urban elites praising the glories of village life -- a life that they or their grandparents struggled hard to escape and to which they have not the slightest intention of returning.

in *UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE* (1988), at 119.

community's ability to sustain certain development projects due to lack of resources, including skilled proprietors.<sup>8</sup> The technology was often anything but appropriate.

While many see the phenomenon of female circumcision as a human rights issue, indeed an unequivocal violation of human rights norms,<sup>9</sup> others contextualize the practice locating it firmly within a docket of concerns not to be resolved without consideration and alteration of international development practices. I admit to a straddling act in terms of the two views as conceptualized above. However, I encourage a conceptualization that makes the two *correlative*. Thus, the phenomenon of the female genital surgery would be re-articulated as a practice that maintains its currency in light of the failure of both African governments and the international community to sustain a development "project" -- project as a total plan and estimate for the future -- that enfranchises poor women affording them an opportunity to reevaluate for themselves the utility of traditional practices that have outworn their usefulness. An intact clitoris in a well-fed and healthy body is, indeed, relevant.

The practice of female circumcision is not alone in the universe of human rights violations that result from women's material deprivations. While living in Thailand in the late 1980s, I was struck by press reports that Thailand was a newly emerging Asian economic miracle. The media accounts obscured thoroughly the reality of precisely which internal labor sectors produced the most significant amounts of foreign currency. They noted that "tourism" was the primary hard currency earner. Unpacking "tourism," however, involved the recognition of a vast child and female prostitution and pornography industry that, for many, characterized the tourism trade in Thailand. I worked with a coalition of grassroots groups attempting to educate government officials and the vacationing masses to the phenomena of economically coercive prostitution, forced sexual slavery, and child pornography. The unfortunate reality was that a significant portion of the holiday-making public came to Thailand for the express purpose of patronizing the sex tourism industry. While the government and various aid agencies, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), made the appropriate noises, they also subverted attempts made by grassroots organizations to develop technologies appropriate for the sustenance of rural populations.<sup>10</sup> For example, vital water sources in the North were deliberately diverted from poor, small villages to accommodate tourist hotels and other forms of recreation. Understanding his civic duty, one provincial governor made public statements encouraging the "warm Thai welcome" of tourists to his province. Many local people understood this message to further promote sex tourism. In some Northern villages, the living conditions and the amount of labor necessary to sustain oneself -- not to mention a family -- were so weakening that the prospect of a brothel bed, servicing male customers daily, a regular meal and earnings appeared to be a reasonable concession to an obvious lack of choice.

Many Western feminists, including Alice Walker, appear to accuse mothers, grandmothers and the village women who perform female genital surgeries of lack of concern for the excruciating pain suffered by girls both during the operation and throughout their lifetimes. If one attempts to "see" the circumcision from the viewpoint of the village women, however, the "decision" to circumcise appears to be another reasonable concession to an obvious lack of

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<sup>8</sup> See VANDANA SHIVA, *STAYING ALIVE: WOMEN, ECOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT* (1989).

<sup>9</sup> See Hope Lewis, *Between Irua and "Female Genital Mutilation": Feminist Human Rights Discourse and the Cultural Divide*, 8 HARV. HUM. RTS. L. J. 1 (1995).

<sup>10</sup> A significant number of Thai prostitutes come from the north provinces which comprise the poorest region of the country.

choice. Leslye Obiora asserts that "many of the values that help perpetuate female circumcision are life-giving. We must harness that life-giving energy when thinking about alternatives."<sup>11</sup> Only by understanding and transforming the generative qualities of a traditional practice like female genital surgery can those in opposition substitute that harmful practice for others that both liberate women *and* offer them hope for survival.

#### Monica Jardine

Julia commends me for a "nuanced presentation" of ideas, but my responses to Obiora's discussions of female circumcision in Africa are incisive. The very important films and texts that Obiora used in her presentation at S.U.N.Y. Buffalo indicate that a growing number of African feminists oppose the practice of female circumcision and want to see it ended immediately. Comrade Obiora does not identify completely with some of these groups, because she wants to make accommodations with "traditional" African cultural practices. There is, in my view, a necessity to break with the cultural practice of female circumcision.

The fact that African women have posed the imperative of exorcising female circumcision makes Obiora's diatribe against Walker uninteresting (and at times mindlessly cruel). Obiora may be correct in her suggestion that Walker's film on African circumcision was both self-indulgent and superficial, but why spend so much time beating this issue? Ms. Obiora is interested in a public health approach to eliminating circumcision. It is my suspicion that so is Ms. Walker.

#### Leslye Obiora: A Rejoinder

*Monica Just Does Not Get It:* I looked forward to reading Monica Jardine's contribution to the conversation because I hoped that it would help me understand the impatience that she expressed towards my interpretation of the vignette I offered at the Baldy Center workshop. Owing to time constraints, Monica could not exhaustively pursue her argument that my comments were "boring." I was very eager to participate in the *CIRCLES* conversation, anticipating that it would facilitate necessary elaborations and clarifications. I am quite taken aback by the brevity and tone of Monica's remarks stated above. Obviously, Monica does not see the need to substantiate her initial reaction to my presentation, or to engage in dialogue. This is especially unfortunate because my workshop presentation and my enthusiasm for the *CIRCLES* forum were prompted by what I perceived as a gaping hole in communication in debates about circumcision. Are the views on the opposite sides of the debate so irreconcilable? Why the recurrent impasse? Why the recalcitrance and finality when some dialogue may facilitate a resolution? Are there no common grounds where interested parties can meet and try to understand each other?

I am puzzled and, frankly, perturbed by Monica's refusal to hear and consider what I am saying. Had Monica grasped the gist of my thoughts, she could not have concluded that I dissociate from African feminist initiatives against circumcision because I want "to make accommodations with 'traditional' African cultural practices." This conclusion is simplistic, inaccurate and unfounded. Disregarding the fundamental issues that I entreated her and the rest

<sup>11</sup> Comments by Leslye Obiora, Seminar on "Women's Human Rights and Development" sponsored by the Baldy center for Law and Social Policy at the SUNY Buffalo School of Law, Fall 1994.

of my audience to factor into consideration, Monica dismisses my insights as a mindlessly cruel diatribe against Alice Walker. How many times will I say it? This is not about Alice Walker. It is a disservice to collapse the network of complex issues involved and trivialize them as some form of personal vendetta. What personality is so overshadowing that we cannot venture beyond it to understand the critical issues at stake, issues that implicate the lives of millions of women?

Had Monica Jardine paid attention at the workshop, she would have noticed that the film I showed was not *Warrior Marks*, but a documentary by the Inter-Africa Committee on traditional practices affecting women and children. I am not sure how she arrived at the conclusion that I was obsessing over and belaboring Walker's film. For the most part, Monica echoes my sentiments that much of the film is, as she put it, "self-indulgent and superficial." Why would I waste a golden opportunity to discuss the issue of women and development with a very exciting audience by focusing on such a film? That would only promote Walker's grand-standing. I referred to Walker at the workshop to frame some issues for discussion. Given that we opted for the *CIRCLES* forum as a means to further explore and explain the issues raised by Monica's (and Julia's) comments, it was inevitable that Walker should resurface here. I regret that this has reinforced the (mis)conception of my good faith effort to interrogate the urgent question of women in development through the prism of the circumcision controversy as, not just "boring" and "uninteresting," but as a "mindlessly cruel" diatribe. Having said this, I wish to encourage Monica to revisit my efforts with a mind free of misconceptions and preconceptions about what I have to offer.

*Speaking of Julia:* I found Julia's "gecko spin" refreshingly provocative. It provides a sobering insight into the pitfalls of well-meaning, but rash and ill-conceived "outsider interventions." Fortunately, the piece reestablishes the focus on development--its objectives, apparatuses, dynamics and implications. In her capacity as an activist and policy-practitioner who has monitored the implementation of abstract policies (and sincerely sought to understand ground-level realities) in other cultures, it is not surprising that she can offer such a realistic assessment of development efforts. Vividly demonstrating the demerits of top-down models of development, Julia amplifies the case for pragmatic temperance and contextualization. The significance of her commentary heightens in light of the proceedings at the Beijing United Nations World Conference on Women. Denouncing culture as a principal source of gender-based violence and exploitation, the majority of participants at the conference insisted that states have a duty, regardless of their particular cultural systems, to protect women's human rights. Julia's elucidation of the obstacles and quandaries of policy implementation can be read as a call for caution in executing the declaration and platform of action that emerged from the conference.