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Amede Leslye Obiora

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Cover Page Footnote
Art: Circle of the Great Mother by Joan M. Goldberg
SITUATING A CRITIC IN HER CRITIQUE: A Vignette

by Amede Leslye Obiora *

In the wake of colonialism, the missionaries had established a presence in a little known town in Africa. In record time, they acquired a core of converts, among whom was a young woman whose zeal and commitment to missionary activity distinguished her and earned her a rank as the chair of the women's guild. Over the course of time, the influence of the mission increased to the extent that it came to be perceived as a pillar of the community. By some unfortunate twist of fate, however, the mission was razed to the ground by a wild fire and the parish Father burnt to death in the blaze. When news of the accident reached the young woman who was endearingly called "Over-zee" (as in Over-zealous), she was dumbstruck. After a long spell of silence, she was able to sober up, but just enough to blurt out one question. She asked: "Was the Father's beard burnt?"

The people who brought the news to her and others within hearing glanced at each other in bewilderment. They were caught off guard by the question which struck them as out of place, especially given the gravity of the other incidents of the accident: their parish mission had just been ravaged by fire; their parish Father was no more. And what seemed preeminent to the young woman was the Father's beard?! Well, the Christian thing to do was give Over-zee the benefit of the doubt, so they graciously concluded that her question was a shock-induced reaction.

Okay. Then came the time for the funeral and burial rites. At the wake, Over-zee lived up to her name. You see, in her past life, she had been a professional mourner. As a tribute to her beloved Priest, she put on what, to her mind, was a remarkable performance. Leaving aside the question of intentionality, Over-zee's antics actually wrought somewhat of a mess: Not only did it just about defeat the purpose of the gathering, it exacerbated the grief of the owners of the corpse and interfered with their opportunity to pay their last respects to their dear one. So spectacular and awry was the performance that it diverted attention from every other thing. In fact, some condolence visitors mistook her for the principal bereaved and sought to console her. But for Over-zee's misconceived agenda, her participation may have been quite welcome and enriching.

At a subsequent village forum which was convened to evaluate the turn of events at the funeral, Over-zee appropriated the floor to articulate her defense. She started: "The way I see...." She had barely finished uttering those introductory words when a child in the audience interrupted and countered: "Just keep in mind that the matter calls for total vision."

*The author is a law professor at Indiana University. This work was presented at the University at Buffalo School of Law as part of an interdisciplinary course on international human rights. Presented as a prelude to a workshop, it is printed here to introduce the discourse which it provoked. The resulting dialogue will be printed in the 1996 issue of CIRCLES.
The child's reminder subdued the air into a deafening silence; not a breath was heard; the vibrations from a dropped pin would have registered as noise. Why such reaction? Over-zee literally had partial vision, her one eye having been mutilated in her childhood. At any rate, every other person was embarrassed and visibly rattled by what they considered the child's irreverence. When Over-zee recollected herself, she came charging toward the child, livid with rage. As she was vehemently reprimanding and pointing her finger at the child, an old woman who had come to be recognized as a sage spoke out in a bid to intercede for the child. Focusing on the finger that Over-zee pointed at the child, the sage deliberatingly asked: "Does anything about the pointed finger strike you as ironic?" Not a word came from Over-zee nor did any member of the captivated audience dare to respond to the rhetoric of the very oracle of wisdom. So the sage continued: "Can you not see that only the index finger is pointed at the child? The bulk of the fingers are oriented toward you as if beckoning you to introspection and self-reflexivity."

*Circle of the Great Mother* by Joan M. Goldberg  
*assemblage*