

## Public Intellectuals, controversial feminists: Elfriede Jelinek and Alice Walker

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« Le silence est la forme civilisée du génocide. »

Régis Debray in Renée Saurel and included in the opening speech by Jeanne Finet at the FEN conference against genital mutilation, December 1986<sup>1</sup>

“Many women resist feminism because it is an agony to be fully conscious of the brutal misogyny which permeates culture, society, and all personal relationships, ... as if our oppression ... cast in lava eons ago [was] now ... granite [with] each individual woman ... buried inside the stone.”

Andrea Dworkin<sup>2</sup>

As Ethan Goffman points out, the public intellectual is heir to a small group of New York Jewish editors and writers who had been “able to bridge the gap between small publications, academia and, to an extent, popular magazines” in making constructive use of “a tension between ethnic status and universal ideology” (Manuscript introduction). I would add, given application of the title to African-American opinion-makers such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Cornell West, or Ghanaian K. Anthony Appiah, that a broader, educated lay audience is also constitutive of the definition. The political position implies socialist sympathies and awareness of minority justice claims, but apart from Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, Catherine MacKinnon, Patricia Williams, and rare additional female thinkers, women are singularly absent from the image.

As creative writers, however, women fit more easily into this framework. Authors of narrative and drama have performed the social functions of public intellectuals at least since the *Bible* or, less controversially, since Euripedes’ *Lysistrata* featured one of women’s first sex strikes for peace. Fiction is among the most effective whistle-blowers, drawing society’s attention to its evils in the hope of effecting *tikkun olam*. Indeed, Toni Morrison, discussing the aptitude of the imagination to elucidate slavery, contends that “some things only artists can do – and it’s their job.”<sup>3</sup> The feminist project is similar, of course, defined as intricate engagement to generate change.

<sup>1</sup> Femmes en Cause 87 [also Saurel].

<sup>2</sup> Inscription on (symbolic) tombstone in *Emma* April 1983, 69.

<sup>3</sup> Toni Morrison. BBC video. 1988.

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**Comment:** This should be footnoted like everything else. Need info from Tobe.

My dissertation, "Ideology and Aesthetics in Neo-feminist German [language] fiction: Verena Stefan, Elfriede Jelinek and Margot Schroeder" (1979)<sup>4</sup> anticipated Morrison's perspective on the authorial Cassandra by exploring a remarkable phenomenon. Whereas in the United States, non-fiction such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) prompted a movement, it was story-telling that inspired action in Germany and Austria. By word of mouth alone, Verena Stefan's slim underground volume, *Häutungen* (1975),<sup>5</sup> reached best-seller status while Jelinek's early novels laid solid groundwork for the Nobel Prize winner's reputation as an outspoken critic of complicity between the economic and ideological systems.

Theories of literature as action clearly influenced the German-language authors. Significant for Jelinek, for instance, are the Brechtian alienation effect, Althusser's "interpellations" that call into being forces for progress, and Hans Magnus Enzensberger's consciousness industry, which illuminates how advertising saturates the public mind by a relentless, repetitive repackaging of concepts such as individuality, ambition, and success, dangled like promises before the working classes, minorities, and women who are, however, systematically excluded from enjoying their fruits. These sources reveal a solid footing on the left.

Women, however, face a specific gendered burden. Critics of pornography, such as the late Andrea Dworkin, probe the fraught relationship between representations of women as prostitutes – the etymology of pornography – and effects on actual females not literally engaged in the "oldest profession." Or, in Elfriede Jelinek's analysis, "Pornography is the exercise of violence against woman aimed at humiliating ... her. If, for example, in a hardcore novel or film, a man is whipped, he remains an individual freely choosing to degrade himself. But when a woman is dishonored ... she is not violated as herself, as an individual. Rather, all women are debased along with her. A member of the oppressed caste is a stand-in, so to speak, for all the rest. That's the decisive thing."<sup>6</sup> In other words, sexual violence remains pervasive in our times.

Post-colonial and anti-racist writers, among them Alice Walker, confront a similar phenomenon, violence, often disguised, that denies individuality to various subordinated groups. Although in marked contrast to Jelinek in style and tone, Walker, in fiction and essays, combines concern for equality of women with reclaiming dignity for African-Americans and Africans subjected to what has been called, at times correctly, a Western gaze.

Because the aesthetic choices of the American and Austrian diverge so significantly, their juxtaposition may at first seem strained. Major distinctions include Jelinek's pessimism versus Walker's optimism; Jelinek's nihilism versus Walker's utopian (if not prescriptive) constructivism; Jelinek's atheism versus Walker's pan-spirituality and ease in using god-driven language; and Jelinek's objective, impersonal irony versus Walker's subjective, personal, even down-home discourse. Yet instructive analogies exist. Both belong to minorities with traumatic histories: slavery for Walker, the Holocaust for Jelinek. Both also experienced personal trauma, Walker in the form of a gunshot wound that blinded one eye and Jelinek in her upbringing, which she has called "psychological torture."<sup>7</sup> Both prolific authors have been acclaimed, with Walker being awarded a Pulitzer and Jelinek the Nobel Prize. Both Marxist/socialist in orientation, they are feminists bold enough to write about female genital mutilation, and both have been victims of

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<sup>4</sup> Tobe Levin. *Ideology and Aesthetics in Neo-feminist German Fiction: Verena Stefan, Elfriede Jelinek, Margot Schroeder*. Ph.D. dissertation. Cornell University, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Stefan, Verena. *Shedding and Literally Dreaming*. Trans. Johanna Moore, Beth Weckmueller, Johanna Albert, Tobe Levin. NY: The Feminist Press, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Elfriede Jelinek. 19 November 1991. Unpublished. My translation.

<sup>7</sup> *Die gehasste Frau Jelinek*. Also, William Vlach offers a comment helpful to understanding the autobiographical Erika figure in *Die Klavierspielerin*. "Symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD) and vicarious traumatization include 'psychic numbing', and increased arousal, e.g., 'hypervigilance'. A person who has been vicariously traumatized may become anxious, depressed, cynical, and increasingly sensitive to violence. This process occurs via empathy for the victim."

debilitating, hostile criticism. “I am Vienna’s persona non grata,” Jelinek once lamented to me,<sup>8</sup> while Walker was so hurt by the negative response given by African women living in the USA to her work against FGM, that, regrettably, she muted her engagement on the issue.

This chapter looks at selected issues these writers take up as public intellectuals and the controversies surrounding them as dedicated feminists.

### Elfriede Jelinek: Subversion and Somatophobia



“Do you love Scholten, Jelinek, Häupl, Peymann, Pasterk ... or art and culture?” This question, posed on the Austrian highway by Jörg Haider’s right-wing party, ‘honors’ the progressive mayor of Vienna, the Austrian Minister of Culture, a well-known theatre director, another respected media figure, and Elfriede Jelinek as proponents of “degenerate art.” Perhaps only 20% of Austrian voters take Haider’s side, but he represents a broad resistance to immigration and feminism by both women and men.

“A dauntless polemicist [in the face of fascism] with a website ... poised to comment on burning issues,”<sup>9</sup> Jelinek has always been an incisive critic of the status quo. Her earliest pieces unmask the culture industry, its saturation and imprisonment of thought, and the ways it denies the possibility of individuality: “...women [and other characters are unable] to fully come to life in a world where they are painted over with stereotypical images.”<sup>10</sup> The Münchner Literaturarbeitskreis notes, Jelinek’s figures are not “psychological, but typological, representative of their class or upbringing.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, language itself – as she’s called it, “the never-ending wound” – is the first of three major themes in Jelinek’s work, the others being fascist Austria and misogyny. To illustrate: the very word “whore” and the concept behind it invalidate all efforts to rehabilitate females, trapped in the inflexible meshes of violent social hierarchies.

The violence needed to literally keep women in their place experiences periodic overflow onto groups that only seem to include men. Sander Gilman shows how anti-Semitism first effects

<sup>8</sup> Interview 1991

<sup>9</sup> Svenska Akademien

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Münchner Literaturarbeitskreis 176.

the feminization of the Jewish male to ripen the seedlings of enmity that grow with murderous results. Logically, Jelinek's second angry thrust targets Austria as an anti-Semitic and xenophobic country, these two hatreds rooted in a consuming masculine militaristic bias. As the Nobel Prize committee notes, "With special fervour, Jelinek has castigated Austria, depicting it as a realm of death [particularly] in her phantasmagorical novel, *Die Kinder der Toten* [Children of the Dead] (1995)."<sup>12</sup> Even earlier, in the drama *Wolken. Heim.* (1989), she dared unveil the Nazi past of a theatre icon, Paula Wessily, who, in *Heimkehr*, the notorious propaganda film made under Hitler in 1941, pronounces the words, "We don't buy from Jews."<sup>13</sup>

But Jelinek's broad jump from a favorite of literati to best-seller and pariah status came with *Lust* (1989) [Lust, 1992]. In this novel, she "lets her social analysis swell to fundamental criticism of civilization by describing sexual violence against women as the actual template for our culture"<sup>14</sup> -- hence the epigram from Andrea Dworkin.

Enormous brouhaha surrounded *Lust* due to what many perceived as deceptive marketing. The book cast as "female porn" soon revealed itself to readers as the opposite, composed of weary and repetitive stage directions for copulative acts, scripted to the point of mechanical reproduction and sucked dry of any visible titillating aura.

The plot is deceptively simple. Since AIDS has penetrated even the most remote Alpine village, our protagonist, a factory boss, realizing that he will have to give up promiscuity and prostitutes, turns to his wife Gerti to satisfy his needs. She tries to escape the sexual attacks, the deadly repetition of the constantly-the-same, only to fall in with another man, this time a young law student. But her urges remain unreciprocated, since female lust deflates male desire. Her caresses elicit brutality. Nor can she as a mother live out her sexuality: motherhood and sex cancel each other out. Ultimately, both maternity and heterosexual coupling fail the female; limited by an imposed biological destiny, Gerti is without alternatives other than self-annihilating ones. In a final symbolic gesture, she suffocates her child with a plastic shopping bag.

True, Jelinek had taken Georges Bataille, De Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and Pauline Réage as her models to experiment with a woman's porn. "I wanted to find a female equivalent of obscene language," Jelinek told critic Sigrid Loeffler (1989), "but the very writing of such a text destroyed me -- as a subject and in my intention to write pornography. I came to recognize that a woman can't do this, at least not given the contemporary situation."<sup>15</sup>

Why this task should be impossible is explained in an interview with Alice Schwarzer from 1989. First, Jelinek admits, she tried to escape the "exclusively male envisioning of female bodies" that dismembers them. Instead, she had hoped to substitute a female gaze, but this didn't work because erotica was forced to cede to violence. "For women, sexuality IS violence," Jelinek insists. "But only women know this; men, not yet."<sup>16</sup> Thus, in Jelinek's oeuvre, women under patriarchy cannot be the subjects of their own desire because once a woman tries to place herself in the subject position vis-à-vis a man, her insubordination turns him off. His loss of lust then triggers an escalation of brutality, as in the novel *Lust* but also in the earlier *Piano Teacher*. For instance, the following portrays one of Jelinek's better heterosexual encounters, Erika and Klemmer still wanting the encounter. Yet:

The very instant that both have become physical for each other, they have broken off any reciprocal human relations. ... And the deeper one goes, the more intensely the flesh rots,

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<sup>12</sup> A highly controversial figure in her homeland, she participates in a long tradition of "sophisticated social criticism" including "Karl Kraus, Ödön von Horváth, Elias Canetti, Thomas Bernhard and the Wiener Group." [Svenska Akademien]

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Wolf.

<sup>14</sup> Svenska Akademien

<sup>15</sup> Sigrid Loeffler. "Die Hose Runter im Feuilleton." *EMMA*. May 1989. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Schwarzer, 51.

becoming light as a feather and flying away from these two mutually alien and hostile continents, which crash into each other and then collapse together, turning into a rattling thing with a few canvas tatters that dissolve at the slightest touch, disintegrating into dust.<sup>17</sup>

Dust to dust: almost Biblical in her evocation, if not downright Tertullian, Jelinek's conclusion drawn from male sexual hegemony is the same as O's: women are scripted for annihilation, a closure that logically conforms to the female's assignment, to hate herself. The theory's narrative embodiment emerges from a typical passage in *The Piano Teacher* (1988; originally 1983) presenting the failed artist Erika:

When SHE's home alone, she cuts herself, slicing off her nose to spite other people's faces. She always waits and waits for the moment when she can cut herself unobserved. No sooner does the sound of the closing door die down than she takes out her little talisman, the paternal all-purpose razor. SHE peels the blade out of its Sunday coat of five layers of virginal plastic. She is very skilled in the use of blades; after all, she has to shave her father, shave that soft paternal cheek under the completely empty paternal brow, which is now undimmed by any thought, unwrinkled by any will. This blade is destined for HER flesh. This thin, elegant foil of bluish steel, pliable, elastic. SHE sits down in front of the magnifying side of the shaving mirror; spreading her legs, she makes a cut, magnifying the aperture that is the doorway ... Her hobby is cutting her ... body.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the protagonist, a cutter, fits the clinical description of the psychological disorder whose victims relieve unbearable tension, anger or anxiety by cutting.<sup>19</sup> And she is symbolic of a larger ill, literally carried out on approximately 150 million females alive in the world today. The move from individual pathology to cultural Überbau is the work of the work of art.

In an interview, Jelinek links the razor to reality:

Müller: The most horrible scene you invented to illustrate the theme of self hatred in the novel is the cutting.

Jelinek: I didn't invent it.

Müller: I mean where the woman in the book cuts her vagina with a razor.

Jelinek: I've done it.<sup>20</sup>

Why?

One puzzle piece emerges from a 1997 ARTE film produced by Jochen Wolf, "Die gehaßte Frau Jelinek /Une femme à abattre" which I translate as "Jelinek despised." It presents the author as a controversial intellectual and examines the effect of stressful young years on her art. A highly ambitious but frustrated mother projected her needs onto the child, required to train for a musical career studying violin, viola, flute, piano, composition and organ at the Vienna Conservatory when only 14. Her mother's motive?

<sup>17</sup> Elfriede Jelinek. *The Piano Teacher*. Trans. Joachim Neugroschel. NY: Grove, 1988. 116.

<sup>18</sup> *Teacher* 86.

<sup>19</sup> As psychologist Favazza (1996) notes, more women cut than men, reflecting 'ambiguity, paradox, and discontinuity in females' experiences of their bodies' (51). Self-slicing may then be an attempt "'to own the body, to perceive it as self (not other), known (not uncharted and unpredictable), and impenetrable (not invaded or controlled from outside)'" (51). Or in Jelinek's terms: "es war ihr eigener Körper, doch er ist ihr fürchterlich fremd" [It was her own body, but horribly foreign to her] (1983: 111). „Sie ist für sich selbst tabu“ [She's taboo to herself.] (1983: 70).

<sup>20</sup> Müller 1990: 55.

She buried me in so many ... things which she would have liked to do herself. My mother had a wonderful, powerful voice. She would certainly have become a great singer ... She had done a business abitur and studied economics. And this sort of business high school was attended almost exclusively by Jewish girls from entrepreneurial families. It was a tradition, and it was said, Jewish maids, for instance, were the only ones who could read and write. And after school, these Jewish girls were the only ones who sang, made music, put on plays. But her mother never let her join in. So she wanted for me, as her substitute, to have these opportunities. But she put terrible pressure on me. The pattern of the demonic mother is well-known. She stole my childhood and youth.<sup>21</sup>

For Elfriede, it is nothing less than “the drama of the highly gifted child whom violence was transforming into a circus monkey.”<sup>22</sup> In Wolf’s view, “the paradise of childhood [had been] nailed shut.”<sup>23</sup> As Jelinek confirms, “I experienced my childhood and youth as .... a nightmare. You could truly say I was a tortured child. Because psychological torture is worse than physical torture.”<sup>24</sup>

Vacation, though hours of practice were still enforced, offered the young Jelinek at least a change of scenery. She visited her grandparents in an isolated region that would become a favored venue in her art:

And what was most decisive for my writing, during those summers, I came into contact with the rural proletariat, this male proletariat. This world of lumberjacks, handymen, unemployed, alcoholics, whom I studied minutely, and this saved me, my contact with the real world of productivity, not only the middle class world of my *gymnasium*. Then I realized this desire to write it down precisely; here I learned objective language.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding her Jewish father, Friederich, Jelinek wrote, “Papa could have been a king, and yet died so miserably...”<sup>26</sup> From him she had her talent for analyzing language and the ability to crack open the world with linguistic humor. He had survived the Nazi terror as a chemist for the war industry, but afterward, survival in a challenging marriage became more and more difficult. Jelinek would write, “The illness transformed him from an unbelievably intelligent person to a complete idiot.”<sup>27</sup> He died in a psychiatric hospital in 1969, another significant blow to the daughter who would dramatize an ecological slippage between child and male parent in *The Piano Teacher* written, perhaps similarly to Jelinek’s entire corpus, as “an act of revenge against the mother. Had the mother forced her to write poetry, she would most certainly have become an accomplished organist...”<sup>28</sup> Like the real daughter, the “literature works only in the opposition.” Jelinek affirms: “I rub myself raw on the status quo in a kind of raging bitter comic mode.”<sup>29</sup>

## Jelinek as Whistle-Blower, or Women against Themselves

Jelinek’s career opened with the first full-length pop novel in the German language, *wir sind lockvögel baby!* [*we’re decoys, baby!*] which admirably illustrates concern for the media

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<sup>21</sup> Wolf. My translation.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

which it parodies in a pastiche of episodes taken from comics (Batman and Robin), teenage magazines featuring pop stars and other plastic idols (the Beatles), romance and film (James Bond, horror, and sci-fi), and homogenized in such a way that individuality dissolves, the borderline of genre is exploded, and the programming of consciousness is revealed. *We're decoys, baby!* asks to be read with one eye on the text and the other on its models, as critic Reinhard Urbach<sup>30</sup> notes: "In form, the book is a collage of clichés from pulp fiction, soap opera and comics, but the content illustrates the flip side of innocence. Where one expects romance, rape occurs. And cynicism takes the place of pathos. The form is in constant conflict with the content."<sup>31</sup> The same can be said of *The Piano Teacher*. It implodes the *bildungsroman*, soap opera, and Harlequin romance: in sum, any conventional boy-meets-girl plot.

Let's return, then, to the mutilating incident above. The passage preceding it probably contains the genesis of the negative feelings to be purged by cutting in the form of the viewpoint on women expressed by a young male music student the pianist finds attractive. Without "the strength to track down her femininity which lies buried in the debris[,] he is of the opinion that a woman is a woman. Then he makes a little joke about the female sex, which is known for its fickleness: oh, women! Whenever he cues HER to play, he looks at her without really perceiving her. He does not decide against HER, he simply decides without HER."<sup>32</sup>

Throughout Jelinek's oeuvre, we encounter this indifference, erasure, annihilation, or "dissing" of women by men for whom women appear not to count, an attitude that then, *faute de mieux*, becomes the template for women's deletion of themselves. Called cunts, women in Jelinek disappear into their own organ which must be violated in order to receive them. Attempts at agency backfire, the only possible outcome self-harm. As we learn about Erika, razor at the ready, "She is entirely at her own mercy, which is still better than being at someone else's mercy. It's still in her hands."<sup>33</sup>

She thus goes at her unfeeling carcass in the spirit of exploration and creation:

The opening is caught in the retaining screw of the mirror, an opportunity for cutting is seized. Quick, before someone comes. With little information about anatomy and with even less luck, she applies the cold steel to and into her body, where she believes there ought to be a hole.<sup>34</sup>

First looked at from the agent's point of view, perspective is displaced and projected onto the disassociated organ in a parody of Luce Irigaray's famous feminist tract, "*Quand nos lèvres se parlent*." A trio of voices, the self and dual genital, results:

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<sup>30</sup> Urbach, n.p.

<sup>31</sup> Often Jelinek's fiction capitalizes on this discrepancy between expectations and poetic forms, playing on a technique of mind control which Elizabeth Janeway (1985: 118) identifies as randomness. In her analysis of television she asks, "What does the Media Establishment assume that we assume about the way this world functions?" In her viewing Janeway found "a consistent, insistent demonstration of randomness, a statement that life is unpredictable and out of control..." Applied as we know in the Gulag and in concentration camps, disruption of prisoners' normal expectations, severing action from consequence, led victims to conclude that safety, if it is anywhere, lies in "passivity and hiding." The effect on the status quo is clear, for "if the powerful can divide the majority of ordinary folk into disconnected, self-protecting [persons], they need not fear organized resistance." This is precisely Jelinek's concern in *Decoys* and her two subsequent novels, *Michael. A Children's Book for the Infantile Society* (1972) and *Women as Lovers* (1975)." [quote from "Introducing Elfriede Jelinek, WSIF, p. 437) ...

<sup>32</sup> *Teacher* 85.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

The aperture gapes, terrified by the change, and blood pours out. This blood is not an unusual sight, but presence doesn't make the heart grow fonder. As usual, there is no pain. SHE, however, cuts the wrong place, separating what the Good Lord and Mother Nature have brought together in unusual unity. Man must not sunder, and revenge is quick. She feels nothing. For an instant, the two halves, sliced apart, stare at each other, taken aback at this sudden gap, which wasn't there before. They've shared joy and sorrow for many years, and now they're being separated! In the mirror the two halves also look at themselves, laterally inverted, so that neither knows which half it is. Then the blood shoots out resolutely. The drops ooze, run, blend with their comrades, turning into a red trickle, then a soothingly steady red stream when the individual trickles unite. The blood prevents HER from seeing what she has sliced open.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas Irigaray offers a positivist revaluation of leg lips embracing while tonguing in erotic affirmation, Jelinek suggests the violence of penetration, the absence of all feeling, and the eventual obstruction of vision – meaning understanding and orientation but also castration – by the carnal flood of traditionally mystified fluid. Evoking both menses and childbirth as organ-obliterating events, the cutter intensifies the loss of self which patriarchy displaces onto the organ: “It was her own body, but it is dreadfully alien to her.”<sup>36</sup>

Or rather, it has become alienated by a thick mesh of social and economic meanings, all pointing toward the deadly equation, woman equals cunt.

In order to stem the flow of blood, SHE pulls out the popular cellulose package whose merits are known to and appreciated by every woman, especially in sports and for any kind of movement. The package quickly replaces the golden cardboard crown worn by the little girl when she is sent as a princess to a children's costume party. SHE, however, never went to a children's party, she never got to know the crown. The queen's crown suddenly slips into her panties, and the woman knows her place in life. The thing that once shone forth on the head in childlike pride has now landed where the female wood has to wait for an ax. The princess is grown up now, and this is a matter of opinion on which opinions diverge. One man wants a nicely veneered, not-too-showy piece of furniture; the second wants a complete set in genuine Caucasian walnut. But the third man, alas, only wants to pile up huge heaps of firewood. Yet he, too, can excel: he can arrange his woodpile functionally and efficiently to save space. More fuel can fit into a neat cellar than one in which the wood is dumped helter-skelter. One fire burns longer than the other, because there is more wood.<sup>37</sup>

It's not difficult to see why, even before *Lust, The Piano Teacher* had garnished such dubious encomiums as “Maternal Apocalypse,” “Motherhood as Torture,” “Sure Shot with Poison,” “On the Heels of Lust,” “Trained for Self-Destruction,” “Your Evil Eye, Elfriede,” all (translated) titles of reviews. Among feminists Jelinek is lauded, of course, for handling such controversial themes as female masochism, rape fantasies, and the maternal misuse of power. As critic Sigrid Loeffler points out, *The Piano Teacher* “can be read as the story of an unsuccessful artist, as the vivisection of the mother-daughter bond in a claustrophobic petit bourgeois milieu, as the etiology of sex-pathological behavior, or as a feminist treatment of the theme, ‘destruction of female sexuality’.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 88.

<sup>38</sup> Loeffler ORF 2

As we have seen, this latter topos is literal in Jelinek, as it is, ethnographically speaking, as a widespread custom in Sub-Saharan Africa. Now, admittedly, an adult's voluntary slicing differs from the excision of children, often brutally forced. Still, a remarkable number of features are shared by Jelinek's isolated European and many tropical practitioners. These include the surgery's compulsive and ritualistic nature; the razor's association with the father; the mothers' complicity in suppressing their daughters' sexuality; and the daughters' acceptance of their mothers' teaching. Not unlike African girls who look forward to the rite, Erika has embedded her mother within herself – "Mother and child have exchanged roles"<sup>39</sup> – most strikingly dramatized in what Jelinek calls the "lesbian rape scene of the mother,"<sup>40</sup> for in this "parasexual, cryptosexual"<sup>41</sup> attack, "as in a lover's struggle [wie bei einem Liebeskampf...] not orgasm but the mother herself is the aim"<sup>42</sup> (my translation).

Following the father's exit to an asylum for the mentally ill, Erika had begun to share the marital bed with her mother. In a penultimate scene, the piano teacher has been beaten up – instead of made love to – by the student Klemmer who had been pursuing her, and whose interest had been briefly returned. But his lust changes to violence once Erika attempts to take control, via a letter describing step by step the masochistic rituals she desires. Wounded, she lies in bed next to her mother where she "mounts a half-hearted love attack"<sup>43</sup> but is "carried away" by the onset of kissing.

She kisses Mother in a way in which she has not even thought of kissing her for years. She clutches Mother's shoulders, and Mother angrily waves her fists, not striking anyone. Erika kisses Mother between her shoulders, but doesn't always hit her target, for Mother keeps jerking her head toward the side that's not being kissed. In the semidarkness, Mother's face is merely a bright splotch surrounded by dyed blond hair, which helps orientation. Erika promiscuously kisses this bright spot. She is flesh of this flesh! A crumb of this maternal cake! Erika keeps pressing her wet mouth into Mother's face, holding her in steely arms so Mother can't resist. Erika lies halfway, then three-quarters upon Mother, because Mother is starting to flail her arms seriously, trying to thrash Erika. With hectic thrusts of her head, Mother's mouth tries to avoid Erika's puckered mouth. Mother wildly tosses her head around, trying to escape the kisses. It's like a lovers' struggle, and the goal isn't orgasm, but Mother per se, the person known as Mother.<sup>44</sup>

Immediately preceding the daughter's initiative, her mother is said to have been thinking of "a separate bed for Erika."<sup>45</sup>

Psychoanalytic and Lacanian critics read this passage as translating into story form an incomplete parting of mother and child, a pervasive textual syndrome theorised by "the psychologist of narcissism and ego development," Erika's namesake Heinz Kohut, who "comment[s] on the destructive effects of a symbiotic mother/daughter relationship, in which the merger with an idealized object prevents successful separation from the primary other, the mother."<sup>46</sup> Now, within the phallogocentric order suppressing feminine alterity, such complicity can only prove dysfunctional.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Klavierspielerin* 293.

<sup>40</sup> Schwarzer 51.

<sup>41</sup> *Klavierspielerin* 293

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid* 292.

<sup>43</sup> *Teacher* 232

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>46</sup> Berka 1994: 213.

<sup>47</sup> From this point, two pages are adapted from "*Die Klavierspielerin: On Mutilation and Somatophobia.*" *'Other' Austrians. Post-1945 Austrian Women's Writing.* Ed. Allyson Fiddler. Proceedings of the

Jelinek, therefore, unveils the quisling mother, the one who colludes in her daughters' mutilation in millions of literal cases each year. But, as Nawal el Saadawi knows, excision is a shared oppression, for in Jelinek's texts, a clitoris or a vagina, when literally and metonymically erased, snuffs out and thereby paradoxically creates a female caste based on somatophobia and body-hatred. Those identified as women, wherever they inhabit patriarchal space, have been divided even unto our most intimate bonds.

Jelinek thus uses the discourse on women to evoke women's absence from discourse showing that, where two sexes may be expected, we have only one, the male (an echo certainly of the Church fathers for whom women were merely defective men). In Katrin Sieg's terms: "Woman ... an image with no 'substance' ... is revealed as a male phantasma. [Jelinek implies] that women ... cannot speak because they are always already spoken for and about. [She refuses] to represent female identity."<sup>48</sup>

If, however, the female cannot be known, the question becomes, one regarding what effect this can have on real lives. "Language [is] the site at which sexual difference is inscribed and performed,"<sup>49</sup> Sieg writes. In other words, at a certain profound level, idiom molds bodies. As Judith Butler contends, "'naturalness' [is] constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and with the categories of sex."<sup>50</sup> Jelinek, reliably denaturing nature, embodies this challenging assertion in her text, in particular in acts of mutilation which ironically construct and deconstruct.

These scenarios include 1) genital mutilation proper, 2) metaphors and metonymies of mutilation, and 3) gynocidal erasures that conflate women with their genitals, negating both.

For instance, consistently transgressive, Erika visits peep shows where, "here, in this booth, she becomes nothing. Nothing fits into Erika, but she, she fits exactly into this cell. Erika is a compact tool in human form. Nature seems to have left no apertures in her. Erika feels solid wood in the place where the carpenter made a hole in any genuine female."<sup>51</sup> The "genuine" females are of course those playing hide and seek with their twats on the turn-table revealed when slots are fed the appropriate coins. (And let's not miss the morphology here, the excavated metaphorical series of coin/power/penis in the slot/slit/slut.) Only by refusing the inversion can the introspective woman, as subject, differentiate herself from the competing female objects, an option made attractive by their reduction to their genitalia.

Language effects this de-feminization by cunning application of metonymy, making intelligible the link between the first sentence (in which Erika is nothing) and the first clause in the second (in which nothing fits into Erika): necessarily reduced to a penile sheath, i.e. vagina, Erika proves to be impaired as an encasing which in turn only confirms her phallic status. In a play on Lacanian thought whereby the man HAS but the woman IS the phallus, Erika becomes the instrument, insinuating her whole self into the cell -- any small, enclosed space that bids entry. But the metamorphoses aren't over yet: now resembling a cyborg -- in a clear allusion to E.T.A. Hoffmann and other romantic forerunners of the life-sized mechanical partner -- Erika's lack of slits is logical. She has been neutered, i.e. castrated, neither giving (shelter) nor receiving (through her entrance hall). In this respect, she differs from "real women."

Clear enough, it seems to me. But the passage continues dismantling the category 'woman' via a healthy flirt with Sartre:

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Conference, Post 1945 Austrian Women's Writing, University of Nottingham, From 18-20 April 1996. Berne: Peter Lang, 1998. 225-234. As this publication was bi-lingual, it required that readers know German to understand the passage. Here all quotes appear in translation, making the discussion available for the first time to English-speaking readers.

<sup>48</sup> Sieg 1994: 151-152, see also Levin 1991.

<sup>49</sup> Sieg 170.

<sup>50</sup> Butler x.

<sup>51</sup> *Teacher* 51.

Erika's wood is spongy, decaying, lonesome wood in the timber forest, and the rot is spreading. Still, Erika struts around like a queen ... The man at the entrance bravely addresses her as "Ma'am." Please come in, he says, welcoming her into his parlor, where three small lamps glow tranquilly over boobs and cunts, chiseling out bushy triangles, for that's the first thing a man looks at, it's the law. A man looks at nothing, he looks at pure lack. After looking at this nothing, he looks at everything else.<sup>52</sup>

Although the translation is good, this last line maintains in the original another important dimension of derogatory meaning: "Zuerst schaut er auf dieses Nichts, dann kommt die restliche Mutti auch noch dran,"<sup>53</sup> meaning "First he looks at this bit of nothing and then takes in the rest of the little mommy ..."

Erika the totem, opening this passage, had just emerged from the preceding paragraph as sealed shut. But wait! What do we understand as spongy, decaying, spreading rot if not the process of creating holes? Thus, even the phallic woman ends up perforated, so that privileges of class and race are merely camouflage. Inviolability and control remain illusory, policed by authority's delegate, the mother: "Erika feels nothing, and has no chance to caress herself. Her mother sleeps next to her and guards Erika's hands. These hands are supposed to practice, not scoot under the blanket like ants and scurry over to the jam jar."<sup>54</sup>

A perishable product, the unstable category woman dissolves. For instance, in this same scene, "the cleaning women *are* women, but they don't look like women."<sup>55</sup> Or, later, when Erika interrupts a young male student's enjoyment of movie posters advertising a soft porn flick, "one would never believe that she and the women in the photos belong to one and the same sex, namely the beautiful .... Indeed, a less sophisticated person might even conclude, just from her outer appearance, that the piano teacher belongs to an entirely different subcategory of the human species."<sup>56</sup> Well, no. Really only the more sophisticated, post-modern thinker might think so.

However, we can agree that the colloquial "nothing" opening the peep show passage echoes in the Master Narrative "nichts" or nothingness at its close, the Nothing men see as a woman. Nothing then – not-woman – is the counterpart to man, with Jelinek's text supporting those who argue for one discursive sex, the male. So-called women play hide and seek: "Women pop up every now and then, busy as they are with disappearing."<sup>57</sup>

These themes – women's complicity in their erasure, a result of the horror their genitals inspire – reoccurs in a strongly worded passage, offering Erika's thoughts while Walter Klemmer stalks her:

Erika hates this porous, rancid fruit marking the bottom of her body ... Soon the rot will spread to the whole genital area. Then you die a tortured death. Erika imagines how she will one day be a 75 centimeter long hole in a coffin, dissolving under the earth; the hole she had disdained, neglected, had taken full possession of her. She is Nothing. And there's nothing more for her."<sup>58</sup>

The final nothingness conflates high philosophy with the tear-jerking of daytime soaps, and tempers with the wit of code-switching, the gloom of an otherwise suicidal passage playing with the trope of woman as illness. For although the hyperbole can be read as satire, the nothingness to

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<sup>52</sup> *Teacher* 51-52.

<sup>53</sup> *Klavierspielerin* 67

<sup>54</sup> *Teacher* 52.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 99.

<sup>57</sup> Berka 1993: 135. My translation.

<sup>58</sup> *Klavierspielerin* 237. My translation.

which woman is consigned both reflects and enacts a gynocidal threat turned in against the female self.

Concerning the origin of this projection, Jelinek tells an illustrative tale (borrowed, I think, from Freud): “A small boy is bathing with his mother. On seeing the water run down the drain, he begins screaming uncontrollably, because he sees in the black hole sucking the water away the black hole that belongs to his mother which he fears could suck him in again, just like that. A strong image, it offered me insight.”<sup>59</sup>

In *The Piano Teacher*, because the whole body inevitably falls prey to a female’s cavity, the victim finds complicity attractive as the only possible form of agency: “Erica is in love with the young man and expects Salvation [Erlösung] through him ... She wants him to vacuum her up until there’s nothing left,”<sup>60</sup> clearly a reversal of the little boy’s drainage angst. If then the male can kill, as “Erika ... wants him as the instrument of her annihilation,”<sup>61</sup> the man has become THE MOTHER.

This nihilism echoes the relationship with the maternal. As noted, we often encounter the daughter’s desire to migrate, i.e. to resettle herself in the mother’s flesh. At one point she is “a fish in the tropical maternal waters”<sup>62</sup> or, again, “Erika would rather simply crawl back in...”<sup>63</sup> More often, however, the matriarch herself originates the threat of re-ingestion: “... this maternal hovering could swallow her whole.”<sup>64</sup> The cannibal progenitor is a “leech ... sucking her marrow from the bone,”<sup>65</sup> an act of infanticide to reinforce the claim that the mother, too, is male: “The mother is a phallic figure, father and mother in one.”<sup>66</sup> With the daughter also phallic – “The father promptly left, passing the torch to her ...”<sup>67</sup> – and the male as maternal, then clearly the feminine is gone.

Jelinek has said about her mother as model for the maternal figure, “I think that she had the feeling, in *The Piano Teacher* I had killed her. We never talked about it but I heard about remarks she made to other people, so I know she saw it as murder but I could only survive by means of this assassination. If I hadn’t done it... and I’m always hearing from women who thank me for killing my mother as an ersatz for them, so they didn’t have to kill theirs ... But this phallic ‘occupation of the mother’ had for me a ‘bitter dialectic’ because for my mother, I was the phallic one...”<sup>68</sup>

### **Alice Walker: More subversion, less somatophobia.**

When in 1982, Alice Walker won the Pulitzer Prize, becoming the first Black American – indeed, the first Black American woman – to do so, not many were surprised, though some would be angry. The Georgian had just published *The Color Purple* which, in Stephen Spielberg’s hands, became a blockbuster of sorts. The epistolary novel innovated in transcribing Black Southern dialect and, more controversially, in revealing dysfunctional post-slavery families characterized by male violence against women and including (presumed) incest, bigamy, lesbianism, and more than a hint of Walker’s iconoclastic attitude toward gender. In contrast to Jelinek, for whom the only discursive gender is male, for Walker it is multiple and not limited to masculine/male and feminine/female. In *The Color Purple*, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, male treachery incarnate, is

<sup>59</sup> Jelinek 1995: 37.

<sup>60</sup> *Klavierspielerin* 257. My Translation.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 270.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 147.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 125.

<sup>66</sup> Schwarzer 1989: 54; see also Berka 1993: 143

<sup>67</sup> Teacher 3 and cited by Jelinek in interviews with Berka 1993 and Meyer 1995

<sup>68</sup> Wolf.

tamed. But not before Black voices were raised in protest against Walker's "washing dirty laundry in public," parallel to the taunt, "Nestbeschmutzer" aimed at Jelinek. Not unlike her Austrian counterpart, Walker was charged with painting African-American males with a violent brush.

Walker weathered the storm of critique fairly well. Worse by far was the reception, eleven years later, of a film, *Warrior Marks* (1993), produced with Pratibha Parmar, that followed up on a somewhat less noticed novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). Here the subject was female genital mutilation. Although in *The Color Purple*, the Olinka perform "a bit of bloody cutting around puberty,"<sup>69</sup> the actual excision remains muted. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker revisits a figure from the earlier work, Tashi, who, spared by her Christian parents, decides to undergo infibulation because her 'leader' (modeled on Jomo Kenyatta) sees it as the marker of ethnicity. Incapacitated by the operation, Tashi soon understands how she, as a woman, has been scapegoated for a political cause. She marries her missionary boyfriend Adam and moves to the USA where she falls ill. Mental instability leads her to seek psychotherapy in Switzerland with a physician resembling Karl Jung. Under his care, Tashi approaches health but only after confronting the unarticulated trauma occasioned when she witnessed her deceased sister Dura's excision. Once the supposedly accidental death is recognized as murder, an agent emerges: the Tsunga (not a real word) or excisor. Tashi's activism consists of returning to Africa and taking the operator's life. As a result, she is hanged.

Typical of the mild criticism of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* – in comparison to that confronting *Warrior Marks* -- is the viewpoint expressed by Gay Wilentz in *The Women's Review of Books*. Wilentz deplores Walker's non-specific treatment of Africa, for with the Olinka Walker has taken poetic license and supplied an invented tribe uniting characteristics of a number of ethnic groups. In anticipation of the popular satire "How to Write about Africa,"<sup>70</sup> Wilentz accuses Walker of "misunderstanding . . . African culture" in her "polemic":

[D]riven by a belief that not only African ... but all societies actively thwart women's sexuality and control over their bodies [*Possessing the Secret of Joy*] tends to efface difference and will be problematic for readers acquainted with African history [because] Western stereotypes of "Africa" [may be] reinforce[d].<sup>71</sup>

Not without some justification, Wilentz questions Walker's imprecision: no single tribe, let alone the composite Olinka, can legitimately represent a diverse continent with boundaries drawn as colonial conveniences. Nonetheless, Wilentz argues less convincingly when she asserts that use of the "most extreme form of female circumcision" lends "an aspect of voyeurism [to] Walker's approach; her taking such liberties unfortunately puts her in the company of other Western writers before her for whom 'Africa' merely represented the exotic or grotesque," since "infibulation is practiced extensively *only* [emphasis mine] in Mali, Somalia and Sudan, and rarely in Kenya and most other black African countries."<sup>72</sup> Even if we limit ourselves to protesting against the 15% of mutilations that involve infibulation, the numbers are large enough to warrant opposition, which is what Walker provides. In the MLA's *Profession 2004*, Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg insist that "the humanities" make a "unique and irreplaceable contribution to bettering the human condition."<sup>73</sup> What better intention can there be, I ask myself, than engaging literature to put an end to torture?

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<sup>69</sup> *Purple* 237.

<sup>70</sup> Wainana.

<sup>71</sup> Wilentz 16.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Davidson 42.

Ah, but here's the rub. Critics don't like the nomenclature, contending it's judgmental and insulting, as it undoubtedly seems to many who have undergone the procedure, whether or not they continue to believe in it. Yet Walker insists on FGM, thereby following the precedent set in the 1970s by Fran Hosken who coined the phrase since taken up by African activists, governments in Europe and Africa, international agencies and development NGOs.

Yet as recently as the fall of 2005, a volume of essays edited by Obioma Nnaemeka, *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge*, turned another page in the troubled reception of Walker's accomplishment. The collective authors return time and again to both *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Marks* in order to deplore Walker's complicity with Western-inspired opposition, reading "interventionist texts" even when written by African activists and finding them suspect of suppressing alternate points of view. To most contributors' minds, there are indeed two sides. Vicki Kirby, for instance, reading Sudanese physician Asma el Dareer and Somali midwife Raquiya Abdalla, objects to the "medical discourse" (as inappropriately universalizing). Yet medicine provides the "red thread through [a] cluster of texts" (83) including Walker's. The problem? "A biological reductionism, Reason's disinterested arbiter of 'what a body is', translates cultured specificity through a universalizing template of sexuality. Although clitoridectomy and infibulation are practiced in thirty countries in Africa alone, the diversity of its cultural, political and historical experience is summarily negated [by] medical discourse" (83).

Given the heralded study, "Female Genital Mutilation and Obstetric Outcome: WHO Collaborative Prospective Study in Six African Countries" published in the prestigious British medical journal *Lancet* on 2 June 2006, such critiques should be laid to rest. The World Health Organization based its results on a sample of just under 30,000 respondents and found a visible increase in mortality among parturient women and babies if the mothers had been 'circumcised'. Therefore, criticism of activists' use of medical discourse seems at least counter-productive, if not immoral. Yet the attitude this opposition conveys is shared by nearly every essay in the collection, each of which also scapegoats Alice Walker.

In response to such attacks on descriptive medical terminology, the European Network for the Prevention and Eradication of Female Genital Mutilation (EuroNet FGM), at its January 2004 meeting in Paris, drafted a press release affirming that the operations constitute a mutilation and should be so named. In Bamako, at the triennial gathering of the Inter-African Committee (IAC), a consortium of twenty-six African national caucuses, in April 2005, the IAC also urged continued use of FGM, which had been the official language of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF until the United States suggested that "mutilation" be replaced by "cutting." The World Health Organization is expected to follow suit.<sup>74</sup> Yes, many women agree with the immigrant from Tanzania: "If you ask me if I'm circumcised, I'll say yes. If you ask me if I'm mutilated, I'll say no."<sup>75</sup> The distinction – a clear one to many of us – is that the removal of a healthy organ is, by medical definition, mutilation. FGM, therefore, is a brutal act, not a state of being.

In *Warrior Marks*, Nigerian Comfort Ottah agrees. She can be seen protesting the motion by a Brent Counselor to legalize female circumcision. Comfort contends that "this is not cultural. It's torture. And these girls suffer for life."<sup>76</sup>

The viewpoint is shared by a number of memoirists, fiction writers, and film-makers: Khady [Koita] in *Mutilée*; Annor Nimako (among the most aggressive and adamant abolitionists) in *Mutilated*; Nigerian Dr. Irene Thomas, the vintage activist and powerhouse behind *Beliefs and Misbeliefs*, a no-holds-barred film made and disseminated by the IAC; Senegalese Awa Thiam, author, politician, friend, and speaker in Walker and Parmar's *Warrior Marks*; Nawal el Saadawi,

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<sup>74</sup> Dorkenoo. Interview 2005.

<sup>75</sup> Richter 13.

<sup>76</sup> Walker/Parmar. *Warrior Marks*.

novelist and physician who is also a friend of Walker's; Somalis Nura Abdi, Fadumo Korn, Waris Dirie, Asili Barre-Dirie, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and other African women and men, most recently, of course, Ousmane Sembène, whose *Moolaadé*, the first feature-length film against FGM, has already become a classic of the genre. I invoke these mentors, many of whom have been my associates for decades, because it remains essential, if you're not from Africa yourself, to credential your rights to this issue.

### **Increasing though still deficient knowledge**

Despite the fact that many West Africans and other global residents now have some idea of what these operations entail, people remain under-informed about infibulation, the type of intervention nearly universal in the Horn of Africa, represented in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and alluded to by Efuia Dorkenoo in *Warrior Marks*.

What, then, are we really talking about? Because Walker omits the stage directions but a number of African activists, among them Nura Abdi, feel they are important to reveal, I offer passages from *Tränen im Sand* [*Desert Tears*, 2003, not available in English], the memoir by a Somali immigrant to Germany dedicated "To all the world's women, victims and non-victims of FGM (Female Genital Mutilation)." Here she describes what happens.

One increasingly hot morning, a drama unfolds in the author's Mogadishu courtyard, where first Nura's elder sister Yurop, then Ifra, Fatma, Muna, Suleiha, and Nasra make desperate efforts to escape, are caught and, "with fanatical violence," are hurled onto the crate that had once held oranges. "When my turn came," Nura writes, "I burst into tears. ... 'I don't want to!' [I shrieked, but] that didn't help at all. They grabbed me, dragged me to the box ... held me down" – and cut. "The sound, like sharp scratching or knifing of burlap ... hammered in my head, louder than all the [women's] screams" intended to disguise the victim's.

"But the worst was yet to come," Nura goes on. "The worst is when they sew you up."

Sweat poured out of me. ... I was nauseated and felt like throwing up while between my legs someone was busy with a needle in an open wound. It was as if with all my senses, wholly conscious, I was being slaughtered. ...

The child faints. But before being bound, she comes to only to experience "a new pain this time, the *halaleiso* rubbing herbs on the fresh wound. ... It felt like ... being held over an open fire." Again, she loses consciousness, but recovers it and notes ...

I remember: when they carried me away ... blood on the floor and those parts ... hacked off.... What had been sawed off all of us... The *halaleiso* had tossed them in a pile in the bowl. Later I learned that someone had dug a hole and buried them somewhere in the courtyard. Exactly where we were never to learn. "What do you need to know for?" was all they would say. "It's long gone to where it belongs. Under the earth."<sup>77</sup>

A burial aptly concludes this scene, interment of female sexuality.

As Abdi's witnessing makes clear, she appeals to human rights in her advocacy of abolition, as does Alice Walker, and in a monument to Walker's influence, no less significant a venue than the German Bundestag cites her as an influence in consideration of specific laws. As that Berlin body states in the government's answer to a major interpellation (an inquiry from Parliament to the executive branch, (Drucksache 14/5285)) posed in the 13<sup>th</sup> legislative period by

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<sup>77</sup> Excerpts in *Feminist Europa. Review of Books*. Vol. 3, No. 1, 2003/ Vol. 4, No. 1, 2004. see <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~tflavin>. Accessed 18 March 2006.

MdB Rudolf Bindig, Lilo Friedrich, Angelika Graf, Dr. Angelika Köster-Lossack, Irmgard Schewe-Gerigk, Claudia Roth, and the Green Party Caucus:

In vielen Aspekten kommt Genitalverstümmelung der Folter gleich und verletzt das Menschenrecht auf Körperliche Unversehrtheit. [In many respects, genital mutilation resembles torture and violates the human right to bodily integrity.]

And the paragraph continues:

Menschenrechtsorganisationen wie Terre des Femmes und Menschenrechtlerinnen wie Alice Walker [footnotes Walker, Alice/Parmar, Pratibha, *Narben oder die Beschneidung der weiblichen Sexualität*, Hamburg 1996] tragen das Thema seit Jahren in die Öffentlichkeit. [Human rights organizations like Terre des Femmes and human rights activists like Alice Walker (with *Warrior Marks* explicitly footnoted) have been pushing the theme into public awareness for years.]

Although Nawal el Saadawi, well known in feminist circles, had in the early 70s already protested her own clitoridectomy, her influence was limited. It wouldn't be until the early 1990s when, as both activist and artist, Alice Walker would become the first personality of world renown to publicly oppose female genital mutilation.<sup>78</sup> Her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) and documentary (with Pratibha Parmar) *Warrior Marks* (1993) did more than decades of international and grassroots agitation by 'ordinary' citizens to bring the dimensions of the problem to the attention of law- and policymakers in Africa and the African diaspora. Before the 1990s, FGM could still be considered a taboo subject, the number of academic and popular articles remaining shamefully small. True, in 1982 Elizabeth Passmore Sanderson published an 82-page bibliography, but ethnographic work, the bulk of listings, addressed academics, not policy- and lawmakers, citizens, or activists. And anthropologists, to put the best possible construction on it, tend to be blinded by good-will toward those in power, which means patriarchal privilege over women. In other words, academic and left-leaning constituencies impeded, and continue to impede, effective challenges to FGM.

Walker's intervention, however, was followed by a wealth of information and action. It is more than coincidence that the two major international conferences, Vienna on human rights (1993) and Cairo on population (1994), came so closely on the heels of Walker's efforts. Both finally accepted FGM as a major humanitarian challenge.

Yet, in the United States, where an estimated 80,000 girls of African origin are at risk, problems in the reception of Walker's book and film immediately surfaced. Now, Walker knew to be fearful. In *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, she records her apprehension. Visiting Jung's home in Bollingen, the final quaff of inspiration taken, she notes: "This was the last journey I had to make before beginning ... *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, a story whose subject frankly frightened me. An unpopular story. Even a taboo one."<sup>79</sup>

In fact, while the USA gave the novel mixed reviews at best, the film incurred outright hostility and, as we have seen, a continuing enmity. Led by African women intellectuals residing in North America, voices of resentment against Walker's violation of boundaries resonated loudly. *Newsweek*, for instance, quoted Sudan's premier female surgeon, Nahid Toubia, alleging that only because Walker's popularity had suffered did she take on FGM; a "falling star," she was trying to get "the limelight" back.<sup>80</sup> More to the point, Walker, it was said, failed at empathy, her

<sup>78</sup> Waris Dirie with *Desert Flower* is the second.

<sup>79</sup> Activism 126.

<sup>80</sup> Kaplan et al, 124.

accusatory finger not illuminating but condemning and, therefore, alienating the audience she claimed to address, African women.

How affected Walker was by her critics can be teased out of the speech that opened *Warrior Marks*' tenth screening on February 24, 1994, in Oakland. Charged with having portrayed only victims, she exhorts, with a veneer of irony, "If in fact you survive your mutilation, and the degradation it imprints on soul and body, live it with fierceness, live it with all the joy and laughter you deserve."<sup>81</sup> In other words, she's addressing survivors, inviting allies, and interpolating enemies: "What can *you* do?" she asks. "... refrain from spending more than ten minutes stoning or attempting to malign the messenger. Within those minutes thousands of children will be mutilated. Your idle words will have the rumble of muffled screams beneath them."<sup>82</sup> Yes, of course, she concedes, "We know that women and children who suffer genital mutilation will have to stand up for themselves, and, together put an end to it. But that they need our help is indisputable."<sup>83</sup> Amen, I say. Yet, ironically, the source of Walker's compassion helps account for antagonism she's met on the part of immigrants to the United States from Africa. Drawing on African-American suffering, "our centuries-long insecurity"<sup>84</sup> Walker dares her audience to know "who we are, ... what we've done to ourselves in the name of religion, male domination, female shame or terrible ignorance."<sup>85</sup> But who are "we?" And why is solidarity rejected?

What is unbearable to Walker's African critics, but incontrovertibly central to events, is named by Verena Stefan in a chapter devoted to Tashi in *Rauh, wild & frei: Mädchengestalten in der Literatur* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1997) [Naturally Wild and Free: Images of Girls in Literature]. Stefan reads the murder of the Tsunga as a dagger to the shibboleth, reverence for the matriarch, a form of emotionally anchored respect with which many African daughters are raised that differs from adult-child egalitarianism in less traditional, less hierarchical societies, i.e. the West.<sup>86</sup> Not unlike Jelinek, Walker uncovers "betrayal of girls by their mothers," and targets "control the older wild over the younger."<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, in a revealing contrast, Stefan takes the rapport between Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple* as the other side of clitoridectomy's perfidy: "Während einer Beschneidungszeremonie herrscht auch geteilte Intimität zwischen Frauen und Mädchen, die Intimität des Horrors: Frauen betrachten und berühren das Geschlecht eines Mädchens, um es zu verstümmeln."<sup>88</sup> ["In the circumcision ceremony, we also have shared intimacy between woman and girl, the intimacy of horror. Women observe and touch a young girl's genital – to mutilate it."]

In *The Dynamics of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African Feminist Literatures*, Susan Arndt raises the issue of homophobia, fear of which propels Stefan's observations, and I'm convinced also accounts in part for Walker's negative U.S. reception. In particular, two theorists of African womanism – Mary E. Modupe Kolawole and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi – frankly come out as homophobes. Arndt writes, with inappropriate neutrality: "I do not know of any feminist theoretician in the West who dissociates him-or herself explicitly from lesbianism... [So] it is a novelty within the feminist discourse that theoreticians of gender issues like Ogunyemi and Kolawole reject lesbian love explicitly, generally and firmly."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Heaven 63.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Activism 150.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> See Dympna Ugwu-Oju. *What will my Mother say? A tribal African girl comes of age in America*. Chicago: Bonus Books, 1995.

<sup>87</sup> Stefan 108.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Arndt 53.

Now, as most of us know, homophobia kills, and overcoming it is the last frontier. It was homophobia that made *Possessing the Secret of Joy* “offensive” to many critics and the lesbian subtext is doubtless present in *Warrior Marks*. Pratibha Parmar, after all, lives an openly lesbian lifestyle and, although “a film maker first and last” – not a “lesbian filmmaker,” in her interviewer’s words – she has, for instance, in her short documentary “‘Jodie: An Icon’ ... looked at ways in which ... Foster has been constructed ... for lesbians in her various screen personas.”<sup>90</sup> To borrow a conclusion from my earlier study, “Alice Walker: Matron of FORWARD,” Buchi Emecheta charges Western feminists, including, ironically, Walker, with concern only for “issues... relevant to themselves ... transplant[ed] onto Africa. Their own preoccupations – female sexuality, lesbianism and female circumcision – are not [African women’s] priorities.”<sup>91</sup>

Say what? Fanny Ann Eddy, a thirty-year-old human rights activist had founded a Lesbian and Gay Association in 2002, in Sierra Leone. On September 29, 2004, she was murdered, having earlier told the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations in Geneva how dangerous it was for lesbians, gays, bi- and trans-sexuals to remain invisible in African society.<sup>92</sup>

Invisible, too, had been FGM. But breaking taboo has its price, and Walker suffered for her courage. Was she still ill at ease with the topic so many years down the road? Would her retirement be permanent? To find out, I phoned a mutual friend, Efua Dorkenoo, OBE, interviewed in *Warrior Marks* and credited as an advisor to the film. “Efua,” I asked, “have you spoken to Alice recently?” “Yes.” “And what, if any, were Alice’s reasons for abandoning campaigns?” After all, she intervenes for other, important, abuses and “insists upon the necessary and strong relationship between spirituality, activism, and art.”<sup>93</sup> Mainly, Efua told me, Alice had not forgotten being “viciously attacked by African women in the U.S. who very much misrepresented her motives, charged her with not knowing Africa, with having self-serving interests. That hurt her quite a lot, leading to the decision [to step back]. After all, she had spent more than 17 years thinking about the issue before writing about it. ... Her aim had always been to use her talent as an artist to bring the subject to the world. Having done that, maybe she feels justified in moving on to other things.”

A shame, since the task remains, as Awa Thiam points out. Having also been attacked for talking publicly about excision, she answered Pratibha’s question, “How do you feel about us coming here and making this film?” with the following: “‘You know, I work ... in the belief [in] universal sisterhood, that we are all in this together. You in the West may be fighting against other things, but for us, ... female genital mutilation [takes] priority. You can help us ... put[.] it on the world’s agenda.’”<sup>94</sup>

The taboo-breaking this entails remains a challenge. I’m thinking of Yari Yari Pamberi, that remarkable gathering at NYU in October 2004, including Walker’s presentation to round out a star-studded panel. Not a word about FGM. True, Ousmane Sembene’s *Moolaadé* had been on the conference schedule but was taken off, the excuse given that Lincoln Center provided a better venue. To his credit, while announcing the change, Manthia Diawara gave a few militant words to

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<sup>90</sup> Lola 38.

<sup>91</sup> Ravell-Pinto 50.

<sup>92</sup> Guido 13.

<sup>93</sup> Griffin 23.

<sup>94</sup> Lolapress 36. And Pratibha comments, “It was refreshing for me to hear her, [Thiam] having come from the late 80s and early 90s talk of post-feminism, with so much cynicism around the bankruptcy of feminism. It was good to meet a woman who still has that wonderfully optimistic belief in the idea of universal sisterhood, which many of us held in the 70s, but which got lost along the way as we got more fragmented and disparate” (Lolapress 36-37.)

the issue. But apparently, the elite of African and African-American intelligentsia continue to tiptoe over torture.<sup>95</sup>

How different has been the reception in Europe, particularly in Germany, where 20,000 African girls are at risk. Walker's input has not only been welcomed and praised but also transformed into concrete action. As we have seen, in addition to the *Antwort der Bundesregierung* [the regime's answer to parliament] following a major interpellation (inquiry) in 1998, Walker is named as an inspiration in asylum debates.<sup>96</sup> The decision to offer sanctuary to African women fleeing the threat of excision is, in part, based on Walker's work. Or, even earlier, in 1997, at a preparatory multi-partisan hearing organized by the Green Party in Bonn, Dr. Angelika Köster-Lossack, MdB (Member of Parliament) included the German title of Walker's film -- *Narben* -- in the title of her talk. Alice Schwarzer, Germany's 'first' feminist, television personality, author, and editor of *EMMA*, has featured Walker and *Narben* in her magazine's pages. In 1996, Christa Müller, wife of Oskar Lafontaine, former head of the Social Democratic Party, advertised *Narben* on the program of her association's inaugural conference, the keynote address delivered by FORWARD'S Comfort Ottah, who appears in Walker's film. In fact, *Warrior Marks* has been distributed throughout the entire nation; nearly every major university and *gymnasium* has it in its archives or has shown it at film festivals and other events. This astonishing diffusion and approval have not been due to suppression of resident African women's voices, for their opinions have been sought. They are engaged in many of the NGOs feeding into governmental agencies concerned with refugees, foreign aid, and women. And finally, great news came through on April 18, 2005, when the GTZ (Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit – similar to U.S. AID), coordinator of INTEGRA, a network of NGOs against FGM in Germany, announced that Bundespräsident Dr. Horst Köhler has agreed to become the patron of the movement.

No parallel to this concerted effort exists in the United States despite an estimated 150,000 girls at risk and excised or infibulated women with special health needs running in the tens of thousands.

What has made such a tremendous difference? Why should Alice Walker be shunned in the USA for dealing with this issue but celebrated in Europe, especially in Germany? Reasons are, of course, complex and have to do with the development of the women's movement on both continents, on what has been learned in Germany from the Holocaust, on what is permitted in terms of who may speak "for" whom, and on the preference for human rights discourse in Europe as opposed to post-structuralist shattering of needed coalitions in the USA with its stubborn, divisive, essentialist stance on "race."

It also derives from the peculiar U.S. institution that conflates first generation Africans, often wealthy, well-educated, upper class people, with the descendents of slaves. The daughter of a former Ghanaian president, for instance, becomes an African-American in *this* sense and in part, Walker drowned in subsequent resentment: "There was a sense of competition, of jealousy, an image issue on the part of the African elite," an African colleague charged. "For in my view, anyone genuinely interested in changing the situation [regarding FGM] should have welcomed [Walker's] efforts. It was the US experience [of misrecognition] and [the nation's] general lack of knowledge of development issues" that led to the lynching (my word – but appropriate) of Alice Walker by African women in the USA.

Though no one will argue the absence of racism in Europe, the history of its institutionalization is very, very different, and has led to a striking distinction in Alice Walker's influence on movements against FGM.

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<sup>95</sup> Another distressing example: Ada Uzuamaka Azodo, in „Issues in African Feminism: A Syllabus,” includes nothing on FGM – in 1997! The course was offered at Indiana University Northwest.

<sup>96</sup> [http://www.ak-kipro.de/fgm\\_bundestag200107.html](http://www.ak-kipro.de/fgm_bundestag200107.html). Accessed 17 July 2004.

## Jelinek and Walker

"After I read *Possessing the Secret of Joy*," Efua Dorkenoo told me, "I wrote to Alice. You see, FORWARD counsels women like Tashi, whose mental anguish at having suffered mutilation has become unbearable. Tashi is so real that I wanted to let Alice know and invite her to be patron of FORWARD. Of course, she agreed if we called her matron."<sup>97</sup> On June 3, 1995, FORWARD-U.K.'s board entered into the minutes an official thank you to Walker for the welcome of Dorkenoo's testimony before the U.S. Congress in 1993; for information that reached Edward Kennedy, propelling him "in[to] the forefront of international advocacy on FGM with UN Specialized Agencies and the US Missions in Africa"<sup>98</sup>; and for inspiring congresswomen Patricia Schroeder and Barbara Rose Collin's bill (H.R. 3247) against FGM in the United States.<sup>99</sup>

Yet, in a 1993 *New York Times* editorial, African residents in the United States take issue with Walker. The video, they charge, is "emblematic of the Western feminist tendency to see female genital mutilation as the gender oppression to end all oppressions ... a gauge by which to measure distance between the West and the rest of humanity."<sup>100</sup> Despite Walker's having made "a deliberate effort to stand with the mutilated women, not beyond them,"<sup>101</sup> her African critics contend that she has not succeeded.

Nor, likewise, has Jelinek persuaded many Austrians to share her political views. In her study, *Elfriede Jelinek in the Gender Wars: Newspaper reception of The Piano Teacher and Lust*, Anja Meyer teases out one source of hostility in the reception of both writers by both sexes. Regarding Jelinek specifically, the inability of most reviewers – that is, journalists who are untrained in influential post-modern theories, analysis, or hermeneutics – to engage her on the intellectual level at which she operates leads to their over-reliance on narrative plotting, the least important of Jelinek's literary strategies. Reduced to what happens without attention to how, that is to the ironies and implosive metaphors of representation, Jelinek's writing feeds aggressive pens of apologetic sexists, including women. Journalist Gabriele Presber asked Jelinek why she thought her critics sometimes included feminists. Her response: "I'd like to know why as well."<sup>102</sup>

Walker's African critics in the U.S. misread her for similar reasons, failing to understand the genre to which *Warrior Marks* belongs as a documentary with a double theme: yes, it's about female genital mutilation, but equally, it shows the coming-to-awareness of an activist, writer, and public intellectual willing to take on, and encourage others to confront, an issue that requires enormous courage.

For one thing, I've been warned, outsiders will be called racist. Though acting at the behest of and in solidarity with African insiders, we will be told to keep our noses where they belong. Concerned for my safety in this respect, Efua Dorkenoo offered a riposte: to say nothing, she told me, is racist,<sup>103</sup> a view offered earlier by Benoite Groiult: « Les femmes .. qui ont fait campagne pour l'abolition de ces mutilations défendaient un principe universel, au-delà des particularismes culturels : le droit de l'être humain à l'intégrité et au respect de sa personne. Ce serait du racisme précisément d'exclure les Africains de cette exigence de dignité

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<sup>97</sup> Dorkenoo interview 1994.

<sup>98</sup> Dorkenoo Rose, 82.

<sup>99</sup> Levin in Maria Diedrich, 241.

<sup>100</sup> Dawit and Merkuria A-27.

<sup>101</sup> *Warrior Marks* 13.

<sup>102</sup> Presber, Gabriele. [Presber im Gespräch mit] Elfriede Jelinek. IN: Frauenleben, Frauenpolitik, Ruchschläge und Utopien. Tübingen 1992. S. 7-37. (here p. 20) cited in Meyer, Anja. *Jelinek in der Geschlechterpresse. Die Klavierspielerin und Lust im printmedialen Diskurs [Elfriede Jelinek in the Gender Wars: Newspaper reception of The Piano Teacher and Lust]*. Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1994. 155.

<sup>103</sup> Personal interview. 14 October 1994.

fondamentale.»<sup>104</sup> Mimi Ramsey agrees. Campaigning for FORWARD USA and a victim herself, she exhorted a conference in Brighton, “Please don’t say, ‘I’m white. It doesn’t concern me. I’m Chinese. It doesn’t concern me.’ It concerns children and humanity.”<sup>105</sup>

A unique exhibition opened on April 6, 2006, at Brandeis. Painters and sculptors from Nigeria were asked to express their views on FGM on canvas or in stone. Most respondents were men. Why? Because, according to the exhibition’s organizer Joy Keshi Walker, men still hold social power. If FGM is to stop, they will have to stop it.

This in turn raises the concluding thorny issue. Can women function as public intellectuals as effectively as men? Are they listened to? Jelinek thinks not. Regarding the hostility of Austrian critics she notes: “They kicked and spit on Thomas Bernhard, too, but they put on his plays. The work of a man simply has a different valence from that of a woman. She’s much easier to dismiss.”<sup>106</sup>

The same observation has been applied to Walker. For instance, in her *LA Times* review of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), Tina McElroy Ansa shares an anecdote:

Months ago, [she] heard an African-American male scholar/writer say in the manner of a comic throwing away a line, “Hey, did you hear that Alice Walker dedicated her latest novel to [ ]the innocent vulva[ ]?” he sort of pursed his lips and looked slowly around the room. Then, ... rais[ing] one eyebrow, [he] ... chuckled and went on to another subject. As if to say, “’Nough said.” His gesture was part amusement, part embarrassment, part incredulity, part derision.<sup>107</sup>

And, I would add, exemplary in trivializing the spokeswomen against FGM – a harrowing “feminist sorrow.”

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<sup>104</sup> Benoitte Groult. *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 16-17-18, 205.

<sup>105</sup> Levin, “Abolition,” 112.

<sup>106</sup> Meyer, 158.

<sup>107</sup> Ansa 32.

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