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Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier

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Editor

Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier
University of Cologne
English Department
Albertus-Magnus-Platz
D-50923 Köln/Cologne
Germany
Tel +49-(0)221-470 2284
Fax +49-(0)221-470 6725
email: gender-forum@uni-koeln.de

Editorial Office

Laura-Marie Schnitzler, MA
Sarah Youssef, MA

Tel.: +49-(0)221-470 3030/3035
email: gender-forum@uni-koeln.de

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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

1 In a 2016 music video, “Borders”, the ever-controversial M.I.A., herself a Tamil refugee, comments on the gendered aspects of Western anxieties in the on-going refugee ‘crisis’: images of endless masses of all-male refugees of colour resonate with right-wing myths of uncivilized brown invaders, stealing jobs, raping white women and undermining Euro-American gender progressivism. In fact, gender issues are a constitutive force not only in refugee status and immigration law, but also in media discourses and popular knowledge production about refugees. “[T]reated as interruptions, intermittent presences” (Said 1986), the Othered gendered practices of refugees are fused into a negative dispositive against which Western host countries can repeatedly rework their gender and sexual exceptionalism. Headscarf debates, “saving brown women from brown men” narratives (Spivak 1988), as well as affective slippages between refugee masculinities, terrorism and perverse sexualities (Puar 2007) are coming to a new head. They hint at the ‘truth’-producing power of neo-Orientalist, neo-liberal vocabularies of gender, family and sexual norms in negotiations of refugee integration, cultural clashes, *our* and *their* values. This issue engages with this subject that is wide as it is controversial and persistent.

2 Benay Blend’s article “‘O My Language, Help me to Learn / So That I May Embrace the Universe’: Transnational Feminist Communities in the Work of Palestinian Women Writers” quotes Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) in its title, evoking Darwish’s desire for a space that preserves Palestinian identity within a wider culture. Rather than leaving ties to Palestine behind, Darwish, like other writers included in this article – Susan Abulhawa, Hala Alyan, Randa Jarrar, and Naomi Shihab Nye, to name a few – puts his homeland within a framework of diasporic space. Similarly, Rana Barakat views exile as both an individual “shipwreck” and a communal journey, a stance that reflects intersectional feminist values. Negotiating “the isolation of the individual within our shared collective condition,” Barakat offers what Anna Ball terms a “transnational feminist approach”. She joins a larger body of post 1948 writers who construct what the “poet of witness” Caroline Forché calls “assembled communities”, groups of friends who, she says, are “varied in the universe” but come together via various kinds of communication in order to discuss common issues (cf. Wright). The article seeks to explore a variety of transformative dialogues which transcend difference by standing together for justice, equality, and peace. How might feminist writers and activists negotiate a balance between connecting to their homeland but also recognize the potential that arises from the transnationalism of Avtar Brah’s concept of “diasporic space?” As a place

marked by hybridity, where tradition is continually transformed, this theoretical concept addresses the confluence of migrating populations, capital, commodities and culture. Furthermore, the article builds on Steven Salaita's *Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine* (2016), a work that explores how such dialogues across borders offer a viable means of resistance. ³ Our second contribution by Pietro Vulpiani addresses the subject of female genital mutilation (FGM) and what European governments have formally committed to in order to prevent its occurrence during the last decades. These practices have been tackled with specific laws and projects, but scaremongering has also been rife. In Italy, prevention has partly relied on sensationalist and top-down approaches that do not help ethnic communities understand the problem. A survey involving migrant women revealed misunderstandings, conflicts and ambivalent attitudes towards the norms and values these practices are based on and the laws introduced to put an end to them. Women thus face an impossible choice (between their family or the host society), while both entities exploit similar bio-political processes to activate either social inclusion or exclusion policies. For the community to which they belong, a mutilated body guarantees identitarian acknowledgement, but the host country refuses it and holds their community responsible. If the abuse is reported or the practice rejected, one may be guaranteed international protection but will probably be ousted by one's family and community. Vulpiano argues that culturally targeted communication, based on tailor made and peer-mentoring exchanges, can create bonds of trust between victims, institutions and services.

³ Our third contribution by Nasrin Khandoker, titled "Love beyond Boundaries: Subjectivity and Sexuality through Bhawaiya Folk Song of Bengal" focuses on her research on the Bhawaiya songs of Bengal and the transgression of boundaries, as she reads them as inherently subversive. According to Khandoker, most love songs in Bhawaiya are about 'illicit' love, deviating from social norms and often occur in reaction to oppressive marital circumstances. They are a gateway to exploring female narratives of subjecthood and desire, in which women are the agents of their own sexuality. Her focus is on deviance from marriage in the Bhawaiya folk songs as a form of subversion. Understanding Bhawaiya and its subversive existence requires an understanding of political, religious, linguistic and cultural boundaries of the Bhawaiya areas. Cooch Behar, the birthplace of the Bhawaiya genre, has historically been situated on blurred boundaries: between the cultural borders of Bengali and Rajbangshi, the religious borders of Islam and Hinduism, the governmental borders of the British Raj and Hindu kingdom and the borders of the Colonial and Bengali nationalist narratives. Khandoker argues that even now, the Bhawaiya areas are divided by the

international borders of Bangladesh and India. These blurred boundaries create a space for marginalised peoples to develop and create their own cultural products, using the language of affection to resist and subvert patriarchal social rules. In her article she explores the subversive existence of female desire within Bhawaiya, and examines its feminist possibilities.

4 Michael Reinhard's review on Stan Hawkins's 2016 published book *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality* and Christina Parker-Flynn's of *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) complete the last issue of this year.

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“O My Language, Help me to Learn / So That I May Embrace the Universe”: Transnational Feminist Communities in the Work of Palestinian Women Writers

Benay Blend, Retired Professor of American and Native American History, USA

Abstract:

In the title quote, Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) expresses his desire for a space that preserves Palestinian identity within a wider culture. Rather than leaving ties to Palestine behind, Darwish, like writers included in this article – Susan Abulhawa, Hala Alyan, Randa Jarrar, and Naomi Shihab Nye, to name a few – puts his homeland within a framework of diasporic space. Similarly, Rana Barakat views exile as both an individual “shipwreck” and a communal journey, a stance that reflects intersectional feminist values. Negotiating “the isolation of the individual within our shared collective condition,” Barakat offers what Anna Ball terms a “transnational feminist approach”. She joins a larger body of post 1948 writers who construct what the “poet of witness” Caroline Forché calls “assembled communities”, groups of friends who, she says, are “varied in the universe” but come together via various kinds of communication in order to discuss common issues. This article seeks to explore a variety of transformative dialogues which transcend difference by standing together for justice, equality, and peace. How might feminist writers and activists negotiate a balance between connecting to their homeland but also recognize the potential that arises from the transnationalism of Avtar Brah’s concept of “diasporic space?” As a place marked by hybridity, where tradition is continually transformed, this theoretical concept addresses the confluence of migrating populations, capital, commodities and culture. This article also builds on Steven Salaita’s *Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine* (2016), a work that explores how such dialogues across borders offer a viable means of resistance. As Cynthia Franklin, editor of *Biography*’s special issue “Life in Occupied Palestine” (2014), notes, while *sumoud* (steadfastness) is a Palestinian tradition, it gains strength when Palestinians ally with social groups who are interconnected via various means of oppression.

1 In the title quote, Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) expresses his desire for a space that preserves Palestinian identity within a wider context (*Almond Blossoms and Beyond* 56). Theorizing home as a physical, but also as a psychological space, he problematizes allegiance to place. Rather than leaving ties to Palestine behind, Darwish, like writers included in this essay – Susan Abulhawa, Suheir Hammad, Hala Alyan, and Randa Jarrar, to name a few – puts his homeland within a framework of Avtar Brah’s ‘diasporic space’, a transnational arena in which multiple structures of gendered, economic, political and social power intersect to form a mesh of solidarities and differences among inhabitants. As a place marked by hybridity, where tradition is continually transformed, this theoretical concept, according to Brah, offers new ways of finding common ground with others who also struggle against oppression (242). The Palestinian diaspora

spreads across the world, creating new communities that sound a call for novel forms of transnational solidarity (Ball 145). This paper draws attention to class and gender differences both amongst and between these communities, and to the conditions under which members attempt to bridge the barriers separating them from each other as well other ethnic groups. Wherever strife appears, these writers situate Palestine within international paradigms.

2 This paper focuses on a variety of borders: barriers that are specific to the Occupation that separate communities from each other and from their land; distances that alienate post-1948 refugees from Palestine; and the separation between exilic communities that are scattered throughout the world. The concept of diasporic space also includes configurations of power, including class and gender, which differentiate communities internally in addition to one another. As the increase in migration creates new communities, so does the language of ‘borders’ and ‘Diasporas’ further acquire meaning. For example, in *Borderlands / La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa, writing from her own experiences growing up at the border between Southwest Texas and Mexico, constructs a natural connection between women like herself and others who feel marginalized by society (60). This essay explores several such theories, including Anzaldúa’s ‘borderlands theory’ (*Borderlands / La Frontera* 1987), Carol Fadda-Conrey’s ‘ethnic borderlands’ (“Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*”, and Avtar Brah’s ‘diasporic space’ (*Cartographies of Diaspora* 1996). It also draws on Steven Salaita’s concept of “reciprocal communalism”, a process which, in Salaita’s words, focuses on an indigenous rather than a postcolonial or postmodern perspective. Forging interethnic comparisons, reciprocal communalism, according to Salaita, “move[s] beyond dialogue into a more defined cross-cultural political consciousness” (*Holy Lands in Transit* 21). This linking of struggles is reenacted throughout the writing selected for this paper. While tied to their space of homeland, designated writers demonstrate a commitment to mutual liberation founded on reciprocal opposition to colonial power wherever it exists.

3 Embedded within the notion of diaspora is Brah’s concept of ‘border,’ a construct that she views as a political entity as well as an analytical theory (15). Her notion of diasporic space offers a critique of fixed identity while acknowledging that refugees living in scattered communities might still relate to their homeland as a place of origin (10). Born to parents from Lyd and Ramleh who sought sanctuary in the United States after 1948, Suheir Hammad, for example, links her own experience of exile within a larger history of imperialism and colonialism that has separated people from their homelands (Abuelhiga 7). Her work examines both the

notion of her own heritage as Palestinian-American but also the diasporic landscape that offers the possibility of forging wider bonds of connection (2). Pondering ways to liberate herself from boundaries others set, Hammad writes: “Too bad we gotta call ourselves by man-made’ labels” (*Drops of this story* 91). Such borders – between individuals, communities, nations, cultures and movements – are precisely what Hammad seeks to smash. Drawing from a Black Consciousness perspective, notes Christopher Brown, Hammad unites all people of color who are under the burden of white supremacy (7). While affirming a fluid identity that is integral to political solidarity, Palestine remains at the heart of her work (Ball 153). “If I didn’t name myself Palestinian,” asks Hammad, “who would?” (*Drops of This Story* 91). Remaining true to her Palestinian heritage, Hammad’s solidarity reflects her homeland’s desire for self-determination, claims Ball, but it also presents a recognition that Palestine’s status remains connected to colonized people around the world. In this way, Hammad’s writing displays an exchange between personal and communal perspectives of belonging (148). “No wall is forever,” Hammad affirmed in a recent interview. “This I know. So what happens then?” (Knopf-Newman 71). The deconstruction of such barriers, according to Soraya Abuelhiga, that separate marginalized cultures from each other, serves as a focus of Hammad’s work. “Her literary gesturing towards universal self-identification” (2), concludes Abuelhiga, most often highlights other communities of color, in this case the borders between Palestinian American, African American, and Puerto Rican. Here, Hammad articulates a particular fluidity of expression that crosses borders, and this intercommunal identity proves integral in her political work. Sounding a call for new forms of political solidarity, Hammad joins other writers who are exploring what possibilities exist for resistance writing when communities are increasingly displaced.

4 “More than anything else I just want my poetry to ask questions” (*Drops of This Story* 91), Hammad explains, and that stance extends to other writers. Some are internationally known, including Susan Abulhawa, others are part of a new generation of activists and intellectuals. While these individual writers reflect different cultural contexts, locations and careers, what draws them together is a vision of interconnectness as well as concern for global issues. “Palestine is so urgent and so terrible,” explains Hammad, “that we do not make the connections” (Knopf-Newman 75) to others’ struggles. Turning her critique of American racism toward a global framework, she offers what Anna Ball terms a “transnational feminist approach” (135). Drawing attention to the universal within the particular, Hammad claims that “borders are manmade” (*Born Palestinian, Born Black* 13). Because she grew up immersed in hip hop,

Hammad continues, she learned early to make connections (Knopf-Newman 76). But she also refuses to limit her identity to what others expect her to be. According to Abuelhiga, Hammad's poetry reflects various experiences in her life, including her parents' displacement, exposure to African American and Puerto Rican cultures while growing up in Brooklyn, and the myriad kinds of violence that she has witnessed. From police brutality in Brooklyn to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Hammad identifies many commonalities across cultures which nevertheless retain particularities (3). "Through the construction and contemplation of a multitude of identities" (5), writes Abuelhiga, Hammad appreciates this legacy of shared suffering that underscores her own. While she participates in broader communities of struggles, she avoids erasing the diversity of individual human experience. A poet who refuses to respect borders, Hammad qualifies that boundaries are legitimate only if she has a "say in their formation" (*Born Palestinian, Born Black* 13), thus recognizing that the particular within the universal, too, bears notice as a means to avoid essentialism.

5 Similarly, Rana Barakat, a professor at Birzeit University, experiences exile as both her own personal "shipwreck" and a communal journey (136), a stance that affirms Brah's assertion that diasporas form out of "migrations of collectivities" (193). For millions of Palestinians living in the Diaspora, writes Rima Najjar, Israel refuses to recognize the "inalienable and internationally" acknowledged right of return of Palestinians to their homeland (Litvan 9). While exile might be "strangely compelling to think about," as Edward Said notes (173), it also invokes the imagery of trauma. Nevertheless, diasporic space often emerges as a site of hope and new beginnings. "I have always argued that exile can produce rancor and regret," writes Said, but it can also "provide a different set of lens" (xxxv). Accordingly, Hammad instructs her readers to "read Baraka and listen to Malcolm", drawing attention here to the language of North American resistance. At the same time, she suggests "let's read Darwish" (*Born Palestinian, Born Black* 28), the poet who reminds her of a childhood nourished by collective memory. Hers is a complex language that communicates both nostalgia for a homeland and desire to forge new alliances. She shares, however, suspicion of mainstream feminism. As Chandra Mohanty writes, assumptions of universality have led to suppression of Third World women within the feminist paradigm (257). A professor of Race and Resistance Studies at San Francisco State University, Rabab Abdulhadi explains that Palestinian women are doubly marginalized because of gender discrimination but also as a consequence of the Nakba (Palestinian catastrophe in 1948). Abdulhadi concludes that this position creates obstacles for an effective women's movement both in exile and in their

homeland (172). When Arab women do challenge patriarchy within their culture, Tanyss Ludescher, a scholar of ethnic and postcolonial literatures, reiterates that they face their own unique problems. When they criticize the patriarchal elements of their society, they are often charged with abandoning their own culture in favor of Western modes of thought. Moreover, Ludescher notes, Arab activists often associate a position viewed as anti-religious and anti-nationalist (106).

6 Other factors add to misgivings about feminism in the Arab world. Because the position of Arab women fuels propaganda in the Western media, Ludescher notes that even valid criticism of patriarchy lends itself to reinforcing anti-Arab stereotypes (106). Nevertheless, as Abdelhadi writes, Palestinian women have a long history of struggling against injustice: against the crusades, the Ottoman Empire, the English, with enough strength left to fight patriarchy in their own culture. Despite this long record of activism, British and American feminists, Abdulhadi claims, fail to acknowledge this history because it falls outside the mainstream Western model of what constitutes feminism (171, 172). How are we to deal with racism of one feminist group toward another racialized group, asks Avtar Brah, each drawing on their own experience, “as if all experience transparently reflected a given ‘truth’” (116)?

7 Understandably, then, feminism has sometimes been suspect within the Arab world. For Abdulhadi the core concern remains whether mainstream feminists (a liberal movement that focuses on legal and political reform), “enabled by their privileged position” (173), respect the right of other women to differ. In “colonized spaces”, Abdelhadi notes, there exists a “more collective sense of self” than in Western culture. Though she blames the dominant society for viewing those who fall outside the norm through a single lens, Abdulhadi views collective memory as a “powerful tool, a strategy for resistance” (173). For example, in Susan Abulhawa’s *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, Nur, the granddaughter of the Baraka family, grows up in exile, alone and longing for her roots in Gaza. But upon return she finds herself caught between living by her own rules, a very Western stance, and conforming to the social rules laid down by the family she has always wanted. Nzinga, the social worker who saves her from abusive foster care then later becomes a friend and mentor, understands her plight. Perhaps because coming from South Africa, she shares similar social values and histories of oppression (265). For example, when Nzinga meets Nur’s grandfather for the first time, she is surprised that he refers to her as “my daughter” (92), an African linguistic term that refers to strangers as relatives. Moreover, Nur later recognizes her own African genes when she notes that “we [her family] all

had brown skin and curly hair” (224), a legacy perhaps of African roots. Finally, when Nur decides to leave Palestine so as not to bring shame upon her family when she has her baby, Nzinga arranges a grant for her through South African government offices. “You know,” Nzinga tells her, “the African National Congress has always been supportive of the Palestinian struggle” (266), so such programs are reserved in particular for Palestinians.

8 As Abdulhadi claims, collective narratives inspire a group’s determination to resist revisionist history (173); therefore, while feminists might stress the freedom of the individual to resist oppressive dictums, Nur chooses to live by new social rules to protect her family whose strong female members provide a safety net that she has never known. For example, when Nur discovers that she is going to have her lover’s baby, she knows that her Palestinian family would be appalled. “You’ve always lived your life the way you wanted”, Nzinga, her friend and mentor, tells her. She continues, “That’s the thing you got from not having family” (265). Now that she has the family that she always wanted, Nur must decide whether to live by her own rules or leave Palestine until the baby is born in order spare her family shame. In the end she chooses collective values over the individualism that she had learned abroad (265).

9 This fictional plight illustrates the real dilemma of Palestinian activists who seek to negotiate a balance between connecting to their homeland but also recognize the potential that arises from the transnationalism of Avtar Brah’s ‘diasporic space.’ It also offers insights into how different cultures define a woman’s role in anti-colonial struggles. Both Nur and her ally Nzinga come from cultures that stress collective memory over freedom of the individual to follow his/her own rules. This stance places the colonial struggle at the very least on a par with women’s issues. While Nur finds a comrade in Nzinga because they share similar perspectives, other feminists might dismiss such positions as unacceptable. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa writes in the preface to *This Bridge Called Home*: “Activism is the courage to act consciously on our ideas, to extract power in resistance to ideological pressure. Foremost, she warns that women who seek empowerment might have to undergo the “risk [of] leaving home” (5). For Anzaldúa, then, healing quite often entails rejecting the “injunctions of culture, groups, family, and ego” (5). For Nur, this privileging of the individual no longer works when it results in actions that might bring shame upon her family.

10 All of the writers included here share what the “poet of witness” Caroline Forché calls “assembled communities”, groups of friends who, she says, are “varied in the universe” but come together via various means of communication to discuss common concerns (Wright, “An

Interview with Carolyn Forché by David Wright” 1). This essay seeks to explore a variety of transformative dialogues which transcend historical and cultural difference by standing together for justice, equality and peace. Hammad locates her individuality within such communal struggles, thus she writes in *Drops of This Story* that “I is we” (14), a space marked by collective memory of a particular group that intersects with commonalities of experience across cultures. “I plaited this story”, she continues, long ago, into the braid of her hair, a weave that includes the stories also of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, both writers who have heavily influenced her writing (62). Grounded in justice for Palestine, Hammad extends the boundaries of place by fusing concerns for Palestine with those of others.

11 Grounded in justice for Palestine, Hammad’s transnational poetic voice features collective resistance against hegemonic structures of power. As Cynthia Franklin, editor of *Biography’s* special issue, “Life in Occupied Palestine” (2014) contends, while *sumoud* (steadfastness) is a Palestinian tradition, it gains strength through international solidarity (xi). Expanding on this idea, Yoav Litvin asserts that “steadfastness’ is one of the hallmarks of the Palestinian struggle for justice” (1). In an interview with two members of the diaspora, Rima Najjar, a retired English professor, and Ramzy Baroud, a journalist who has written about the Middle East for many years, Litvin asserts that those living in exile are “indispensable to the collective struggle” (1) for liberation. They serve as mediators between Israeli Palestinians and those living in the occupied territories, and, finally, with the larger world. They also lobby their respective governments for justice, offer counter-narratives to Israeli propaganda, and spearhead campaigns, such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement (1). For her part, Najjar concludes that the most important contribution of Palestinians in exile is steadfastness. For decades, the estimated six million Palestinians who are registered refugees have maintained their identities as well as fought for the “inalienable and internationally recognized right of return” (8). Though born in Jordan, then residing in America for many years, Najjar does not acknowledge borders between herself and Palestine, no matter her current status as Palestinian American. “I know in my bones what it is to be Palestinian” (4), she explains, thus describing, too, the porous boundaries that exist for Palestinians in the diaspora.

12 As the increase in migration creates new Diasporas, so also does the theory of borders undergo transformation. In *A Map of Home*, Randa Jarrar creates the quintessential “check point heroine”, a term invoked by Anna Ball to describe the condition that Palestinian women confront when they are faced with double struggles of national and gender autonomy (108). In this

coming-of-age novel, Nidali, born to an Egyptian mother and Palestinian father, spends her life fleeing war-torn areas in the Middle East until her family settles in Texas. A marginalized young woman whose name derives from the feminization of an Arabic word for struggle, Nidali occupies a tenuous position within her patriarchal family and the larger world (8, 9). Nevertheless, while she appears to inhabit what Anzaldúa might term the social margins (60), Nidali negotiates both a psychological and literal space that she claims as her own.

13 Taught early by her father to draw the map of Palestine from memory, Nidali comes to recognize that borders are arbitrary constructions that are controlled at will by the occupying force. “That map is from a certain year,” explains Baba, referring to his daughter’s drawing. “The map that came earlier looked different”. Because, as Baba says, “there’s no telling where home starts and where it ends” (193), Nidali develops a tolerance for contradictions. For Anzaldúa, the female subject situated at the intersection of cultural, gendered and social boundaries, must find her own way home. Significantly, Nidali takes the map to her room where she erases the Western and Northern borders. Leaving thus a blank page except for the Galilee, the blankness of the map blended into the whiteness of her sheets (193). “You are here” (100), declares Nidali, here and everywhere, a condition akin to Anzaldúa’s *La Mestiza*, a woman of mixed racial heritage who sustains contradictions by making alliances with other outcasts but also by finding home within herself. “Mother, homeland, self, that could all be taken away”, Nidali claims. “But school? School remained” (257) her refuge, a place where she would not be running, but instead a place where even in exile she could be at home.

14 Anzaldúa speaks of borders as simultaneously geographic, cultural and social, barriers that the fictional Nidali learns to negotiate in order to chart her way home. For Nidali, living in what Anzaldúa terms the borderlands offers new ways of being in the world. A space, claims Anzaldúa, where different cultures collide, it offers new ways of finding common ground with others who struggle against oppression. Despite ongoing violence since the *Nakba* (catastrophe of 1948), which created approximately 8 million refugees, these exiles, like the fictional Nidali, find allegiances, too, with other Palestinians who continue to define what it means to retain an identity while far away from their homeland. As Avtar Brah explains, the relationship of subsequent generations to their homeland remains different than their parents, mediated as it is by witnesses to what was left behind (194). Always being in motion, always moving, defines what it means to be Palestinian for Nidali’s father. “Our people carry the homeland in our souls” (9), he tells his daughter, leading her to conclude that exiles must have very heavy souls.

15 This “situated knowledge”, as Ursula Heine describes it (30), speaks to transnational bonds expressed by Palestinian refugees. In *Drops of This Story*, Suheir Hammad “write[s] of longing for a land I have yet to feel under my feet” (9), but at the same time she is conscious of “the want of [her] feet for...Brooklyn concrete” (88), too. Displacement takes a nuanced meaning; Hammad’s story flows from “the love of a faraway nation” (92) mitigated by efforts to negotiate new alliances beyond the Palestinian community. Rejecting whiteness, Hammad chooses an in-between status akin to Anzaldúa’s *La Mestiza* (100), in this case not a woman of mixed racial origins herself but who relates most positively to other people of color. Declaring Barbie “dead; “decapitated,” in need of an “obituary” (*Drops of This Story* 100) to free all women like herself who seek self-acceptance, Hammad looks instead to poets like June Jordan, whose “Moving Toward Home,” she writes, transformed her life. From Jordan, a black woman who “was born a Black woman / and / [now became] a Palestinian” (Knopf-Newman 77), Hammad learned to make powerful intertextual connections in her own work, weaving an engagement with Palestine into a web of indigenous liberation movements around the world.

16 For Palestinian people, cultural production remains grounded in a specific place despite living far away. “I’m Palestinian” (*Drops of This Story* 85), writes Hammad, even though she does not live there. Though Resolution 194, passed by the United Nations in 1948, guaranteed the “right of return” to refugees displaced by violence, Israel continues to bar people from returning to their homes (Ball 172). Because the desire for a nation-state remains a powerful symbol for Palestinians around the world, Anzaldúa’s celebration of the borderland, according to Anna Ball, represents at times “a source of disenfranchisement rather than liberation”. A Palestinian border theory, Ball concludes, exposes areas of conflict as well as overlap with Anzaldúa’s theorization of the borderlands (128). In *This is Not a Border: Reportage and Reflection from the Palestine Festival of Literature*, a compilation gathered from ten years of PalFest’s cultural production, the editors Ahdaf Souceif and Omar Robert Hamilton assert that restrictions on freedom of movement are never-ending (3). “Military barriers separate everything from everything”, writes Mahmoud Darwish in his “welcome” to the first PalFest in 2008. “And everything – even the landscape” is temporary and vulnerable. Even though, as Darwish concludes, “life here is less than life, it is an approaching death”, he asserts that writers continue to “gather the fragments of this place” (8) into a literary whole. Similarly, participants in PalFest often travel from abroad to break through Israeli boundaries and local borders in order to bring art to rural areas. For the millions of refugees outside of Palestine’s borders, the distance from their homeland’s boundaries

is greater than the barriers faced by writers traveling with PalFest. This section seeks to explore a variety of transformative dialogues which take place within what Carol Fadda-Conrey terms the “ethnic borderland”, a place which draws upon Anzaldúa’s theory by focusing on cultures intersecting within the same geographic space (187). While including all of the usual markers that Anzaldúa notes in *Borderlands / La Frontera* – psychological, sexual and spiritual spaces (19) – Fadda-Conrey’s ethnic borderlands goes further by placing all of these groups in transformative conversations that break through existing barriers (197).

17 Fadda-Conrey draws on Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge We Call Home*, co-edited with Analouise Keating, a volume that Fadda-Conrey says calls for “radical inclusion” (192) of previously omitted white and Arab American voices. The sections in *This Bridge We Call Home* by Nathalie Handel, Rabab Abdelhadi and Reem Abdulhadi are foundational to the editor’s call for a “transformative, coalitional consciousness” that encourages both “new alliances” and calls for “‘white’ middle-class feminists” to own and “rectify their racism, their classism and other biases” (19). Included in *This Bridge We Call Home*, the email dialogue between Reem and her sister Rabab focuses on connections with other groups but also in this case includes internal markers that distinguish one individual from another. The sisters, despite the different spelling of their last names, an anomaly that Reem attributes to colonial language, each holds a different stance towards exile (165). As Fadda-Conrey notes, food serves often as a connecting avenue between ethnicities while also “highlighting the internal distinctions” (189) between various groups of people. For Rabab, life in exile allows her to challenge essentialist definitions of her people. “I like not having to always say that I only enjoy Arabic food”, she explains, “because frankly it is not true” (167). Chinese, Tai, and Puerto Rican cuisine rate just as high, in her opinion, but she is careful to reject postmodern interpretations of her stance. While admitting that a “nomadic existence can be ok”, she rejects what might be termed a “cosmopolitan existence”, implying, as she says, a binary between “us” – “provincial backward creatures” – and “them” – those who belong to a “superior”, in fact, dominant culture (167).

18 Recognizing the differences within Palestinian enclaves challenges the dominant groups’ homogenization of minority groups that tends to render them invisible. As Fadda-Conrey explains, establishing links between communities also requires a recognition of commonalities and difference. In this way the search for ties between communities bypasses ethnic stereotypes in favor of complex enclaves whose porous borders render border-crossing easy. In the ethnic borderland food is often a favored mediator that connects individuals within a group as well as

between normally separate enclaves (191). While sometimes carving out difference between communities, food preparation becomes a connective bridge in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* and brings together a community forcibly displaced to Gaza. At the center stands the beekeeper's widow, a lively woman whose familiar dishes bring people together despite war, displacement and loss of material goods (47). No matter previous status, war had reduced all families to an equal status, giving rise to a "subculture" marked by "adamant pride, defiance", and recreation of home, a physical refuge but also a symbol of *sumoud* (steadfastness) (47). Soon familiar smells of "onions, rosemary, cinnamon, cardamom and cilantro" infuse the air with memories of home but also hope that life will go on, nourished by the widow's care for her community (49).

19 The beekeeper's reconstruction of communal spaces remains incomplete without members of the community sharing the preparation of familiar dishes. These characters' presence within her home ensures a revival of the spirit of community. In the writing of Suheir Hammad, food acts as a bridge between many cultures resulting in the transformation and enlargement of the ethnic borderland. "Smells of the East, the Caribbean, and the South suffused her apartment building", Hammad recalls, leaving her with memories of "fried foods, spoiled fruits, and garbage". The smells of this interethnic borderland find their way into Hammad's poetry, a borderland in which "the assault of colors, smells, and sounds of the Caribbean in Brooklyn" create a complex mixture of interlocking groups (*Drops of This Story* 44).

19 In her poetry Hammad renders porous the otherwise rigid borders that separate various groups and pit members of one group against another. For Hammad, sensual imagery transports her, too, to the lost world of her parents. In *Drops of This Story*, the food that she invokes is not so much a link to Palestine as a recreation of the culture that her mother tried to replicate by cooking traditional meals. This story, Hammad notes, "lives on the back of my tongue". It is a circuitous route, however, that leads Hammad to a place of self-acceptance and pride. Remembering fondly how her mother "pounded the garlic and peppers of my father's fava beans" for Sunday breakfast, she wondered at the time why her family could not "eat pancakes and bacon like everybody else?" As an adult Hammad realized that she was "just another immigrant kid, trying to fit in" a mainstream culture that she rejected as much as the culture itself excluded her. "I never liked mayonnaise and cheese anyway" (51), she claims, recalling foods symbolic of conventional American cuisine. "Never liked hot dogs and apple pie" (52). Instead of trading her *labneh* (Arabic recipe for cheese made from strained yoghurt) sandwich for peanut butter and

jelly, as she did sometimes at recess, she chooses now to create her story out of falafel and hummus, singular tastes that mingle with the bites of plantain and curry (51), all connected by a bridge that transcends limits that difference might engender.

21 Writing about food as a concept of personal identity does not go without its critics. According to Sarah Hassan and Marcy Newman, immigrant groups often write about familiar foodways because it relates in a safe manner to a readership that otherwise might be hostile. While Hassan and Newman view reliance on culinary tropes as accommodationist (8), other scholars have explored how contemporary women of diverse cultures have used writing about foodways to reclaim a female identity within a specific ethnic heritage. Because recipes, like culture, are handed down from generation to generation by way of oral history, culinary literature conveys a sense of how food sharing creates solidarity but also allows women to speak across cultures. By claiming food as a serious literary subject, Suheir Hammad also explores the ways that it validates a relational understanding of the self. Her poetry invokes a sense of place and belonging through the familiar foods of home. By infusing the “dates, pomegranates, figs and cactus” that her father brought home into the “nectar of [her story]” (*Drops of This Story* 52), Hammad overcomes a mediated, rather than straightforward, loss of home.

22 While Hassan and Newman claim that Arabic food writing exists as an isolated genre, failing to position itself vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in an innovative manner (8), Hammad’s work does just that. By fusing a blend of hip hop, Caribbean and Palestinian rhythms, she creates an intertextual gumbo while simultaneously encoding an affirmation of cultural specificity and autobiographical presence. As Anne Goldman notes, writing about foodways may communicate more than just focusing on cuisine (169). Indeed, Hammad’s mention of specific dishes signals her participation in the larger struggle for Palestinian nationhood. In this way she becomes part of the “diasporic awakening” (8) called for by Hassan and Newman, a transnational movement that connects exiled Palestinians around the globe with each other as well as with other groups in struggle.

23 Suheir Hammad’s poetry communicates stories of individual and group identities, thus locating itself in an ethnic borderland that recognizes the complexity of groups involved. Her affirmation of culinary sharing as a ritual uniting women across social borders nevertheless is sometimes open for debate. As Goldman asks: “When does recipe sharing become recipe borrowing, with only a coerced ‘consent’ from the domestic ‘help’?” (171). No stranger to what Goldman terms “culture plunderer[s]” (171), Hammad swallowed her anger, she claims, when

she overheard some “white girls” order falafel in their “oh-so-cute voices” (*Drops of This Story* 72), culinary choices made without understanding the culture or the context in which their cuisine was made. In this case Hammad apparently uses foodways to refer to larger issues, specifically what Steven Salaita refers to as Israel’s “project of ‘erasure’”, a deliberate theft of Palestinian cuisine in order to “validate settler colonization”. Indeed, Salaita warns against focusing on individual consumption. Instead, he suggests looking at systematic efforts by the Israeli state to render Palestinians invisible (“‘Israeli’ Hummus is theft, not Appropriation”). In this vein, Hammad turns the tables. When students at her school replaced “their hair Barbie straight” and “jeans skin tight” with “baseball caps and baggy jeans”, she concluded that “they had no center” (*Drops of This Story* 76). It is the appropriator who had no culture, claims Hammad, not the Other whose identity has become a commodity. “I’d feel sorry for them”, Hammad recalls, “in their fake tans, fake hair, fake selves”, until they asked if she could “cook curry” (*Drops of This Story* 76), displaying their inability to recognize an authentic Palestinian identity.

24 In Hammad’s work, culinary metaphors raise complex questions related to cultural identity, national belonging and the limits of border—crossing within the ethnic borderland. As Salaita claims, when “Zionists claim Arabic food as Israeli”, it’s not a celebration of “intercultural harmony” (“‘Israeli’ Hummus is Theft, Not Appropriation” 3) but rather the systemic erasure of Palestinian culture. The same conclusion could be drawn regarding “culture plunderers” who steal another’s customs in order to make up for the perceived lack of a culture of their own. Such differences, according to Avtar Brah, are not simply the consequence of culture clashes within “diasporic space”. Instead, these relationships are marked by a number of factors, including gender, economic class, ethnicity, race, and sexuality (Brah 84). In her work, then, Hammad, among others included here, writes about what Brah terms the “multiaxiality of power”, a “cartography of the politics of intersectionality” (6) that allows for solidarity within and across groups but also divisions based on inequalities of power.

25 How and in what ways do diasporic journeys intersect – in what places, spaces and historical conjectures? Among all the writers examined here, Suheir Hammad emerges as an artist most preoccupied with transnational resistance. As Hammad observes, the structures within and between the United States and Israeli systems of oppression enable her to join dissenting voices in her own country (“I will not / dance to your war / drum” [*Born Palestinian, Born Black* 60]), while also remaining grounded in the Palestinian solidarity movement (“I will not forget where I came from. I / will craft my own drum” [ibid.]). The context of diaspora, as Najat

Rahman notes, carries with it a subtext of “home”, a concept that references those indigenous to the region (50, 51). While Palestinians living in scattered communities might still relate to the homeland as their place of origin, this stance does not preclude claiming a positionality that becomes the means to join a struggle with other oppressed people.

26 According to Rahman, Hammad seeks such a belonging based on solidarity rather than fixed identity (39). It follows then that Hammad’s analytic frame of reference would follow multiple, intersecting lines. Much like Brah’s theory of diasporic space, a place where “border[s]” and the “politics of location” (212) intersect, Hammad looks to several political strands – queer theory, colonialism, imperialism – to determine “who are the most marginalized, the most demonized” (Knopf-Newman 76) groups in society. “A space of / for theoretical crossovers”, in Brah’s terms, such a “theoretical creolization” (210) highlights complex webs of power. Moreover, it encompasses strands of Anzaldúa’s borderlands theory along with Hassan and Newman’s “ethnic borderlands”, but goes further to include insights drawn from colonialism and imperialism that are essential to understanding the ongoing Nakba (catastrophe) of the Palestinians.

27 Given the global nature of the economic system, writes Blah, feminism must be framed within an international context. Nevertheless, she continues, the feminist mantra “sisterhood is global” (84) appears outdated. Failing to note how individuals are marked by a variety of subject positions – sexuality, economic, class, ethnicity, to name a few – it assumes a homogeneity based solely on the subject’s gender. Brah’s concept of diasporic space, on the other hand, contributes toward the development of a feminist position that is both local and global, a politics that appreciates how the experiences of various categories of women exist within intersecting “relations of power” (89). At the core of diasporic space is the way in which collective signifiers are configured and mobilized in the service of solidarity / differentiation within and without the group.

28 Diasporic space offers an important site where solidarity / difference can be observed within gendered areas of class, racism, ethnicity, sexuality and age. In Susan Abulhawa’s *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, the Palestinian diaspora is a mixture of individual, collective, and sometimes disparate narratives. Abulhawa makes clear in this novel that Palestinians never feel at home. Shuffled from one foster home to the next, after the death of her grandfather, Nur informs her social worker, Nzinga, that “there’s nothing holding her together”. Exiled from a place of no return, a mythic place of desire that she knows only from family stories, Nur describes herself as

“made up of a bunch of pieces from different places”, a precarious whole that threatens to “rip apart” (103) if she acts outside accepted social norms. Diasporic space, as Brah explains, is different from the notion of diaspora, contains not only refugees like Nur, but also those who inhabit the dominant sphere (16). While Nur differs very much from mainstream society, she shares certain aspects of Nzinga’s culture; both Palestinians and South Africans have been subjected to similar colonial forces, and Palestinians are now struggling against an apartheid regime very much like the South African government from which Nzinga’s people won their freedom.

29 Judging from this list, groups in diaspora do not intersect solely on the basis of shared oppression. When Nzinga visits Nur in Gaza, after she returns home, Teta Nazmiyeh tells her friend from South Africa that she will always have a home in Gaza because, in addition to sharing in liberation struggles they hold in common a similar communal culture (97). In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, Abulhawa problematizes the concept of minority / majority relationships. Minorities are positioned vis-à-vis each other, as in the case of Nzinga and Nur, but when economic class becomes a factor, minorities with more access to wealth within the Gazan diaspora assume a position of power. When Nur’s family visits the home of Jamal, the doctor who enabled Nur’s return to Gaza, then has a brief affair with her, it becomes clear that the Palestinian community contains a matrix of economic, political and cultural relationships. “A showy thing in an expensive neighborhood”, at odds with “the world’s biggest ghetto” (185) surrounding it, the doctor’s house, implies Abulhawa, symbolizes class division within an already impoverished people. Concomitant with status, the doctor’s wife does not conform to the mores of Palestinian society. Elegantly dressed, her hair uncovered, Maisa’s presence presents a barrier across which Nur and her family do not wish to pass. Adding yet another layer, Maisa has domestic help from the Shati refugee camp to help with dinner. “We do what we can to help” (186), Maisa explains, at which point, Nazmiyeh, Nur and Alwan silently express a mutual desire to go home.

30 What Avtar Brah terms “the multi-axiality of power” (6) also plays a role in Hala Alyan’s *Salt Houses*. In this novel about a family’s multiple journeys from Jaffa to Nablus and then scattered to various diasporas, multiple modalities of gender, class, generation and country of origin are at play both within and between communities of displaced people. Uprooted after 1948 and again during the Six-Day War in 1967, Salma’s family benefitted from wealth that allowed them to establish a life free of the crowded camps. An “armor of wealth” (6), Salma believes,

separates her family from the camps skirting the outskirts of Nablus. Although all Palestinians in this novel are oppressed by the dominant Israeli society, they are positioned in relation not only to the Occupation, but also with respect to one another. Salma knows of the misery in Balata camp from her housekeeper, Raja, but she prefers to remain ignorant of its existence. Salma feels guilty over her “queasiness” (11) about the camps, but she believes that it is only random luck that keeps her family comfortable.

31 At the core of Alyan’s novel is the notion of a journey. As Avtar Brah explains, “diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down” (182), about putting down roots somewhere else. The concept of diaspora in *Salt Houses* concerns variable forms of connections within the group, as in the case of Salma and Raja. It is also about relations of power between Salma’s son-in-law Atef and the family’s “pillar”, Prija. Considered the “center of the house” (81) by Atef, Prija still remains a servant who returns to India every two years to see her real family: her husband and two children. In the case of Raja and Prija, and their connections to Salma’s family, itself displaced by the Israeli government, relationships of power differentiate them both internally (Raja) as well as externally (Prija) across different diasporic constellations.

32 Such differences, notes Avtar Brah, are formulated within the “interstices of socio-political and economic relations” (18). On the other hand, Brah goes on to state that difference does not necessarily prove unbridgeable among various groups of people. Diasporic spaces are marked by a variety of factors, she continues – “geography, environment, psychological, psychic and social” (91) – so that at a particular point in time, all groups experience certain common forces that promote sharing across “engendered borders”. “Parallel lives”, thinks Salma, about her status in relation to the Balata camp. “One person having lamb for supper, the other cucumbers”, with “fate”, she believes, being the “random” (11) arbiter. What Salma neglects to say, however, is that our fates are linked within a common economic system, which is not driven by fate at all but instead human choices. Gender, class, ethnicity, and so on, combine with global economic forces to decide who eats what for dinner. Significantly, however, the other native Nabulsi women whom Salma employs from time to time do not make her as uneasy as Raja, perhaps because only Raja knows the ballads that Salma’s own mother used to sing (11). While the simple fact of being women does not make them sisters, both Salma and her servant share a common maternal culture that is separate from economic status and other forms of oppression.

33 This article has sought to highlight both the commonalities and individual differences embodied in the Palestinian diaspora in order to explore, through this community’s literary

output, how ethnic communities coexist and communicate within diasporic space. As Avtar Brah explains, inherent within the concept of diaspora is the concept of the border, thus drawing attention to interethnic bridging that may reinforce or undermine inherent differences within and between ethnic communities (198). “The road I’ve traveled, the land beneath my feet” is for Suheir Hammad many paths that transcend exclusionary limits. Along the way, however, she “make[s] [her] own way home” (*Born Palestinian, Born Black* 13). By encouraging a search for commonality that respects individual difference, Hammad displays a form of empathy that is inherently anti-essentialist.

34 “Stories are songs”, writes Suheir Hammad, and “singers are prophets. Those stories are one”, she continues, “our story” (*Drops of This Story*, “Author’s Note” n.p.), referring to all those who are engaged with issues of freedom and justice. In his “Welcome” to *This is Not a Border*, Mahmoud Darwish discusses this issue of personal responsibility in the wake of gross injustice. The writer’s role, Darwish explains, consists of a “search for truth” (7), a quest that takes on particular meaning for Palestinians who, he claims, are erased from the history of their own country. Susan Abulhawa agrees. In “Once Upon a Time in Jerusalem”, she explains how she left a lucrative career to become a storyteller. Because “someone stole [her] story”, she explains, and “retold the truth of [her] as a lie” (61), Abulhawa found solace in setting that record straight. In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, she sets straight the history of Deir El Hawa, her “namesake” and “the landscape of [her] DNA (“Once Upon a Time in Jerusalem” 62). “Stories matter,” Mamdouh tell his granddaughter Nur, in this semi-autobiographical novel recounting the history of Abulhawa’s people. “We are comprised of our stories” (62). But how much better, writes Suheir Hammad, when the task is not placed only on the Arabs. “To have this kind of solidarity created through writing” (Knopf-Newman 78), she concludes, generates the possibility for viewing similar struggles in different spheres, a strategy for honoring uniqueness while participating in acts of interethnic bridging. Born the year before Golda Meir declared: “I cannot sleep at night knowing how many Arab babies are being born this same night” (Knopf-Newman 72), Hammad understands the urgency of switching this particular narrative. By connecting the dots to other causes, different anti-colonial movements around the world, she joins others in this essay whose cultural production furthers change. Embodying what Darwish calls the writer’s role, Nathalie Handal finds in words a refuge to create change. “A place where words have no boundaries and titles change”, books constitute for her “a place of many places, different names,

endless endings, and beginnings” (165) – indeed, an ethnic borderland where cultures are translated and maintained.

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Migrant and Refugee Women, Scaremongering and Afterthoughts on Female Genital Mutilations

By Pietro Vulpiani, Senior Adviser on Migration, Public Administration, Italy

Abstract:

In the last decade European governments have formally committed to preventing female genital mutilation (FGM). These practices have been tackled with specific laws and projects, but scaremongering has also been rife. In Italy, prevention has partly relied on sensationalist and top-down approaches that don't help ethnic communities understand the problem. A survey involving migrant women revealed misunderstandings, conflicts and ambivalent attitudes towards the norms and values these practices are based on and the laws introduced to put an end to them. Women thus face an impossible choice (between their family or the host society), while both entities exploit similar bio-political processes to activate either social inclusion or exclusion policies. For the community to which they belong, a mutilated body guarantees identitarian acknowledgement, but the host country refuses it and holds their community responsible. If the abuse is reported or the practice rejected, one may be guaranteed international protection but will probably be ousted by one's family and community. Culturally targeted communication, based on tailor made and peer-mentoring exchanges can create bonds of trust between victims, institutions and services, helping women who share FGM values, beliefs and meanings to overcome these conflicting values they have to come to terms with.

Introduction

1 Since the late '90s in several European countries increasing attention has been paid to the diffusion of female genital mutilation (FGM), due to the growing number of immigrants landing in Europe from African countries where these harmful traditions are still practiced. And yet this painful tradition has been known and documented as having taken place as far back as 2000 years ago, when in A.D. 25 the Greek historian, philosopher and geographer Strabo, journeying to Egypt, wrote that: "this is a widely followed tradition [...] to circumcise males whilst cutting females" (Strabo 17.2.5; Morrone and Franco 78). And when, on February 6th of 2003, the First Lady of Nigeria, Mrs. Stella Obasanjo, made an official declaration in Africa regarding "Zero Tolerance of FGM", during a conference organized by the IAC, the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children, she remembered and emphasized the great commitment for the eradication of these practices at the local, regional, and international levels since the early 1930s (Feldman-Jacobs). Thanks to the efforts of the IAC, of several African and

International NGOs and women such as Mrs. Obasanjo, the UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights has adopted the 6th of February as its International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM. Since this formal undertaking, ceremonies have been taking place around the world and in Europe on this particular day. And since 2001, the European Parliament has condemned female genital mutilations and called for specific legislation to be introduced in all EU Member States to tackle these practices. The European Parliamentary resolutions of March 24th, 2009 (2071/2008), June 14th, 2012 (2684/2012) and February 6th, 2014 (European Commission), call on Member States to tackle these harmful traditions with “the protection of women and girls and the identification of victims and in taking measures to ban gender-based violence including FGM” (European Parliament 3). At European level, several EU Directives¹ have been put in place that provide international protection against harmful practices such as FGM. Moreover, the Stockholm Programme (2010/C 115/01), adopted under the Swedish Presidency in December 2009, states that “Vulnerable groups in particularly exposed situations, such as women who are the victims of violence or of genital mutilation or persons who are harmed in a Member State of which they are not nationals or residents, are in need of greater protection, including legal protection” (European Council 10). Another relevant international tool that is improving the protection of asylum seekers at risk of FGM is the Istanbul Convention. “With its entry into force in 2014, the Istanbul Convention legally obliges State Parties to accelerate preventive measures to protect and support FGM-affected women and girls” (Petitpas and Nelles 83). The Istanbul Convention is the first treaty to recognise that female genital mutilation exists in Europe and makes it compulsory to offer protection and support to women and girls at risk (Coe). In Italy, Legislative Decree N. 142/2015 implements Directive 2013/33/EU that sets standards for the

¹The most relevant Directives fostering protection asylum seekers by harmful practices are: the EU Council Directive laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers (2003/9/EC); EU Council Directive on minimum standards for the qualification and status of third country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or as persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of the protection granted (2004/83/EC); EU Council Directive on minimum standards on procedures in Member States for granting and withdrawing refugee status (2005/85/EC); Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted; Directive 2013/32/EU of the European parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on Common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection. The European Directive 2013/33/EU laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection, introduces gender specific reception conditions which will also apply to those fearing FGM, namely: i) the special needs of all vulnerable female applicants will need to be identified in a timely manner; ii) those subjected to serious acts of violence should have access to rehabilitation services to obtain the necessary psychological and medical support; and iii) accommodation facilities should be gender sensitive.

reception of asylum applicants and Directive 2013/32/EU on common procedures for the granting and revocation of international protection status. Its article 25 includes FGM victims among the most vulnerable people entitled to international protection. At international level, the ambitious goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development expect this practice to be eradicated by 2030.

2 In recent years, the efforts of non-governmental organisations, associations and many female activists from countries where traditional excision is still practiced, as well as those of many public administrations, has had a considerable impact on the prevention and eradication of FGM. This international commitment, alongside the productive collaboration between organisms and institutions both in the North and South of the world and the joint efforts to ratify the Maputo Protocol, the Charter of American Women's rights which since 2003 has reiterated the illegal nature of every form of mutilation on the body of women and the many awareness campaigns and international lobbying initiatives have helped develop the current legislative and regulatory measures designed to prevent and stop female genital mutilations in African countries like Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Egypt, Djibouti, Ghana, Guinea, Senegal, Tanzania and Togo. Clearly the introduction of a judicial instrument banning FGM is an essential step towards eradicating these practices, but the worrying extent to which excision and infibulation is still being practiced even in countries where it is banned make it even more crucial that these regulations be accompanied by educational and cultural awareness strategies that can reach out to the heart of these communities and undermine the symbolic value systems that grant a form of legitimacy to these operations performed on so many children and innocent women. In fact, while in countries such as Kenya, FGM practices already only concern 10% of potential victims and in Ghana now it is only 2%, the same drop has not been registered in Somalia, Djibouti, Egypt and Guinea, where the practice is still performed on 90% of female population. Other countries with no great decrease in FGM are Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Chad. The phenomenon has however halved in countries like the Central African Republic, Liberia, Nigeria, Iraq, and has dropped even further in Togo, Cameroon and Benin (Unicef 2014). Nowadays, the risk that a girl will face FGM is about one third of what it was around three decades ago (idem). However, the number and global ratio of girls born in the 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East where FGM is concentrated will continue to increase due to the rise in the demographic curve in these countries. For the same reason, European countries could see an increase in the number of girls migrating away from these countries which could have an impact on the number of FGM cases reported on the continent. This will be even harder to detect given the problems linked to under-reporting and

the difficulty in collecting reliable data within the communities where FGM is practiced. Reliable and comparable estimates on the dissemination of FGM in Europe has only been available very recently (Van Baelen et al.; Eige).

3 Even on the prevention front, in spite of the many excellent information and formative campaigns, institutional awareness of these issues in Italy is still very limited and communication failures have increased and not reduced the difficulties encountered when trying to understand the scope of the problem and making any headway in changing the cultural perception of these practices. This has led to an instrumental exploitation of the risks of FGM in racially prejudiced political rhetoric that has used this phenomenon in order to stigmatize entire foreign communities. Political and media sensationalism surrounding FGM, by highlighting such a complex problem without providing appropriate tools for its comprehension, has not helped the families involved to come to grips with these oppressive rituals. The ethnic communities have tended to react by closing themselves off to outside influences. A pamphlet sponsored by the Presidency of the Council of Minister's Equal Opportunity Department in 2004, which was handed out to FGM victims, was entitled "FGM: A barbarous and senseless practice" (De Luca). In it, the correct explanation of the possible medical and psychological complications that FGM can carry with it, was undermined from the outset by a title that contained an obviously asymmetric and Euro-centric bias. Another initiative which involved a toll-free number linked to the State Police and set up in 2009 within the context of Law no. 7/2006, through which people could report FGM cases, has not led to any significant results (Stella). Finally, Article 17 of the Legislative Decree no. 142 of 2015, has expanded protection for FGM victims, offering them the opportunity to be hosted by reception services in Italy. In spite of the very noble goal of protecting the victims, the lack of any culturally informed methods of communication and social inclusion has meant that any woman accepting the protection immediately loses all support from their family and community. In all these instances, the FGM victim is caught in between two incompatible universes, their traditional social context and the rule of law, which both mean to impose a form of political control over their mutilated body. The imposition of a form of bio-political control over the mutilated body leads to a perfect Catch-22 situation: the mutilation is the necessary condition to be accepted within one's own community as a woman/wife/mother, but it is also a required condition if one wishes to claim and obtain international protection from our host society that is intent of protecting FGM victims. As the woman/victim is invited to report her persecutor (her family and her traditional values) to the legal authority, she finds herself in a double bind: only by violating traditional rules can she comply with the laws of

her host country. This inner tension is clearly voiced in the interviews discussed below with women have been subjected to FGM. From their witness accounts, filled with misgivings and political claims, we can start to picture the social and cultural nature of this cruel identitarian practice, which is clearly very difficult to relinquish. Their words can be understood along the lines of Foucault's (1980) idea of biopolitics, that defines the power of institutions (in this case the family's and society's) to control individuals and collective groups even through their body and sexuality. FGM leads to an active exploitation of the mutilated female body, a subject that is subordinate and constrained by an externally controlling agent, and thus wittingly decides to put her daughters and grand-daughters at the mercy of the same agent. The body of the interviewed women is considered as a tool that incorporates and reproduce social roles and cultural signifiers, as a form of negotiation with the social context to which they belong or which has taken them in, through wounds/symbols that brand the female body (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 61-63). Furthermore, revising the Foucauldian theory of biopower, Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'bare life', biological life included in the political control and violence of sovereign power (Agamben), can enlarge the interpretation of FGM. Thus the body with mutilated genitals is transformed from a "bare life" without rights, into a political subjects with rights, both within the traditional community (in as far as the victim of FGM becomes marriable) and as deserving of international protection by the Rule of Law (as a refugee to be protected). As happens when a sans-papier immigrant acquires citizenship rights as a subject to be protected in that they are sick (Fassin), the FGM victim sees her citizenship right granted as a wounded woman deserving of protection. An understanding of the individual and emic meaning assigned to FGM in the West then becomes a key through which one can start an intercultural discussion, capable of challenging cultural and identitarian values and sowing the seed of doubt with regard to traditional dogma. If we can unravel the semantic value that these women assign to FGM, will can hope to understand how to shape a culturally based discussion and communication. In this way we will avoid all sterile media sensationalism, and promote meetings between people and communities from the bottom up, with the involvement of men and women, in order to achieve a truthful and lasting cultural shift that should lead to these harmful practices being abandoned.

Alarmism and scarce research

4 Firstly, the vast media and political attention paid in the 2000s in Italy to the phenomenon of FGM has not always been matched by accurate statistical and epidemiological analyses, or by comparisons of the data on the dissemination of FGM in the

countries where it is still practiced. Generally speaking a lack of serious research and the false social alarms resulting from biased media reporting, have resulted in a very distorted image of how by migrant families feel about FGM and how actually widespread it is. In various European countries there have been reiterated public claims that thousands of young girls are at risk of excision and infibulations every year. Politicians and journalists make comments to the press that mingle a thrilling fear of the exotic with elements of voyeuristic amazement and value judgements that deform reality and simply foster stereotypes and stigmatise entire migrant and refugee communities. The distortion of reality undermines intercultural communication or attempts to understand the true extent of the phenomenon and the cultural changes that are taking place. Furthermore, focalising on the dangers these defenceless children face certainly garners a quick emotional response from the public, but it completely overlooks the serious and much less media-grabbing problems of the medical complications caused by the mutilation of female genitals, both for the young and old who have suffered these practices in their country of origin.

5 In Italy, where FGM was banned with Law N. 7 of 2006, policymakers and institutions, have formally committed to fighting these practices with a specific law and by providing funding for prevention projects. Unfortunately, overestimated figures of FGM and the fear of a spread of FGM due to the scale of the landings of migrants and refugees on the European coasts, have often amplified the phenomenon unduly, stigmatizing entire groups of asylum seekers. This alarmism has been growing since the 2000s. In March 2001, during the presentation of the International Forum against female genital mutilation, the main newspapers estimated that there were 50,000 infibulated women in Italy, a figure that was growing at a clip of 6,000 young girls a year (Vulpiani 51). “Infibulation, this barbarous practice now reaches the Italian shores”, was the title that was being bandied about by the Italian press at the time (*La Nazione* 21). These figures have been dredged back up every year, particularly as the February 6th celebrations approach. Even in February 2017 the *La Stampa* newspaper announced that there are “around 57,000 women in Italy with mutilated genitals” (Parlangeli). These are worrying figures that would seem to indicate that many young girls who are now fully integrated within our Western societies are at risk. However, the collective representation of the spread of the phenomenon is clearly at odds with the in-depth analyses carried out in various countries. In Sweden and Great Britain, for example, there have been no documented cases of excised or infibulated children, as all judiciary police enquiries have not come up against any such violence on minors. Sara Johnsdotter (2004 78-79) has underlined these critical aspects by analysing the limited literature available on the

issue and suggesting a new approach to the problem that might combine a constant vigilance to ensure that these violent practices are not reiterated, with a healthy dose of scepticism regarding all the sensationalist coverage that is not backed by serious and painstaking analysis.

6 But getting back to the alarming Italian figures, what is a realistic figure of the women and girls who are at risk of being subjected to FGM practices? A survey by the Piepoli Institute, a major polling company, published in 2010, covering the six regions with the greatest number of women from countries where excision is practiced, has come up with a map of the risk starting from those regions that are home to 85% of women from FGM risk countries (Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Lazio, Piedmont, Tuscany). The total number of the target population was 110,000 people, of which 35,000 were women who could have been subjected to FGM practices. The calculation was based on approximately 4,600 young and adolescent girls below the age of 17 from at risk countries, of which approximately 22% could have potentially been subjected to FGM practices (a percentage estimated based on the incidence and fall off of FGM in the countries of origin and the migration effect): this means that the potential victims of these practices in the coming years among young and adolescent African girls living in Italy are approximately 1,000. Clearly even if just one single little girl was at risk of being subjected to FGM procedures one would still have to confront the problem and find judicial tools to remove the risk. But does it make sense to discuss these issues with the public at large when only specific sectors of the population are affected? Furthermore, though we have no wish to underestimate the need for constant and caring action aimed at preventing and combating FGM, it is nevertheless essential to clear the deck of any prejudices and stigmatizations, so that a culturally oriented approach can take into account the roles, meanings and cultural changes affecting these ritual practices. This is the only way we can hope to come up with effective information models and educational measures.

7 When reading media news and documents published by associations and organisations engaged in fighting FGM, we are constantly reminded of the danger for so many young daughters of women who have emigrated from countries where these practices are performed, that they too may have to suffer these practices in Europe or when they go back to the country of origin on holiday. The reproach and anxiety resulting from horrific actions performed on defenceless young girls, presents a very emotional backdrop, often with an ideological slant, that makes it that much harder to analyse the data and engage in a rational scientific debate to assess the true extent to which these cruel practices are shared by the immigrant and refugee

communities in Europe. According to Melissa Parker (507-509), many European and North American investigations of the medical complications and social aspects of FGM are strongly affected by these strong emotional distortions, influenced by sensationalist press strategies and false social alarms designed to bolster the undisputed authority of a number of associations and organisms operating in the field of reproductive healthcare in Europe. Intense emotions underlying this concern are often tainted by biased ideological moralism that views the evil exoticism of these practices as a challenge to be won at all costs to ward off the new barbarianism introduced to the West by immigration (Johnsdotter 2002). The most widespread position here is that an excessive protection of cultural prerogatives and diversity could justify serious forms of physical and psychological violence. In this climate of moral reproach, all attempts to understand the true epidemiological and semantic boundaries of the FGM phenomenon in Europe is disdainfully labelled as a relativist and complicit attitude that justifies violence against young defenceless children, without being given a chance to argue its case. The fact that a practice makes sense within a cultural context cannot be taken as a valid justification, yet one cannot avoid addressing the profound significance that these social entities assign to such practices (Augé 96) if we want to see changes in regulations, values and ideas.

8 So, scaremongering notwithstanding, there is an urgent need to take action against the medical, psychological and sexual complications these female genital mutilations carry with them. These actions must also involve the medical professions, which come into closest contact with these phenomena, and must be provided with the appropriate tools to discuss it with their patients. This will only be possible if procedures related to FGM are somehow developed by seeding an understanding of the medical complications in the target population. Families need to be supported in their rejection of practices that are so damaging to a child's physical and psychic health, but many health professionals currently claim they have little knowledge of FGM and are rightly asking for appropriate training to confront a phenomenon that up to a few years ago was unknown in doctors' offices and hospitals (Thierfelder et al.; Morrone and Sannella; Caroppo et al).

Harmful traditions, migration and cultural change

9 In recent years, significant cultural changes have led to a drop in FGM practices in countries where they were historically more widespread. From 2014 onwards, updated reports on the prevalence of FGM in several African countries, showed a decline of these practices among girls aged 0 to 14, suggesting that fewer women and girls were subjected to the

procedure when compared to data from surveys carried out between 2003 and 2011. Unicef and Unfpa in their updated data sheets found that in one-third of those nations half as many young women aged 15 to 19 had undergone FGM compared to older women, aged 45 to 49. While in general terms, improved surveys and reports have raised estimates of the total number of women subjected to FGM practices worldwide, partly as a result of a more detailed analysis of the phenomenon in Indonesia, the 2017 update of the new Population Reference Bureau Wallchart (PRB) on data and trends, shows that countries such as Burkina Faso and other African countries registered the steepest decline in female cuttings. In Burkina Faso, for example, 14 % of girls aged 5 to 9 and 5 percent of girls aged 5 and under suffered FGM, compared to 90 percent of women in their 40s. This decline is higher still within migration flows.

10 People who emigrate may have inclination to abandon traditionally held norms. All this is evident in Europe in the social integration process of families from countries where FGM is performed. Emigration and inclusion within a new cultural context mean that immigrants tend to engage in an unwitting renegotiation of their own original cultural values which they necessarily compare to the one they now find themselves in. For this reason, the culture of each individual should not be considered as an independent and uniform set of values, norms and symbols that are statically passed on from generation to generation, but should instead be viewed as a magmatic and somewhat opaque collective product, in which the dialectic nature of each individual's relationship with society helps to sow doubts and contradictions that are the basis of the tensions that afflict every cultural reality. This means that, in studying FGM in Europe, a strategy designed to take into account the subjective meanings that each individual (and not every abstract 'culture') assigns to genital mutilation practices, will inevitably shift awareness from a stereotyped cultural fossilization, whereby infibulated victims are often considered the future infibulators, and accept that people can interact with the own world of values, which are often contradictory, to find new ways of freeing themselves from the cultural models imposed by tradition. All this causes the kind of ambivalence towards FGM that can be found in many immigrant and refugee men and women in Europe, an ambivalence that can best be perceived by comparing the country of origin with the host country. According to Gerry Mackie (2000), the decision to continue or reject the practice of FGM falls within a strategy that is perfectly normal among mothers, who like every other parent want the best for their children. The mothers that reach this decision do so to guarantee their daughters a future, for example by ensuring that through infibulation they will be virgins at the time of marrying and will find an appropriate husband to marry, in

contexts where the non-infibulated woman is considered ‘socially dead’. The same mothers chose not to have the operation performed on their daughters, in a context where not being excised or infibulated guarantees a better life and avoids stigmatisation, as happens in a number of European immigration contexts. Emigration and integration in a different social and cultural context has certainly had a strong impact on the tendency to review traditional cultural models, catalysing processes that lead to reassessments and cultural change that often juxtapose first and second-generation immigrant women. European research has revealed a strong sense of critical awareness among second generation immigrants regarding the need to reject every form of FGM. In research conducted on the Somali community in Sweden (Johnsdotter 2002), it has become apparent that the gradual phasing out of arranged marriages, the fear of stigmatisation by the host culture, and the risks pursuant to the laws introduced against these crimes have led to a gradual rejection of infibulation. This rejection has also been made possible thanks to Islam’s position against infibulation, a practice that is considered prohibited by God or *haram*. The refusal of infibulation does not however coincide with the loss of value of virginity, even in the Swedish society in which virginity may no longer be viewed as a positive attribute (Johnsdotter 2002; 2009). In Sweden, virginity for Somali girls is now being associated with the trust relationship with one’s freely chosen partner, and the need to maintain one’s chastity up until marriage (ibid). The values associated to genital modification such as pride, purity, aesthetics and faithfulness, are acknowledged even without the need to resort to excision and infibulation practices, and many of the girls interviewed opt for alternative methods of symbolic legitimization of their social standing, such as the symbolic *Sunna*, an alternative practice that consists in a pricking of the outer membrane that covers the clitoris with a pin or a thin needle (Vulpiani, Focus Group 3). The symbolic *sunna* is an alternative symbolic rite proposal discussed among Somali women in Florence, and formally presented in 2004 by dr. Abdulcadir Omar Hussen and dr. Lucrezia Catania of the Regional Center for Preventing and Curing FGM and its Complications at Carreggi Public Hospitals of Florence. The idea opened a controversial public discussion involving media, NGOs and policy makers, that ran out in 2005 with the final withdraw of the proposal (Catania and Hussen).

Values and ambivalence towards FGM

11 FGM is declining in several countries (Unicef), and in Italy associations and migrant activists, who have easier access to migrant and refugee women, are contributing to the rejection of these practices. With their support, training courses and culturally focused

projects of sensitization, based on tailor made and peer-mentoring exchange, could help to overcome the lingering doubts in migrant and refugee women that still, consciously or subconsciously, share FGM values, beliefs and meanings. In general, whether cultural attitudes are very much against FGM, training courses, interviews and focus groups carried out with cultural mediators and migrant and refugee women of countries with prevalence of FGM, showed misunderstandings and ambivalent attitudes towards norms and values that justify these practices. These ambivalent meanings and feelings have been investigated through a survey involving migrant and refugee women in the 2000s.

12 Through a series of interviews, carried out in 2003-2004 with 30 women who were subjected to FGM² and thanks to 5 focus groups held in five Italian cities in 2010 (Rome, Florence, Turin, Palermo, Lecce) with 25 cultural mediators from countries with excision customs who attended training sessions that provided tools to counter FGM, I had the chance to discuss a few symbolic and semantic reformulations of the excision and infibulation practices that have been noted in women who have emigrated to Italy. The women involved were from Mali, Eritrea, Somalia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Algeria, Cameroon and Egypt and were aged between 16 and 50 approximately. They had been living in Italy between 5 and 25 years and spoke good Italian. A few of them had already been involved in cultural mediation in a health/sanitary context. The focus group participants were never of the same nationality, because they had reported that they had never had the opportunity to discuss FGM among their friends or family, seeing as any discussion of it with parents and/or relatives was considered taboo. Many of them felt embarrassed discussing these topics, particularly with women of their own nationality, for fear of being criticised and becoming a subject of gossip. For this reason, they preferred not to have people of the same nationality or ethnic group within the same focus group. Many of the women interviewed had no idea how widespread the practice was in their own country of origin, while they only fully understood once they were in Italy that these were illegal practices, that were not shared by all women of their community and came to realise the existence of other forms of FGM to the ones they had experienced or encountered.

13 “What are you waiting for... for her to get married?” (Vulpiani, Focus Group 1). As agreed by several participants during focus groups, these were the words young women who had immigrated to Italy from countries where FGM was practiced often heard from their

² The interviews had been carried out by the author as part of the Daphne “Stop female genital mutilation: a European strategy” project coordinated by the Rome Council, Department XVIII Security; the 5 focus groups had been carried out in the framework of a consultancy with the Rome’s National Institute for Health, Migration and Poverty (NIHMP).

grandparents still living in their country of origin. Faced with social and family pressure to subject their young girls to FGM, many women have a hard time standing up to mothers and mothers-in-law. But the awareness that they must find a way of putting these traditions behind them is also summed up by a sentence often quoted in the interviews: “I understand my mother, but I’d never do it to my daughter” (Vulpiani, Interviewee 12). The interviews and focus groups, regardless of whether FGM was considered negatively or positively or its legitimacy, were mainly focused on explaining what we believed to be the reasons, causes, belief and value systems that had led to these practices taking root. Even when faced with similar points of view, there was a great variety of representations of FGM within the imagination of those who experience them within their community, and vary from person to person rather than based on cultural affinity. Meanings of FGM were repeatedly mentioned in interviews and focus groups. Some of them are here underlined: The protection of a woman’s virginity before marriage, a way of ensuring there are no pregnancies out of wedlock, also imbued with associations of cleanliness, aesthetics, emblematic of femininity often synonymous with fertility and improved chances of having children, the will of God, which implies religious compliance, and so on. There are many lines of reasoning that can be brought to bear to justify or even just understand the age-old practice that has been passed on within many ethnic communities. These are emic explanations, that are internal and legitimate within community, that we can easily access by speaking to people from countries where excision is a traditional practice; small clues that can lead us to understand the many cultural values that are assigned to FGM but that never access the common structural root underpinning cultural gender differences.

14 Seeking control over a woman's sexual and reproductive potential is a broadly shared explanation of how infibulation practices have become a way of protecting a woman's virginity prior to marriage and ensuring that a girl does not become pregnant out of wedlock. As a Somali interviewee pointed out, such a woman would be “socially dead” (Vulpiani, Interview 8), deprived of any social support from her family or clan, and the *wacal* (fatherless) child would grow up without any protection in the future, as he/she would be deprived of the social and cultural legitimacy that only affiliation with his father’s clan can guarantee. One young Somali girl mentioned that one of her family’s mottos was: “Marry who you know, and you will give birth to something known” (Vulpiani, Interview 7). This entails that the woman’s role is to get married into her community and to accept the mutilation of daughters at an early age in order to fulfil symbolic protocols that guarantee and protect the woman and her reproductive potential within a future marriage that is the basis of

the social structure. Emigration to Western countries, effectively produces a very profound revision of the cultural contexts that legitimate FGM; but migrants and refugees can still retain significant points of contact with the symbolic representations shared with their country of origin. The opportunity to share and discuss these issues during the focus groups provided the opportunity to voice other cultural justifications on these issues, that still highlight the importance of FGM as a rite of passage. Another Somali woman during her interview said: “Hey, I have to guarantee a future for my daughter, I can’t just leave her with her shameful parts and dump her in the middle of the street; no one will want to marry her then.” (Vulpiani, Interview 18)

15 How can we not approve the words of this Somali woman who wants to ensure her child has a best future, if it were not for the fact that by shameful parts she is referring to the clitoris and minor labia of her innocent new-born child. In the mother’s eyes, and in that of her community, ensuring that her child has a future as a wife depends on a readiness to deface that person’s body, so that it may comply with the symbolic dictates of a social body which requires an imperfect nature to be modified. For the mother, the cutting of the child’s genitals becomes a symbolic, albeit cruel, acknowledgement of the need for social protection of the future woman/wife and the child they bear. It is way of ensuring that the mother and child will be respected within society and any offspring will receive the community’s support. The interviews and focus groups often brought to light the dichotomy between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ women. Apparently the ‘closing’ of the labia minora of the little girl engaged in this rite of passage has a great symbolic value in terms of the child’s identity, as a way of showing the individual’s acceptance of values shared with the community and its institutions. The ‘closed’ woman is fully acknowledged by the entire community, enjoys respect and is guaranteed an honourable future, compared to a less deserving ‘open’ woman, who is constantly at risk of being marginalised and social excluded, when not subjected to sexual molestation. Furthermore, as some interviewed women explain, the event is awaited and experienced as a *very special moment* by the young girls that are still not undergone FGM, and who anxiously await the moment when they can become women, wives and mothers and have full membership of the community they belong to (Vulpiani, Focus Group 3). The social importance of the act is further revealed by the enigmatic paradox of the young girl who is suffering the pains of the cutting and the festive family, outside the home, that is celebrating the great event with the entire community.

Attitudes, contradictions and new meanings of FGM in the host countries

16 By emigrating one subconsciously becomes subject to many pressures stemming from the encounter and adoption of cultural values and behavioural models that were previously unknown: these are cultural dynamics that even for FGM victims may lead to new contradictory cultural meanings and a forced alteration of ritual practices. Changes affect the system of symbolic values with which these practices are imbued, through syncretic merging with the traditions and values pertaining to the host countries.

Given the complexity of the problem and the adaptive responses of migrants and refugees, the new attitudes and behaviour surrounding FGM may lead to formal changes that are designed to conceal the phenomenon to our eyes, or substantial ones, which should be capable of modifying the symbolic representations and values assigned to the practice. In other words, a formal behavioural change is the lowering of the age of FGM (Creighton and Hodes 267). Over the past 15 years, Unicef worked to standardize survey questions on FGM, in order to prove how many girls and women are undergone FGM before the age of 15 and often in infancy or early childhood (2013, 7). FGM is shifted away from the major events of puberty and a woman's social development such as the first menstruation or marriage, and is instead brought forward to the early days of a young girl's life. The change, that has already taken hold in the countries where FGM originated, with excision and infibulation rituals performed in early infancy³, on arrival in a European country leads to a very sudden lowering of the age range, particularly when with FGM one risks being reported and jailed (Creighton and Hodes 267). Furthermore, by lowering the age one reduces the risk of resistance or reporting by the young girls involved. In this case the change in the ritual practice, or the shift from infibulation to excision, are functional responses to a change context and do not alter the ideology or the symbolic representations that underpin the act of mutilation, nor the legitimization of these practices by those who are not in a position to carry them out due to a lack of means or because they have no daughters. An emblematic case, mentioned during a focus group, was provided by an Ethiopian woman who was assisted by an Italian operator in Sicily for a gynaecological problem; during an extended period in which the woman was in touch with the operator, the woman had always shown a very strong and outspoken refusal of all mutilation practices; subsequently, when one of her sons was about to be married, she who had only had male offspring, would only approve of her son marrying a 'closed' daughter in

³ From the first days after birth to 3-4 years of age for female circumcision to between 8 and 10 years for infibulation of young girls.

law, justifying her position with a very clear explanation: “but that’s my son, he would certainly not marry one of those open women” (Vulpiani, Focus Group 4).

17 The woman felt there was no contradiction compared to what she had stated in the previous months: In fact, she constantly reiterated her approval of our system protecting little girls from the risks of being subjected to FGM, showing formal acknowledgement of the rights of women and her firm belief in her claim that she was against female mutilation in Italy. Her acknowledgement regarding the need to fight FGM was just formal and not matched on a practical level by a will to actually forsake said practices, which she instead considered an essential yardstick when assessing the marriage potential of an aspiring wife for her son. These contradictions are fairly common and may also depend on a lack of competence in the Italian language, and difficulties in effective communication and finding a shared cultural horizon. An extreme case in point relates to a Nigerian wet nurse who had enrolled in a training course on prevention of FGM in Turin: she believed that the course was going to teach her how to better practice excision of the labia and clitoris. Only her questions during the course did her mates realise the extent of the misunderstanding (Vulpiani, Focus Group 2).

18 The interviews and focus groups also led to extensive questioning of FGM, even though the values involved were considered paramount by the family of origin, and there had clearly been a distancing from the traditions and actual rejection of the reasoning that lent legitimacy to these practices. In this case these were substantial changes, capable of producing a collective and community based reassessment of FGM practices as they were performed in the emigrant’s country of origin. The emotional involvement and the allocation of meanings to the excision practices thus lose their shared community basis that can more easily be pursued in a village context. The practices encounter direct pressure through personal and family experience of integration or marginalisation within the host society. The migratory project has its bearing on this change of attitude: the readiness to integrate within the society into which one has emigrated or a very reclusive attitude that points to yearning to return to one’s country of origin clearly affect the decision to refuse or impose the violent traditional markings of the bodies of daughters. By the same token, marginalisation or acceptance by the country to which one emigrates can increase the likelihood of either a rejection or the embracing of a value system that does not accept excision or infibulation. The risk of a whole range of responses is apparent within second generations, who while striving to move ahead also heed their traditions just in case they are denied an acceptable future; or systematically rejected by the host society or if no social and economic mobility is also forthcoming; or

when faced with constant stigmatization or criminalisation of the reference community. It is the case of an 18 years old Somali girl living in Florence, deeply depressed for her marginalization by Italian peers, who decided to come back to Somalia to be infibulated, against the opinion of her family and the cultural mediators that were unable to persuade her⁴.

19 Based on the interviews and focus groups we could say that in Italy we still have to deal with a considerable clash of world views, one that considers these practices acceptable while the other openly condemns them. This juxtaposition comes to the fore every time we start to engage in honest discussions among women, whether or not they belong to countries with a tradition of excision. In a very heated discussion between a Rumenian cultural mediator who viewed the practice of violating a small girl's genitals as barbarous and a woman from Sierra Leone, the latter forcefully reiterated the symbolic role of mutilation in no uncertain terms:

Don't you realise that culture is everything? It's a whole, it's our entire identity. If you don't see things as you would if you were part of the community you can't hope to understand, from within it's not so terrible; you see it from outside and you don't understand. It's not right that a practice that we consider normal should be banished... [...] and I don't see why these practices should be banned, people in our country do them, it doesn't hurt and nothing gets shut off, nothing is removed and one is beautiful, those useless things are removed. (Vulpiani, Focus group 1)

The tradition and the communities' beliefs are replaced by an anthropological concept of culture ("You don't realise: culture is everything") but the explanatory concepts and models of the operation are functional to those of much ethnographic literature. And thus, the need to mutilate is once again invoked to match traditional assessments of beauty, cleanliness and hygiene, a dominating aesthetic value, that can overcome the limits and imperfections of a thankless nature ("those useless things" or "those shameful parts". A woman from Togo during an interview proudly stated the aesthetic value of the excision she has been subjected to: "Then you are finally beautiful, as beautiful as a doll." (Vulpiani, Interview 23). These statements, which try to lend legitimacy to excision as an extreme yet essential mode of overcoming the limitations of nature itself, are often reiterated in order to use cultural considerations to re-establish the boundaries between male and female, discarding what is not needed and that nature has absent-mindedly left behind, leading to nothing but chaos in the couple and in the community. The excision of the clitoris and the labia majora leave no

⁴Example described after focus group 3 in 2010 by Lucrezia Catania, a Specialist in Gynaecology, Obstetrics and Sexuology at the Hospital Careggi, in Florence.

shadow of doubt in the family and the community, redefining in irreversible fashion the boundaries between the sexes and removing any sexual ambiguity between penis and vagina.

20 Evidence of bio-medical consequences and complications of FGM was widely discussed during focus groups, also with unexpected arguments by some migrants. A young Congolese woman stated: “But it’s not as painful as you claim and one has to be careful to do it properly... and in any case one doesn’t feel much because pain thresholds differ and pain is not felt.” (Vulpiani, Interview 16). The firm belief and the absence of valid cultural alternatives could then lead to belittle even the unmistakable pain of an invasive operation that is irreversibly mortifying for a woman’s body, reducing the impact of medical complications in relation to which the institutions and the associations carry out a regular and essential job of providing appropriate information and awareness-building. Even the ideology behind human rights and the right of the young girl/woman’s right to a healthy life and psychological and physical integrity, which is perfectly acceptable by those who share the founding social and cultural constructs and paradigms, is not devoid of misunderstandings or worse, semantic reversals. An instance of this was provided by a cultural mediator of Mali, who according to her understanding of human rights, claimed during the interview that mutilation was a right, a cultural right that everyone could claim:

In Italy you keep talking about universal rights... and you believe diversity to be a resource... that immigration is a resource and that cultures are a right and a resource... and if we don’t want to be open don't we have the right to choose? This is our diversity and we have the right to uphold it... it's a right granted to us by our customs. (Vulpiani, Interview 28).

In this statement we can notice that the education to human rights may be accepted with contradictory ambiguity. The oxymoron proclaimed when stating a ‘right to mutilation’ clearly undermines a form or rhetoric used in discussing rights that is at times hard to accept or acknowledge outside its own particular historical and cultural context. Rights that are constitutionally ratified and protected by our legal institutions are merged with rhetoric referring to ideal rights, brought into play to claim rights that are believed to be legitimate, set up a very perilous contradiction in terms that could be detrimental to the very important rights granted and protected by our laws. Thus, in a dangerous misunderstanding of fundamental rights, the right to cultural diversity, as right to FGM, is used in an attempt to take over the right to protect the little girls that risk mutilation, and who are effectively denied the right to their own health and psychological/physical integrity.

Bridging the gap between sensationalism and intercultural communication

21 Having delved into the multi-faceted nature and the many meanings that FGM can have, one must necessarily review the communication strategies developed by governmental institutions combating FGM and NGOs that work towards preventing these practices. Sensationalism and the information provided to the public at large only seem to divide social groups, increasing stigmatisation and closing women off into even greater community isolation, thus becoming victims on two different levels: of the traditions, they would like to avoid and the host society that condemns them without hearing them out. Perhaps, in order to set in motion bidirectional communication, one must first cast aside the rhetorical component of FGM prevention, when it is reduced to empty statements on indictments of their victims. Indignation and accusation may reassure us but all too often distance and cloister the women victims of FGM in their own community, putting them in a position of having to reject any doubt or questioning of the traditions in which they believe. Furthermore, we must try and avoid language that is open to misunderstanding, particularly in the arguments put forward by politicians and associations, which pretend to agree with an out and out condemnation of the practices (in meetings between institutions, associations, communities, community leaders and immigrant families), in order to avoid conflicts or legal repercussions, though by so doing they remove any chance of a truly symmetric discussion and a possible revision of the cultural paradigms on which mutilations are based. In this way, we end up raising the awareness of those who already approve our out and out condemnation, while leaving behind for good those who would like to embrace a future safe from genital mutilation.

22 Other reactions leading to families and communities closing off are produced by sensationalistic media campaigns that focus their generalist communication strategy exclusively on indignation and condemnation, foregoing any attempt at true communication with the persons directly involved in these issues. The lack of communications which attempt to attract those directly involved through requests for meetings based on a shared context of meanings and values, on elements that can be objectively compared (such as psychological and bio-medical complications as a result of FGM, the condemnation of these practices by the main universal religions or the existence of actual criminal responsibility resulting out of the performance of said practices), increases the likelihood of an emotional and disdainful rejection both within the host society and by the population affected by these practices. These kinds of communication only end up fostering the stigmatisation of entire foreign communities, leading to an increasingly closed off attitude and a falling back on traditional

family identities for many women and men who would otherwise be ready to give up these practices.

23 In conclusion, once we have got rid of the tendency to make easy claims, if we want to effectively eradicate genital mutilation, we must address the processes that lead to the construction of gender identities along with the material and symbolic aspects that lead up to them in many communities where excision is practiced, in order to have an impact on how social discourses and categories that have now become obsolete and dysfunctional to the new social and cultural context of the host society can be communicated. Explaining that genital mutilations are a crime that carries a jail sentence is very important, but the information must be supported by the construction of individual and collective roles and discourses (carried out with the reference community and their community and religious authorities) that must be functional to daily life; strong arguments must be put forward (which might include bio-medical complications, the femininity and aesthetic value of non-violation, the uselessness of FGM to marriage, the risk of losing parental control over the children if reported, the lack of any religious justification for FGM, etc.).

24 Introducing change means adopting a listening stance, a temporary suspension of judgement in order to understand the individual's value system and thus the extent of their problem; to understand what can be culturally conceived and what cannot. In other words, it is essential to understand whether the mutilation practices are conceivable or not by the person we have before us, whether the woman alone with her daughters believes that this practice could be included among the obligations that tradition imposes, among the possibilities that must be practiced or whether the seed of doubt and uncertainty have been sown in her mind, a first step towards a possible rejection of excision and infibulation practices.

25 If we want to understand how things can change and how excision and infibulation practices can be rejected in a specific context, we must be clear about the space between the social significance assigned to FGM by the foreign family or community, in its territorial and temporal context, and the presumed increase of the power of choice that allows the individual the chance to express their freedom to act in opposition to cultural traditions; and I am referring to the 'individual' as there is a shared responsibility of both men and woman with regard to the liberation of the woman's body from the coercive power of culture. For every given context, in every 'here and now' in which we operate, if we want to build a path towards communication we must have a clear understanding of the cultural context in which the individual operates. In that symbolic space of what is conceivable, what according to a

mother and father is socially and culturally acceptable and actionable, this is the area we must address, in order to expand and broaden the options open to the individual.

26 The proposal I feel it is my duty to put forward is that one should always start out from specific spatial and temporal contexts, to set in motion preliminary analyses of meaning and significance assigned to female genital mutilation by whoever we have before us (be it an individual and/or a family and/or a specific community), according to a situational and contextual analysis based on the development of customised forms of communication. With this in mind, a culturally structured approach to communication, information and awareness represents an unavoidable choice if one hopes to interfere with a person's possible life choices: what is allowed and what is not, what values, beliefs and practices cannot be sacrificed in order to retain a social and cultural equilibrium. A communication model of this kind must be introduced in a space where dialogue and confrontation are based on reciprocal understandings, in which the presence of the rights and duties, social rules and moral imperatives of the host society (the inviolable nature of young girls, the self-determination of women regarding their own body and sexuality); a place where opposing tensions are allowed to interact, in which discussions on how foreign value structures can be ferried over and embrace these undeniable principles. To achieve this one must set up an alliance between national and local institutions, associations, ethnic and religious communities; an alliance based on symmetrical relations and true participation, assisted by cultural mediation as a tool for community integration, according to a bottom-up approach and not a top-down one. Such an approach must primarily be based on the acknowledgement of the Other, an essential prerequisite to allow the identification of shared objectives, targets, messages, communication strategies with the communities, relying on a systemic approach that can merge knowledge and representations of FGM with their impact on thought patterns. This will necessarily require the involvement of both the cognitive and the emotional spheres, to be achieved by providing the appropriate balance between correct information and an equivalent capacity to receive the message. Ultimately, this will necessarily have to involve the men of the community. In this way one can hope to take both the individual and their family on board, by affecting attitudes and behavioural models, through bottom up communication that will allow a critical revision of values, practices and community obligations.

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Love beyond Boundaries: Subjectivity and Sexuality through Bhawaiya Folk Song of Bengal

By Nasrin Khandoker, Maynooth University, Ireland and
Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh

Abstract:

Boundaries mark limits, and as such the transgression of boundaries is inherently subversive. My research on the Bhawaiya songs of Bengal examines this transgression. Most love songs in Bhawaiya are about ‘illicit’ love, deviating from social norms and often occur in reaction to oppressive marital circumstances. They are a gateway to exploring female narratives of subjecthood and desire, in which women are the agents of their own sexuality. My focus is on deviance from marriage in the Bhawaiya folk songs as a form of subversion. Understanding Bhawaiya and its subversive existence requires an understanding of political, religious, linguistic and cultural boundaries of the Bhawaiya areas. Cooch Behar, the birthplace of the Bhawaiya genre, has historically been situated on blurred boundaries: between the cultural borders of Bengali and Rajbangshi, the religious borders of Islam and Hinduism, the governmental borders of the British Raj and Hindu kingdom and the borders of the Colonial and Bengali nationalist narratives. Even now, the Bhawaiya areas are divided by the international borders of Bangladesh and India. These blurred boundaries create a space for marginal peoples to develop and create their own cultural products, using the language of affection to resist and subvert patriarchal social rules. In my article, I will explore the subversive existence of female desire within Bhawaiya, and examine its feminist possibilities.

“From your/my lips, several songs, several ways of saying echo each other. For one is never
seperable from each other. You/I are always several at the same time.”
(Luce Irigaray 72)

1 In this article I will examine the subversive existence of female/subaltern subjectivity as sexual subject through a genre of Bangla folk songs: Bhawaiya. It emerged within the Rajbangshi community of North Bengal, becoming famous for expressing the (often sensual¹) desires of women. Performed by both men and women, Bhawaiya lyrics detail youthful and non/extra-marital desire, often in contrast with oppressive marital circumstances. Bhawaiya’s subversion unsettles the heteronormative gender roles that emerged in colonial Bengal. The ideal of ‘respectable’ Bengali women was central to Bengali nationalism, countering colonial tropes of backward customs and female oppression (Chatterjee 627, Banerjee 129). Bengali nationalist narratives strove to create a homogeneous domestic model reflecting nineteenth century British domestic norms of puritan/motherly new Bengali women and stern patriarchs. Non-normative social and domestic practices were excluded from middle-class Bengali society (Chatterjee 628,

1. Here I define ‘sensual’ as feelings through body and senses; sensual desire as embodied sexuality, not phallogocentric or linear, rather expressed and embedded through all senses in blurring the binary of mind/body.

Banerjee 129). Bhawaiya nonetheless retained its appeal until now within the norms of Bengali society, despite its explicit language of female sexual desire.

2 In this paper, from my fieldwork experience², I hope to show how blurring borders of language, gender, class and region enables Bhawaiya to straddle the boundaries of decency. First I will discuss the historical context of the genre in relation to the emergence of Bengali nationalism. Second, I will situate Bhawaiya's geographical and political liminality which enables its creativity. And third, I will examine how female sexual subjectivity exists in the lyrics and performances of the folk songs, crossing gender boundaries and providing space for female agency.

Blind Spot of Sensuality in Bengali Nationalism

3 The first Bhawaiya lyrics were published by George Grierson as the example of Rajbangshi dialect for the Linguistic Survey of India in 1904. The song is about a young girl who wants to get married for the fulfilment of her sexual desire. His translation of the lyrics goes:

At dawning youth I was not by Hymen favoured/
How long still am I to remain single at home/
O fate marble-hearted!

The full-blown flower of my golden youth yields to Malaya's softest breeze/
My parents have become my foes in not sending me to another's home bound in ties hymeneal, /
O fate marble-hearted

My heart cannot open to my father for shame, my mother I cannot press by maidenly modesty bound/
Slowly is love consuming my frame as fire within chaff/
O fate marble-hearted!

[...]

Stain who will my name, aught do I not care? To the fill of my heart will I enjoy the time in my love's sweet company. O fate marble hearted. (Grierson 186)

4 The song lyrics describe the sensual desire of the woman as newly blossoming. Grierson's translates *biya* (marriage) as 'hymen' to accentuate the sexual connotation of the lyrics, although the word 'marriage' here equally upholds the connotation of sexual union to the native Bangla speakers. This theme is one of the most common trends of Bhawaiya:

O dear, to whom I will tell the story of my sorrow/
Who would have empathy for me? My parents married me to a crazy man/
The scorns of my in-laws are making me sick/
The crazy husband stays home, but never even touches my pillow/
O dear, I was cooking

² As part of my PhD research, I did my fieldwork in various districts of North Bengal in India and Bangladesh. My fieldwork was divided in two parts, first part was in 2016 and the second part was in 2017. I mainly use interviews and focus group discussion with observation. This paper is a part of my ongoing PhD research.

while you were playing the flute/ Smoke covered the sky as I set fire to the damp wood.
(Song collected from fieldwork and translated by myself)

5 In these lyrics, the sexually frustrated subject desires her lover (the flute player), transgressing marriage and chaste female norms. ‘Biya’ or marriage is a common theme of the lyrics of Bhawaiya songs, but the meaning of it is flexible. In some lyrics it clearly indicates sexual fulfilment, in others it refers to marital oppression, depending on the relationship with the husband and lovers. Extra-marital desires are usually justified by the female subjects because of their oppressive or sexually unfulfilling husbands. Anam³, a research participant, explained that Bhawaiya is the only genre where illicit affairs are not judged by the singers and listeners. Transgressive or not, these sensual passions are framed as transcending sexual normativity. Crossing monogamous marriage in these songs is less of a moral dilemma than a social obstacle.

6 Around the same time as the emergence of Bhawaiya (the late 19th century), terms like polygamy and adultery were emerging in mainstream discourse in the context of British colonialism. British colonialism was partly predicated on orientalist depictions of India’s cruelty to women; “white men saving brown women from brown men” in Spivak’s famous formula (Spivak 307). Bengali nationalism responded to these depictions by remodelling gender norms to reflect idealised Victorian domesticity and banish the trope of Indian women as ‘victims’ (Mani 121). This historical process constructs a specific image of decent and sacrificing ‘Bengali women’ centering around images of motherhood (Bagchi WS65, Banerjee 168). Moreover, the honorable Muslim mother image of Bengali women was free of sexuality (Mookherjee 38). In short, the ‘new Bengali woman’ was chaste, domestic, and devoted to her family and husband. Not only did this reformulation of womanhood de-personalise and de-sex women, it aimed to replace the multiplicity of sexual practices across Bengal with institutionalised, standardised norms.

7 The ‘new women’ of this class disassociated from the popular nineteenth century folk cultural products like doggerels, poems, proverbs, and songs (Banerjee 168). Tanika Sarkar shows that in the last half of the nineteenth century the emergent ‘public sphere’ expanded to include the lower class, through the huge numbers of cheap Bengali publications. She argues that ‘adultery’ became the ‘other’ of Hindu conjugal sexuality (69). Although she shows the resisting voices of women against child marriage in various middle-class women’s writings, the issue of

³ I used pseudo names for all the research participants.

'adultery' remains the unspoken taboo for the women in the formal discourse. If we consider 'adultery' as the 'other' of marriage, then it has no function other than to strengthen the 'self': marriage. However, the adulterous desire expressed through women's voices has agency symbolically existing in the Bhawaiya lyrics, and not morally dismissed by its performances. It shows a different narrative of 'adultery' that is not as the 'other' of marriage, but which transgresses its norms. I want to augment Sarkar's depiction of the Bengali 'public sphere' by situating Bhawaiya lyrics and female desire for 'illicit' relations in the blind spot of that public sphere, where the emotions of love with its sensuality were not scrutinised for their illicitness.

8 Marital and sexual customs that fell outside these new boundaries were banished to fringes of respectable Bengali society. The area where the Bhawaiya song emerged is Kamrupa, traditionally a centre of devotion to Kamdev Madan (Madan, the God of sex). According to Sukhabilasha Barma, that is the reason why "sex-oriented love, and not the unworldly heavenly love, has been deeply rooted in the songs of this area" (232). While marginalised from respectable moral Bengali discourse and disassociated from the idea of 'new women', sexual expression continued to exist through Bhawaiya and its reproduction in the middle-class/elite musicians with semi-respectability in the early twentieth century. Although the woman speaker/subject of the songs is subaltern, her expression of desire enables her to transgress the boundary between the lower class and the upper class through the popularity of the songs among prominent elite musicians. Rabindranath Tagore, the most important literary guru of Bangla, was also influenced by Bengali folk music. Tagore's songs, which culturally dominated Bangla music for almost a century, were influenced by the Baul genre of folk music. While he was promoting Baul music in his institution, the other legendary poet and songwriter of East Bengal, Kazi Nazrul Islam, became fond of Bhawaiya and Bhatiali folk music. Bengali folk music began to be adored by mainstream Bangla musicians and audiences, and soon recordings were being made for gramophone records. In this form, in the twentieth century, the Bhawaiya crossed over into the living rooms of the elites, carrying with it, its attitudes to female desire.

Subversive Existence on the Border

9 I want to argue that female subjectivity in Bhawaiya and its sexual subversive desire could exist because of the ambiguity of Bhawaiya's location between borders. Political or cultural/religious/linguistic borders are important in understanding the 'location' of Bhawaiya and its subversive emergence. Bhawaiya is one of the main cultural signifiers of North Bengal.

‘North Bengal’ cannot be found on the maps of Bangladesh or India but it still exists in Bengali topography. ‘North Bengal’, like its main cultural product, the Bhawaiya musical tradition, transcends the border between Indian and Bangladeshi North Bengal with an imagined geographical community.

10 There are many stories and disputes about the origin of the Bhawaiya which are part of the debates about the identity politics of language and culture of the area. However, Cooch Behar is generally accepted as the genre’s place of origin, by both its residents and most Bhawaiya researchers. It has a historical context of being situated in the blurred political and cultural border between Bengal and Rajbangshi, between Muslim and Hindu communities, between the British Raj and Hindu kingdom. From 1947 to the present, the whole Bhawaiya area has been divided by the international border between Bangladesh and India.

Border between Kamrupa Dynasty, Mughal India and British Raj

11 Cooch Behar was an independent dynasty initially known as Kamrupa. The area was inhabited by the Rajbashi people, whose language and culture were considered distinct from Bangla. The area remained a sovereign Hindu kingdom throughout the period of Mughal rule in India, and its defeat by the British. In the colonial period, Cooch Behar was governed by a king as a feudal ruler under the indirect control of British commissioner until India's independence from British rule. The Cooch Behar state of that time included almost all the Bhawaiya areas which today are outside of its border. After the end of the British Raj, the king of Cooch Behar handed over the state control to India, and became a mere district of the state of West Bengal (now Bengal). Therefore, for the Rajbanshi, the ‘independence’ of India was not really an ‘independence,’ but rather an acute marginalisation of Cooch Behar and its language and culture. As a result, the anti-colonial sentiment which fueled Indian/Bengali nationalism and its project to create a new kind of Bengali woman was not very strong there. This marginality from the mainstream was a factor in enabling the sensual desires of women to exist in the lyrics of Bhawaiya songs.

Border between Bangla and Rajbangshi

12 The language of Bhawaiya remains a mixture of Rajbangshi and Bangla (there is little difference between the two languages, one can understand the other). There is however, a tension between these two cultures. The rise of Bengali nationalism in the 20th century marginalised

Rajbangshi culture and practices. Although Bhawaiya is now considered a genre of Bangla folk song, it is actually situated in the blurred border between Bangla and Rajbangshi language and culture. According to the linguist George Grierson, Rajbangshi is just another dialect of Bangla, a view that many in the Rajbangshi community disagree with. On the other hand, Azim and Roy show that, the sanskritization and modernization of Bangla through the colonial influence marginalised many ethnic, 'non-proper' words. This came about through the educational scheme proposed by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, which was visible in the curriculum of Sanskrit colleges (Azim and Roy 18). It can be assumed that, the various words and dialects (like Rajbangshi) have been excluded from that standardization process. The rise of Indian/Bengali nationalism in response to colonialism therefore, did not influence political and cultural identity in North Bengal. This blurred borderland between Bengali and Rajbangshi is one of the central factors that allowed the subversive or deviant sexual elements to exist in Bhawaiya song lyrics. According to one of the research participants, "since they weren't controlled by the British colony, they were not civilized. People didn't have the proper identity of the father", Men could have more than one wife. At the same time women could have a 'supplementary husband' (*thekna swami*) if her husband left her. It was possible that this situation created space for non-monogamous and flexible/blurred conjugal relations for both men and women in flexible marital and family laws of that situation. With the rise of Bengali nationalism imposing a new normative sexuality in the twentieth century, the marginal areas of North Bengal continued to allow space for crossing the normative sexual bond by marriage.

Border between Center and Margin

13 In the contemporary situation, the 'centers' of Bhawaiya spread through the wider Bengali population through being recorded in the capital cities: Kolkata and Dhaka. The people associated with Bhawaiya, living in those two capital cities, are the most elite Bhawaiya people, and they possess the knowledge and power of being the representatives of Bhawaiya to the outside world (greater Bengal and abroad). However, since it is the folk tradition of the poorest peoples who reside in the rural areas, the areas around Cooch Behar and Rangpur are considered to be more authentic Bhawaiya areas. For example, Jalpaiguri, Dinhata in Bengal, Gauripur in Assam, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat and Chilmari in Bangladesh are considered as important rural breeding grounds for this musical tradition. The tension between center and margins complicates the idea of authenticity and recognition. The more marginal the songs are, the more authentic

they appear. However, this authenticity negotiates with the recognition from the center. The rural Bhawaiya, using its authenticity, negotiates with the urban representative form and with the nation state that produces, regulates and protects this as a national tradition (Fillitz and Saris 16). However, within this negotiation, there remains room for creativity in the margins (Das and Poole 30). The marginality of Bhawaiya and its indeterminacy allows for creativity and for strategies of engaging the state, thus their normative and dominant narratives.

Female Subjectivity Crossing the Gendered Border

14 Considering lyrics which articulate female desire for a sexually fulfilling lover as feminist subjectivity could be viewed by many as an over ambitious project. However, if we consider those lyrics as cultural products which have the ability to shape the attitudes towards constructing the agency of women, they can definitely be worthy of exploration, as female subjectivity can be the starting point of a feminist political agenda. Here my enquiry is influenced by Rosi Braidotti's arguments on constructing feminist subjectivity. For her,

the feminist project encompasses both the level of subjectivity in the sense of historical agency, including political and social entitlement, and the level of identity, which is linked to consciousness, desire, and the politics of the personal; it covers both the conscious and the unconscious levels." (Braidotti 7)

Starting from the sexual difference theory, Braidotti suggests that in the search for a feminist subject we need to deconstruct the phallogentric, linear idea of woman and to reconstruct lived experiences of women, using the myth of woman as a vacant lot where different women can play with their subjectivity (9). I want to examine whether or not the lyrics and performace of Bhawaiya can become the sphere in which female subjectivity can be constructed.

15 In discussing female subjectivity, I will consider the expression of female desire in the lyrics and 'becoming the woman' through performances. In considering the voices of women as the desiring subject of the songs, I will first examine the authorships of the songs in order to discover who gave the language of subversive desire to the female subject. Second, I will examine whether Bhawaiya as a cultural product, is influential in constructing the agency of women or not. And third, I will look at how the emotions inscribed in the songs became instrumental in crossing the gendered border and creating female subjectivity through the singer becoming the woman of the songs.

Voice and Authorship of the Lyrics

16 When I was discussing authorship with the participants, initially most of them said that the creators of the songs were mostly men. Nihar Barua from Assam, a key ethnomusicologist of the early-twentieth century, offers a contrasting interpretation, which was quite different from this assumption. Nihar was one of the first self-taught ethnomusicologists from the prestigious Jamindar family.⁴ For her, it was the village poets who were able to bridge the gap between men and women and brought out the most secret and passionate desires of women. The poets from whom she collected those songs were both men and women. According to Nihar, the poets who devised the songs were ‘psychologists’ who can understand and express female desire (in Bangla, *joibon*, which refers desire with a strong sexual connotation). *Joibon* here is expressed as the erotic form of matured womanhood that is difficult to repress. Nihar gives one female poet’s song as an example⁵:

How can I repress (tie up) my new lusty youth? It’s neither gold, nor silver that I can make into a necklace to wear on my neck. It’s neither money, nor penny that I put into the locker. It’s neither gem, nor jewel that I tie up in the *anchol*⁶ (68).

17 This sentiment is central to Bhawaiya according. According to Nihar, the songs are created (written is not the correct term, as the poets were not literate) by both male and female poets. Although the lives of men and women were different because of the coercive patriarchal systems, the songs came from the poets who transcended gender with compassion, expressing the feelings of women as sexual subjects rather than male objects of desire (Barua 67). The characteristics of Bhawaiya tradition contribute more than the individual author. Therefore, it is more collective than individual. Sara Ahmed’s concept of collective feelings explains how “to align individuals with collectives.....can construct intercorporeal encounters creates the impression of a collective body” (25-26). These collective emotions can construct the intercorporeal female subjectivity, which transcends biological individual gender identity, and is not bound to the physical female body or sexual orientation, but rather can be identified through the sexual desire and vital emotions inscribed in the songs. My fieldwork experiences of the performances of the songs were invaluable to me in understanding this.

⁴ Considered the royal family, it was then part of the greater Rangpur of undivided Bengal, it is now within the Assam state of India.

⁵ This song is translated by myself from the writing of Nihar Barua.

⁶ *Anchol* is the spare hanging part of the *shari* in which women tie up valuable objects, along with its many other uses

Bhawaiya as a Sphere of Women's Agency

18 Lyrics about female desire and sexuality in Bhawaiya do not automatically create a space for women as the agents of their own sexuality. There is a clear gap between what acceptable desire is in a women's real life and what is acceptable in the fictional context of the song. For Bhawaiya performers, discussing their own sexuality is not acceptable in formal discussion. When conducting interviews, in keeping with the social norm of a good woman, I did not even bring up the topic. Most of the interview participants avoided drawing connections between the lyrical expression of love and their own experiences.

19 However, I wanted to examine whether the lyrics are a form through which these women can voice their emotions. Although the majority of contemporary songwriters are male, many of the female singers write their own songs, despite receiving little recognition as song writers. In spite of this, their agency and satisfaction at being able to express their words through the songs was clear. For example, Laila, a middle-aged female singer, continues to sing despite strong opposition from her husband. Her story of fighting obstacles shows how strong-willed she is. While taking me to her room where she sings and writes, she told me: "Let me introduce you to my closest friend: this harmonium. I talk with it in the language of my soul". She did not give me the permission to record her interview and songs, but gave me her published poetry book, where according to her, she wrote about her passion, in her own voice. She also played me some songs that she wrote, full of rage, sorrow and desperation. She amazed me with her strong will and ability to transcend the borders imposed upon her by social norms.

20 In the interviews, however, the responses and reactions of female singers and song writers vary when asked how they connect lyrics with their own lives. Some expressed their sufferings and struggles as singers, and some did not. A subtle, 'silent' agreement of the difficulties that they are facing and struggling with, was evident. However, the idea of the subjugation of women in the past, when the lyrics were written, was commonly agreed upon.

21 When I explained to informants the focus of my research was female passion, feelings, desires, they often translated this as 'sufferings of women'. It was common to depict women as victims of the social system without mentioning patriarchy, especially from the middle-class, formally educated male informants. The 'subjugation of women' trope is present in the formal conversation of the interviews with this group of informants. But it is depicted as something 'out there', in an abstract form, never presented as connected to their lives. Maloti, the newly married singer living with her mother-in-law and husband, spoke about how she is treated by everyone

with respect as she never performs songs that are socially inappropriate, thus upholding social norms and her role as a 'respectable woman'. However, her role changed once her husband left the room, leaving us alone together. Upon discovering that I was divorced, she suggested that I should get a new man in my life. "Why should women have to suffer to uphold the image of the good woman? You are young and pretty, why would you waste it?" This formal to informal code switching illustrates her conscious performance as a 'good woman' while also questioning it when appropriate.

22 Maloti did not connect her life with the song lyrics, but for her, performing the songs meant performing the voice and stories of the characters of the songs. The 'being the woman' of the song became visible when she was explaining her thoughts on the meaning of the songs and performance. For Maloti, the women in the songs are not so far from her own self: "If the story doesn't match with me, I imagine someone I know, with this type of story and go there, and become them." The sufferings, despair or desire of the women in songs are common to her and easy to relate to.

23 This inter-discursive situation of overlapping interview and performance, showed not only the performing of the self in specific social situations, but showed the kind of situation from which subversion can be forged. Female agency is absent from the 'suffering woman' trope, but agency, sometimes very conscious and shared, sometimes subtle, is present and salient to the middle and lower middle-class female singers. Being 'good women' is central to their self-representation, assuming the generalized discourse of subjugation of women, while subtly trying to transcend it. This can be examined through Saba Mahmood's conceptualization of agency as not just the ability to subvert patriarchal norms, but also in which women work to become willing subjects to negotiate the historical and cultural situation through which a subject is formed (203). This is where I see the formation of subjectivity negotiating with patriarchal norms. For Maloti, her agency meant accommodating social norms, while retaining the wish to transcend them.

Becoming the Woman

24 Performers becoming the women of the songs was clearly visible in two performances that I recorded, where the singers started to cry by leaning on the sorrow of the women. In the first case, it was a female singer and in the second case, it was a male singer who began weeping along with his accompanying musicians. The respondents explain that weeping while performing the songs is a very common occurrence.

25 In the first case, the performer was Asha, a once famous singer who has lived a dramatic life of success and tragic failure. She is currently living in extreme poverty with her husband. The first day I went to meet her while she was practicing music in a neighbour's house with her husband, who is a songwriter and plays the '*dotara*', a vital instrument for Bhawaiya. She cannot practice music in her own home, as she cannot afford the harmonium and her sons do not like her to play for Islamic religious reasons. While performing a song of a departed female lover, she wept and her voice trembled with emotion. The song concerned a woman who was unable to rid herself of the *maya* (illusionary, worldly love and passion) for her lover. She expressed her suffering and urged her lover to come to see her dead body, as she was now living out her last days. The other respondent, Amin, who brought me to her, was also crying at that time and explained to me later that, it is impossible for Asha not to cry while performing, as her life is very similar to the lives of the women in the Bhawaiya songs. The details of Asha's tragic life became clear by the second interview. Being a member of a religious minority, being stubborn and passionate and following her heart were identified by Amin as the causes of her tragedy.

26 Asha herself is the iconic woman represented in Bhawaiya; passionate and stubborn, who tried to negotiate with the gendered norms of 'womanhood'. Her life story expressed by her and by others seems to show her strong will to negate the social norms too. Being a Muslim girl, she became accepted in the society by singing *gazal* (considered the high standard of music of the Islamic sufi tradition), but she became popular as a Bhawaiya singer, and most of her popular songs express the sensual desires of women. However, when she was at the height of her popularity, she fell in love with a songwriter and *Dotara* player and married him against the will of her family. This was the beginning of tragedy in her life. From that point on, while enduring fierce enmity from all of her family members, she struggled to be with the love of her life and also tried to continue singing. Asha does not speak much, but her moody, proud and passionate expression is very significant. She is a woman who did not compromise her passion. This caused suffering and poverty, but she remains dedicated to her musical expression. Her agony is expressed in the song performance and coincides with the 'suffering' image of women, but she also transcends it with her agency.

27 In the second case, I went to an establishment similar to an orphanage in which children were being trained as folk singers. The organization is run by the Bhawaiya singer Badol and funded by some Norwegian artists. The children live in an extension of Badol's house, which also contains a studio. After the interview, three female children (from aged 10 to 16), sat

together in the studio with the musicians and songwriters of the organization for their regular practice session. They all sang and were expecting me to record their songs. Badol performed last, and during his performance tears came from his eyes. In the song, the first person female protagonist is lamenting to an elderly woman (*obo*; a word which often refers to the grandmother) that her husband has married a second wife and brought her into their home. Before beginning the performance, he explained the story of the song, which concerned child marriage and the polygamy of men, and how it was and still remains an exploitative situation for women. While performing the song, he wept, performing as her, and feeling the sorrow that she feels.

28 I want to examine the performance of the man becoming a ‘suffering woman’. For these two cases, I want to locate the possibilities of agency in the constitutive performativity by the reiteration of gender norms (Butler 2, Mahmud 210). If gender is a performing act that we “put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure”, the deviance from the normative gender role in a performative act can be understood as a subversion of these norms (Butler 531). Here, the man performing a woman’s song carries this subversive possibility. This process can be seen as ‘becoming woman’, by the idea of ‘becoming’ of Deleuze appropriated by Rosi Braidotti, as the process of constructing multiple subjectivities through it. For her, “the reference to ‘woman’ in the process of ‘becoming-woman’, does not refer to empirical females, but rather to socio-symbolic constructions” and “on the other hand, the becoming-woman is a fundamental step in the process of becoming, for both sexes” (Braidotti 45). Therefore, this notion of becoming woman through musical performance can be considered a first step towards the construction of temporal female subjectivity. In an atmosphere created by the temporal emotions felt by women, I experience that process of becoming-woman for both sexes, transcending the border of male/female binary by internalising the female musical emotions. That experience of ‘becoming-woman’ shows a process of constructing female subjectivity that is neither bound to the individual female body, nor the fixed sexual orientation. It is created by the emotional atmosphere inscribed in the songs.

29 Borders and margins demarcate and define normativity, but being between borders potentially subverts this norm. Bhawaiya, produced and reproduced by both men and women, bears the elements of subverting Bengali gender norms. This folk musical genre can merge both men and women in an atmosphere that transcends biological limits and combines a collective emotion of female subject. As the women in the Bhawaiya lyrics express sexual desire, sorrow, rage and resistance, contemporary female Bhawaiya singers also use it to voice their agency in

negotiating patriarchy. Emerging in the margins of a new Bengali patriarchal public sphere, Bhawaiya's mobility between the border and social centre enable the popularisation of lyrical 'illicit' passion. By crossing the geographical, linguistical, cultural and gendered borders, It's liminal existence nurtures this subversive feminine subject. I believe that this feminine subject has the potentiality to construct the temporal feminist subjectivity that cross the individual and gendered body/mind binary with collective emotions of love.

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Stan Hawkins: *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality* (Routledge Studies in Popular Music). Routledge, 2016.

Michael Reinhard, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

“Astonishment helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place” (Muñoz 5).

1 Professor Stan Hawkins’s latest book, *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality*, takes up the queer aesthetics and politics of performance within pop music as its subject. Over the course of seven chapters, Hawkins invites his readers to “partake in his own experiences, delights, and impressions” (Hawkins 2) of such figures as Madonna, George Michael, and David Bowie. This volume joins recent works in analyzing the political and social dimensions of pop music and its performers as *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (2012) by Jack Halberstam, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars* (2013) by Kristin Lieb, and *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (2013) by Sheila Whitley. Drawing on his training as a musicologist, Hawkins’s work emphasizes how performers in pop music foreground a queer sense to normative representations of gender and sexuality. It is this queer sense, the author argues, that helps unsettle dominant social conventions and provide new frameworks for imagining the future.

2 As with many works in queer studies, Hawkins foregrounds his investigation using José Esteban Muñoz’s model of queer utopia as a form of desire for the “not-yet” of a future social world (Muñoz 26; Hawkins 7). This desire, addressed against the present’s lack (Hawkins 7), attunes his inquiry into the social function of pop music. *Queerness*, provocatively, works toward a reparative understanding of this genre as a space where queer bodies can “reorientate themselves” and “rethink our [their] own being in the world” (Hawkins 220). This attention to popular music’s queerness intimates how disruptive strategies of performance can stoke longing for political and social transformation. With this implication in mind, the queer potential of pop music directs us to consider how audiences experience and fulfill fantasies of disrupted gender and sexual norms. By focusing on these reorientations, Hawkins’s book provides a counterpoint to some of the work being done on postfeminism by complicating understandings of the

problematic relationship between sexualized bodies and fantasies of agency forwarded by marketing rhetoric. While there are clear issues to this relationship, *Queerness* acknowledges and emphasizes how audiences are oriented toward the limitations of the social and political present through the visual and sonic ecstasies of pop music.

3 A limitation of this work is, perhaps, due to its use of thematic structuring. Each chapter focuses on broad topics like art-pop aesthetics, camp, queer masculinity, and futurity among others. While this array is well suited for an anthology volume in Routledge's Popular Music series, it creates the impression that the entire work hews too closely to its chapter's subjects and limits its interrogation into the meta-discourses of queerness, utopia, or pop music more broadly. This limitation is most evident in Chapter 5, "'Talking Blah Blah': Camp into Queer," which interrogates how musical styles communicate the sounds and sensibilities of subcultures like the urban drag ball scene in the case of Lelf. In dealing with these subcultural dimensions, Hawkins's comments on camp raise important questions about how the symbolic economies of the past are disrupted, re-produced, or re-imagined in queer performance. The author's analysis of camp as a subcultural mode makes use of Susan Sontag's assertion in "Notes on Camp" that camp is more a sensibility than a concrete and visually-identifiable style (Hawkins 134). A methodological quandary surfaces here due to the instability of 'camp' as an aesthetic object since this categorization relies on subjective, internal logics of the spectator/listener. If 'camp' cannot be claimed as a concrete aesthetic or object, the use of Sontag provides strong justification to consider camp as an encounter between the audience and the pop music text, an encounter in which the spectator's affective relationship with a specific performer would take precedence. As such, Hawkins raises interest into the audience's engagement with the textures of queerness within pop music. A greater attention to the audience's encounter with the pop music text might yield further reflection on how queer performance is authored not in terms of a purely expressive or artistic perspective but as a calculated design of capitalist enterprise. Such reflection might ask how industrial and generic pressures structure the production of subversive, queer texts for pop music's contemporary markets. The resulting analysis might, indeed, find no different conclusion about how queerness modulates political and social norms. However, an attention to how advertising and marketing interests define issues of identity and queerness are intriguing research directions raised by this work, particularly as some studies now suggest that U.S. teen populations have become quite friendly with the label 'Queer' (Rodriguez).

4 On this point, however, Hawkins's project is, decidedly, strengthened by its investment in how pop music might be understood through its *cultural context* than strictly through its capitalist modes of production. In Chapter 3, "In and Out': Games of Truth and Disclosure," David Bowie, Madonna, and Diana Ross are all considered in how the 'closet' is a recurring metaphor in pop music. Hawkins analyzes how the gender-play of pop stars represents a genre of performance that privileges the confession of self and identity. For this argument, the author borrows Foucault's treatment of confession as a "transformation of knowledge and consciousness" (Hawkins 72) to interrogate the queer transgression and pleasure of these celebrities. For these personae, the coherence of identity is problematized by highlighting its performativity and its production as an object of self-presentation. Here, Hawkins astutely intimates how identity has become an object of freedom within pop music's songwriting such that the genre's declarations of self transforms and augments the audience's conscious experience of that identity. This insight is a notable strength of Hawkins's work as it encourages further debate into how queerness in pop music is influenced by discourses of American liberalism and its interaction with artists and listening populations.

5 In her inquiry into the utopian dimensions of queerness, Angela Jones remarks, "If queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe" (Jones 2). Hawkins's work draws similar conclusions from the queered presentation of social identities within popular music. His emphasis on disrupted gender and sexual norms are privileged precisely for their capacity to allow audiences the freedom to breathe, simply and queerly. *Queerness in Popular Music* makes strong use of its author's musicology training to raise this compelling insight. Further, Hawkins's analysis of self and identity in popular music provides excellent groundwork for further exploration into the affective dimensions of this genre. These resulting studies would investigate what queer and radical discourses pop music makes possible and how it interacts with broader segments of American culture and political discourse. In doing so, this promising research area would yield further insight into the affective forms of belonging found within popular music and how integral queerness might be to these forms. These types of investigations are ones that Hawkins is clearly capable of leading, and I look forward to his future work that makes such answers possible.

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Joe and the ‘Real’ Girls: *Blade Runner 2049*

Christina Parker-Flynn
Florida State University

1 About halfway into *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), Officer K (Ryan Gosling) finds himself seeking the source of a wooden and quite literal Trojan horse that, he has been told, originates from a hotbed of radioactivity. K sends his drone-like camera into the vaporous twilight to find the locus of contamination. Constantly moving and re-centering simultaneously, the viewfinder reveals the first of numerous and giant sculpted women littering the Vegas wasteland. A “heat analysis” reveals “life” collecting in a tangerine puddle at the fingertips of her delicately carved hand. The digital equivalent of these deserted Galateas, K’s fembot companion Joi (Ana de Armas) responds, “what is it?” to which K retorts, “guess we’re about to find out.” Like life itself, both this question and the film’s very quest are of woman (figure) born.

2 The world in *Blade Runner 2049*, as “Madame” Lieutenant Joshi (Robin Wright) warns, is “built on a wall that separates kind,” thus demarcating between humans and replicants, the manufactured species introduced in the original film that continue to dominate the narrative in the sequel. The crux of differentiating who is on either side of this wall reaffirms this very question: of woman born?

3 Directed by Denis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049* is a direct sequel to the original *Blade Runner* (1982) directed by Ridley Scott (who serves as an executive producer here), written by David Webb Peoples and Hampton Fancher, who also wrote the screenplay for the original. Thirty years after the events of the first film, Officer K finds himself commissioned to kill replicant Sapper Morton (Dave Bautista), and at Morton’s farm he stumbles upon a discovery: buried bones. These bones belong to replicant Rachael (Sean Young), a main character from the original *Blade Runner*. More than the mystery of the body’s identity is the mystery of its procreative powers. Her autopsy reveals ‘she’ died while giving birth to a child, a point that further complicates the concept of being “of woman born” while powerfully amplifying the Tyrell Corporation’s motto from the original film, which boasted that the company manufactured beings “more human than human”—mechanical copies that surpass the originals. The remainder

of the film largely focuses on K's quest to find this "miracle" child born of Rachael and Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) in the space between the original film and this "sequel," a word that fittingly comes from late Middle English, meaning "offspring" or "descendant."

4 In "*Blade Runner's* Moving Still," Elissa Marder asserts that "the photograph is the true 'subject'" of the original film, that "the photograph is the site of humanity and the locus of the film's quest for origins" (139). The "still" photograph Marder analyzes is the one Rachael has of her mother, false evidence that she's a 'real girl'; the mother in the photo is "no more Rachel's mother than she is anyone else's" (143). *2049* repeats a similar photographic gesture when K unearths a photo of a mystery woman holding the baby he seeks. Since we know the baby's mother, Rachael, has died in childbirth, we also know that this woman only operates as mother symbolically, just like in Rachel's mother-picture in the original film. And, after finally uncovering Deckard's whereabouts, K silently peruses his apartment's décor and stops to contemplate a framed photograph of Rachael that he has displayed on a table, surrounded by wooden figurines he has sculpted, a *mise-en-scène* tableau that sustains the undercurrent of woman as art object(ified). Yet, despite its staged appearance, it is a photograph of the film's one and only mother.

5 Many of the female characters in *2049* do 'mother,' or at least protect their charges, whether it be Freysa (Hiam Abbass) who helped deliver Rachael's baby and thus plays mother as the mystery woman in the aforementioned photograph, or Lieutenant Joshi, one of the film's only seemingly 'real' women, who displays warmth enough when K is designated off baseline that she offers him safe passage from the building. What flows through the veins of both films is this 'still' mother, as well as the necessity for the mother to be dead, rendered 'still.' Yet *2049*, which begins with a literal unearthing of the bones of the miraculously procreative Rachael, affirms even more powerfully than the original that "mother is not easily buried" (Marder 143).

6 In an undoubtedly meta- moment, *Blade Runner 2049* uncannily reproduces the original film's Rachael in the not-flesh, part of Niander Wallace's (Jared Leto) attempt to dupe a love-starved Deckard into giving up the whereabouts of the replicant resistance. To depict the resurrected Rachael, London-based effects company MPC digitally de-aged

images of 1982 Sean Young and combined those with current photographs of her taken with a capture rig and kit, essentially reproducing her from “stills” along with the assistance of many computer programs, some of which, like 3D animation software Maya and painting program Mari, are named as if they were women themselves.

7 Despite science-fiction’s emergence at the expense and usurpation of the female body and its procreative powers in the tradition of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, *2049* exalts the surprisingly reproductive Rachael to goddess status. Niander Wallace, *2049*’s Dr. Frankenstein, not only embraces but hopes for his own scientific reinstatement of that which was cast out: a procreative female. Wallace aims for his “new model” to be the Eve to a next generation of replicants who actually reproduce, as we are told Rachael has done with Deckard (not to put aside that this act of procreation equates to her death). External to the film and as part of their own marketing campaign, MPC declares on their webpage that they are “Leading the race to digital humans with a photoreal character for *Blade Runner 2049*.” In essence, taking over the role of mechanical mother, the conditions of the film’s making mirror the narrative content of its story. MPC’s reproductive work within the film, similar to the digital recreations of the predeceased Peter Cushing in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), and the ethical ramifications of reanimating the dead (what Victor Frankenstein quite literally does in Shelley’s novel) only reinforce the boundless ethical and philosophical quandaries born of *Blade Runner* and continued here in the sequel.

8 Not only surprisingly human, *Blade Runner 2049* is surprisingly feminist as well. Villeneuve’s early directing projects suggest his preoccupation with the portrayal of women. His first two feature films were predicated on issues of female subjectivity and reproduction: in *August 32nd on Earth* (1998), Simone decides to have a baby after a near-death accident, and in *Maelstrom* (2000), post-abortion Bibiane fails to measure up to her celebrity mother. Cara Buckley at the *New York Times* points to a strong pattern of female protagonists in many of Villeneuve’s films and suggests his feminist leanings are “ingrained in Mr. Villeneuve’s DNA,” as if he were programmed like one of his film’s replicants. In their interview, Villeneuve affirms his exploration of “the shadows of masculinity and femininity, and the tensions between both” while filming *Blade Runner 2049*.

9 One may assume that female representation in *2049* perpetuates Hollywood's historical projection of woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness" famously condemned by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay in feminist film theory, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Mulvey 715). Indeed, *Blade Runner 2049* offers a kaleidoscopic bevy of kinds of women, like the murderously empowered yet ultimately subservient Luv (Sylvia Hoeks), but almost none of them 'real' in the traditional sense. Not just women, all of the 'male' characters are fraudulent too. The film participates in traditional gender stereotypes and iconographies not to confirm but at least to contaminate them. K's first digital projection of Joi as 1960s housewife corroborates traditional stereotypes only to reveal how they are as unreal as 'she,' and film itself, really is.

10 Believing he was not made but born, Joi decides K needs "a real boy" name, as his mother would have given him, and settles on one analogous to her own: Joe. The slipperiness between gender and identity here compels us into acknowledging that the film takes the mis-identification of both as central to its story, *2049* reflecting upon gender disparities more deeply than its predecessor. In order to seek out an anomaly in the computerized birth records of 6-10-21, Joe and Joi join forces by literally syncing bodies, only to unearth the aberration: two children, one male and one female, with the same DNA. Because this would be impossible Joe concludes that one is a copy, and since the records indicate the boy survived, we are fated to believe the girl has perished. This interpretation is aided by the fact that Harrison Ford and Ryan Gosling appear as if they come from the same filmic DNA, therefore 'syncing' in both looks and performance. But the film plays up these literal resemblances only to thwart them. The audience expects the film will continue to affirm the masculine perspective and make Ryan Gosling the prodigal son. Instead, traditional projections become empowered prophecies, and in the end we come to realize it will be a woman who leads the promised resistance.

11 Freysa, the head of the replicant resistance, almost literally quotes from the sentiments found in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* when she explains their cause to K near the film's end. These replicants can finally affirm being "more human than human" specifically because a child has been born to one of them, an equal affirmation of maternity and humanity. In *2049*, there's power in being "of woman born," and in this way the replicants' resistance equates to the

resistance Rich says is bound to emerge when patriarchy is unmasked as the true illusion, as “a pervasive recognition is developing that the patriarchal system cannot answer for itself; that it is not inevitable; that it is transitory.” Many reviews lament *Blade Runner 2049*’s dated and patriarchal representation of women, completely missing that the emphasis on the male perspective is meant to highlight its destructiveness, and signal its imminent destruction.

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List of Contributors

Benay Blend received her doctorate in American Studies from the University of New Mexico. She has taught at the University of Georgia, Memphis State University, and University of New Mexico. Currently she is an adjunct professor of Native American, American, and New Mexico history at Central NM Community College in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She has published widely in such fields as southwest women writers, Native American Studies, and nature writing. Her published articles include “Linda Hogan’s ‘Geography of the Spirit’: Division and Transcendence in Selected Texts,” From the Center of Tradition: Critical Perspectives on Linda Hogan, Barbara Cook, Ed. (2003); “‘Because I am in All Cultures at the Same Time:’ Intersections of Gloria Anzaldúa’s Concept of Mextizaje in the Writings of Latin American Jewish Women,” Postcolonial Text 2 (2006); “Challenging the Official Story: Alicia Kozameh, Alicia Partnoy, and Mother Activism During Argentina’s Dirty Wars (1976-1983),” Mothers Under Fire, Arlene Sgoutas and Tatjana Takseva, Eds (2015); “Intimate Kinships: Who Speaks for Nature and Who Listens When Nature Speaks for Herself?” Ecocriticism and the Global South, Scott Slovic, Vidya Sarveswaran, Swarnalatha Rangarajan, Eds.(2015); “‘I Learnt All the Words and Broke Them Up / To Make a Single Word: Homeland’: An Eco-Postcolonial Perspective of Resistance in Palestinian Women’s Literature,” Ecofeminist Dialogues (Forthcoming), Douglas Vacocho and Sam Mickey, Eds. ; and “‘Neither Homeland Nor Exile are Words’: ‘Situated Knowledge’ in the Works of Palestinian and Native American Writers,” Ecopoetics: Global Poetries and Ecologies, Isabel Campos, Editor (Forthcoming). Her current research interest focuses on identity in the works of radical poets Margaret Randall and Carolyn Forché.

Pietro Vulpiani, PhD, is currently Senior Adviser in the Resettlement Unit of the Dept. of Civil Liberties and Immigration of the Ministry of Interior, Italy. He is a former Senior adviser of the National Office against Racial Discrimination (Unar), Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Italy (2004-2015) and ex Senior Adviser on Migration for the Ministry of Labour (2002-2003) and several Italian NGOs (1991-2001). From 2006 to 2013 was a national member of the Italian Commission against Female Genital Mutilations. He received his doctorate in Ethno-anthropological Sciences in 1996 from the University of Rome “La Sapienza” with fieldwork in Bolivia (1989-1995). His last books are: (2013) *I dubbi dello stregone. Medicina, magia e immigrazione in una capitale latinoamericana*, Armando (The doubts of the healer.Medicine, magic and migration in a Latinamerican metropolis); (2014) *I*

volti dell'intolleranza. Xenofobia, discriminazioni, diritti e pratiche di convivenza (The faces of intolerance. Xenophobia, discrimination, rights and practices of common life).

Nasrin Khandoker is working as an associate professor in Anthropology at Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh from where she is currently on study leave, for conducting her PhD in Anthropology at Maynooth University, Ireland. She is receiving a Wenner-Gren Wadsworth fellowship and John and Hume Pat scholarship for her PhD studies. She was awarded a Master's degree from the department of Gender Studies, Central European University, on behalf of the New York State Education Department in 2014 besides her Master's degree from the department of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University. Her publication of articles includes recent debates of post-modernism and feminism, sexuality, education and social studies of science. She is also a social activist in several feminist and anti-sexual violence groups in Bangladesh.

Michael Reinhard is a PhD candidate in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. He earned his Master's in Film and Bachelor's in English Language and Literature from the University of Chicago, where his graduate thesis focused on beauty culture and visibility politics in teen girl comedies of the 1990s. His doctoral dissertation researches the cultural politics and identities of online fan communities in the contemporary U.S. music industry.

Christina Parker-Flynn