

ics. Bigwood's concern is that the eternal deferring of subjectivity (as proposed by Derrida) is nihilistic (it has no ground) and by-passes the possibility of a female subject, thereby negating the existence of "women" once and for all.

As an alternative vision and project, *Earth Muse* explores the potential for a "groundless ground" in which identity is neither rooted in biology nor abstract conceptualization. This prospect is articulated in the second chapter, entitled "Renaturalizing Gender (with the Help of Merleau-Ponty)." In it, Bigwood rethinks the modern body so that the notions of "a subject" and "gender" can be rooted in it in a manner which is noncausal and nondeterministic, or, to put it another way, so that our understanding of sexual difference can be comprehended non-metaphysically, or apart from the constraining discourses of phallocentrism. Thus, Bigwood understands the category "woman" to be both historically constructed and "connaturally" located in nature and the living world.

The next section is not a chapter, but the first in a series of "art writings" Bigwood introduces in order to provide other-access to many of the ideas she is attempting to explore. This particular essay focuses on Brancusi's sculpture *The Seal* which she feels embodies a mode of being not characterized by the metaphysical despair of mind-body opposition that otherwise permeates much of Western culture. Instead, the seal's aspects are viewed as connective, and although grounded, *The Seal* is ever-turning, and always changing in its balance. According to Bigwood, *The Seal*, then, does not wilfully strive to overcome her earthly body and weight, but is constantly shifting in order to both reach out to the world, and yet recline into it.

That *The Seal's* being puts into relief our own ontological posturing is the subject of "The Will to Power and the Feminine." This chapter explores the notion that, since the time of Aristotle, Being (the character of relations between beings in a given

epoch), throughout its various transmogrifications, has reflected those characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity (for example, assertiveness, forwardness, aggressiveness). Bigwood here also covers how within metaphysics, the concept of nature has been conceived historically in relation to the feminine as being dark, mysterious, and concealed.

The next section, another art writing, helps readers to re-think the concepts of nature and culture through the ancient Greek notions of *phusis* and *techne*, to which they are connected. In so doing, Bigwood examines three stages in the evolution of a single sculpture in order to convey the negative decline of the feminine in metaphysics from a "reclining strength" to a "destructive withdrawal." All these concepts are central to the rest of the book which, for the most part, deals with the re-emergence of the feminine, of concealment itself, and of all that has been subordinated as being stereotypically feminine. As Bigwood reiterates time and again, however, the goal is not to simply "return to" or "retrieve" a "female essence" (as if that were even possible or desirable) that will supplant the masculine will to power; she is, rather, suggesting that activities such as nurturing, cultivating, caring and sheltering are ways of organizing that may help *techne* (art or culture) work with *phusis*. It is this gesture of the feminine as a "way of bringing forth" marked by "holding sway" (as opposed to a fixed entity or quality) that sets Bigwood's work apart from other ecofeminists.

How *techne* came to not only override but actually replace *phusis* as the dominant means of revealing beings in Western society is the basis for Chapter Seven, which examines the Being of water in an hydroelectric plant. This work (abstracted from her doctoral thesis) examines the phallogentric challenging out of water that is gathered principally by human technology and *techne*, as compared with water that is allowed to gather itself (ie. maintain its relation

to the earth and sky). The book ends with a discussion of the importance of reconceptualizing home as a kind of post-psycho-ontological space with fluid boundaries.

If this review highlights *Earth Muse's* playful struggle with dualisms and polar opposites, it is because Bigwood consciously works within a traditional metaphysical framework with the hopes of not just moving *beyond* it (that would be phallogentric), but of swaying "backwards" and hence "through" it. This is a difficult task, for both author and reader, for to varying degrees each of us has been taught to examine the concepts she uses in a very particular (masculine?) way. (As a reviewer, I have struggled immensely in my attempt to illustrate her ideas.) One of the values of this book is that it invites us to see familiar notions within a new light: both conceptually (in terms of content) and methodically (in terms of style), Bigwood works with the reader to not just abstractly think these ideas, but to feel them.

## WARRIOR MARKS: FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION AND THE SEXUAL BLINDING OF WOMEN

Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar,  
New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993.

by Caroline Roman

Pulitzer prize author Alice Walker and award-winning filmmaker Pratibha Parmar have made a valiant attempt at educating women and men about the ramifications of female circumcision and clitoridectomy in *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of*

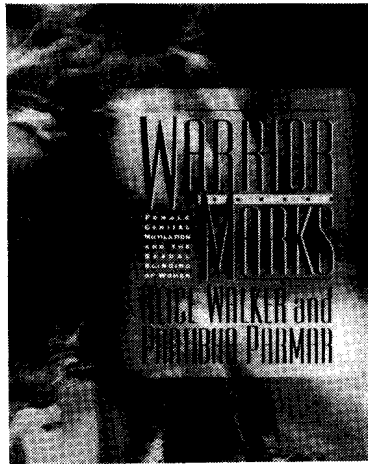
*Women.* Following Walker's moving novel on this subject (*Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Harcourt Brace, 1992), *Warrior Marks* (a non-fictional work) marks the literary progression of an author who aims to liberate those who suffer from this particular form of patriarchal domination. Parmar adds to her own feminist work in film a documentary which gives voice to a subject area shrouded in "deafening silence."

*Warrior Marks*, a joint venture by Walker and Parmar, chronicles the making of a documentary film on female genital mutilation. To make the film, they travelled to Africa (specifically Senegal and The Gambia) and interviewed proponents of this "initiation" practice, advocates for change, and children upon who this painful and life-changing procedure had been performed. Their personal journals and logs are shared with readers in the book. We begin with Walker's vision in a letter to Parmar, and follow through with glances into the thoughts of these two brave women. The interviews held with women of varying social genres and points of view on the topic of genital mutilation are fully transcribed. The book expands on the topics and portions covered in the film, but instead of sound-bites and edited interviews, complete and detailed insights are provided.

Perhaps one of the best features of the book occurs through the introduction to the work that is done in Africa, by African women, to liberate themselves from the oppression of patriarchy. An extensive interview is provided with Awa Thiam (African feminist and political activist, editor of *Black Sisters, Speak Out*), in which a clear discussion is held about the roots of genital mutilation. This is only one example of how this book becomes a medium through which the voice of African women can be heard.

Issues of cultural imperialism and racism have surrounded the discussions of female genital mutilation in the past. *Warrior Marks* does not exist as simply another example of

this tendency in political and feminist works. Pratibha Parmar handles this issue more than adequately when she states, "...what [is] happening to women in Africa should concern *all* women across the world...." Through their journey, Parmar and Walker provide a classic example of the joining of women of colour in the diaspora to do their part to help and educate...and end the violence against



women and children, particularly as exemplified through the genital mutilation of young girls.

The book sets out not only to expand on the journey undertaken by Walker and Parmar, but to provide a glimpse into the issues facing African women and children in African societies. Definitions are provided along with addresses of activist organizations in America, England and Africa.

*Warrior Marks* significantly contributes to the work being done in Africa, the Middle East and Asia to liberate women from the chains of bondage and mutilation. If this book and film save only one African child from genital mutilation, liberate one woman from male domination, make one person remember and face her pain...it has done its job.

## POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY

Alice Walker, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.

by Sandy Fraser

Alice Walker's book, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, was released in October 1992. Alice chooses Tashi, one of the characters from a previous book, *The Colour Purple*, to weave a pseudo-mythical tale about Female Genital Mutilation, and it's immediate and long-term effects on Tashi and her family. This book represents a strong departure from the usual presentation of this subject matter. There are countless articles and books written about FGM. All of them tend to take a scientific approach, with facts and figures to explain the practice. There are many in the African community that view Walker's book as trivializing the subject; however, no other writer has had the ability to bring this taboo subject, affecting an estimated 100 million women worldwide, to the international scene.

Walker employs an unusual style. She becomes the orator, telling Tashi's story through the various characters who are a part of her life. This is an effective tool, which reflects the oral culture of African tribal life. Little by little, Tashi's life is revealed; however, quite often the story does not flow, and is sometimes made cumbersome by the constant changing back and forth in time and place.

Interestingly, Tashi has chosen to be "circumcised" at rather a late stage in her life, after escaping this fate as a child. She wants to assume the mark of an Olinka woman, so that she can fight along side the men, to free her country from Colonial repression. The reasoning here seems convoluted, but since this is a fictional account we can allow some licence. Tashi seems to have been left an invalid after her mutilation by M'Lissa, the excisor, so soldiering out of the question.

Then along comes Adam to the rescue, too late to prevent her or-