

Looking for the Other
Feminism, Film,
and the Imperial Gaze

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"Can One Know the Other?":
The Ambivalence of Postcolonialism
in *Chocolat*, *Warrior Marks*
and *Mississippi Masala*

Paganism does not lie in a celebration of Aboriginal rootedness but in the fact that, whatever it is, the Aborigines' "authenticity" or "identity" is radically inaccessible to us. Keep the question open, imagine that I make no negative value judgement in saying . . . that Aborigines are not "human," because by considering them "human" (exemplars of an abstract nature that we share) we victimize them, make them more like us than they are. Their identity remains radically untranslatable, heterogeneous to western modernist rationality.

—Bill Readings, "Pagans, Perverts or Primitives?"

It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that my instances of colonial imitation come. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a "partial" presence.

—Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

In this chapter, I explore how two theoretical frameworks illuminate the film discussions that follow. The first addresses the complex

problem of "knowing the Other"—the question often phrased as "Can one Know the Other?"—while the second deals with the related issue of the ambivalence of the colonial relation. I hope that bringing two (usually distinct) kinds of discussion together will offer a way out of what is sometimes seen as an impasse.

In chapter 5, in the course of discussing travelling theorists, the possibility or not of "knowing" the Other arose for the most part implicitly.¹ But the question was brought up explicitly by Yoshimoto Mitsuhira, who claimed that the very question itself (i.e., "Can one know the Other?") is imperialist and assumes a power relation privileging the West.

Yet to argue that the question is itself imperialist is to accept white centrism and to ignore the problems of knowing between peoples other than white—something that scholars and journalists in the United States are beginning to write about.² In order to explore such issues further, I follow a discussion of Claire Denis' *Chocolat* with an examination of Pratibha Parmar's provocative film, made together with Alice Walker, *Warrior Marks*, to see similarities and differences between fantasies of white women travelling and confronting an Other in colonial and postcolonial Africa, and women of color travelling and confronting the Other in postcolonial Africa.

The somewhat tired questions about "knowing the Other" (originating in anthropology) parallel those around the subaltern discussed earlier, namely, can the subaltern speak? Or look? Can the nonsubaltern speak? While the terrains of speaking or looking, and of knowing are different, they are linked. The question of speaking addresses itself to agency; that of knowing to identity. But both have to do with the overarching problem of subjectivity: I can only speak or look if I am a *subject*, not an *object*; I can only know the Other from a position of a subject able to stand outside myself, and, while still being the subject I have constructed, construct myself differently because in relation to this Other.

But this is to anticipate. Let me first discuss theories regarding knowing the other before looking at colonial ambivalence in the two instances of non-Hollywood cinema—that of Claire Denis's *Chocolat* (where a French director travels back to the Cameroon to recall 1950s French colonialism in contrast to the 1980s); and

that of Parmar/ Walker who travel in Africa to pursue an activist cause against African practices of clitoridectomies. Both films challenge apparently secure boundaries between fiction and documentary or ethnographic film.

Debates about knowing the Other have only relatively recently become central in humanities scholarship. While anthropologists object to humanists treading on their terrain, our discussions arose naturally in the course of taking up the challenge of addressing cultures other than white. Given the different ends of humanities research—its less empirical, more philosophical and psychoanalytic interests—conclusions and debates take on their own distinct casts.

The urgent questions for my purposes may be usefully engaged by looking at Readings' provocative essay on Lyotard's *différend*. The essay puts on the table questions that concern many of the films and filmmakers I deal with around the problem of knowing the Other. It provides a useful point of origin from which to examine positions that others take up. The extremity of Lyotard's original position—made more extreme, arguably, in Readings' reading of Lyotard—allows me to open out less extreme possibilities, to see what others have theorized and arrive at a conclusion.

What is Readings' main argument? Basically, it is that the very articulation of a concept of "universal rights" is an eighteenth-century western concept. If this concept is brought to conflicts between colonizers or even postcolonizers and an "other" in the best of intentions, it nevertheless remains imperialist because it is an idea that arose out of the West. Readings gives the example of Kenelm Burridge's *Encountering Aborigines*, which demands of readers, and assumes it is possible, that they learn from the Aborigines as much as the Aborigines learn from us. Yet the notion of a common heritage, Readings says, is a western one, as is the very concept of "history"—in the sense of an organized chronological account of events. Such a concept is anathema to the Aborigines, he points out.

Readings makes his case with the help of Werner Herzog's film *Where the Green Ants Dream*, and Lyotard's concept of the *différend*. By the *différend* Lyotard means "a case of conflict between (at least) two parties that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments" (Lyotard 1988, 5). Lyotard is writing in France with the idea of the French Republic in mind, and

within the tradition of thinking about "nation" that Ernest Renan (discussed in chapter 2) articulated. In Readings' summary of Lyotard, "The idea of the modern democratic republic is that of a people that becomes a people by saying 'we, the people', rather than by living together . . . for a long time" (Readings 1992, 173). In other words, the eighteenth-century conception of the Republic relies on a "we" that forces, or wills (Renan) into existence a "people" (a nation) rather than coming together because they are a community or have lived together for a long time. Lyotard argues that "the notion of a universal human nature, and the attendant imperialism (external and internal) of the modern nation-state, proceed from the representational structure of the republican 'we'" (173). Readings argues plausibly that Australia finds its rationale as a modern state in the Republican tradition, in a mode similar to that of France or the United States, with the same claim of universal humanity that is present in the American Declaration of Independence. As Readings puts it: "Americans believe themselves to be human. Theirs is not a tolerance of difference, but of identity, of the identity of an abstract human nature" (174). In a manner similar to that I argued for in the Hollywood cinema, Readings says that Americans "believe they can say 'we,' and that their 'we' will stand for humanity, that it can mean 'we humans'" (174).

In the case of the dispute in the film, Readings claims that "neither can recognize the other as an 'argument' at all." Readings finds himself saying that he will not claim that the Aborigines are "human," since to do so implicates him in linking the Aborigines to eighteenth-century western concepts, and to the limited concept of what "human" can mean in the West. He demonstrates this through analyzing the court case in the film, stressing the evident radically different concepts of time, space, the human body, language, relations between land and humans and so on that emerge and yet that have to be forced into the discourse of the western idea of justice, the Court. Readings concludes that the point is to force us to ask "Who are we to speak?" and to "think community and freedom otherwise." We have to evoke an "incalculable difference, an unrepresentable other, in the face of which any claim to community must be staked" (187).

The problem with Lyotard's position and Readings' rendering of it is that it does not look at the situation of different "others" in relation

to one another. Would Lyotard or Readings argue that the same "incalculable difference" exists between, say, postcolonial Indians and postcolonial Africans? While Safran has usefully pointed out the different kinds of diaspora that exist (some of which I have already noted in dealing with different reasons that people travel), nevertheless, if one wants to think of commonalities that might link groups resisting the domination of western imperialism, it is necessary that the differences not be "incalculable," the other not "unrepresentable." It is important to situate the *différend* in terms of a historical process, a set of happenings over time, rather than relying on Lyotard's model of the trial or court case in which a judgment is made once and for all—and all at once.³

Other theorists, including Chatterjee, Radhakrishnan and Fanon, believe that it is inevitable that western tools be taken up by the previously and still (in some ways) colonized because those tools are irremediably there. The tools may, however, be taken up by the other with agency, intelligence and a will to do with them what serves them rather than in mimicry, wholesale adoption or unthinking celebration. If used critically, self-consciously and carefully, people have argued that these tools can be useful. To refuse them is to throw the baby out with the bathwater.⁴

Arif Dirlik, meanwhile, argues quite contrary to Readings that if criticism is to be counter-hegemonic, it needs to learn from those (namely indigenous peoples and diasporan peoples) who have suffered the sentence, or the pain, of history, those who have been deprived of their riches (Dirlik 1995). Indigenous people aim to restore what's been stolen, to reclaim the land, to reconnect with it. Further, Dirlik suggests that interpreting "knowing" as *always* an imperializing western humanism may itself throw the baby out with the bathwater and produce a world in which once again everyone retreats into their communities and any "knowing" or attempt to "know" outside one's own community is surrendered.

In this sense, Readings' use of the Aborigines was, first, to take an extreme and unusual case. But it was also, second, to deny that, whatever the Aborigines might name what is happening to them, they are in a process in which events happen and follow one another: even though this process is imposed from without, it impacts on Aboriginal life. In the case of Herzog's *Where the Green Ants Dream*,

the Aborigines have to respond by coming to a specific place and sitting there as opposed to elsewhere; or keeping a court date dressed in western-style clothes. The *différend* is, perhaps, not quite as extreme as Readings claims. Or, rather, what seems to have been confused is *cultural* differences (indeed, non-Aborigines cannot ever, perhaps, claim to *know* what being Aboriginal means or "is like"); and the specific instance of a court case in which something has to be decided about who has right to a piece of land. While the first issue of cultural difference may have validity, the question of the court case takes place on a different and legal set of claims.

Readings' position, then, is radical in the sense of using Lyotard's *différend* to conclude that one can never know the other. For Readings, the only thing to do is to surrender to the impossibility of "knowing" (in the sense of western humanism's modes—the only modes westerners have) and yet agree to fight *with* the Other against western attempts, as in the case of the Aborigines in Herzog's *Where the Green Ants Dream*, where westerners try to appropriate land that means something to these Others that the West cannot understand.

I say this position is "radical" because it implies that the only way of "knowing" is that of a distorting western humanism which applies values that may not pertain to the Other. Would Readings have agreed that western humanism remains a viable mode of knowing one another for those of us within the West? There has surely to be a way between the alternatives of an oppressive application of a perhaps irrelevant western humanism to the Other, and surrendering any kind of cross-cultural knowing. As I have noted earlier, it's striking that many of the scholars working on postcolonialism, questions of knowing the other, and issues of nation are male (with the important exceptions also noted). I will argue that the positing of two such limited positions as described emerges from western *male* modes of knowing, which ignore psychic energies, psychoanalytic operations and concern with subjectivity/interiority. I will argue that women scholars, critics and workers, administrators, teachers, wives and mothers (not to exclude some male scholars, like Dirlik) offer other possibilities through knowledges that male scholars and theorists often ignore. Like Jane Flax (quoted in chapter 2), I analyze films by independent women filmmakers in support of the claim for a different

way of thinking through and imagining problems of nation, global relations, imperialism.

Homi Bhabha, meanwhile, deals with the problem from the other end, as it were. That is, instead of the impossibility of knowing the Other, Bhabha discusses the problem of colonial ambivalence. In reading Bhabha, it's not quite clear if he intends to see the ambivalence from both the white and the black, the colonizer and the colonized, points of view, or whether he is thinking mostly of the position of the colonized. The danger of mimicry on the part especially of elite groups under colonialism is obvious. Bruce Beresford's fascinating film *Mister Johnson* is perhaps the most poignant and graphic representation of the dangers of mimicry. Mister Johnson, the black assistant to a British government agent, so thoroughly identifies with his boss as to believe he is white and English. But the British boss exploits Johnson (partly unwittingly) and when things get out of control, is ready to have Johnson executed (indeed, he pulls the trigger himself). But the phenomenon of so-called "going native" (the term itself is racist and belies power imbalances that remain) is also an example of mimicry now on the part of the colonizers (see a film like *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, in which the character Moon leaves the Christian missionary group he had joined and goes off to join the "native" imaged in classically stereotypical ways). While this may also be dangerous, it entails a less sympathetic response because a self-consciously chosen mimicry, while the process for blacks is about trying to obtain power and recognition through identifying as white.

I want to explore the problem of "knowing the Other" as it has been represented in films by women about women travelling. Once again, the situation of travel requires confronting the Other and dealing with difference directly. My aim is to show different imagings of inter-racial knowing as a way of working through the complex issues noted above: Is it true that peoples only have recourse to the concept of the *différend* in relation to knowing across cultures? Do the women's films being studied offer other ways of knowing the Other than that offered by male theorists? What might a feminist position be vis-à-vis such important issues?

I start with French filmmaker Claire Denis' 1988 film *Chocolat*. Since this is the twentieth century, some of the constraints analyzed

as operating for nineteenth-century white female travellers have changed. However, the film details two different examples of white women travelling—that of the mother, Aimée, wife of a colonial official (Marc Dalens) in 1950s Cameroon—and that of the now grown-up daughter (named, aptly, France) returning to the Cameroon in the 1980s to rediscover her childhood home. This dual story—the one paralleling the other—offers an opportunity to study the changes in inter-racial looking relations that happened between 1950s Cameroon, still under French imperialism, and 1980s Cameroon, now a Republic and (technically) independent of France. *Chocolat* offers an opportunity to explore how the problem of "knowing the Other" is conceptualized by Claire Denis.

Denis, although French, grew up in the Cameroon in French West Africa, the daughter of a colonial official, rather like France in the film.⁵ In the 1960s, after French Cameroon became the Republic of Cameroon, Denis moved to France, attended film school and worked with several directors, including Wim Wenders and Jim Jarmusch. *Chocolat* was her directorial debut.

What does the film assume about knowing the other, in 1950s colonial Cameroon and in independent 1980s Cameroon? A second related question (but looking beyond the film itself) is: What does the film's emergence in 1989 tell spectators about current and past French colonial exploits? What is the film's ideology about colonialism, past and present? What does the film indicate about France, qua nation?

The opening shots of the film, set in the 1980s, suggest difference but curiosity between the young white woman (her name is not only apt but surely symbolic) sitting on the beach and watching a black father and son swimming and playing. Difference is implied in the odd cutting and camera angles in this sequence. At first it is unclear whether the two black men are fighting or playing, for the camera keeps them at long distance. Then, when the camera catches them lying down, it's unclear whether they are alive or dead. The looking agent, the bearer of the look here as throughout some (but significantly, not all) of the film, is the white woman, France (as adult, then as child and again as adult). It is her look, her lack of understanding, that makes the opening scene strange. But the way the scene is cut anticipates some of its main themes. There is the contrast between

whiteness and blackness: the camera surprises us first by not following the two men as they move left, but turning right in a long sweeping shot to settle on a close-up of a white woman's face, lost in pained thought; and then by a sudden cut to a high-angle close-up looking down on the head of the older man, whose blackness stands out against the sand. There's another cut to his hand, with the water flowing over it; and then a cut to the white woman's foot, as she removes sand.

The early visual links, made with only the sound of the sea, anticipate France's closeness to another black man, Protée, in the following flashback to her childhood. The images of black and white limbs prepare for the importance of limbs later in the film: Protée's and the child France's hands are imaged in close-up several times leading up to the fateful moment when France burns her hand out of trust (in this one case misplaced to punish her for being part of colonialism) of Protée.

Perhaps because of the painful memory of this closeness, when the father (who turns out to be an American black, William J. Park) offers France a lift a bit later on, she first refuses and is cool, keeping her distance. As part of the ambivalence of the colonial relation, Denis shows that there is more *distance* if not *difference* between France and William in the 1980s Cameroon than there was between France and Protée under ambivalent colonialism.

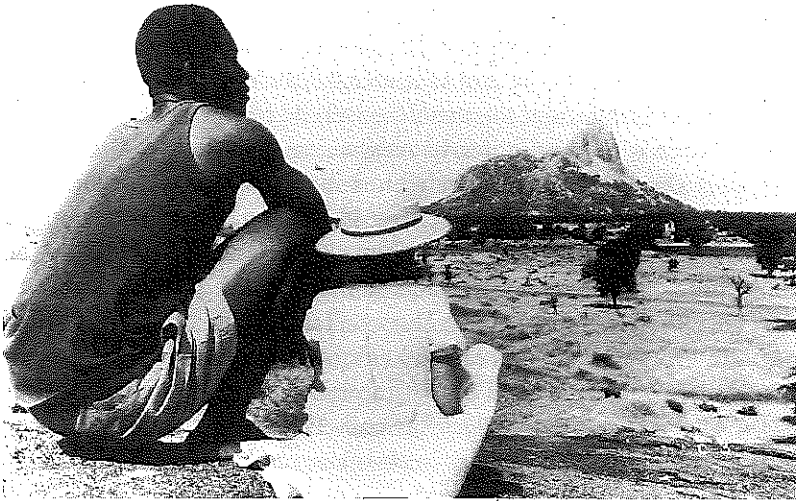
It is during the car ride, as France glances through her father's sketch book (the spectator is shown close-ups of drawings of a phallus-shaped rock, near the colonial home, that fascinated her father) that the narrative flashes back to France's childhood and her close relationship with Protée.⁶ The narrative, then, is a prolonged series of memories by France of her past life. The film returns for a short but significant time to the 1980s Cameroon at the end, when William drops France off to return home. France has understood during the ride that there is no longer any place for white colonial travellers in Cameroon. She cannot refind her special relationship with Protée in modern postcolonialism.

But in the flashback sequence France does not really control the look: for much of the time, Denis makes Protée's look the one the viewer is invited to share, in a very important reversal of the regular

mode of representing in Hollywood films about colonialism. "Proteus," the name of the Greek god who kept changing his form, suggests Protée's varied roles in the film—as only a house servant, as France's play companion, and as a sexual African man. Because of his closeness to France, and the many household functions he has to perform, Protée is present in nearly every scene. In addition, Denis cleverly puts the consciousness of whites in that of a young child, for whom categories of difference are just being learned. Questions regarding knowing the other take on a special dimension when the subject seeking to know is a child still relatively free of the categories that absolutely control adults. The spectator, then, alternately looks through Protée's and France's eyes. Through Protée's eyes, the white French couple are ridiculed (one is reminded here of Sembene's 1966 *Black Girl*—see below), as in the marvellous sequence when, with Protée watching, Aimée bosses her cook around, commanding him to make varied meals by following the recipe book, only to discover that he can't read English. Only from time to time is the spectator invited to see as Marc Dalens or his wife Aimée see, and even then empathy for them is not induced.

Denis is brilliant at constructing the world of the child—a world parallel to that of the adults, who know little about what the child is seeing, doing, experiencing, learning. The child observes everything closely, including her parents. The parents observe very little, locked as they already are into routinized "knowledge," which means one no longer *sees* or *learns* but only *repeats* the already known.

Yet even the world of the adults—at least, the world of Aimée—is unable to keep itself entirely to itself, much as it tries. Bhabha's concept of the *ambivalence* of the colonial relation is useful in this sense. For the women at least, the issue of mimicry Bhabha isolates in the quotation at the start of this chapter seems to work both ways in colonialism. Aimée Dalens, at once assumes (and needs to assume) that Protée is the same, i.e., a French national; and has to be aware that in fact, he is not quite the same. It is in that gap between same and not same that tension erupts. Protée, in turn, may mimic French whiteness, because he has been hired to do so, but also (as Lucas, one of the wanderers marooned in the house taunts Protée with) because he has been trained by French priests.



Chocolat (1988): Totally asexual, the liaison between Protée and France nevertheless violates colonial mandates and forms. Here, Protée and France gaze silently together at the phallic rock so beloved by Marc Dalens, the French colonial governor.

And yet, like Mister Johnson, Protée retains African values. He keeps insisting on his difference: and he takes pleasure in teaching this difference to France, perhaps hoping to undermine the French colonial codes she's learning. France prefers being with the native servants because their world is noisy, lively, and warm, as against the austere, frigid atmosphere of her unhappy mother. The servants are perfectly aware of France's parents' racism, as when they joke: "You're not in bed? You'll see. You'll turn black and then your father will scream!" But if this implies France is getting too close to the blacks, her relationship with Protée is of another order.

A few scenes dramatically mark the illicit liaison between Protée and France: there is an early scene where Protée picks up ants for her to eat with her cheese; later on, he plucks off a moth's wings and eats the body, and invites France to do the same; there's the scene where the family come upon some chickens killed by hyenas, and Protée paints some chicken blood on France's arm (in this sequence, there are close-ups of France's and Protée's white and brown hands and arms, linked through the blood); finally, there is the complex scene

already noted where France dutifully follows Protée's silent example and scars her hand with a bad burn as a result. Totally asexual, the liaison between Protée and France nevertheless violates colonial mandates and forms. Through these rituals, France and Protée perform a bonding beyond words, language and discourse that challenges colonial order, law and the Name of the Father. Denis has captured something that Hollywood can only present ridiculously, as for instance in the many films about characters who "go native." (I am thinking of both Mr. Dean in *Black Narcissus* and Moon in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. Herbert Babenco is unable to present the indigenous peoples in this film in any but the most stereotypical manner, and Moon's joining of them is rendered in crude images.) Denis' imaging of France's "going native" rises above the offensive term itself to convey a solemn, dignified coming together of two people from different cultures in their ambivalent, complicated relationship. It contrasts with William J. Park's derisive comment to France when she at first refuses to take a ride from him or order a taxi: "Going native, eh?"

While ambivalence is surely present in male colonial relations, I am impressed that women (and children) travellers and colonizers like Aimée and France, unlike their husbands, live with the servants in the intimacy of the domestic sphere. The gendered nature of the colonial relation is made clear in the film. The white women travelling as wives of colonial officials are forced travellers, if in a privileged sense. They are not agents with a mission, as the men are. The men are able to keep at a certain distance: they ride off into the bush to meet with tribal leaders, settle disputes, keep the social order and maintain the colonial interests of France.

Denis does not provide any direct historical or political perspective in *Chocolat*, but the film assumes knowledge of French colonialism and of the waves of colonists who came to take advantage of Cameroon's riches in palm and ivory. She manages to introduce us to traces of German colonialism of Douala, her parents' province, through the German missionaries near their dwelling who hang on despite tragedies. The Dalens' house still has a sign left over from the German official (killed by his servant) saying, "This is the last house on earth." The visit of the British government official reminds us that after World War I, Cameroon was divided up between the French and the British. The French finally gave their zones autonomy

in 1959 after the guerilla wars that are just sensed on the horizon in the attitudes of the servants aside from Protée in the servant kitchen and compound. By 1972, a decade or so before France returns, Cameroon has become a unitary state run by the Cameroon Nationalist Union.

The job of officials like Dalens is to keep order while the French companies and government agents plunder the land. Dalens, however, is protected from knowing this by a colonialist ideology which says France is "civilizing" the natives for their own good (as we saw in chapters 1 and 3), teaching them the values of the modern state. But by the 1950s, France's control was flagging and guerilla groups were growing. This is subtly suggested in Marc Dalens' abstraction, indeed feminization (in one shot, he is seen stopping to draw the phallic rock, as if aware France has lost its virility, aware of the need to gain the phallus. Meanwhile the natives wait patiently, also patiently waiting for their time to be free). Once again, as I've shown already in the cases of Britain and China, women protagonists carry the main symbolic weight of French identity, that of the French nation. In this limited sense, all these films are "national allegories," as Jameson says. All the films confirm Ann McClintock's statement that "all too often in male nationalisms, gender difference between women and men serves to symbolically define the limits of national difference and power between men" (McClintock 1995, 354).

Denis makes her protagonist's standing for France quite clear in naming the daughter "France," but Aimée too carries symbolism about the ending of colonialism in her sadness. I showed how the nuns in *Black Narcissus* come to be protagonists of colonialism just at the moment that the British are losing India (the pain of this loss can be more safely imaged through female characters than through male ones). In the case of China, I showed that Hu Mei's protagonist comes to represent the impossibility of individual desire, individual fulfillment and subjectivity, and symbolizes the situation for the entire Chinese nation under communism (again, it was safer to show this through a female figure than a male one). So, in *Chocolat*, Aimée and France image the loss that France (the nation) is experiencing as it faces an enormous economic, political and psychological change with the ending of its empire, at last. Aimée's sadness during the course of

the film is quite haunting; France's loss (of Protée, of Cameroon, of her past and of her nation—in a sense) at the end of the film is equally so.

But the loss for male and female characters is different because the issue of knowing the Other is a gendered one. Recall some of the quotations that James Mill inserted in the preface to his *History of British India* in which British colonial officials claim that they know nothing about the Indians—"We cannot study the genius of the people in its own sphere of action. We know little of their domestic life, their knowledge, conversation, amusements, their trades, and castes, or any of those national and individual characteristics, which are essential to a complete knowledge of them" (Mill 22).

Interesting in the quotation (taken from a report) is the humanist fantasy (that Mill shares) that by studying a people one could know *everything* about them. The fantasy of "a complete knowledge of them" is quite arrogant. I am not arguing for this kind of knowledge, but a "knowing" in a way that is more kinesthetic, bodily, sensual. White women travellers, especially colonial wives like Aimée, live within the intimacy of eating, washing, sleeping, cleaning, cooking, etc., with the black community in and around the house. Keeping distance is much harder. The strain of this tells, as we see with Aimée. Meanwhile, keeping *difference* is harder too. Subtly, unconsciously, in *Chocolat* we see how at least France (in whose consciousness the film mainly is) comes to "know" Protée and some of the other servants through sharing some of their customs and perspectives on the colonizer adults. So, in this sense, there is mimicry too, and a confusion of identity.

Both the colonized and the women colonizers become subjectivities-in-between, both irrevocably changed by their interaction in the new space within which they live and work because of imperialism. However, we must not forget that the power relationship remains totally in the favor of the colonizers, not the colonized, while imperialism lasts. Even France, as a child, cannot ultimately distance herself from the Cameroon's colonial structure. She asserts her power over Protée from time to time, just to make sure he knows it. In one scene, she forces Protée to eat food she doesn't want; in another, when he is having a letter written for him at the local school, France yells imperiously that it is time to go, and he must interrupt what he is doing. In

her parallel relationship with William in the 1980s, I'll argue that a very different power relationship exists.

Part of the 1950s male colonial presence is to insist on difference through the discourse of the colonizing nation. In *Chocolat*, it is the mythic idea of the French nation that Marc Dalens tries to keep uppermost and whose values (of democracy, education, humanism) he tries to inculcate in the people he governs. For the wife, Aimée, the task is to inculcate in the colonized a sense of French culture and ways of eating, sleeping, dressing, etc. Claire Denis (in a kind of European inside joke about French/British rivalry) has fun satirizing the English colonial representative (he is ridiculed as he hangs up a picture of the Queen he carries with him. Her French colonizer, Dalens, gets off a good deal easier!). The nation is symbolized in keeping up French or English upper-class cultural customs, no matter how ridiculous in the Cameroonian context [such as having the black servants dress in French officer-style party clothes (white coats and large red sashes); or the adults themselves, in the sweltering heat, putting on evening dress for dinner.]

The beautiful Mrs. Dalens is all but seduced by the drunk English colonial official, within the sight of Protée and the English official's servant. Meanwhile, these servants have to stand by silently, eyes downward. In a similar scene, when Marc returns home after days away, Protée sees Aimée passionately embrace Marc before they close the door. Protée and France wait outside while the couple make love. It is no accident that this is the moment Protée chooses to taunt France with eating a live moth.

Protée's desire to see and be seen, as a full subject, a sexual man, is forcefully presented by Denis. Protée's pain of *not* looking or being seen, of being sexually excluded, is graphically shown, and recalls hooks' statement about the prohibition on American slaves to "look" at their white masters. It also recalls (and evidently was explicitly influenced by, as Denis told me) Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. This is clear in the portrayal of Protée's pain in being excluded from whiteness, but also not any longer quite at home in his black community. The familiar quotation from Fanon, cited in chapter 1, literalizes black self-alienation (in the context of 1950s French colonialism) produced dramatically through the "look."

Having grown up as part of an elite class in colonial Martinique, the gaze of the white child at Fanon startled him out of an inner identification that did not include blackness as something horrifying or different, or to be objectified.

Although not an elite in the same sense as Fanon, Protée nevertheless has grown accustomed to white French culture and its ways of speaking and living. Let me cite just two scenes where Denis captures something of Fanon's position: The first is the scene where Protée is showering and France and her mother come home. Before their arrival, Protée seems to be enjoying the shower. But once he sees them, without being seen, he breaks down in silent crying. The shot is organized so that Protée is in the right of the frame, his face twisted in silent pain, while to the left, Aimée and France are visible entering the house. His pain seems to be at the impossibility of their seeing him sexually. Perhaps the situation of his being naked and vulnerable sets off his hatred for his entire context of not being seen, of having to squelch his desire, of hiding out in his primitive cold shower, while he prepares hot water for Aimée to shower inside, symbolizing his emasculated colonized position. However that may be, the spectator is invited to share Protée's pain, to identify with him and not with the women entering the house in the distance.

A short scene where Protée is arranging Aimée's underwear in the dresser in her bedroom also presents Protée's self-alienation: Aimée suddenly turns on him and harshly forbids him to touch her things. It's almost as if she had said: "You're black: Get away from my nice things," analagous to the child's "Look, a Negro!" But Aimée's rejection carries an obvious repressed sexual desire: she cannot bear Protée that close to her body through her underwear and being in her bedroom.

In a central scene, Aimée makes a sexual advance toward Protée. She is perhaps spurred on by uninvited visitors—entrepreneurs, adventures, aimless world wanderers—whose plane has broken down and whose open sexual intimacy with blacks while virulently racist has surely unsettled Aimée. Once again, the camera remains with Protée and so does the spectator's gaze. The scene begins as an extension of an already long scene constructed from Protée's point of view—a scene which gives the spectator the satisfaction of seeing Protée

throw out the ugly Lucas, who has been needling Protée ever since he arrived.

Given the desire we know he has, Protée's refusal of Aimée's advance (partly gentle, then abrupt) marks his strong character. Also, as the title's double entendre indicates ("chocolat" can also mean "don't get caught"), Protée would not want to get caught. However, he is punished anyway by Aimée insisting that he be sent to the garage, bringing about distance between him and France.

As against Readings, Denis shows that a certain kind of "knowing" between peoples from dramatically different cultures is possible without imposing an inappropriate western humanism on them. However, in the case of the intimate relations of servants and their masters in the colonial as in the American slave household, cultures are already merged. There is no pure culture left intact to function as a *différend* in the sense that Lyotard and Readings insist on. Protée and the other servants have already entered western culture, and the white Europeans have entered African culture. Both sets are already hybrid, so that one cannot simply put "western humanism" out of the picture. It's already in there, in Protée's inner life, his emotions, his desires. Especially for France, the child, much of African culture is now inside her. Perhaps the *différend* as a concept works on the level of the male sphere of the state, the law and the Name of the Father, as power relations manifest in institutions. I thus hesitate to deploy the *différend* across the sphere of the private and domestic, where fusion cannot help but happen within certain specific contexts.

Shortly after the scene in the garage, France comes out of her reverie and the film returns to the Cameroon in the 1980s. William Park refuses France's offer to share a drink, knowing that he must keep the boundaries clear because that is best both for himself and for the French woman trying to regain something no longer hers. The symbolism of his seeing France's burned hand, lacking therefore a future to read in it, figures forth that France, the nation, has no future in Africa. The liveliness of the ending, in which the spectator is shown Cameroonians cheerfully loading up a plane with cargo, their bright yellow raincoats blowing in the wind to the accompaniment of lively African music, leaves us with an image of an energized, modern African state.

What does Denis mean by this? On the positive side, she perhaps means that Africa has recovered from colonialism and is moving forward energetically. The color coding in the film underscores this point, since the colors used in the flashback scene are quite different from those in the 1980s postcolonial framing. In the main story, Denis' palette consists of stark blue (the sky), stark reddish brown (the earth) and white (the house)—not accidentally, I assume, the colors of the French flag. Inside the house, the colors are repeated in the reddish brown floor and furniture, red table cloth, the clothes (blue for Aimée and France; white for Protée; the white mosquito nets). The dark brown skin of Protée and the pink skins of the Europeans are set off against the starkness of the other colors. Since Denis mostly keeps her camera at a distance, only cutting in for special effects, the spectator often sees the stretch of sky and earth together. The color scheme provides a dream-like sense of an unreal world—the world of the imperialists' imaginary, perhaps of the child's memory, or both; but not a real place at all.

By contrast the colors in the framing story are bright and multiple, a hectic display of many different colors. Loud noise and bustling activity also contrast with the sad emptiness of the main story, in which, at times, life seems to stand still, waiting for something to happen, waiting for the real life made by the people themselves to return, as in the last image of the men loading the airplane. It is a refreshing image in an era when most of the western stories about Africa are of corruption, lethal tribal wars, grotesque violence toward each other and westerners, chaos, despotic leaders, etc.

On the other hand, there's a danger of idealizing France in all this: a pretense that France really has left, which, as the story of Algeria shows, is not necessarily the case. Political alliances and obligations remain from past colonial relations in nearly every instance—obligations which the once colonized resist to their economic peril.⁷ The legacies of France's empire remain in the increasingly intense racism in France toward the ex-colonial subjects who are currently entering France in search of jobs and economic survival, as Etienne Balibar has shown.⁸ Jean LePen and his followers tragically misrepresent the cause of French economic problems as that of the immigrant peoples on whose labor (or that of their ancestors) French wealth was originally built.

If indeed Denis does gloss over these latter points, she has made a contribution in regard to resisting normal inter-racial looking relations and raising questions about how one may know the Other within colonialism and postcolonialism. If the film shows that Protée cannot be seen by the adult white characters, the spectator of her film does see Protée—his subjectivity, his desire for agency and his limited exercise of power vis-à-vis France: Denis' contribution is to expose the ambivalence of colonialism and the repression of the black subject's look, his reduction to an object by whites. In this respect, *Chocolat* stands in a very interesting relationship to Ousmane Sembene's 1966 award-winning film, *Black Girl*. Made by a director in another French colony, but this time a black director, in the early years of his long and prestigious career, *Black Girl* is one of the most powerful renderings of the ambivalence of colonialism, the dehumanization of the black servant, the arrogance and cruelty of white colonizers. It is also one of the first films to reverse the colonial gaze and to give the agency of the look to the central black character, Douana. White spectators are invited to look from the position of the colonized—something that Tracy Moffatt will also insist on in her 1986 short film *Nice Coloured Girls*—and to see how the white master and mistress are *seen*. In some senses, Protée resembles Douana, with the big difference that, in this case, he is able to establish a good close relationship with the child. In *Black Girl*, the children take their cues from the parents and mock and harass Douana. There is a small component of poetic justice at the end of the film when the white French husband returns to Dakar to bring Douana's belongings to her relatives after her tragic suicide. The hostility of the people makes clear their understanding of the French man's complicity in their relative's suicide. One of the small children takes the mask Douana had prized as recalling her home and follows the French husband ominously with this mask. Once again, Douana's death symbolized the need for Senegal to revolt and win full independence.

Trinh T. Minh-ha has noted that the concept of travelling cannot be separated from the concept of dwelling, or of "home," for if one travels, one assumes a travelling from one's own home to the home of someone else. As noted earlier, one carries one's "home" (in a plurality of meanings, including that of "nation") with one in travelling. But Trinh also believes that even this polarity connotes too much fix-

ity on the part of the category of home. Travel means movement, not staying "fixed." But Trinh notes that this "fixed" is a false concept, since cultures travel all the time. They never stay the same. So, dwelling is also travelling, and travelling is a kind of dwelling. Denis' heroine, France, demonstrates this well: France travelled essentially as a white woman in between France and Cameroon seeking to find the fixed home in Cameroon that she left. She then learns that home is no longer there: all has changed irrevocably. Perhaps she also understands how she has changed.

These themes, of symbiotic travelling and dwelling, and the impossibility of returning to a home one has left—a home which then becomes purely imaginary and, in the imaginary, a fixed place—are posed dramatically by Indian director Mira Nair in her 1992 film *Mississippi Masala*. Nair's *Salaam Bombay* caused a stir with its searing images of a cruel, poverty-stricken Bombay. In *Mississippi*, Nair travels to America to examine Indian immigrant relations with African Americans.

Nair's Indian protagonists (Jay and Kinu, and their daughter, Meena) are already diasporic when the film opens in a newly organized postcolonial Uganda, with Idi Amin in control. Evidently quite prosperous, Jay, a business man, and his family are living in a large, rambling, flower-bedecked house overlooking a lake. They have servants, and seem happy, until Jay gives an interview on British television about the terrible new conditions in Uganda resulting from the Amin regime. His teacher friend, Okelo, is upset about the interview, seeing it as a stupidly provocative act. Shortly thereafter, Jay and Kinu are brutally arrested and, along with other Asians, forced to leave Africa. Okelo sympathizes but agrees with the sentiment: Africa is for Africans. Jay will never forgive him, despite Okelo's having put himself on the line to save his friend when he was arrested by the new regime.

This context, briefly alluded to, gestures toward larger issues of the colonization of Third World nations of each other, only indirectly linked to western imperialism. While such colonizations are often less talked about than those of the West, there is the exception of some Chinese and Taiwanese films which have increasingly, in the 1990s, dealt with these nations' experiences of Japanese colonization in the 1920s and 1930s. From an African perspective, Indian and European

political equality increased far more quickly than African and European equality: Indians "colonized" East Africa with their aggressive trading practices, and were disliked for unscrupulous practices. There is no evidence that Jay, one of the film's protagonists, was personally disliked, but he has to leave with the other Asians.

The rest of the film takes place in the American deep south, where Jay and his family have travelled to join Indian friends who run a motel. The film, then, presents multiple layers of travelling, with their accompanying different kinds of subjectivities-in-between. The Indians displaced from Africa are different from the Indians who have come directly from India, and different again from the African Americans they meet in the deep south who were displaced from Africa through enforced "travelling" centuries ago. These different kinds of diasporas create different levels and kinds of racisms. The racism of the Africans toward Asians, as noted, had a largely economic base, in that Indians in Africa were the bourgeoisie, owned businesses and were largely middle class. Their economic interests, then, differed from those state-controlled ones Amin was establishing.

There is no evidence in the film of specific *cultural* clashes around ethnicity in Africa. But the clash with Okelo shows that the different ethnic groups within Africa understand the codes each existed within but are unable to understand the codes Others have to exist within. Jay has to leave his fine house and lands and hurry out of the country. He does not understand that Okelo was trying to protect him by telling him of Amin's policy.

In America, however, there is, arguably, less of an economic base for ethnic rivalry—after all, the hero, Demetrius (played by Denzel Washington) owns a growing business and the Indians are successfully managing the motel: the hostility is mainly cultural and produced within white discursive frames. By this, I mean, as is abundantly clear from earlier chapters, that white discourse organizes African Americans as somehow "lower"; new ethnic groups incoming do not want to be linked to this already-existing "lower."

As Safran has argued, migrating peoples bring cultures with them to the host nation. What Safran says about people "retaining a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history and achievements" (Safran 1991, 83) is certainly true of Jay, who continues to grieve over being displaced from Africa,

shamefully driven from his lovely home and middle-class status and psychically wounded by what he sees as his friend's betrayal. But it is a fixed and imaginary Africa that he recalls. How home also travels is brutally revealed to him when, like France, he finally does return and discovers an Africa that is no longer his, and where he does not belong. He too has travelled while being in his new American "home."

Safran notes that the "Indian diaspora differs in important ways from that of the Jews and Armenians: an Indian homeland has existed continuously . . . and Indian diaspora has not always been associated with political disability or even minority status" (88). This partly accounts for the difficulty Jay and his wife have in being accepted in America. They partly keep themselves different and distanced. The family brings with them an Indian culture that remained intact during their time in Africa. The family and their friends attempt to continue this culture in the American south.

But Indian cultural assumptions about femininity, marriage and male/female relations are quite different from those common in the American south. While Indian cultural values are upheld by the parents, the children (who go to American schools and absorb American culture through their peer relationships) do not hold the same cultural beliefs, creating a well-known conflict. (Think of the classic example of *The Joy Luck Club* in relation to Chinese parent/child conflict in America.) Often tied to a fixed image of the homeland, migrant parents cannot begin to understand the experiences and values of children growing up in diaspora.

In *Mississippi*, as in *The Joy Luck Club*, larger diasporic issues, and those of subjectivities-in-between, are worked through via the mother-daughter relationship. Kinu expects Meena to agree to a more or less arranged marriage with Harry Patel, whom Kinu would be thrilled for Meena to catch, both because he is relatively wealthy and because he is lighter skinned. As one of Kinu's friends comments at a wedding that Meena reluctantly attends with her parents: "Arrey, you can be fair and have no money or you can be dark and have money, but you can't be dark and have no money and expect to get Harry Patel."

It is clear that Meena's family still functions according to a system in which families traditionally arrange marriages, where women are

thought of as commodities, and where gradations of skin color still prejudice the darker-looking.⁹ As in many American and other diasporic communities, the male gaze still dominates, and lighter-skinned women are considered “valuable” in obtaining a good marriage.

Nair has chosen to focus on two ethnic communities in Uganda—Indians and Africans—and, once her family are in the United States, on Indians and African Americans. In the Uganda scenes she does not include white settlers and colonizers; nor in America does she introduce white Americans except on the margins of the narrative. Her strategy was to focus on the relationships between minorities by minimizing the white presence around both groups, a presence with which they are inevitably involved: whites own the motel chain, white bank managers can give or withhold loans to Demetrius and the white police arrest Kate as a prostitute.¹⁰

The focus on Indians and African Americans makes for a refreshing and different examination of important issues, but it is striking that imperial structures reassert themselves even when whites are not directly involved. White presence hovers over inter-racial relationships in the sense of a paradigm of racial hierarchy that infects relations between groups other than white.¹¹ Partly for this reason, bell hooks, among others, has criticized *Mississippi Masala*: she argues that the film presents a slightly comic version of the Indian community and that marginalizing white spectators allows these spectators to reinforce their racism toward Indians. A white spectator may perhaps watch other groups fight one another with gratification. In addition, it's interesting that Nair, as an Indian herself, presents a very positive view of African Americans. Demetrius is industrious and upwardly mobile; his family does not object to Meena at all. It is the Indian family whose racism explodes when they discover that Meena loves a dark-skinned African American.

Yet to critique this film for showing tension between racial groups other than white makes for the kind of impossible situation that I return to in the last chapter: either the whites are always in the picture, and therefore always the focus, or, if we make a picture that excludes them, then their perceptions and readings are focused on. As everything in this book makes clear, it is not only film images—filmic processes of looking—that need to be focused on, but also who

is looking at the film. I have stressed throughout that the impact of inter-racial looking relations within films needs to be balanced by inter-racial looking relations *at the film*. In this case, a narrative about inter-racial Indian–African American relations on both of these groups as spectators may have important impact. The criticism of Indian racism is necessary for showing the struggle of Meena to find a female subjectivity outside of the models available to her within her community. It is her in-between-ness, part American, part Indian—that opens up the possibilities for her to find some other way to be and to fulfill her desire, in this case to be with Demetrius, her African American boyfriend. In addition, her love for Demetrius is very clearly linked to her love for Okelo, whom she kisses fondly when leaving Africa as a small child. Nair, then, is not simply writing a narrative about individuals who manage to find their personal happiness. She intends to indicate, to reference, larger perspectives regarding Third World nations, links between Africans and African Americans, decolonization in Africa and postcolonialism in America, in the sense of increasing demands by African Americans for access to the center, just as properly postcolonial nations have demanded independence (Banerjee 1995).

The film's hopeful ending—with the two running off together—has been criticized as utopian and as asserting American values of “freedom” and “individual choice” over those of traditional Indian culture. This critique returns us to the difficult issue of universal female rights—women's right to control their bodies and subjectivities—as against the idea that such a view is already deeply implicated in western humanism, as I discussed earlier. One might argue, as Banerjee has, that whether or not constructing women as commodities is right or wrong within India, it is irrelevant to the situation of diasporic women in America. Meena has learned about a different kind of subjectivity within America and seeks to make herself different from the subject her family demand of her.

Warrior Marks takes up these issues yet again, and it is an interesting text to juxtapose with Claire Denis' *Chocolat* and Nair's *Mississippi Masala*. In this film, instead of a white woman travelling to recapture a colonialist past in Africa, in nostalgic mode, Pratibha Parmar and Alice Walker travel to Africa on an activist mission that



Mississippi Masala (1992): The criticism of Indian racism in *Mississippi Masala* is necessary to show Meena's (Sarita Choudhury) struggle toward a subjectivity not dependent on her family. Her love for Demetrius (Denzel Washington) is linked to her childhood affection to "Uncle Okelo" in Africa.

goes right to the heart of issues to do with universal rights, with colonial legacies and with how one knows the Other. Like *Mississippi Masala*, the film opens up the question of travelling with one's home to investigate someone else's home. *Warrior Marks* produced an ambivalent response in this spectator vis-à-vis what results, because of the aggressive way in which it takes up the position of universal women's rights.

Warrior Marks has provoked much debate and discussion both in terms of its overall aims, its visual style and the cinematic genres it relies upon. It provides a useful focus through which to argue some of the opposing positions about "global" feminism, transnational female values and cross-cultural intervention in practices to do with the female body, like clitoridectomies—the topic of Parmar/Walker's film. What assumptions do the two non-white women make in undertaking this film aimed at critiquing clitoridectomies in Africa? How far are these travelling women of color participating in assumptions similar to those of white colonial female travellers, especially missionaries and anthropologists? What makes their travelling different from those of colonial and postcolonial religious groups? Do they travel as British or American women, i.e., travelling self-consciously as Euro-Americans assuming the right to impose American customs and values on the African women? Or do they travel as already occupying a diasporan, trans-national feminist location? How far does their voyage turn on the issue of universal women's rights, which the Beijing Women's Conference affirmed in summer 1995, to the delight of many feminists, but which Readings would claim are ultimately imperialist? Does Readings' criticism of attempts to bring the Aborigines within a western thought system also apply vis-à-vis female clitoridectomies? That is, may the notion of a common heritage be alien to women in certain African groups, and therefore should it not be imposed? By considering the African women "human," are Parmar and Walker "making them more like us than they are"? Finally, is there really any alternative to a concept of universal human rights, as it was agreed upon in Beijing? For while Readings opposes the concept in "Pagans, Perverts or Primitives?" he does not provide another model.

Readings' essay draws on anthropological and anticolonialist rejection of the anthropological endeavor up through the 1960s as critiques were initiated by Clifford Geertz and then pursued in different directions by James Clifford, George Marcus, Talal Asad, Edward Said and others. Readings' essay summarizes much of this critique in arguing that most anthropology is unable to avoid being imperialist in the very assumptions that undergird its research. Without such assumptions, anthropologists could not travel to cultures and carry on their work of documenting, discovering, classifying, explaining, interpreting and so on.

Edward Said's "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors" supports the already noted loss of innocence in undertaking anthropological knowledge, and points to the "genuine malaise about the socio-political status of anthropology as a whole" (Said 1989, 208). Said importantly observes that "there is an almost total lack of any reference to American imperial intervention as a factor affecting the theoretical discussion" (214). He asks that scholars reflect on ways in which "work on remote or primitive or 'other' cultures, societies, peoples . . . feeds into, connects with, impedes or enhances the active political processes of dependency, domination, or hegemony" (218). Meanwhile, in a similar vein, Paul Smith in "Writing, General Knowledge, and Postmodern Anthropology" links what he calls Geertz' paranoiac mode of anthropology (i.e., his retreat into the hermeneutic circle) as linked to the collapse of empire, "the postcolonial emergence of an at least potentially autonomous world and its troublesome claims" (Smith 1989, 162). In concluding (after an important discussion of debates about language, writing and speech in anthropology), Smith notes that what has been repressed by focus on these categories is the body and its history. These reflections usefully frame some of the questions I want to deal with in regard to Readings' position and ethnographic film.

Smith's remarks return us to the issue of subjectivity, to which the body is necessarily linked. There is a big difference between *failing* to approach the subjectivity (including the body) of the Other, and its being *impossible* to approach such an Other subjectivity (body). I agree about the difficulties of approaching an Other subjectivity from an entirely different culture, but believe, with Trinh T. Minh-ha, that there are ways of "speaking nearby" if not "about." "Speaking

nearby" evokes the body. It evokes an ethnographer whose presence is noted, who listens and speaks, but does not assume knowledge of the other. The entire critique of anthropology's hitherto uncritical understanding of its project has made possible better understanding of what is not possible, but also of what may be possible. But this is, again, to anticipate.

If the balance between fiction and documentary is blurred in non-Hollywood films (and even within Hollywood), Denis' film follows largely fictional cinematic codes. Parmar/Walker's film, on the other hand, adopts ethnographic cinema codes, and its process will return me to some of the troubling questions about anthropology noted above. *Warrior Marks* provides yet another set of issues around the question of this chapter—that of "Can one know the Other?"—issues that come closest of those in any of the films to the example I started with, namely Readings' discussion of Herzog's *Where the Green Ants Dream* in relation to Lyotard's *différend*.

The coming together of the African American Alice Walker and the Kenyan-born, Indian/British Parmar is itself interesting as a transnational collaboration. Parmar has spoken vividly about the impact on her consciousness of the American civil rights movements, as showing that people can stand up, resist and achieve something.¹² It was a founding moment for Parmar and ultimately resulted in her making a film, *A Place of Rage*, in which several African American women (including Alice Walker, but also June Jordan and Angela Davis) active in the civil rights movements talk about their experiences. Parmar also interviews Vietnamese American Trinh T. Minh-ha (see chapter 7), whose films and theories have been influential for Parmar. In the book about the making of the film as well as in the interview, Parmar describes how the project got underway following the publication of Alice Walker's book about clitoridectomies in Africa and their meeting with the African women's group, FORWARD, based in Britain, who supported the making of the film partly as a publicity vehicle for their movement.

All of these conditions of the film's making are evident in its form. Its aim is straightforward: namely, to dramatize the terror and pain of clitoridectomies still being performed regularly in Africa on young girls, and indeed also within African communities in Britain (if not the United States), and to educate women about the physical and

psychological dangers of the practices. To this end, Parmar films her journey with Alice Walker and women from FORWARD from London to selected villages in Africa where clitoridectomies are still being performed.¹³ The project comes close to anthropology in the women's interviewing of indigenous women about the ritual, and in their documenting aspects of the ritual on film. Where it differs is in its explicit taking up of a position against clitoridectomies. Ethnographic film usually pretends to a "neutral" stance, although no stance is ever really "neutral" within prevailing ethnographic film codes. *Warrior Marks* is clearly best located as one kind of propaganda film. This location will be important for later arguments I make about the film.

What's interesting for me about *Warrior Marks* is the confident subjectivities of the women of color throughout the film, both the older African women (not the young girls—the film needs to render them passive and victimized to make its arguments) and the Euro-American, diasporic women. In the film's favor is the strong bonding that it shows among the women fighting clitoridectomies. It provides a glimpse into the world of strong women of color who are activists, take agency and want to make a difference. How often does one have a chance to look at such images? To see such active and politically engaged feminists? These are not women travelling like Denis' protagonists with their husbands or like France as an adult, seeking to recover something lost, a lost love, a lost identity. This is not the sadness of an imperial nation losing its colonies, as in *Black Narcissus* or *Out of Africa*. These women know who they are and what they are about. And this makes for much of the pleasure in watching the film.

But the African women are equally sure about their practices. And it is here that the issue of "Can one know the Other?" emerges. It is significant, however, that the filmmakers do not situate themselves within that kind of discourse, but are working from a different position. Walker and Parmar stress that clitoridectomy is a male practice that serves patriarchy, yet we do not see any men (nor any white people) in the film. If this is a ritual for patriarchy, the women have made it their own as well. The film shows that there is no agreement about the practice among the women in the film. Since the film takes us into the realm of deciding what is right, it comes closer than did *Chocolat* to the terrain of the *différend*. The African women assert the impor-

tance and rightness of the clitoridectomy ritual, defending it mostly in terms of "tradition"; the Euro-American and African women in FORWARD equally strongly assert its wrongness, arguing that the practice is not "culture" so much as child abuse, torture. There seems no way to negotiate the gap. There does not seem to be a category that both sides can agree on. Time and again, the African women refuse the claim that this is not merely a cultural practice but child abuse, or child torture. The meanings of the practice for the African women simply cannot be accommodated within these notions: the meanings lie elsewhere, perhaps beyond the reach of western understanding.

In showing this *différend*, this implacable, unresolvable difference, Parmar and Walker have done us a service. However, before exploring the implications of the *différend* here, and the problems with it, let me discuss objections to feminist uses of clitoridectomy in general and then refer to specific criticisms of the film raised by various critics. Katiatu Kanneh has objected to how "female circumcision" has become a "dangerous trope in Western feminisms." It becomes "one visible marker of outrageous primitivism, sexism and *the* Third World woman," Kanneh argues (Kanneh 1995, 347). She concludes that "The battle over the black Third World woman's body is staged as a battle between First World feminists and black Third World men" (348).

Specific objections to the film arise in relation to its form and the way the form slants issues very much toward the western view and against the African view. I will illustrate the cinematic strategies that support this criticism in one moment. I just pause to wonder how a film with an explicit aim to support the cause of FORWARD could be expected to be other than a kind of propaganda? Inherent in agreeing to work with FORWARD was agreeing to make a film supporting FORWARD's clear anticlitoridectomy position.

The film makes its points powerfully through familiar documentary strategies. *Warrior Marks* is a beautifully photographed and edited film, and all the more powerful for that. One successful cinematic strategy in *Warrior Marks* avoids creating fiction or fantasy which is made deliberately to look like reality—namely the dance performance: this performance is obviously choreographed specifically for this film. It is inserted at moments throughout the interview and documentary sections. The performance is an imaginative presentation of emotions



Warrior Marks (1993): The dance performance is a beautifully photographed and imaginative presentation of the emotions suffered in the act of clitoridectomy.

suffered in the act of a clitoridectomy. In the interview we did, Parmar mentions some spectators' discomfort with the erotic nature of the dancer's image, apparently a disjuncture with the pain of clitoridectomy, but Parmar believes it offers a poetic rendering that highlights the film's position on clitoridectomy as torture.

Let me now explore problems that have been raised. One problem with the film, as Kagendo Murungi (1994) and Caren Kaplan (forthcoming) have pointed out, is that it makes its points at the expense of the African women. The way the interviews are set up ends up being manipulative of the women interviewed. Alice Walker is seen trapping the women into saying things Walker already knows. There are, in addition, camera shots that deliberately construct a terror around the practice of clitoridectomies, such as that where the camera wobbles toward a run-down hut, looming near its half-open door, creating a sense of fear and unhealthiness as the place where girls are prepared



Warrior Marks (1993): Controversy about the film focuses on shots like this one, in which the face of a young girl awaiting clitoridectomy is enlarged and placed behind the dancer for dramatic effect.

for the cruel ritual. The focus on the ritual killing of chickens before the ceremony also manipulates spectators' emotions, producing revulsion and disgust. In one of the interviews with the old women in charge of the ritual, the camera rests ominously on the women's hands—as if these hands are to be fetishized for the cruelty they enact in taking out the clitoris.

Another question about *Warrior Marks* is, then, whether or not Parmar/Walker are unconsciously working within the tradition of colonialism in coming to Africa to teach the Africans a better, more modern way of doing things, as Caren Kaplan has again argued. Were they irresponsible in not being precise about the specific cultures they went to, knowing the languages, or learning more about the specificity of each culture? What about the absence of reference to colonialism, its legacies, the entire context of Africa today within which the women continue their tradition, which Kaplan has also drawn attention to as did Said and Smith in critiquing ethnography?¹⁴

Further devastating criticisms are raised in this regard by Kagendo Murungi (1994), who argues that the film is “yet another imperialist treatment of Africa,” relying on “established stereotypes for its own purposes” (12). Murungi fears that the film plays into remaining western images (from Hollywood cinema) of Africa as “a mysterious and savage land,” so that spectators are called “to voyeurism at exotic and distant savagery” (12). These are important and persuasive criticisms, and (as is evident in Murungi's Afterword), have evidently spurred much passionate debate. They are not criticisms that one can decide about, since so much depends on the frameworks within which one positions the film. I have largely positioned the film as not a film about Africa so much as propaganda for a particular cause led by the African American women in FORWARD.

In addition, one could well ask if critics should apply a completely other sort of standard to Walker/Parmar's project, namely seeing it not only specifically as propaganda (a genre that demands some of the techniques that have been critiqued) but situating propaganda against clitoridectomies as valid in light of an assumed trans-national feminist project. Such a project does implicitly take into account global power relations. In this view, Parmar/Walker are working from a position—quite frequent among activist women in resistance movements worldwide—that hopes women can discover and then act in accord with, agreed upon universal women's rights *in relation to the female body*.

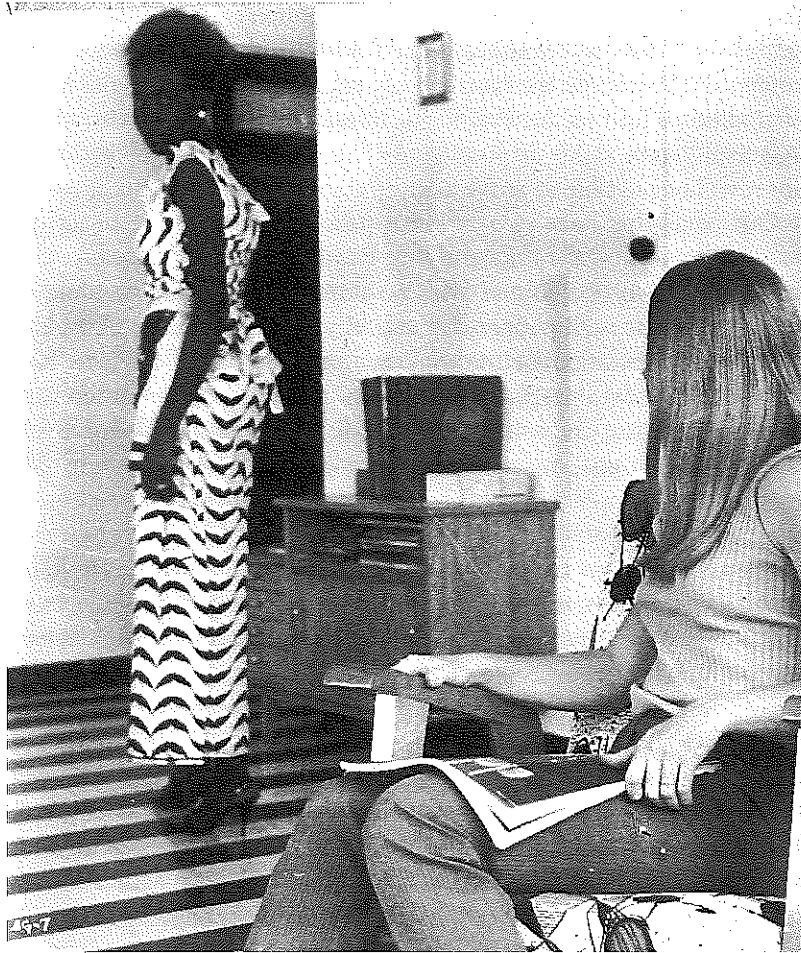
This position does not ignore the body, as much of the anthropological research Said and Smith critiqued does. In this argument, rather, universal rights about the female body take precedence over the rights of traditional and local cultural practices. Whether or not one views universal female rights as possible will have an impact on whether or not it will be possible to arrive at any “global” feminism.

Out of all this I see two possible positions to adopt. I reject the strong position on the *différend* that Readings takes up, because this leaves people in one culture with no possibility of understanding or having relations with people in a radically different culture. A variant on this rigid position of the *différend* was suggested by Jane Flax (1996) such that, despite what seem like intractable differences between cultures, and without hoping to close the gaps, people can enter into dialogue, articulate different positions and question one another about implications of their beliefs. This offers one position to take up.

The other follows the logic of activist “grass roots” women holding on to a notion of universal *women's* rights, despite the problems of this position already noted. Note that I stress *women's* rights, not *human* rights. However slight, the difference is crucial: for the first time, international women in Beijing in fall 1995 were deciding what universal rights in relation to their bodies—usually a main site of social contestation and women's oppression—they need.¹⁵ The old human rights concept barely took into account women's needs, and thus has largely only served men.¹⁶ While there are problems with whether or not such a position is viable, it makes sense within certain activist contexts. Theoretically, I think the first position, in which people dialogue across a gap, comes close to that I argued for in chapter 5.

I believe that Parmar and Walker *were* aiming at a dialogue across a gap in making their film, but that the needs of FORWARD for a film that worked on the spectator to bring her to the FORWARD position encouraged Walker/Parmar toward some propaganda techniques. It is that need, rather than the actual trans-national feminist position, that opened the film up to the legitimate critiques noted above.

Taken together, *Chocolat*, *Mississippi Masala* and *Warrior Marks* offer challenging new inter-racial looking relations, with their attendant complicated cross-cultural underpinnings. Denis' dual narrative



Black Girl (1966): Douana, superb in her African robe, refuses to conform to her French employers' idea of servant dress. Here, Douana "looks back" at her mistress with obvious anger and disdain. The white woman's face is hidden in a reversal of cinematic norms.

offers insight into colonial and post-independence Cameroon, and the contrasting inter-racial looking relations that each historical context produces. The tortured look and desire of Protée—its exclusion and prohibition—have become the confident, amiable and self-assured look of William J. Park. It is William who keeps the boundary

between whites and blacks when France wishes to cross it; he does it from a position of control and not, as with Protée, from weakness. In *Warrior Marks*, the unusual situation of black women travelling with subjectivity and agency produces the provocative argument that women of color repeat the arrogant gaze at the indigenous Other that white female colonial travellers bore. However, I hope I have shown that such a reading is too simple and reductive. *Warrior Marks* offers important new images of black female subjects with agency and a commitment to the welfare of women worldwide. The philosophical and metaphysical issues the film provokes are part of what make it valuable.

Both films question the stereotypes of Hollywood films reviewed earlier. *Chocolat* gives the look to the servant who, in Hollywood films, is totally marginalized. Hollywood has traditionally only imaged black servants in stereotypical black Mammy figures and male waiters, busboys and chauffeurs often indeed ridiculed and used for comic effect (as in *Blonde Venus*). American imperialist Hollywood, perhaps more than any cinema, figured forth the ugly unconscious of European colonialism that African directors like Sembene, or Denis and other European directors are currently contesting in powerful, stunningly photographed films like *Black Girl* and *Chocolat*. The two versions of *Imitation of Life* (much discussed in feminist scholarship)¹⁷ were exceptions but still presented problems. In the 1990s, America seems ready for less stereotypical images: *Corrina, Corrina* (starring Whoopi Goldberg) finally allows the black servant agency, voice, the gaze and, in the end, a measure of autonomy and interracial love. Meanwhile, *Maid to Order* makes comedy out of the topic and brings together, in a large house, three maids of varied ethnicities (black, Latina and white). While the white maid is the main protagonist, nevertheless closeness and caring develops among the three women through their common plight. The white maid, as a rich girl fallen on hard times, becomes a figure of ridicule for the far more accomplished maids in the beginning of the film. By the end, following Hollywood mandates, the white maid finds her way out of being a servant and into the arms of the rich hero.

Nevertheless, none of these American films come close to taking the theme of white oppression of blacks with anything like the power and dignity of the foreign films. This has partly to do with the way in



Maid to Order (1987) makes comedy out of domestic service and brings together three maids—Latina, black and white. However, while the white maid has to take her cues from the more experienced women, the Hollywood ending ensures she finds herself in the arms of the rich hero.

which American imperialism has been masked, its power dynamics hidden. Legacies of slavery will remain in cultural images and productions as long as the United States is unable to fully understand that the relations in which it was involved with African American and other minority groups are analogous to the much more obvious imperialism of European nations.

In the next chapter, I look at the (implicit) critique of ethnographic film in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s films through a contrast with earlier models before turning to comment on Trinh’s theories of approaching the Other. I link discussions back to issues relating to China by selecting Trinh’s *Shoot for the Contents* as my focus.

Notes

1. I also indicated that the question of “knowing” may also be at stake in Ahmad’s reading of Jameson.
2. See Ed Morales’ article, “Color Coding” (1996), regarding black/Hispanic issues in a Harlem store fire. That fire had mainly been discussed in terms of the familiar black/Jew hostility and rivalries. This author believes it had as much to do with black/Hispanic increasing enmities. As Morales puts it: “If the idea of a separate, ‘colored’ category is a chilling one, there is some basis for it—consider the gray (or ‘brown’) area one steps into when examining Latinos. From the brown zone it’s possible to cross-identify with African and European-based cultural models; the Latino world is one where a light-skinned woman might be offended to be called “white” and a dark-skinned man may deny his blackness . . . None of this begins to address Asian minorities, particularly Chinese Americans, whose poverty statistics and underclass scenario closely mirror those of blacks and Latinos. Whether we like it or not, it is apparent that even though people of color constitute more than 60 percent of New York’s population, we are competing with each other perhaps as ruthlessly as with the white plurality.”
3. I want to thank Dicle Kogacioglu, a student in my fall 1995 graduate class on the topics in this book, for stressing this point about the need for a process, a historical context, within which different groups can come together to resist western domination.
4. Very fruitful discussion and debate about western theoretical tools in non-western contexts has taken place in response to V. Y. Mudimbe’s 1988 volume *The Invention of Africa: Philosophy, Gnosis and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press). Mudimbe uses Foucaultian analysis to situate various discourses within and about Africa: he isolates and epitomizes the categories of knowledge discourses assume; he shows what various types of knowledge can be found organizing thought about Africa in the West. He explores the degree to which western philosophy and theory has penetrated African thought, and ponders the possibilities of extricating this thought from other African philosophical traditions. In the end, Mudimbe seems to argue that the myth paradigm is the

best for understanding African thought—that is, the mental, intellectual thought processes as they may be distinguished from predominant western paradigms.

Manthia Diawara's 1990 "Reading Africa through Foucault: V. Y. Mudimbe's Reaffirmation of the Subject" (*October* 55, Winter 1990:79–92) very usefully highlights how, in using Foucault, Mudimbe in fact transforms Foucaultian thought. Diawara shows that Mudimbe not only used Foucault to critique discursive formations of Africa, but he also exposed the paradox of the Foucaultian system—namely, the inability to create a discourse outside itself. Indeed, Diawara argues that the system is designed to cater to western fears of what the West cannot know: it "fears the emergence of (an)Other discourse, one that excludes the Western ratio. . . ." (87).

Meanwhile, in his essay, "Que Faire? Reconsidering Inventions of Africa" (*Critical Inquiry* 19, Autumn 1992:87–102), Andrew Apter takes up issues from an African Studies Association panel session on Mudimbe's book. I recommend this essay for a full survey of debates about western knowledges and African thought, and for a bibliography essential to this field. Apter's own position seeks to synthesize opposing positions regarding whether or not African thought constitutes real philosophy or rather "wisdom." Apter argues from his work with Yoruba peoples that Yoruba ritual is a genuinely critical practice.

Other scholars important in these debates about Africa include Christopher Miller, Terry Ranger and Robert Young.

5. However, Denis denies any autobiographical elements to this narrative.
6. Protée is played with incredible power and dignity by Isaac de Bankole, whom Denis also stars in *Man No Run*, about cockfighting.
7. Viz the case of Indian groups' resistance to an American company winning the contract for construction of a major electricity plant on the basis that there are perfectly good Indian companies for this.
8. In his *Race, Nation and Class*, Balibar argues that current French immigrants appear "as a result of colonization and decolonization and thus success in concentrating upon themselves both the continuation of imperial scorn and the resentment that is felt by the citizens of a fallen power" (Balibar 41–42).
9. Once again, I want to reference Banerjee's discussion of this film in her dissertation, "Nationalist and Feminist Identities: Moments of Confrontation and Complicity in Post-Colonial Fiction and Film." Suny Stony Brook Diss., August 1995.
10. This scene parallels the one in *Jungle Fever*, where once again an inter-racial couple are pounced on by police. In that case, however,

since one of the couple was white, the police assume she's the victim of black rape.

11. I want to thank Debjani Banerjee, one of my dissertation students, for noting this point and also for reminding me of bell hooks' position on *Mississippi Masala*.
12. Parmar spoke about this in an interview I did with her in London, 1994, referred to below. The interview will be published in a volume of interviews I have done with other women filmmakers of color.
13. Parmar is aware of criticisms that could be made of her film (see below), when she says: "Again, some people have said: 'Who are you and Alice Walker to make a film about this subject?' What I say to this is, 'You do it, and that's all the better'; I did it because (clitoridectomy) was an issue that I felt committed to as a feminist—as someone who has always been involved in campaigns against violence against women. This was just part of the continuum of different kinds of struggles against violence against women" (interview, London 1994).
14. In the interview I did with Parmar in London, May 1994, Parmar noted that she "had thought long and hard about doing this film precisely because of questions of authorship, of our being cultural outsiders—questioning how you can make a film of a supposedly cultural practice (one of the arguments of the film is that this is not culture)." Parmar continues: "What I wanted to do was to make a film that did not portray women as victims, but as resisters, women as fighters, women who have actually survived and continue to survive—despite what has been done to them."
15. Since writing this, I have heard Jane Flax argue quite persuasively that even the universal *female* rights that depend upon the specificity of woman's body cannot really be defended. She argued persuasively that even if you push at specific things like pregnancy, one ends up with a language or rights which only can adhere to the abstract individual. Rights of any kind requires a universal ground and this ground has to be shorn of all determinants—or of all specified determinants. In fact, this abstract individual is white and male, but these cannot be stated.
16. In a lecture at SUNY Stony Brook regarding the Beijing women's conference in summer 1995, Temma Kaplan outlined how this had been the position that international women argued for at the Beijing Women's Conference, September 1995. That such international women's rights may be influencing United States policy vis-à-vis clitoridectomy may be seen in highly publicized cases throughout 1996. One young woman, refused asylum in the United States at first, finally won the right not to be sent home—where she faced clitoridec-

tomy. See the long article "New Law Bans Genital Cutting In United States," *New York Times* (Saturday October 12, 1996): 1, 28.

17. For a bibliography and reprinting of some feminist work on the 1959 version of *Imitation of Life*, see Lucy Fischer (1993). See also E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992).

7.

"Speaking Nearby": Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* and *Shoot for the Contents*

Before moving on to discuss two of Trinh's films, let me return to the question of a kind of male discourse that, for the most part, neglects the level of subjectivity, whether that of one subject confronting another or that of a subject vis-à-vis a text.

I earlier discussed the various issues at play in the debates among Jameson, Ahmad, Said and Dirlík, among others. I argued that debates about knowing the Other have been debates mainly conducted by males in a male intellectual mode. While a scholar like Arif Dirlík shows some sympathy with postmodernism and deconstruction, he too does not dwell on the level of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, let alone that of the psychoanalytic subject.

There has surely to be a way between the alternatives of an oppressive western application of humanism to the Other and surrendering any kind of cross-cultural knowing. The positing of two such limited positions perhaps emerges from western *male* modes of knowing (which ignore psychic energies, psychoanalytic operations and concern with subjectivity and interiority). To his credit, of all the male thinkers noted above, in his provocative essay on "Third World Literatures" Jameson throws in an occasional reference to subjectivity, as when he talks of the oedipalization of 1960s radical politics or, most significantly, when he refers to the position of the *reader* in