

CLIT LIT

I presume the chronicle of female sexual mutilation has few lyrical moments. Listening a while back to three Toronto commentators wrestle with the problem of how to appropriately inform the general public that the practice still goes on, somewhere, was like listening to a poor player practice a difficult Prelude and Fugue — desperation and disbelief vying with incredulity. You see, to put the matter in context, as we were urged, such traditional mutilation was never a staple of stodgy Reaganomics (in translation: stolid Western Conservatives didn't 'initiate' it.) Hence to dwell at length on the unseemliness of a practice that pains and endangers women, whether or not willed by long-standing, earth-loving cultures, is to put cultural humanists everywhere at risk. If you tell the general public that such a practice still goes on, somewhere, the next time a woman of colour gets on a bus someone might go 'hmm'. And the person so 'hmmmed' would be the object of, well, a concocted context. So reasoned one of the earnest trusting commentators, with a consternation designed to appease. Statistics, we were told, are relevant only 'in' context — a serviceable tautology if you believe there are erroneous statistics. The point is that numbers, figures, in and of themselves are neutral, but liars constantly dissemble and plodders mislead. It's the interpretation or presumption that is crucial, and that our news brokers seemed determined not to let their listeners risk resolving on their own.

Hence the interminable fugue.

The generic worry of the brokers was wide ranging and extended to things like the *perceived* stubbornness and *perceived* proliferation of criminal assault by blacks. A longstanding convention of the insular humanitarian. Blacks cannot be blamed for white

perception. All crime is seen ethnocentrically, and is measured mainly by institutional hacks, noted mainly ‘out of context’. Thus, to restore the context, put black crime in perspective, one of the fair-minded commentators inadvertently let slip ‘the fact pretty well established over the last fifteen to twenty years that the person likeliest to be hurt is a black middle aged woman.’ An ostensible truism. And as such, definitely a statement for the ‘No Comment Department’.

By listening further I just knew I was destined to be an accessory — overhearing the very thing correct-minded editorialists seek to contextualize. But the brokers seemed in earnest. Thus, how do you broach questions of cultural scarification and mutilation without weakening the spirit of humanist magnanimity? People do have sinister imaginations. My perverse Western mind then reeled between images of venerable head binding and contouring (long before President Lyndon Johnson got on the phone), to resplendent Mayan princes drawing bark paper through obsidian holes in their penile glands (so attentively described by Linda Schele and David Freidel in their book *A Forest of Kings*). You don’t have to be a hoary European male to blanche before ritual like that.

Then I recall Lady Evening Star, a Mayan queen, having a stingray spine thrust through her tongue, and her own blithe self pulling a rope the thickness of her finger through the lesion, ‘her blood...in brilliant contrast to the deep green of her shoulder cape.’ (The cape suggests the Mayans too had their Versace.) Another princess, not a slave to habit, did it with barbs set in the rope!

One can only stand in awe of Mayan wisdom. So that’s how they abided influential female tongue, kept the backchat and ululations to a minimum — yet managed to be differentially even fondly written about later on by a pair of caring scholars! The lesson is ineluctable.

So gents, off with the penile tea cozies! Bloody but unbowed is not politically perverse if you want to skewer a few tongues or an obnoxious prick. When habitual, the resolve to do so can be venerable. Even if you end up being fed to the royal jaguars as a war trophy, you may still adorn immortal stelae and demonstrate how the Mayan health plan kept a population youthful and on its toes. All career guilt-ridden mutilators and vivisectionists do take note.