On the Very Idea of Development: Reflections on Thomas McCarthy's *Race, Empire, and   the Idea of Human Development*

Lorenzo C. Simpson

Harriman Hall 233
Philosophy Department
Stony Brook University
Stony Brook, NY 11794-3750
Lorenzo.Simpson@stonybrook.edu

Agency and political amnesia

Central among the themes of McCarthy's powerful performative display of Critical Theory's continuing relevance is the claim that the requirements of global justice must include sustained attention to the repair of the "harmful effects of past injustice." One way of pursuing what he aptly calls the "politics of public memory" in which a critical theory of global development must engage is to address the hysteretic effects of both racial discrimination at home and colonialism abroad.   By 'hysteretic effect,' I refer, to

appropriate a particularly apt term from physics, to situations where physical systems have a "memory," situations where consequences of a set of causal conditions persist well after the initiating conditions have changed, as if the past state of the system were still present. Often, corresponding to the system's "memory" is a political amnesia. Symptomatic of our public amnesia regarding matters of race is the neo-conservatives' well-known "culture of poverty thesis," and in the global arena, the invocation of "dysfunctional cultural values" of "underdeveloped" societies (Thomas McCarthy, Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009], pp.10, 119).   In challenging the claim of neoracists that social pathology is the independent variable in accounting for social wretchedness, McCarthy suggests that social structures and processes, on the one hand, and psychological and cultural patterns, on the other, should rather be understood as being reciprocally related (McCarthy, p. 11). This is a point with which I strongly agree and would like here to develop a bit further.

The expression "culture of poverty" is a signifier for a weakness of culture and character that manifests itself as an agency deficit, a deficit conceived of either as a) a values deficit and/or as b) a volitional deficit, understood as a lack of discipline, self-control and so on. I shall first address briefly the thesis of value deficit. In an article entitled "The Moral Quandary of the Black Community," a prominent spokesperson for this view deployed the formulation "values, social norms and personal behavior observed among the poorest members of the black community" (emphasis mine).[1] However, unlike behavior, values are not observables in any straightforward sense. In order to gain access to an agent's values we must enter a hermeneutic circle, wherein the relationship between values and behavior is acknowledged to be mediated by the cognitive representations agents hold about socially available avenues of action.

This might lead us to question, for example, social-psychological studies such as those that purport to establish differential attitudes towards immediate gratification exhibited by poor black children as compared to whites. Is the unwillingness of the poor black children to forego a prize in the present in order to receive one of somewhat greater value in a specified future testimony to a culture of hedonism? Or is it rather an instance of pragmatic behavior predicated upon the rationally acquired belief that the system cannot be trusted to deliver, that is predicated upon the absence of a basis for hope? As I have argued elsewhere, it is the failure of neoconservative thinkers to acknowledge this and to *assume*, as opposed to hermeneutically demonstrate, such value differentials that underwrites their assertions to the effect that behavior regarded as dysfunctional within the global-capitalist system can be attributed to deficient values.

Next, I would like to try to complicate a bit the way in which we are typically inclined to think of agency. It is natural enough to think of agency as the capacity to produce an effect or to bring about a state of affairs. But often, if not always, what I shall now call first-order capacities are conditioned by capacities of the second order, capabilities that enable or condition the exercise of capacities of the first order. I find it useful to think of second-order agency as the ability to acquire or avail oneself of the enabling or facilitating conditions of agency in the first-order sense. I think that an example of Locke's can be turned to my purposes here. I have in mind the situation of a person who is put into a cell and is led to believe, falsely, that all the doors are locked.[2] The person who is put into a cell and convinced that all of the doors are locked (when in fact, one is left unlocked) is objectively, from a third-person standpoint, able to leave the cell. But because he cannot--given his information--avail himself of this opportunity, his ability to perambulate where he pleases is limited. In other words, because the second-order capacity of being able to avail himself of knowledge

regarding the doors was lacking, he was not in a position to exercise his first-order capacity to walk out. To take another example, knowing that one needs, and having the ability to gain access to, a quiet place to study can condition one's success in completing a project requiring uninterrupted concentration. If the conditions for second order agency—conditions whose satisfaction most of us can take for granted-- are blocked for some due to structural features of society that are beyond their control, then it is unjust to demand, and unfair to expect, the same exercise of first order agency from them that we would expect from those of us who are more favorably positioned.

In his study's conclusion, McCarthy alludes to a tension that is subtended in our current global context of a growing transnational solidarity around a "politics of human rights" and a deepening consensus about a "human rights culture," namely, a tension or conflict between two dominant interpretations of human rights (McCarthy, p. 235). Developed societies tend to emphasize civil and political rights, while those regarded as developing societies tend to emphasize social and economic rights. This tension, he says, exerts a countervailing pressure which prevents a sufficient overlapping consensus on the extension of 'human rights' to allow for even reasonable disagreement on the interpretation or application of the idea. That would be to say, proponents of the competing interpretations would, in some important sense, be talking past one another.

One of the justifications for my having adduced what I have called second-order agency is to provide a means of mediating these two horizons of interpretation. Attention to economic and social rights is a moral-political obligation because it is a condition of agency, of the ability to exercise civil and political rights. I wonder whether McCarthy would assent to this emendation of his position.

In this section, I have briefly alluded to the importance of a hermeneutic sensitivity to the contexts in which differently situated social agents find themselves. In the next section, I exploit the potential of hermeneutics with the aim of responding to McCarthy's expressed worry that, in a culturally diverse global society, his cosmopolitan hopes for global justice might run the risk of being construed as yet another incarnation of Western normative imperialism.

Modernity and its "others"

As far as I can tell, McCarthy does not offer a full-blown *philosophical* argument for the ineluctable status of cultural modernity. He instead takes the latter as a "fact," though an inescapable one. When McCarthy invokes a phrase often associated with Bruno Latour and claims that "we are now all moderns in an important sense," I found myself a bit puzzled by the modality of his claim (McCarthy, p. 233). Are we merely contingently modern, necessarily modern, in some sense, or what? Is modernization a matter of functional exigency, of quasi-transcendental necessity? Now, to be sure, certain aspects of *cultural* modernity do seem to be cognitively irreversible. For example, the disenchantment and associated reflexivity that Weber diagnosed as symptomatic of modernity does seem irrevocable and irreversible; we cannot go back on the historicist enlightenment that led to the postmetaphysical view wherein there are *multiple contexts* of world-disclosure, each making a *hypothetical* validity claim (McCarthy, p. 222). And other aspects, such as the learning processes institutionalized in modern science, do seem to be asymmetrical achievements in problem-solving ability that we could relinquish only with loss. I find this argument from the inescapable fact of modernity generally persuasive But, of course, Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action, to which McCarthy is generally quite sympathetic, was motivated in part to combat the potential for nihilism and the one-sided

view of rationality that would be encouraged by *this* legacy of modernity. In commenting on Habermas' strategies of argumentation for his position, at least the position that Habermas held in the 80's, that "the ability to act communicatively...and to reason argumentatively and reflectively about disputed validity claims is a developmental-logically advanced stage of species-wide competencies, the realization and completion of potentialities that are universal to humankind," McCarthy notes with approval Habermas' move away from the more *a prioristic* forms of transcendental argumentation towards more empirically informed, and hence in principle defeasible, styles of rational reconstruction (see Thomas McCarthy, "Rationality and Relativism: Habermas's 'Overcoming of Hermeneutics'," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, eds. J.B. Thompson and David Held [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982] pp. 66f). However, McCarthy went on to raise questions, mainly from two directions, about this rationally reconstructive defense of a model of communicative action that claims to capture *universal* conditions of understanding, *general* and *unavoidable* presuppositions of communicative action. First he questioned the adequacy of the empirical bases of the reconstruction, as it made appeal to disputable studies of cognitive and moral development (McCarthy, "Rationality and Relativism," pp. 68-75). Here he warned us to adopt an attitude of suspicion towards construing practices in other cultures as Aexhibiting a more or less deficient mastery of our competencies rather than as expressing mastery of a different set of skills altogether" (McCarthy, "Rationality and Relativism," p. 70). Second, McCarthy pointed out that meta-ethical disputes about the most adequate styles of moral reasoning, be it contractarianism, utilitarianism, 'justice as fairness,' or communicative ethics itself, can be settled only by what I would call hermeneutic dialogue, where there presumably could exist reasonable disagreement (McCarthy, "Rationality and Relativism," pp. 74-75).

I briefly rehearse this "intellectual biography" of McCarthy's to set the premise for the puzzlement on my part. The move from 1) issuing cautionary reminders in the 80's with respect to Habermas' rational reconstructive justification of the universality of communicative action: "we should guard against faulting *them* for not doing *our* tricks well" to 2) we are all moderns now, so 3) we're all trying, or perhaps should be trying, to perform the same sort of tricks, is interesting to me. I assert 3) because something like it is presupposed by non-question begging claims about advance. A claim to progress or of "developmental advance" (McCarthy, *Race, Empire and the Idea of Human Development*, p. 162) implies the existence of *mutually* identified problems that are seen to be handled more satisfactorily by "theoretical matrix$_2$" at time t_2 than by "theoretical matrix$_1$" at time t_1. Do all cultures have to acknowledge the same "certain range of problems" (McCarthy, *Race, Empire and the Idea of Human Development*, p. 161)? McCarthy seems more sanguine now about answering this in the affirmative than he did earlier. I am curious about the trajectory of *his* evolution. My guess is that growing interconnectedness has made it true *de facto*. But I would be interested in McCarthy's explicit account of the route that got him from 1) to 3).

I would like to end by suggesting further reasons to persist in the hope that McCarthy so movingly articulates. I believe that we can make intelligible a non-question-begging criterion of developmental advance, i.e., a criterion that does justice to cultural difference, and therefore one that strongly couples the acknowledgment of multiculturalism to a commitment to social justice. I refer here in particular to McCarthy's worry, expressed at the end of his book, about postcolonial objections to the "imposition of normative standards developed in the West." I would like to point to two ways in which there may be structures that would allow *internal* normative pressure to do the critical work that the "imposition of normative standards developed in the West"

would otherwise do (McCarthy, *Race, Empire*, p. 243). These are, I would claim then, two bases for confidence that we can navigate successfully between the Scylla of arrogant cultural imperialism and the Charybdis of impotent cultural relativism.

Differently cultured others operate with an *ideal* of themselves wherein their actions can, if challenged in ways that are understandable to them, be held accountable to *reasons* that have a non-parochial purchase. Conspicuous here is a dimension of rationality that has a transcultural or culturally-invariant purchase, what I call second-order rationality. "Second-order rationality" refers to the inclination that we are entitled to impute to everyone to reform their practices in the direction of more rationality when their lack of rationality is pointed out to them in terms with which they are conversant. This dimension of rationality, which can be deployed to critical effect in scientific experimental design, in the interpretation of sacred texts, as well as in the interpretation of political constitutions, has, I would argue, a context-invariant status. Further, it implies that we can--without appealing to anything beyond the matrices of intelligibility, standards of rationality, and/or central vocabulary of any particular epistemic community or cultural group--intelligibly mark a distinction between what even everyone in a particular epistemic community *happens* to believe and what is, by their *own* lights, *reasonable* for them to believe, a distinction, moreover, that should command *their* attention. To *convince* someone of the questionability of their practices is *ipso facto* to provide them with a *reason* to consider alternatives.

The cross-cultural commitment to second-order rationality implies that social agents must, even if only pre-reflectively or implicitly, *anticipate* a relationship among their aims, beliefs and practices whose rational coherence differently situated others (including cultural "outsiders") could also appreciate.

This gives members of a cultural tradition an optic for recognizing and acknowledging what could be problems *for them*. So a critical outsider is fully entitled to view others as being eligible, and in a way that begs no questions, to accept the burden of rational critique. In this sense, social agents, however implicitly, anticipate a dialogical confirmation of their rationality, granting an opening to potential critics.

I conclude my reflections with a brief sketch of a second way in which critical work can be done without the *imposition* of normative standards. Here I wish to make a case for a sort of conversational practice that can lay claim to being a genuine "development practice," and I shall illustrate it with primary reference to the practice of female genital cutting or excision, a practice that is pursued, often with the apparent consent of women themselves, in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Now, to be sure, while the existence of such a practice is clearly a matter of intrinsic significance, I am not here claiming that the fact of its existence is the main problem faced by these societies. Focusing on it, however, is useful for illustrating how resources for critique can be unearthed when careful attention is paid to the *autonomously* voiced preferences and concerns of those local cultural agents who are affected by such a practice, resources whose critical potential can be redeemed independently of any one-sided imposition of "Western" standards.

We begin by reminding ourselves that cultures are not seamless wholes, that, in the words of one observer: "[s]ince a culture's system of beliefs and practices, the locus of its identity, is constantly contested, subject to change, and does not form a coherent whole, its identity is never settled, static and free of ambiguity."[3] And further, as a United Nations report on justice and gender indicates: "the history of internal contestation reinforces [the premise] that cultures are not monolithic, are always in the process of *interpretation* and *re-interpretation*, and never immune to change."[4] These

statements are consistent with my view that cultural identity is a cluster concept in that few if any beliefs or professions of value, taken singly, are essential to such an identity. Cultural identity, then, need not be construed as being *identical* to one's *prevailing* purposes, goals and projects; cultures are in general sites of conflicting interpretations. If we further concede, as I have argued elsewhere we must, that the distinction between *intra*-cultural hermeneutic dialogue and *inter*- cultural hermeneutic dialogue is a matter of degree, not kind, then we should expect to find *within* many cultures traces of the tensions that we are more accustomed to noticing between them.[5] Consistent with this, it can be argued that many intercultural normative disagreements can be productively analyzed as *intracultural* conflicts.[6] Consider in this regard some of the conversations about genital cutting that are now taking place, in real time, in a number of societies where it has been traditionally practiced. In the African country of Mali, for example, they are pursued under the indigenous auspices of the COFESFA Women's Association and other NGOs. These conversations highlight the physical and emotional consequences of the ritual, the plurivocity of the cultural narratives deployed to justify the practice, and the patriarchal interests that it serves. And, though of course there are no guarantees, given that these conversations seek to engage opinion leaders and take place among both men and women in local communities, they may give rise to proposals that will be candidates for the sort of general social recognition or semantic authority that can foster cultural re-interpretation.[7] It is useful to think of these conversations as a component of the within-group struggle to expand the moral imaginary by persuading members of dominant social groups to acknowledge the semantic authority of claims put forth by others. Indeed, such community-based discussion, sponsored by a NGO in Kenya (the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization), has in some cases led to the implementation of alternative non-invasive rituals marking female rites of passage in local communities

(Maendeleo Ya Wanawake [2000] 'FGM--advocacy strategy for the eradication of female genital mutilation in Kenya', [http://www.maendeleo-ya-wanake.org/]. Accessed March 25, 2011). And similar developments are occurring in Senegal. It is worth noting that in the Senegalese case, where the issue of genital cutting was explicitly raised by Senegalese women themselves, care was taken in the discussion of this issue to avoid descriptors such as "barbaric" and other potentially question-begging cognates that would invidiously pre-judge the   issue (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/16/world/africa/movement-to-end-genital-cutting-spreads-in-senegal.html).

What lessons can we draw from these examples, highlighting as they do the agency of local groups? Given that cultures are not monolithic, homogeneous wholes such that none of their component parts--beliefs and practices-- can be altered without loss of integrity, it behooves us to be wary of taking at face value any *single* narrative purporting to capture definitively a culture's identity. This suggests that we be attentive to ways in which cultural identity claims may be reified products. Categorically asserted cultural identity claims can be understood to be reified products in at least two ways: they may disingenuously veil strategic orientations, and they may belie conflicting interpretations of a culture's identity-defining structures, the fact that cultural identity is best seen as a cluster concept.[8] Cultural identity claims should not then be given carte blanche to function in such a way as to immunize practices from critical examination. The operating assumption behind the conversational practice that I am here proposing, "counterfactual narrative critique," is that cultural agents can be encouraged to consider social possibilities that, while currently unrealized, might actually be preferred by them, social possibilities whose realization is suppressed not because such realization would offend against all intelligible interpretations of cultural identity, but rather primarily because it would offend against particular vested interests.

For this reason, then, we should be on the lookout for interpretations of cultural identity that operate as cloaks or ideological veils concealing   prudential interest-based concerns.[9]

There may be signs that would trigger such a "hermeneutics of suspicion," signs such as observed conflicts between speech and behavior, conflicts of interest within the culture, observed indices of perceived or actual power asymmetries between interlocutors within the culture, and so on.[10] But what if, as is not infrequently the case with female excision, there is no overt contestation of what seem to us problematic cultural practices? The *appearance* of asymmetrical or invidious treatment of identifiable demographic groups can serve to trigger hypotheses about the real interests implicated and about whether or not the interests of all cultural members converge in the way that prevailing cultural identity claims implicitly assert that they do. It is useful here to consider a suggestion made by Habermas, indeed one that I have myself criticized in another context.[11]

> I make the methodological assumption that it is meaningful and possible to reconstruct (even for the normal case of norms recognized without conflict) the *hidden* interest positions of involved individuals or groups by counterfactually imagining the limit case of a conflict between the involved parties in which they would be forced to consciously perceive their interests and strategically assert them, instead of satisfying basic interests simply by actualizing institutional values as is normally the case. [12] (Italics mine)

My suggestion here is that we treat Habermas' comments as pertaining to what philosophy of science was wont to call the context of generation, the context within which hypotheses are proposed. Central now is the question, How can we "test" these hypotheses concerning suppressed interests? Habermas makes reference to the possibility of indirect

empirical confirmation based upon predictions about conflict motivations.[13] However, I want here to emphasize the extent to which the suspicion of potential dissensus can be *hermeneutically* redeemed (or, for that matter, falsified). The reasoning behind the ascription of a potentially hidden interest can, indeed should, be a collaborative, dialogical project, one involving those whose interests are in question. With regard to the question of female excision, this means the affected and potentially affected women, whose perspective would be articulated under conditions that I describe below.

As an explicit *stylization* of the sorts of question that might, whether implicitly or explicitly, underlie such a dialogical engagement, capture its critical intent, and perhaps thereby prompt some of the processes of cultural self-reinterpretation alluded to above, I suggest the following. When encountering some form of the practice of excision or genital cutting, a witness, whether sharing cultural membership with the affected women or not, might initiate conversations of a particular sort with them, conversations guided by the basic question: Armed with the knowledge of the all too likely physical and emotional consequences of the procedure, if the connection between undergoing the procedure (or the procedure in the concrete form that it now assumes) and your chances for flourishing in your society were virtualized, if that connection could be severed, would you still choose to undergo the procedure?[14] This is the sort of question that could be raised in the conversational modality that I refer to as counter-factual narrative critique, a modality that, if practiced within a society, illustrates the plausibility of non-question-begging, non-invidiously ethnocentric, critical perspectives on practices within cultural formations that are not our own.[15]

Non-question-begging conversations with affected social agents --in "safe" spaces providing immunity from the threat of unfavorable repercussions-- aimed at eliciting fundamental

or overriding interests (interests which, for the agent herself, may not be readily apparent and may require varying degrees of introspection) can be initiated.[16] Woven into such a conversation might well be discussions in which the agent is encouraged to engage in an imaginative variation of possible conditions on the realization of those interests; these are the virtualizations of counter-factual narrative critique. This would entail consideration of scenarios in which the linkage between succumbing to the procedure of excision in the form that it currently assumes and being able to realize those interests is gradually severed. These counterfactual narrative scenarios may range from replacing cliteridectomy with lesser forms of mutilation, to a ritualized symbolic circumcision consisting of a small cut on the external genitalia performed under medical supervision and hygienic conditions, all the way to nothing at all.[17] If the agent, upon reflection, expresses a genuine *preference* for situations wherein her interests-- chances for marriage and other important forms of social recognition, for example-- and *foregoing* the procedure were jointly realizable, then this would count as her opting out of the putative "consensus." At the very least, we could say that a discussion that is informed by a consideration of these alternatives is more autonomously pursued--and that a life that is led in an awareness of them is more lucidly lived-- than one which is not. This would be a means of conversationally interrogating the reasonableness of socio-cultural configurations wherein women are faced with the forced choice between flourishing and bodily integrity, are confronted with the demand to choose "mutilation" or face "social death." My aim here is to try to capture some of our intuitions about the criterial conditions for the exercise of genuine autonomous agency. And minimally that involves the agent's *informed endorsement* of what she does.

It might be objected that this conception of autonomy is too demanding to be of critical use, for none of us chooses all of our choices. Many of them are "thrust" upon us because of

the nature of things or in situations that we would uncontroversially regard as "normal conditions." Everyone faces disjunctive situations not of their choosing. But some face situations of this sort that others do not, and do so for reasons that are more contingent than necessary, more "contrived" than "natural." The critical purchase of the concept of the restriction of autonomy takes as its background what someone would otherwise--absent arbitrary constraint-- be capable of doing. The asymmetrical arrangement wherein one determinate group of mature agents must exercise a choice within a dichotomous or disjunctive framework--e.g., one structured by the alternatives of flourish or retain bodily integrity, but not both-- while others are exempt from facing such a dilemma may be an arrangement that may well serve the interests of those who are exempt. This is sufficient to question the rational warrant of this arrangement and therefore to suspect the arbitrary, i.e., *unreasonably* limited, and, hence, *criticizable* nature of the framework for choice for those who are constrained by it. It is important to note that this dialogical method of critique requires no *wholesale* opposition to the actual options and choices of action available to, and sustained by, a given culture. It is attuned more to the nature of the *distribution* of those social options and choices. And what about those cases where, after such a conversation, some persist in holding to the view that such a ritualized procedure has an identity-constitutive character which is itself of overriding value? Consistent with the dialogical nature of the enterprise that I am here proposing, such a response may ultimately have to be acknowledged as a "falsifying" event. Prior to such acknowledgment, however, and given the heterogeneous constitution of culture, our questioning can be broadened to ask, Given the likely physical and emotional harms of undergoing such a procedure, whose interest is served by the perpetuation of the practice? Given the conceived alternatives that our discussion has brought to mind, and in light of the hypothesis that the restricted alternatives in terms of which you originally chose

were promulgated in the interest, or implicitly served the interests, of some as opposed to others, would you now *endorse*, in the sense of voluntarily choose, what you would have chosen before?

As a way of summarizing the significance of the analyses that I offer above, but with reference to a different locus of cultural identity, I refer to some of Akeel Bilgrami's reflections on Muslim identity. Bilgrami, a philosopher who is himself Muslim, has argued that being a Muslim is not necessarily to accept the strategic framing of one's identity put forward by some of one's fundamentalist co-religionists;[18] such an identity can be critically reconfigured. He points out that Muslim communities are defined by competing values, of which Islam is one and, further, that Islamic identity is itself negotiable. He goes on to make the point that given the spectrum of positions actually occupied by members of Muslim communities, such critical pressure need not necessarily be viewed as an ethnocentric, imperialistic imposition from the outside, but that rather it can be applied from the inside, where there are indigenous resources and aspirations that can fuel *internal* processes of critical response.[19] I am curious to know what McCarthy's response would be to the proposal that I have offered in this section for a way to avoid a potentially dilemmatic opposition of an arrogant imperialism to an impotent relativism.

NOTES

---

[1] Glenn Loury, "The Moral Quandary of the Black Community," *The Public Interest* 75 (Spring 1985): 19.

[2] See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II. Xxi.10.

3 Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), p. 148.

4 "Gender, Justice, Development and Rights," Report of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development Workshop (2000), cited in Deveaux; emphasis mine.

5 See my *The Unfinished Project: Toward a Postmetaphysical Humanism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 105, 109-10, 112.

6 See, for example, Monique Deveaux, "A Deliberative Approach to Conflicts of Culture," *Political Theory* 31 (Dec. 2003): 780-807.

7 I have discussed the concept of semantic authority in my *The Unfinished Project*, pp. 110-111; and in my "Humanism and Cosmopolitanism after '68," *New Formations* 65 (2008): 57-58, 64-65.

8 On the latter, see my *The Unfinished Project*, pp. 91-92.

9 Devaux, p. 788.

10 On the occasion of a seminar that he offered at the Humanities Institute at SUNY Stony Brook on September 9, 1999, I understood the cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo to offer the following methodological advice in response to a question that I put to him concerning strategic representation: one should in the first instance take what is said at face value, but be prepared to question it when, for instance, conversations with others seem to contradict it or when the respondent's own behavior seems to belie what s/he has said. Then go on to hazard interpretive projections of the form, "what would be the case if what the 'informant' has said is true? or false?" Then, making the process recursive, return to engage the interlocutor in a confirmatory or disconfirmatory dialogue informed by what one has learned.

11 See my "On Habermas and Particularity: Is there Room for Race and Gender on the Glassy Plains of Ideal Discourse?" *Praxis International* 6 (1986): 338.

12 Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 114.

13 Habermas, Ibid.

14 The health implications of female genital cutting have been well-documented. See, for example, United Nations, *Human Rights Fact Sheet 23: Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children*, Geneva: United Nations, 1995 (cited in Sheldon and Wilkinson).

15 Here I am not concerned to address the putative inconsistency or hypocrisy of Western objections to such practices while apparently tolerating potentially dangerous forms of cosmetic surgery aimed at increasing sexual desirability (see Sally Sheldon and Stephen Wilkinson, "Female Genital Mutilation and Cosmetic Surgery: Regulating Non-Therapeutic Body Modification," *Bioethics* 12 (1998): 263-285). I am concerned to elaborate mechanisms for critical response to such practices that are untethered to "Western" views.

16 The idealization implied in the notion of "safe" spaces is deployed in the defense of the meta-ethical claim that non-question-begging, critical cross-cultural conversations can be meaningfully held. It does not address the equally important political question of how such spaces are to be created, maintained and respected as sources of proposals that are treated as candidates for semantic authority, that is, as candidates for general social recognition and acknowledgment..

17 On this spectrum of procedures, see Anna Elisabetta Galeotti's "Relativism, Universalism, and Applied Ethics: The Case of Female Circumcision," *Constellations* 14 (March 2007): 91-111.

18 Akeel Bilgrami, "What Is a Muslim? Fundamental Commitment and Cultural Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 821-842.

19 Ibid., p. 823 and Akeel Bilgrami, "Rushdie. Islam, and Postcolonial Defensiveness," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 4 (1990): 301-311.