



# **Between Rites and Rights: Excision in Women's Experiential Texts and Human Contexts**

*Chantal Zabus*

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In the past five decades and over three generations, African women writers have introduced a new autobiographical discourse around their experience of excision that brings nuance to the Female Genital Mutilation debate. Spanning pharaonic times through classical antiquity to the onset of the twenty-first century, this unprecedented study shows how this experiential body of literature—encompassing English, Arabic, and French—goes far beyond such traditional topics as universalism and cultural relativism, by locating the female body as a site of liminality between European and African factions, subject and agent; consent and dissent; custom and human rights. Women across the African “excision belt” have broken away from the male discourses of anthropology and psychoanalysis and have fled from “the cult of culture” and from religious and patriarchal surveillance. These women have relocated their struggle to the West, where they seek empowerment and wrestle with the law. While showing the limits of autobiography, *Between Rites and Rights* boldly interweaves Freudian hysteria, the surgical age, the world of high fashion, male circumcision’s “fearful symmetry,” and Western body modification.

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