

REDEFINING THE POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY THROUGH THE DECONSTRUCTION
OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S NOVELS

by

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In her 2009 TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains that when one group is defined by one story, they are reduced to one-dimensional caricatures; they are objectified. The danger in a single story is that whomever is conveying the story are the ones in power, and these power-holders determine the way in which those with the single-story are perceived. In her novels, *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *Americanah*, Adichie avoids telling a single story. Adichie purposefully and skillfully nuances both the oppressor and the oppressed in these texts. This thesis explores how the multiplicity that characterizes Adichie's novels intersects with the deconstruction project of Jacques Derrida. Derrida's project shows how textual interpretations are unstable. Deconstruction reveals the indeterminate nature of a text and shows how any number of interpretations can be applicable. By applying Derrida's deconstruction project to Adichie's texts, the danger of a single story can be eliminated. This thesis will show that the deconstruction that is organic within Adichie's novels produces an infinity of interpretative readings.

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OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S NOVELS

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my loving husband, Will, for all of the patience and love he provided me through this process. I appreciate every bit of free time that you devoted to caring for our daughters while I toiled away on this thesis. Without you, this journey would have been much more difficult. I love you with all of my heart. I also want to dedicate my work to the other two loves of my life, Sophie and Taylor. You two are what made all of this worth it. When you grow up, I want you to remember that yours is more than a single story. I love you both more than words can say. It is an honor and a privilege to be your mother and to watch you grow. Finally, I would like to dedicate my work to my wonderful parents, Gregory and Sylvia Ferguson, and to my extraordinary sister, Tamara Ferguson. Thank you for always believing in me. I am the person I am today because of your love and guidance. I love you all.

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INTRODUCTION

In her 2009 TED Talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” This poignant remark mirrors the foundation of her novels. Adichie refrains from telling only one story in her three novels, *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *Americanah*. In fact, Adichie relies on multiple perspectives of both the oppressed and the oppressor to move her narratives forward. In doing so, she engages in a postcolonial discourse that seeks to dismantle the essentialization of oppressed peoples--in this case, of Nigerian people. All three novels embody Adichie’s masterful construction of a postcolonial identity that is complex, nuanced, and dynamic. Each of her works problematizes the hegemonic construct that silences, devalues, and exoticizes oppressed people. Adichie remarks on this point in her TED Talk. Discussing the colonial writings of John Locke, she notes, “...it represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West: A tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness...” The tradition that Adichie refers to is that of Eurocentric literature.

Eurocentric literature has long been criticized for its essentialization of non-Western peoples. Told over and over again these essentialist imaginings eventually become hard-held beliefs that tip the balance of power. This is the single story to which Adichie refers. In remarking about the danger of a single story, Adichie touts a postmodernist stance. This intersectionality between postcolonialism and postmodernism that characterizes Adichie’s work is what has resonated with me. Both theories emphasize the inequity that is inherent in hierarchical societal structures. Additionally, both theories counter the Eurocentrism that systematically constructs and perpetuates the oppressor/oppressed binary opposition. Adichie speaks on this point in her TED Talk. She posits, “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of

another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” Eurocentrism has done just that: It has repeatedly essentialized oppressed peoples to the point that the oppressed have become flat, one-dimensional characters in reality and in literature. Adichie’s attempt to counter essentialization through the multiplicity in her novels is compelling to me. The depth and scope with which she examines the postcolonial experience allows us to attend to each component of the postcolonial identity separately and as a collective. My goal in this thesis is to broaden the scope of Adichie’s discourse. I intend to show that not only is there the danger of a single story, but a single story is an impossibility.

In adding to Adichie’s discourse about the danger of a single story, I also intend to add to the critical discourse that examines Adichie’s work. Several critics of Adichie’s work have interpreted her novels--each using a different theoretical framework. I will add to the critical conversation by using a theoretical framework that reveals the multiplicity that is embedded in her texts. My research into criticisms of Adichie’s work shows that critics have focused on her reconceptualization of Nigerian history and ways of life, on her reflection of memories that were transferred to her by her parents, and on her examination of her own identity through the lens of American ideas about race.

In the article “Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation,” Heather Hewett explores Adichie’s contribution to Nigeria’s third generation of writers. According to her article, Nigeria’s literary timeline can be divided into three parts: the first generation which includes those who lived through the colonization of Nigeria, the second generation which describes writers who lived during and directly after the Nigeria-Biafra War, and the third generation which is characterized as those whose works were first published in the 1980s. Presumably this is a generation that was born in post-colonial and in most cases, post civil

war Nigeria. Hewett observes “the emerging account of this generation is one of triumph over adversity, a story of courageous individuals refusing to be silenced and the greater community supporting them” (74). Hewett suggests that the Third Generation defines itself as being separate from the older, first generation of Nigerian writers. Her reason for exploring the early writings of Adichie is to show how Adichie, though situated among her contemporaries in the Third Generation, “has made no such assertions of difference about her writing” and sets herself apart from her third generation contemporaries by openly paying homage to her predecessors from the first generation (78).

In Adichie’s earliest published works, *Light Skin* and *Purple Hibiscus*, she borrows from Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* in order to signal to readers that they are about to engage in a revamping and reimagining of the great literary classic. Hewett goes on to say that Adichie is in a sense challenging Achebe’s message by saying that the line “things fall apart” is still very much relevant in postcolonial Nigeria. Adichie uses Achebe’s premise of the breakdown of family amidst colonialism as a framework for her declaration of the same topic in “post-independent Nigeria” (79). Her daring dismantling of and subsequent rebuilding of traditionalist Nigerian viewpoints exemplify her precarious position among the third generation of Nigerian writers. Hewett uses *Purple Hibiscus* as an example of how Adichie adds the female voice into her storylines, something that is notably missing in first generation writings. Additionally, she chooses to have the story told from the point of view of a powerless, young female as opposed to the domineering, powerful male. A notable characteristic of first generation writings is the writers’ exclusion of the female experience. Part of Adichie’s reconceptualization of first generation ideas is to include the female vantage point in her plot lines (80). Her exploration of

the effects of colonialism on independent Nigeria is another avenue that Adichie uses to reimagine first generation topics (79).

In Cheryl Stobie's critical essay from 2010, "Dethroning The Infallible Father: Religion, Patriarchy and Politics In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*," Stobie points out the progressive, but not radical, ideas about religion and gender that Adichie illustrates in her novel. Stobie's essay seems in keeping with Hewett's claim that Adichie makes no grandiose claims to be so far removed from the writing traditions that characterize the first generation. Just as Hewett points out in 2005, Stobie shows that Adichie takes traditionalist views about pivotal topics such as religion and gender and reconfigures them so as to make them relevant for present-day Nigeria. In an interview with Ike Anya, Adichie describes her attitudes toward religion noting that she has trouble reconciling being all at once loyal to her indigenous Igbo traditions while maintaining her faith in Christianity, which is an institution that thinks of such tribal traditions as evil (422). Based on this interview, Stobie notes that "Adichie can therefore be seen as progressive and reformist in her viewpoint towards her religion. She is interested in contradictions between the reclamation of Igbo culture and the practice of a religion that has a colonising and punitive history" (422).

Stobie's essay goes on to illustrate how Adichie tackles gender issues and redefines them in *Purple Hibiscus*. She takes the Big Man archetype that is a staple of Nigerian literature and adds depth to it. In an interview, Adichie contends "that 'I can't stand empty Big Manism, something my people do too well'" (425). Kathryn Holland is cited in the article as noting that the Big Archetype is considered a "highly desirable mode of masculinity" (425). Adichie deepens the notion of the Big Man archetype by depicting Eugene, the abusive, oppressive father in *Purple Hibiscus*, as a complicated and contradictory character. She shows ways in which he

acts honorably and bravely. For example, he is the publisher of a newspaper that uncovers corruption in the government. Adichie's devotion to presenting a multifaceted antagonist further establishes her reformist and progressive writing style (425).

Joke De Mey's dissertation, "The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*," continues to expound upon Adichie's position in Nigeria's third generation of writers. One of the most prolific parts of this dissertation discusses the ideas of trauma theory and postmemory and their effects on Adichie's retelling of the Nigeria-Biafra War in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. According to the dissertation, trauma theory was an area of psychological study first researched by Sigmund Freud in the early twentieth century. Freud asserted that trauma could be applied to "psychological injury" as well as to "physical injury." Theorists in the 1990s built on Freud's trauma theory by applying it to survivors and children/grandchildren of survivors of catastrophic events such as the Holocaust. The article goes on to explain that the Holocaust is not the only traumatic event that this theory can be applied to; in fact, it can be applicable to slavery and postcolonial trauma. Bringing it back to Adichie, Mey discusses how trauma theory can be applied in *Half of a Yellow Sun* in two ways: "on the level of the author and on the level of the narrator." He continues to explain by stating that "Adichie inherited their [her parents' and grandparents'] trauma, and this novel is her interpretation of their past and of her own trauma." Her trauma would be considered the trauma transferred to her by the testimony and psychological fall out of her parents and grandparents (34).

To branch out even further, Mey delves into the idea of postmemory. Mey includes research from scholars, Eva Hoffman and Marianne Hirsch, to describe the effect postmemory has on the "hinge generation." This "hinge generation" is defined as the "second generation after every calamity" and Adichie falls neatly into this category. "Postmemory describes the

relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their birth but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to constitute memories in their own right.” Hirsch’s definition is used by Mey to synthesize the effect postmemory has on Adichie’s writing of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Mey states that what makes Adichie’s perspective unique is that her telling of the civil war is actually inherited memories and not those of her own. Although the concept of postmemory is different to Adichie’s deliberate throwbacks to first generation writers, the outcome is still the same. She reconceptualizes the past in order to make it relevant to the present (35).

The trajectory of Adichie’s work seems to follow a path of self-realization. Her earliest works draw upon ideas from first generation writers that she grew up reading and respecting, such as Chinua Achebe. A close study of Adichie’s body of work will reveal that her earlier works reconceptualized first generation topics, like gender, family structure, post colonialism, and religion. From there, Adichie begins to tackle a pivotal point in Nigerian history – the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War. She uses her own postmemories to frame the events described in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. With *Americanah* Adichie continues to journey even deeper into her psyche and deals with issues of her own self-identification.

Bernard Lombardi’s thesis entitled, “Foreseeing identity in blank interstices: New-wave African migration to the United States and a new theory of diaspora,” discusses Adichie’s membership into the new-wave African migration to the United States and how those experiences shaped her identity. Lombardi quotes Adichie as saying, “I’m not Nigerian-American. I’m a Nigerian who likes America.” Lombardi asserts that Adichie’s attitude about her identity is a sentiment that is characteristic of new wave African immigrants. The new wave African immigrants, Adichie included, feel that their migration to the United States is a

temporary one. Lombardi further states that “Adichie’s self-identification portrays to us how individual consciousness is shaped significantly prior to adulthood” (30). The character of Ifemelu, *Americanah*’s protagonist, appears to mirror the experiences and feelings of Adichie herself. Ifemelu’s stay in America affects her understanding of her identity as well as her understanding of herself in relation to how she is viewed in America (31).

“Adichie, as a novelist is important to our consideration of literary genre; her previous works fit into an African tradition, yet we can consider *Americanah* both truly African and truly American” (31). Lombardi’s quote points to the importance of Adichie’s work in establishing a new discourse about the direction of Nigerian literature. As many critics have pointed out, Adichie is marginally considered a third generation Nigerian writer. Her inclusion into this category seems to be based on when her works were published. Although, she does embody the “courageous individuals refusing to be silenced,” Adichie’s works have emerged into a class of their own. Adichie skillfully weaves matters of the past into the story of the present. Her redefining and reimagining of Nigeria’s history sets her apart from other third generation writers in that she does not aim to be separate from Nigeria’s past and the writings of the first generation. She embraces them while adding a level of depth that takes into account the experiences of a post-colonial, modern Nigeria. Although Adichie’s career is still in its early stages, it would be prudent of literary scholars to track Adichie’s evolution as a writer and consider the possibility that she is defining a fourth generation of Nigerian writers.

My work in this thesis will move beyond the critical discourse of Adichie’s work by offering ways to read her novels through the framework of the necessity of the multiple readings. Contrary to what I have found in other criticisms of Adichie’s work, I intend to show that a singular reading of Adichie’s work is impossible. To do this, I will demonstrate how binary

oppositions, which frame Adichie's postcolonial discourse cannot have universal meaning. Although Adichie attends to the multiplicity within the postcolonial experience, she does so within the framework of an oppressor/oppressed binary opposition. By problematizing the oppressor/oppressed binary opposition, a multitude of readings become possible. In this thesis, I apply older philosophical frameworks, such as Derrida's deconstruction project and DuBois's double-consciousness to show that the multiple experiences told in Adichie's work knows no bounds. Though it may seem anachronistic to apply the philosophical frameworks of older intellectuals such as DuBois and Derrida, the multiplicity of Adichie's work makes these frameworks applicable in present day. Although DuBois's notion of double-consciousness applied to African Americans in the early twentieth century, it is useful in the twenty-first century and can be used to read Adichie's *Americanah*. Likewise, Derrida's deconstruction project, though peaking in the 1960s, is a strong theoretical framework to use for examining the multiplicity in Adichie's work.

Using Jacques Derrida's deconstruction project as my theoretical framework, I examine how Adichie's texts unravel at critical points and how those unravelings subvert the binary opposition that center her narratives. Derrida's deconstruction project is key in understanding how texts unravel and deconstruct. There is no single way to describe deconstruction. Derrida uses multiple designations for the aporia he finds in Eurocentric literature. What is clear, though, is that deconstruction reveals the instability of words, concepts, and contexts due to a constant deferral of meaning and to an interdependence that exists between opposing parts of a binary opposition. Derrida states, "Since these concepts are not elements or atoms, and since they are taken from a syntax and a system, every particular borrowing brings along with it the whole of metaphysics" (*Writing and Difference* 281). Here, Derrida discusses Nietzsche, Freud, and

Heidegger who “worked within the inherited concepts of metaphysics. The crux of Derrida’s project lies within this excerpt. Metaphysics--regarded as Eurocentric philosophy by Derrida--is the basis for all interpretations in Eurocentric literature. However, as is pointed out in the quote, every philosophical school of thought or literary interpretation that is grounded in metaphysics brings with it the entirety of metaphysics. In Derrida’s view, this means that competing ideologies are encased within one another. To put it another way, all concepts bear the residuals of all other concepts. Therefore, there can be no definitive delineation between right and wrong, good and evil, or black and white.

In order to engage with Adichie’s discourse about the danger of a single story, I examine all three of her novels and uncover the deconstruction that makes a single story impossible. I decided to discuss the deconstruction of Adichie’s texts using the same general process that Derrida uses with the texts of such thinkers as Plato, Levi-Strauss, and Husserl. First, I will give a reading of the text using a postcolonial framework. This allows me to establish the binary opposition that is created in Adichie’s text. Next, I unravel my postcolonial reading of the text by uncovering the instability of the binary opposition. In Chapter 2: Deconstructing Binary Oppositions: *Purple Hibiscus*, I discuss Adichie’s manifestation of the colonizer/colonized binary opposition. Through her intricate construction of Papa Eugene’s character, Adichie shows that the British colonizer used religion as a weapon to oppress the Igbo tradition. My postcolonial reading of this novel discusses how Adichie uses Eugene as a symbol of the colonizers far-reaching impact on those they colonized. I then review critical parts of *Purple Hibiscus* in which Adichie establishes the privileged positionality of the colonizer, and I examine the instability within those critical points. Applying the research I have done on Derrida’s deconstruction project, I show in this chapter how the colonized must be included in defining the

meaning of the colonizer. They are inextricably linked and define one another; the colonizer and colonized are interdependent.

Chapter 3: Exploring Différance: *Half of a Yellow Sun* demonstrates Derrida's "nonconcept" of différance. Derrida states that "*Différance* is neither a *word* nor a *concept*" ("Difference" 279). He considers différance a nonconcept, in part, because of the infinite deferral of meaning for signifiers and their significations. I examine différance closer in Adichie's text. For my first reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, I analyze the characters Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard. I explain how each of these characters, despite their multitude of differences, is placed in a subordinate position within a colonizer/colonized binary opposition. Each of these characters identifies with being Biafran and that single identification places them in a subaltern position when Nigeria declares war on Biafra. After I establish the placement of each character within the colonizer/colonized binary opposition, I explain how the play of meaning within the text, the différance, deconstructs the binary that is at the center of casting privilege to the colonizer and hindrance to the colonized. The result of this play in meaning is the problematizing of significations. All words, concepts, and contexts are part of the referential system of significations that prevent one fixed interpretation.

To round out my discussion of Adichie's body of work, I turn my attention to *Americanah*. My initial reading of *Americanah* interprets the text through the lens of DuBois's double-consciousness. According to Holton, "The story of the 'souls of black folk' for Du Bois is not a singular, unified, or consistent narrative, but a multifaceted and fragmented story that demands to be told and retold in 'many ways' (Holton 23). Critics of DuBois's work recognize the relevance that his work has today in speaking to the black American experience. As I explore, double-consciousness in *Americanah*, DuBois's work will be relevant. I discuss the

paradox of DuBois's theory that characterizes the black American experience. More specifically, double-consciousness is the conundrum experienced by blacks in America in which they are cognizant of the duality of their existence: They are at once living life according to the standards of the white, dominant society while also maintaining the values and beliefs of the black experience. Both of these lives are constantly opposed to each other. In *Americanah*, I analyze the double-consciousness of three characters, Ifemelu--the story's protagonist, Auntie Uju--Ifemelu's aunt, and Aisha--the hair braider. Adichie paints a duality with all three characters in which they all try to achieve the ideals of white America while also maintaining the values and belief systems of their home countries. The double-consciousness that I see in *Americanah* is compounded by the immigrant status of Ifemelu, Auntie Uju, and Aisha. Before coming to America, neither character considered herself black. Living in America forced them to confront the realization that in the eyes of white America, they are black--devoid of any cultural uniqueness that is part of their identities. Because Ifemelu, Auntie Uju, and Aisha are seen as black by white America, I decided to apply DuBois's notion of double-consciousness without amending it to address the issue of immigrant status. As with *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, I dismantled my first reading of *Americanah*. In this instance, I did it by revealing the trace that is evident within every word, concept, or context. Derrida's notion of trace is that words are defined by what they are not rather than what they positively are. Thinking of signs and significations in this way adds validity to the idea that meanings are unstable. The trace contains the infinite meanings that can be attached to any one word, concept, or context. I expose the trace in these key places and make the argument that the double-consciousness that supposedly defines the three characters is invalid because it is meaningless. Double-consciousness cannot exist as a fixed truth because of the trace that is inherent in its meaning. If

double-consciousness is meaningless, then Ifemelu, Auntie Uju, and Aisha cannot be defined as subordinates within the context of the situations that Adichie creates for them.

Adichie and Derrida may seem like strange bedfellows, but what I found is that they both strive to dismantle the power imbalance that is at the root of oppression caused by the rhetoric of Eurocentric literature. The following chapters will demonstrate that the postcolonial identity can be interpreted in infinite ways. Even postcolonial writers, like Adichie, can diminish the postcolonial experience because they are working within the framework that was established by Eurocentric ideology--the ideology of the oppressor. I will show that only by dismantling the binaries that frame postcolonial narratives can we effectively reflect the postcolonial identity. The goal of this thesis is to explore that point using the ideas of Derrida

CHAPTER ONE: DECONSTRUCTING BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie creates a colonizer/colonized binary that can be deconstructed by examining the paradoxical space of meaning that makes all words, concepts, and contexts interdependent. The deconstruction of key points in *Purple Hibiscus* reveals the instability of the binary opposition. In order to deconstruct Adichie's narrative, we must consider the hierarchy that is constructed by her privileging of Christianity over traditional Igbo religion. Throughout the novel, Christianity is seen as a destructive, controlling force that reigns superior over Igbo. What results is a binary tradition that places Christianity on the privileged side of the Christianity/traditionalist binary. The Christianity/traditionalist binary is a more narrowly defined representation of the broader colonizer/colonized binary. Adichie privileges Christianity by representing it as an all-consuming, insidious, and powerful tool, used by the colonizer, to subjugate the colonized. The hierarchical dominance of Christianity that Adichie creates is embedded within the character of Eugene, the overbearing patriarch of the novel. Eugene's oppressive actions--grounded in Christian beliefs--direct the disquietude of his household. Young Kambili, Eugene's teenage daughter, is the novel's protagonist; yet, it is Eugene who is presented as the central, impacting figure. Eugene is an embodiment of the colonizer's subjugation of the colonized with Christianity being used as the weapon. Adichie uses Eugene as a symbol for the colonizer's Christianity, and since he is a paramount figure in the text, Adichie has effectively established the superiority of Christianity.

Examining how Adichie's text deconstructs itself reveals the reversing of the binary opposition that has been established and nuancing that binary--showing how each part of the opposition would be meaningless without the other. According to Derrida, "So, at the same time, you have to follow the rule, and to invent a new rule, a new norm, a new criteria, a new law" ("Deconstruction in a Nutshell" 6). By reversing the binary opposition, the instability of clearly

defined boundaries can be revealed. Deconstructing a text dismantles the notion that a single experience or condition can be clearly defined and delineated. Out of the deconstruction of Adichie's text, emerges "an indefinite range of self-conflicting significations" (Abrams 59). The deconstruction of the text problematizes any single interpretation. In the case of *Purple Hibiscus*, an interpretation that uses the colonizer/colonized binary as a framework for explaining the experiences of the characters is dismantled because of the deconstruction of the text.

Adichie develops the character of Eugene in such a way that Christianity (colonization) is the powerful and dominating force that dictates his behaviors. If we reverse the binary opposition that frames Eugene's character, we would attend to it through the lens of traditionalism meaning traditionalism would be the dominating force that has dictated his behaviors. In discussing the dismantling of the culture/nature binary, Derrida suggests that in essence, deconstruction "consists in conserving all these old concepts within the domain of empirical discovery while here and there denouncing their limits, treating them as tools which can still be used" (*Writing and Difference* 357). By attending to Eugene's character through a reversal of the Christianity/traditionalist binary, the text is now privileging traditionalism and essentially showing how Christianity depends upon traditionalism. Furthermore, Igbo and Christianity are synonymous with the colonized and colonizer, which means a deconstruction that privileges Igbo is also privileging the colonized and placing this subordinate part of the binary opposition on a level playing field with the colonizer.

Kambili narrates the story from a subordinate positionality. Living under Eugene's dictatorship places her in an oppositional role to him as his subordinate. She explains in excruciating detail the ways in which Eugene's oppression dictates all of their lives. In a scene shortly before Eugene viciously beats his wife, Beatrice, Kambili observes that "Our steps on the

stairs were as measured and as silent as our Sundays: the silence of waiting until Papa was done with his siesta so we could have lunch; the silence of reflection time, when Papa gave us a scripture...to read and meditate on” (Adichie 31). Kambili presents this description in a matter-of-fact tone because to her, this is life as normal. However, Adichie creates a tone of anxiety and uneasiness through her description of deafening silence that must be maintained until Papa initiates verbal interaction. With this scene, Adichie has masterfully constructed a space in which silence, religion, and dominance occupy one space. By doing this, Eugene becomes a symbol for the inextricable link between Christianity and dominance that is characteristic of the colonizer/colonized binary.

Even when Kambili and her brother, Jaja, visit their Aunt Ifeoma (Eugene’s sister), Eugene’s dominating presence can still be felt in absentia. Not only does he send tangible reminders of his authority--daily schedules dictating every hour of Kambili and Jaja’s day--but his ideological beliefs and religious fanaticism appear to hover over Kambili and Jaja, coloring their experience with Aunt Ifeoma. For example, Kambili and Jaja are aghast when Aunt Ifeoma, Amaka, and Obiora begin singing in Igbo as they say the rosary. Eugene’s indoctrination of Kambili and Jaja suggests to them that Christianity should not be polluted by traditionalist heathenry. Therefore, when their aunt and cousins mix religions, Kambili, in particular, is confused and horrified. It makes sense, then, that later in the scene Kambili feels as though she is not fully present at her aunt’s house. She notes that “I felt as if my shadow was visiting Aunt Ifeoma and her family, while the real me was studying in my room in Enugu, my schedule posted above me” (Adichie 125). Presumably, Kambili’s Christian conservative indoctrination has left her in a state of limbo. She dissociates herself from what she believes to be sacrilege and instead, cleaves to what is familiar and normal to her: her room in Enugu with her schedule

posted. Although Eugene is not physically present in this scene, his presence still permeates the action. Again, it appears that Adichie has solidly constructed a binary opposition in which Eugene who represents Christianity/the colonizer occupies the privileged and dominant space in the hierarchy. His omnipresence affects all manner of interactions between Kambili and Jaja and Aunt Ifeoma. Though a transformation appears to occur with Kambili and Jaja during their visit, it is still evident that Adichie has constructed Eugene as the focal point from which the teenagers are trying to distance themselves--the focal point thereby enhancing his privileged position.

Eugene's dictatorial reach extends to Aunt Ifeoma in a seemingly less direct way. For most of the novel, Aunt Ifeoma attends to Eugene as merely an eccentric brother that has outlandish ideas. Her interactions with Eugene are far more direct and straightforward than those of his nuclear family. In a small scene where Aunt Ifeoma and her children visit Eugene and his family, sister and brother have a verbal exchange that is unlike any other exchange that has occurred between Eugene and a family member. Eugene casually asks Ifeoma about the conditions at the university in Nsukka where she works. Irritated that he has never before inquired about the state of her affairs, Ifeoma responds by pointing out that the conditions at the university had long been deteriorating but that Eugene had never thought enough to call and get an update. Observing the fierceness of Ifeoma's reaction, Kambili notes that "Her Igbo words had a teasing lilt, but the steeliness in her tone created a knot in my throat" (Adichie 98). Kambili's amazement at Aunt Ifeoma's retort to Eugene holds the same level of anxiety that floods Kambili's perception of her father. She is seemingly scared for Aunt Ifeoma, or more precisely, she is afraid of her father's reaction to Aunt Ifeoma's candor. Being anxious about a seemingly innocuous exchange implies that Eugene's controlling nature dictates the atmosphere in his home.

Still, though, as the novel progresses, Eugene's controlling nature cracks Aunt Ifeoma's resolve during a time when she is most vulnerable. When Ifeoma and Eugene's father, Papa Nnukwu, dies, Ifeoma is shattered by Eugene's insistence on Papa Nnukwu having a Christian funeral. Enraged at the notion, she cries, "'I ask you, Eugene, was he a Catholic? *Uchu gba gi!*' Aunty Ifeoma snapped her fingers at Papa; she was throwing a curse at him. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She made choking sounds as she turned and walked into her bedroom" (Adichie 189). A Christian who also maintains and respects traditionalist beliefs, Ifeoma is so enraged by Eugene's coldness that she relies on traditionalist beliefs as a form of retaliation against Eugene. Essentially, in her period of grief, she no longer embodies a peaceful blending of the two traditions. Instead, Adichie constructs a clear tension between Christianity and traditionalism by having a symbol of peace, resolve, and unity (Aunt Ifeoma) use rituals from one tradition (Igbo) to harm a symbol of the other tradition (Eugene/Christianity).

Up until this point, Aunt Ifeoma appeared to be immune from Eugene's totalitarianism and Christian fanaticism. She simply chalked up his behavior to the ravings of a fanatic. As this scene demonstrates, though, Ifeoma is hurt by Eugene's harshness and insensitivity and lashes out by completely aligning herself, in the moment, with the Igbo tradition and using it to exact revenge on Eugene. Ultimately, though, Adichie's words show that Eugene maintains his privileged status in this binary opposition: "She was making choking sounds as she turned and walked into her bedroom" (Adichie 189). The language of this particular line conjures an image of Ifeoma in distress as she is "making choking sounds." The most harmless version of her stress is that her crying is causing her to breathe erratically. Interpreting this scene figuratively, though, would suggest that Eugene's domineering stance has injured Ifeoma to her core. Her resolve has been obliterated by Eugene's callousness that is disguised as religious piety. Again, Adichie has

clearly marked the tension between Christianity and traditionalism that appears to center this narrative.

One of the clearest binary tensions that Adichie constructs is between Eugene and his wife, Beatrice. No other character in the book experiences the level of subjugation and otherness that Beatrice does. She is regularly beaten, undermined, controlled, and belittled. Nowhere else in the novel is there a clearer example of the dominant/subservient binary. A closer examination of this tension seems to reveal the inextricable link between Eugene's dominance and Christianity. Again, we see a hierarchy in this tension that suggests Christianity is privileged while anything opposed to it is positioned in a place of otherness. Complicating the tension, however, is Beatrice's devotion to Christianity and to Eugene. When speaking with Ifeoma about a woman's role, Beatrice states that "A husband crowns a woman's life, Ifeoma. It is what they want" (Adichie 75). This statement insinuates that Beatrice feels as though she needs Eugene to make her whole. She has placed herself in the role of subordinate. It appears that Adichie has deliberately constructed a hierarchy in which Beatrice subordinates herself and automatically Eugene is placed in the privileged position by virtue of being a man. Still, one cannot circumvent the allusory language that Adichie uses in this portion of text: "A husband *crowns* a woman's life..." (my emphasis, Adichie 75). When contextualizing this sentence, crown can symbolize an array of Biblical references--kingdom of Heaven, Christ the King. Given the Biblical connotation associated with the word crown, it can be inferred that Beatrice's subordinate status is pitted against Eugene's dominance that is enveloped in Christianity.

There are several instances throughout the novel in which Beatrice and Eugene's interactions take on a physical manifestation of the oppressor/subjugated tension that Adichie creates. One of the most brutal instances of this tension is seen when Eugene severely beats

Beatrice causing her to miscarry. Kambili's recollection of this event reveals a vivid scene that shows the physicality of the oppressor/oppressed tension manifested. Kambili reveals that "Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme Border.... We cleaned up the trickle of blood, which trailed away as if someone had carried a leaking jar of red watercolor..." (Adichie 33). Here, Adichie appears to reduce Beatrice to a non-human role--a "jute sack of rice." Further supporting Beatrice's objectification is the contextualization of the sack of rice--rice that Eugene's "factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme Border." Not only is Beatrice likened to a sack of rice, but the depth of her subjugation is enhanced by her connection to Eugene's factory workers. Eugene, being the owner of his factory, occupies a privileged position in relation his employees. The contextualization of the simile that positions Beatrice in a place of objectification is aggravated by her connection to Eugene as an "owner." Taken in its totality, this simile places Beatrice in a solidified position as an object that is in direct opposition to a privileged dominating force. Adichie continues to use language that can double as Biblical references. The "trickle of blood" brings to mind imagery of sacrifice. Adichie's construction of this brief but brutal scene further intertwines Eugene's cruel and unyielding dominance with conservative Christianity that was the tool of the colonizer. Eugene, as an extension of the colonizer, has literally and figuratively overcome the subjugated. Eugene is situated as an imposing figure whose power and strength physically bears the weight of an inferior object (Beatrice).

After completing a critical examination of Eugene's privileged status in the tension between Christianity (colonizer) and traditionalism (colonized), it is important to note that, in general, traditionalist values are relegated to a position of "underdog" in Adichie's narrative. Although, the reader is likely to empathize with the characters who embrace Igbo traditions, that

empathy is an output of the Westernized tendency to root for the underdog. In other words, Igbo is situated as the subordinating tradition, pitted against the dominant force of Christianity, and it is in a Western reader's nature to show compassion and sympathy for those who occupy a subordinate position. Traditionalism is contrasted against Christianity: It is constantly demonized by the conservative Christian characters of the novel, and those conservative Christian characters occupy positions of authority within the text. In the text, Igbo is situated as a "native" tradition, and one that, if practiced, is a gateway to Hell. When Father Benedict presides over the Achike family's confession, Adichie seems to place Christianity and traditionalism in direct opposition. As Kambili confesses to Father Benedict, he explains to her the sin she has committed by engaging in an Igbo ritual. Father Benedict says, "You understand that it is wrong to take joy in pagan rituals, because it breaks the first commandment. Pagan rituals are misinformed superstition, and they are the gateway to Hell" (Adichie 106). Father Benedict's words leave no space for respecting traditionalism or finding a way to merge it with Christian principles. Nor do his words note any overlap between Christianity and the Igbo tradition that may exist. In fact, his words pointedly state that any Christian who attends to traditionalism, even in secondary ways, will be subjected to eternal damnation. For a Christian, this leaves no room to embrace any sort of traditionalist values. This scene is a clear example of Adichie's construction of a Christian/traditionalist tension that places Christianity in a privileged position.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Christianity affords its faith holders the type of social capital that is not enjoyed by those who follow Igbo traditions. Papa Nnukwu exemplifies this very point. Eugene's father, Papa Nnukwu, holds true to Igbo traditions and incurs his son's disapproval in doing so. Although Papa Nnukwu appears to be an eternal optimist, the facts in the narrative show the desolate conditions of his life. He cannot afford medicine, and he survives on the bare

essentials. Kambili describes Papa Nnukwu's home by stating that "The house that stood in the middle of the compound was small, compact like dice, and it was hard to imagine Papa and Aunty Ifeoma growing up there" (Adichie 63). Prior to this description of Papa Nnukwu's meager dwelling is Kambili marveling at the enormity of her own home: "Our house still took my breath away, the four-story white majesty of it, with the spurting fountain in front and the coconut trees flanking it on both sides and the orange trees dotting the front yard" (Adichie 55). Eugene's home exemplifies the social capital that is afforded to the conservative Christian believers in this novel. Eugene is prosperous where Papa Nnukwu survives on bare essentials. Eugene lives lavishly and comfortably while arguably, Papa Nnukwu suffers physically from ailments for which has no medicine. Adichie has skillfully constructed a clear tension between the privileged positionality afforded to conservative Christian followers and the inferior positionality of traditionalists. Just as Eugene is the embodiment of the colonizer's Christianity, Papa Nnukwu represents the Igbo and more importantly, the colonized Igbo.

Eugene's identity is an endless entanglement of traditionalism and Christianity. As the text deconstructs itself, however, we see that Eugene could not assume a role of hardened superiority without being Igbo. Eugene's self-loathing fuels his extreme devotion to Christianity. His strict observance of Christianity is the result of an inextricable relativism with the Igbo tradition. Derrida states,

...the identity of a culture is a way of being different from itself; a culture is different from itself; language is different from itself; the person is different from itself. Once you take into account this inner and other difference, then you pay attention to the other and you understand that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity, is open to another identity. ("Deconstruction in a Nutshell" 13)

Removing Igbo from Eugene's identity is an impossibility because doing so would compromise his power—dampening it. Adichie constructs Eugene's character in such a way that his devotion to Christianity can simultaneously be interpreted as his cleaving to Igbo. In other words, for Eugene to completely be free of Igbo traditions would mean that his fanatical devotion to Christianity would be dismantled.

In order to illustrate the inherent instability of the Christian/traditionalist binary, it makes sense to examine the aforementioned scenes in order to observe how these scenes contradict themselves. On page 31, Kambili, recalling the moments shortly after Papa and Jaja's confrontation states that "Our steps on the stairs were as measured and as silent as our Sundays: the silence of waiting until Papa was done with his siesta so we could have lunch; the silence of reflection time, when Papa gave us a scripture...to read and meditate on" (Adichie 31). As stated earlier, a close reading of these lines shows Papa's dominance enveloped in the colonizer's Christianity, thus privileging Christianity and the colonizer. However, what is not obviously apparent in this scene is the paradox that exists between Eugene and his family. Eugene's power is fueled by silence, subservience, and hatred. In other words, although his power and oppression exist, that power cannot be defined without those he oppresses. Kambili describes instances of the family remaining silent "until Papa was done with his siesta" and "the silence of reflection time, when Papa gave us a scripture." This silence empowers Eugene and promotes the growth of his dominance. Emerging from this paradox is the simultaneous privileging of the subordinating element--represented by Eugene's family--in this binary opposition. In a broader sense, this is one of the first examples in *Purple Hibiscus* of the colonizer/colonized binary being problematized. What emanates from the problematized binary is the understanding that colonizer

only exists because of the colonized. The colonized is what brings into existence the colonizer. Essentially, both colonized and colonizer occupy the same privileged positionality.

Not only is the hierarchical tension inverted in Adichie's text, but the text continuously collapses onto itself resulting in an erasure of any linear construction of meaning. When Kambili describes her state of mind after first hearing Aunt Ifeoma and her children mix Igbo into the Catholic rosary, she states that "I felt as if my shadow was visiting Aunty Ifeoma and her family, while the real me was studying in my room in Enugu, my schedule posted above me" (Adichie 125). As I stated before in my prior critical reading of these lines, Adichie seems to suggest here that Eugene's conservative Christian indoctrination of Kambili has resulted in her being in a state of limbo: Her shadow is with Aunt Ifeoma and the mixed religions but her body is back in Enugu following her father's strict schedules. If we take away the lens of postcolonial theory, what emerges is a state of ambiguity in which there is no obvious hierarchical tension. Kambili's "shadow [that] was visiting Aunty Ifeoma and her family" appears to be Kambili's essence that seeks to dismantle the metanarrative that Eugene has perpetuated. Visiting Aunt Ifeoma has introduced Kambili to the idea that Christianity can be manipulated to suit the needs and desires of those who practice it.

Before this visit, Kambili is very much indoctrinated to believe that Christianity is a singular, pure institution that transcends all who believe in it. The visit with Aunt Ifeoma dismantles this notion for Kambili, throwing her into a tailspin. She is now introduced to the concept of faith holders being autonomous agents and practicing their faith in a way that suits them rather than situating themselves to accommodate the religion. Kambili can never unlearn this knowledge. Since that is the case, she partitions her spirit and body in order to make sense of her world. While she visits Aunt Ifeoma, she disciplines herself and controls her body so that she

remains true to her father's wishes. She does not join in the singing and continues to silence her voice. However, her essence, her "shadow," remains open and free to subverting the grand narrative that has been instilled in her throughout her whole life. Kambili's spirit, free from her father's taint, devours the concept of agency. Adichie's narrative continues to unravel itself at this point. Although Kambili partitions her spirit and body, both occupy a space of ambiguity and ambivalence that privileges neither tradition over the other.

Derrida points out that the instability of language creates a space in which newness emanates. "That is what deconstruction is made of: not the mixture but the tension between memory, fidelity, the preservation of something that has been given to us, and, at the same time, heterogeneity, something absolutely new, and a break. The condition of this performative success, which is never guaranteed, is the alliance of these to newness" ("Deconstruction in a Nutshell" 6). Eugene's insistence on Papa Nnukwu having a Christian funeral is a scene in which memory, fidelity, and heterogeneity occupy the same expanse. Eugene tells Aunt Ifeoma, "I cannot participate in a pagan funeral, but we can discuss with the parish priest and arrange a Catholic funeral" (Adichie 189). As mentioned in my previous close reading of this scene, Aunt Ifeoma is outraged by Eugene's apparent callousness for wanting to impose Christianity on Papa Nnukwu, a steadfast traditionalist, at such an important transitional state. Using Derrida as a guide for examining how this line deconstructs itself, this scene shows the tension between Christianity and traditionalism, but the text also shows a heterogeneity that sparks new possibilities. Despite Eugene's long-standing disapproval of Papa Nnukwu's traditionalist beliefs, he nonetheless wants to involve himself in laying his father to rest. Here, the text unravels itself in a stylistic fashion. Eugene insists that he "cannot participate in a pagan funeral," but then he goes on to say that he will inquire about a Christian funeral instead. No

matter what type of funeral Papa Nnukwu has, he is still considered a “pagan” according to Christian beliefs because of his traditionalist beliefs. Therefore, whether he is buried according to traditionalist (pagan) beliefs or Christian rites, he, himself, is still a pagan. What is happening in this scene is the tension between Christianity and traditionalism birthing a new, paradoxical possibility. Later, Eugene reveals that he voluntarily finances Papa Nnukwu’s “pagan” funeral: “‘I sent Ifeoma money for the funeral. I gave her all she needed,’ Papa said. After a pause, he added, ‘For *nna anyi*’s funeral’” (Adichie 198). The same paradoxical possibility still applies to these circumstances because if it were not for Eugene, and the wealth he has accrued and maintained because of his strict Christian principles, Papa Nnukwu would not be laid to rest in an honorable, traditionalist way. In this case, Eugene is still entangled in this tension between Christianity and traditionalism because his money (and his spirit) are the impetus behind Papa Nnukwu’s spiritual transition.

By widening the lens of deconstruction, in essence, we can further observe the paradox that is the postcolonial condition. As Bhabha contends “Such ‘indeterminism’ is the mark of the conflictual yet productive space in which the arbitrariness of the sign of cultural signification emerges within the regulated boundaries of social discourse” (Bhabha 173). Adichie’s dismantled text points to the ambivalence that is created when the colonizer/colonized binary is pulled apart. Each segment of the binary only has meaning because of the other segment. Again, Bhabha’s theories on postcolonial discourse support this notion. He states, “The postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation. It forces a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres” (Bhabha 174). In terms of the text, the colonizer has no meaning without the

colonized and the colonized has no meaning without the colonizer. The two are inextricably linked.

CHAPTER TWO: EXPLORING DIFFÉRANCE IN *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie continues her examination of the colonizer/colonized binary by retelling the history of Nigeria's split with itself after being liberated from British rule and the resulting Biafran War. The novel illuminates the role that Britain played in Nigeria's arbitrary conception as well as its role in the ensuing chaos and genocide that occurred there post-independence. Using three narrators, Adichie is able to capture different perspectives of postcolonial Nigeria. Ugwu's perspective as a young Igbo teenager from the small village of Opi most directly reflects the experiences of the oppressed. Meanwhile, Olanna's experiences as a wealthy, educated, Anglicized Igbo reflects the point of view of one whose mimicry of the colonizer means little when the war starts. Finally, Richard's viewpoint as an Igbo sympathizer of British origin problematizes the colonizer/colonized binary.

All three perspectives embody a spectrum of realities that were experienced by Biafrans during the 1960s. Even though the experiences are varied, the commonality that is shared by all is the subordinating position that each character occupies in relation to the dominant imperialistic influence of Britain that is manifested through the puppet government of Nigeria. A close reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun* using a postcolonial theoretical framework will reveal the ongoing binary opposition that Adichie uses to highlight the power imbalances between the colonizer and the colonized. However, as was done with *Purple Hibiscus*, I intend to show how Adichie's text is even more indicative of the postcolonial experience than a close reading implies. The inherent deconstruction of Adichie's works reveals an equalizing of the colonizer/colonized binary opposition. Another way to consider this is that from the deconstruction of Adichie's texts emerges a shift between each component of the binary. That shift evinces a paradox in which neither colonizer nor colonized can be separated from each other; their dependence upon one another is how we make meaning of these terms. Therefore,

the deconstruction of Adichie's works mimics the postcolonial identity in that the postcolonial identity occupies a paradoxical space in which colonizer and colonized identities are interdependent.

In my previous chapter, I uncovered the interdependence between both components of the colonizer/colonized binary, thereby rendering the terms meaningless. In this chapter, I will dig deeper into the deconstruction of Adichie's text by revealing the play of language that at once makes words meaningful and meaningless. This play of language makes it impossible to definitively make meaning of the text. In order to demonstrate the play of language that subverts the colonizer/colonized binary, I will do a Derridean-style reading of the text.

In order to examine the paradox in *Half of a Yellow Sun* it is again necessary to begin by interpreting the text in a straightforward way that reveals the privileging of the colonizer over the colonized. Following the close reading, I will reexamine those same characters for evidence of linguistic and conceptual unravelings that are suggestive of the text deconstructing itself, and thus dismantling any single interpretation of the postcolonial identity.

Adichie problematizes the colonizer/colonized binary by attending to it from multiple angles--a houseboy (Ugwu), a wealthy and educated Igbo woman (Olanna), and a British man infatuated with Igbo culture and in love with an Igbo woman (Richard). Each of these perspectives offers different realities based on each character's positionality. Alcoff speaks to this point when she says, "First, there has been a growing awareness that where one speaks from affects both the meaning and truth of what one says" (Alcoff 26). Adichie capitalizes on this notion of positionality affecting one's reality by presenting three characters who are all oppressed as Biafrans, but each occupies a different positionality which uniquely colors his or her outlook. Generating a multifaceted image of those who occupy a subordinate position

humanizes them. Nuancing the subordinate position in the colonizer/colonized binary complicates the binary in that it no longer essentializes the subordinate position. Still, although the subordinating position is no longer essentialized in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it does not mean that the binary itself no longer exists. In fact, all three perspectives, though nuanced by their particularities, are united in that they are all oppressed by a dominant power. Hall defines this occurrence when he discusses the two types of cultural identity. Hall states that “The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (Hall 223). In other words, Adichie paints a picture of the two types of cultural identity that Hall discusses: a shared history and a unique, differing state of being. It is at this point that I see Adichie continuing to illuminate a binary that is characterized by one group being subordinated by another. The differing states of being that are experienced by Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard all converge at a point of similarity. Each one of them occupies a subordinate position: Biafra sympathizers. To this end, Adichie extends the colonizer/colonized binary that is woven throughout her works by manifesting the binary into the context of the Biafran War. She solidifies Igbo as the subjugated party with relation to the Hausa-controlled Nigerian government. Through the characters of Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard, Adichie demonstrates the suffering and oppression of the Igbo people during the years of post-independence. In effect, what Adichie appears to have done is to show the lingering effects of colonization even after independence.

Ugwu, for example, begins the novel as a subordinate on many levels. He appears to have no say in whether or not he becomes Odenigbo’s houseboy. From the beginning, his agency is compromised in that the decision to work under Odenigbo likely was not his own. Ugwu’s aunty

recounts to him that “While she was sweeping the corridor in the mathematics department a week ago, she heard Master say that he needed a houseboy to do his cleaning, and she immediately said she could help...” (Adichie 4). The depth of subordination in this passage is far-reaching in that both Ugwu and his aunty seem to occupy a lower rung in society than does Master. Beginning with aunty’s physical act of sweeping--indicative of cleaning what others have left behind--we already see a possible class division between her and Master, who we later learn is Odenigbo. By familial extension, Ugwu is subordinated to Master as well; so, given that aunty and Ugwu are related, that, in effect, places them in similar positionalities. Additionally, aunty solicits work from Master on behalf of Ugwu. She arranges for her nephew to occupy a subordinating position as a houseboy in Master’s home. The reader’s immediate connection to Ugwu is through his introduction as a servant to a Master.

As is characteristic of Adichie’s work, Odenigbo is a robust character whose role as Master is complicated. Odenigbo exemplifies the far-reaching impact of British colonialism. His British education arguably is what has resulted in his Master status. The paradox is that Odenigbo likely would not have achieved this level of social standing without his British education. Yet, on the other hand, it is the British whom Odenigbo blames for the oppressive state of Nigeria. Adichie speaks to this conundrum when she has Odenigbo explain the idiosyncrasies of British education to Ugwu. Adichie writes, ““There are two answers to the things they will teach you about our land: the real answer and the answer you give in school to pass”” (Adichie 13-14).

Odenigbo proves to be a gracious employer to Ugwu, providing him with an education and providing support when Ugwu’s mother falls ill. Ugwu ruminates about how well he is treated in comparison to other houseboys. He notes that “The houseboy at the end of the street...

did not decide what would be cooked, he cooked whatever he was ordered to. And they did not have masters or madams who gave them books...” (Adichie 21). Although Ugwu is arguably in a more comfortable position than other houseboys, he continues to play the role of subaltern--not just in his service to Odenigbo but also within the confines of the societal stratification that Adichie establishes with her characters. At every major turn in the novel, Ugwu occupies a position of alterity: houseboy, proprietor of unrequited lust, conscripted soldier. It is not until the end of Adichie’s narrative that we see Ugwu’s redemption, which I will argue is still a subordinating part of the binary opposition that is created between colonizer and colonized.

Throughout the novel, Ugwu matures from a lustful boy with juvenile impulses to an educated, intellectually gifted young man to a hardened soldier that commits one of the most perverse acts in the novel. The arc of Ugwu’s transformation ultimately ends with his apparent attempt to atone for his sins. His atonement comes in the form of a novel that he uses to capture his experiences from the war: *The World Was Silent When We Died* is embedded within the larger storyline. Ugwu writes in Chapter 6 of his book, “He writes about the world that remained silent while Biafrans died” (Adichie 324). Adichie appears to use Ugwu as a symbol of the many states of the Igbo people during the war years. He begins the novel with something of a free-spirited innocence that is indicative of the hope of the Igbo people when Biafra is established. The innocence appears as juvenile and lustful obsessions with Nnesinachi and Olanna. Ugwu’s infatuation early in the novel with both characters is indicative of juvenile, yet optimistic, behavior. When Olanna first moves in with Odenigbo, Ugwu engages in bizarre covetous behaviors. After clearing the dishes from a dinner party, “Ugwu sat down and selected one [of Olanna’s discarded chicken bones] and closed his eyes as he sucked it, imagining Olanna’s mouth enclosing the same bone” (Adichie 105). Though unusual by most readers’ standards,

Ugwu's actions can be seen as a sort of hope against hope that he can possess what Odenigbo possesses, which is Olanna.

A further interpretation would reveal that this early demonstration of hope by Ugwu is akin to the hope that Biafrans felt when their country is first established. Adichie cements the interconnectedness between the lustful, juvenile hopes of Ugwu and the patriotic hopes of the Igbo people. On the night of the first coup, Ugwu observes the atmosphere during one of Odenigbo's dinner parties as the news breaks of the coup. The excitement was palpable among the dinner guests as hope filled the air. Later that night, Ugwu "ached for [Chinyere] to come on this exciting night of the coup that had changed the order of things and throbbed with possibility, with newness" (Adichie 160). Ugwu and Chinyere are apparently engaged in a strictly physical intimate relationship as is evidenced by each of them appearing to imagine someone else during their encounter. Nonetheless, Ugwu's hope that Chinyere "would slip under the hedge and come over" clearly intersects with the excitement experienced by the Igbo sympathizers. The coup is first announced during one of Ugwu's chapters (as opposed to any of the ones narrated by Olanna or Richard). Juxtaposed throughout the chapter are Ugwu and his innocent, hope-filled actions and the intellectual elite and their exultation at the news of the coup. Ugwu notices that the dinner party guests' "voices were urgent and excited, each person barely waiting for the last to finish speaking" indicating their hope of a Nigeria free from British influence--as they feel that the North Nigerian government are puppets of Britain (Adichie 158).

Adichie emphasizes Ugwu's innate intelligence and ultimate break with humanity as a way of further establishing a link between him and the fate of Biafra. Ugwu's teacher informs Odenigbo that "The boy will surely skip a class at some point, he has such an innate intelligence" (Adichie 107). Ugwu feeds his intellectual curiosity with books, and they become an escape for

him. When Ugwu's burgeoning intellectual talent rises to the surface, it becomes a version of freedom for him. His thoughts are his own, and reading strengthens those thoughts and by extension, his version of freedom. I am qualifying Ugwu's freedom by referring to it as his version of freedom because while his mind remains free, he still remains subservient to Odenigbo as a houseboy, to the army as a conscripted soldier, and to the colonizer as the "other." Comparatively, southern Nigerians (who will become Biafrans) acquire strength and their version of freedom due to their fiercely independent spirit and desire to be free from British influence. After Nigeria's attempted annexation of Biafra and the start of the Biafran War, freedom for both Ugwu and Biafra erode. Ugwu loses all hope and humanity as he engages in questionable military tactics, witnesses the bullying and degradation of Biafran civilians, and participates in the gang rape of the bar girl. The gang rape is Ugwu's lowest point that effaces all humanity and intellectual freedom that characterized his being throughout the novel. His intellectual freedom is compromised the moment he acquiesces to the rape. From there, Ugwu becomes an empty shell of a person whose innocence and intellectual curiosity are perverted by war. Likewise, the will of Biafra becomes corrupted by desperation and loss of hope.

Adichie's integration of Olanna and Richard into the narrative supports the differing states of being that can be characteristic of the colonized. Together Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard create an assemblage of personalities, cultural attitudes and positionalities that seem to be arbitrarily interconnected. Adichie seems to skillfully connect three very different characters whose relationships, were it not for the Biafran War, would not be as deeply intimate. This point is reiterated throughout the novel and serves as a connection to the ongoing colonizer/colonized binary opposition that is characteristic of Adichie's work.

Olanna is described as a beautiful young lady from a wealthy family that enjoys ample social capital. Olanna has a dynamic effect on people including both Ugwu and Richard who are enamored with her from afar. For all intents and purposes, Olanna enjoys a privileged existence prior to the war. She is a sharp contrast to Ugwu in many ways--positionality being chief among them. Where Olanna is wealthy, Ugwu is poor. Where Ugwu is a servant, Olanna is served. Despite the differences, however, Olanna identifies as Igbo and therefore, occupies the same subordinate position as Ugwu within the colonizer/colonized binary opposition. In this way, Adichie creates Hall's differing state of being between two characters that both occupy a subordinate position.

The differing states of being between Olanna and Ugwu become especially evident in the years during the war. Both characters are relegated to an inferior status by nature of their ethnicity. In other words, both characters are Igbo and citizens of Biafra. Within the colonizer/colonized binary opposition that Adichie creates, Olanna and Ugwu occupy the subordinate position of that binary. However, within the macro-level of the colonizer/colonized binary framework, Olanna and Ugwu maintain vastly different social positions on the micro-level. Pre-war roles are maintained between Olanna and Ugwu: He remains in service to her, Odenigbo, and Baby. The war does blur the lines a bit so that Ugwu is considered part of the family. Nonetheless, though, on a fundamental level, Olanna maintains a higher placement in the societal hierarchy.

Olanna capitalizes on her higher placement when it is advantageous for her to do so. During the war, Baby falls ill and Olanna takes her to a hospital for treatment. Knowing that the doctor at the hospital is an old friend, Olanna uses her breeding and social status to avoid waiting in the overcrowded hospital waiting room. As she enters the hospital, "She told the nurses that

she was an old colleague of his. ‘It’s terribly urgent,’ she said, and kept her English accent crisp and her head held high. A nurse showed her into his office promptly” (Adichie 330). Adichie creates a clear distinction between social classes. After Olanna uses her influence to skip ahead in line, “One of the women sitting in the corridor cursed. ‘*Tufiakwa!* We have been waiting since dawn! Is it because we don’t talk through our nose like white people?’” (Adichie 330). Olanna’s privilege is contrasted with the plight of the waiting-room mothers who do not share the same social standing as she. Again, Adichie nuances the subordinate position of the colonizer/colonized binary by establishing the differing states of being among Biafrans. However, despite the nuances, she makes it clear that *all* Biafrans occupy a subordinate position within the larger scope of the binary, regardless of social position. We see this later in the hospital scene when Olanna’s privilege and social status are not enough to secure the medicine she needs for Baby. Although she was able to use her influence to bypass the waiting room, she still ends up no better off than the other--less privileged--women in the waiting room.

Olanna’s conflicting status as a subordinate on one hand and empowered on the other is exemplified in the scene where she and Richard become intimate. Adichie’s description of the scene is laden with symbolism that supports an ambivalence between Olanna’s privilege and her subjugation. According to the text,

Everything changed when he was inside her... it was as if she was throwing shackles off her wrists, extracting pins from her skin, freeing herself with the loud, loud cries that burst out of her mouth. Afterward, she felt filled with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace. (Adichie 291)

A close reading of this scene seems to reveal that Richard is responsible for saving Olanna from her despair over Odenigbo’s infidelity. Digging deeper, we could interpret Richard as being a

symbol of Britain's imperial power. Adichie sets up Richard's character as an embodiment of both British superiority and white guilt. Furthermore, the British superiority endemic to Richard's character is synonymous with the colonizer exercising power over the colonized. If viewing Richard from the perspective of British superiority then, this interpretation suggests that Olanna represents the colonized who is only able to be saved from Richard who represents the colonizer. Solidifying this point is the imagery of slavery--depicted as the metaphorical shackles and pins that are released from Olanna's body during the scene. Up until this point, Olanna has been humiliated and betrayed by Odenigbo, another representative of the colonized. The injury that she has sustained is repaired by her encounter with Richard, who is acting as a proxy of the colonizer in this interpretation.

Despite this interpretation, though, Adichie creates ambivalence in Olanna's positionality by giving her a sense of empowerment after her encounter with Richard. Instead of depicting the encounter as oppressive as is characteristic of the colonizer/colonized binary, Adichie gives Olanna strength from the encounter. Perhaps, this a way of creating an interconnectedness between Olanna and Richard that connects them both under the overarching colonizer/colonized binary opposition. In other words, the ambivalence of the scene essentially places Richard and Olanna on an even playing field: He "saves" her, but instead of being oppressed by the colonizer's salvation, she regains her strength of mind and is empowered. This leveling of societal positions supports the notion that nuances and positionality aside, Olanna and Richard are equal in their subordinate positions as Biafrans.

Richard's role as a British national who identifies as Biafran is a complex one. By nature of his race and country of origin, he occupies the highest societal position out of all three narrators. Still, though, Richard does not completely assimilate into the British expatriate way of

life in Nigeria. At the beginning of the narrative, we learn that he wanders around parties aimlessly trying to conjure witticisms that will impress his British girlfriend, Susan and her expatriate friends. Even after trading in his superficial relationship with Susan for a genuine, committed relationship to Olanna's twin sister, Kainene, he continues to fumble in his words and actions. Ultimately, Richard struggles to reconcile his privilege with his desire to immerse himself in Igbo culture. There are numerous points in the novel in which Richard cleaves to the privilege that is associated with his social status. Often, he becomes annoyed or insulted when members of the Igbo tradition fail to recognize his privileged status. By contrast, he loathes the racist attitudes of the British and makes whole-hearted attempts to embrace Igbo culture.

After several failed attempts to be intimate with Kainene, Richard seeks the help of his gardener, Jomo. He asks Jomo about special herbs that help African men perform sexually. Jomo tells Richard that the herbs do not work for white men. This, of course, is not the answer Richard is looking for. Here, Adichie creates a shift in the broader colonizer/colonized binary that underscores her work. Richard, as stated before, is a symbol of the colonizer, and by that logic, Jomo becomes a symbol of the colonized. It is Jomo, however, that holds the power in this scene due to the fact that he denies Richard access to something that he needs. The "special herbs" scene further supports Adichie's characterization of Richard as a proxy of the colonizer that has no functional power.

As the scene concludes, Richard "made sure not to let his dejection show; he walked straight and reminded himself that he was, after all, the master" (Adichie 93). Juxtaposed with Richard's powerlessness is his capitalization of his inherent superior position within the social hierarchy. This represents an instance of Adichie illuminating the ambivalence of her characters. Although Richard desires the special herbs in order to be intimate with Kainene, an Igbo woman,

he nonetheless seems to make a conscious choice to flex his inherent “superiority” towards an Igbo servant.

Throughout the novel, Richard exhibits anti-colonizer sentiments--claiming Biafra as his own country--while also acting on impulses reserved for the colonizer. One such scene occurs at the end of the novel when Richard searches for Eberechi as a favor to Ugwu. When he arrives at the address that was given to him, he encounters an elderly woman who does not seem impressed that Richard, a white British man, is speaking in Igbo. This perplexes Richard. According to the text, “It surprised Richard; he was used to his Igbo-speaking whiteness being noticed, being marveled at” (Adichie 534). Taking a close look at Richard’s reaction, it appears that Richard cannot completely shed the feelings of superiority that have been ingrained in him. Likewise, in scenes where Richard and Madu have linguistic sparring matches, it also appears that Richard’s embracing of Igbo culture has more to do with him wanting to be recognized for going out of his way to embrace the culture rather than for his genuine interest and respect for the culture. In a dinner party scene with Madu, Richard insists on speaking to Madu in Igbo while Madu refuses to speak Igbo to Richard and instead, speaks to him in English. Richard believes that Madu does this so that Richard is “forced to revert to English” (Adichie 172). It can be argued that Madu’s insistence on speaking English to Richard should not bother Richard if he is truly secure with his immersion into Igbo culture. Richard, however, is not secure in his immersion into Igbo culture. He objectifies all things Igbo from the roped pots, to the language, to Kainene. His passion for Igbo culture comes from a place of fascination and amazement of the “other.”

Half of a Yellow Sun masterfully constructs a complex portrait of the aftershocks of British imperialism in Nigeria. By embedding Ugwu’s book into the larger narrative, the reader learns of Britain’s influence in the Biafran War, and how ultimately, Britain still controlled

Nigeria through political power. Chapter 2 of “The World Was Silent When We Died” establishes the history behind Nigeria’s construction. Essentially, the reader learns that through this embedded book that Britain preferred the Hausa people of the North to the Igbo and Yoruba tribes to the South. The Hausa people, according to Ugwu’s book, were favorable to the British because their socioeconomic structure--feudalism--was “perfect for indirect rule” (Adichie 146). By contrast, the Southern tribes, Igbo in particular, were used to governing themselves in a democratic manner. The numerous republics that comprised the Igbo tribe made it difficult for Britain to rule indirectly. According to the text, what Britain did instead was to institute “warrant chiefs” to govern the Igbo. Then, “In 1914, the governor-general joined the North and the South, and his wife picked a name. Nigeria was born” (Adichie 147).

Already, though, a hierarchy was in play between the North and the South. The British-favored Hausa dominated the Nigerian government therefore establishing British rule by proxy. By the time Biafra and Nigeria went to war, the Hausa-dominated Nigeria were already in a position of power because of “The arms and advice that Britain gave Nigeria...” (Adichie 324). Adichie brings this imbalance of power to the forefront with the characters of Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard. Each of them occupies a space of inferiority within the colonizer/colonized binary that is manifested through the Nigerian/Biafran war.

Adichie appears to capture the essence of the postcolonial identity by vividly articulating the insidious influence Britain had over Northern Nigeria and how that influence further perpetuated the colonizer/colonized binary opposition. However, it is my contention that the postcolonial identity cannot be singularly described. The deconstruction of the text shows this. In fact, Adichie’s body of works, *Half of a Yellow Sun* included, continuously unravel themselves thereby exposing the disruption of the binary tensions. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, in particular, can

credit its deconstruction to the continual deferment of meaning that accentuates the major concepts of the work. According to Derrida, “Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences” (“Différance” 286). Différance, as described by Derrida, is the systematic play of differences. Additionally, différance constitutes “a continual and indefinite postponement as the signified can never be achieved” (“Différance” 283-284). In this sense, a text cannot be interpreted singularly for its deconstruction prevents that and the deferral of meaning is indefinite. I intend to review the pivotal points in the lives of Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard that define them as the “other.” These pivotal scenes are important to the framework of Adichie’s postcolonial narrative because they establish the perspective of the colonized and places that perspective in direct contrast with the colonizer; thus creating a binary tension. By illuminating key points in the novel that appear to unravel, I will show that Adichie’s narrative cannot be housed within a postcolonial theoretical framework.

When we are first introduced to Ugwu, it is within the context of becoming a servant to Master. Ugwu’s subordination is compounded by his aunty making this decision for him and essentially, removing his voice. Adichie writes that “While she was sweeping the corridor in the mathematics department a week ago, she heard Master say that he needed a houseboy to do his cleaning, and she immediately said she could help...” (Adichie 4). As I established through my close reading of this scene, the concept that is at play here is that of the master/servant paradigm. The master/servant paradigm defines Ugwu throughout the novel, and the genesis of that paradigm can be traced back to this moment. However, if we approach the text from a deconstructionist approach, the paradigm unravels.

The *différance* that is present in the text of this scene reveals that the concept of servant is unstable in meaning: The meaning is in a constant state of deferral. To interpret this scene through the lens of binaries is to affirm what Derrida refers to as a “violent hierarchy.” Master is superior to the servant, and the servant is marginalized and considered a special case of the master--something of a derivative. Giving validity to this type of hierarchy is problematic in that it relies on an ultimate, definitive confirmation that a master is superior to a servant; thereby, acknowledging a universal definition that states that the dominant part of the hierarchy always is and always will be superior to the subordinate part of the hierarchy. Words cannot be taken at face value because of the indeterminant amount of residual meanings that are embedded within them. Moreover, when an interpretation of a text is thought to provide a finite meaning of that text, there is an assumption that the words, concepts, and contexts that make up the text have a definitive origin. Given the multitude of reasons of why words, concepts, and contexts have various meanings and connotations, the idea of having any interpretation of a text begins to unravel. The issue here, then, is that the instability of words, concepts, and contexts subverts the idea of a fixed truth anchoring an interpretative response to a text. Derrida discusses this point by noting that “It is a question of strategy because no transcendent truth present outside the sphere of writing can theologically command the totality of the field” (“*Différance*” 282).

Here, Derrida is referring to his theory of *différance*. *Différance* refers to the play of language and its instability. Using the idea of the infinite deferral of meaning (because there is no ending point or ultimate truth value to language), we can see how the beginning scene that places Ugwu in permanent subservience for the entire narrative can unravel itself. Thus, Ugwu’s state of subordination within the text, while still present, carries little meaning. When we look again examine the master/servant paradigm, the obvious interpretation is master reigns over

servant. However, when considering that the concept of a servant can have various connotations, the “servant” half of the paradigm becomes shaky. For instance, it is typical in the Christian faith to consider faith holders to be servants of God. Intersecting with that belief, is the idea that Christians hold a superior status to non-believers. Therefore, in this instance, a servant is only subservient to God and dominant to the rest of humanity. This example shows that another connotation of servant not only exists, but this connotation dismantles the connotation of servant that is implied in Ugwu’s situation. The Christian concept of servant would not be a position of inferiority from the point of one who holds these Christian beliefs and happens to interpret the scene with that connotation in mind. The fact that an alternate connotation exists is enough to subvert the hierarchy that ultimately places Ugwu in a subservient role because a play of language now emerges from the text. According to Derrida, “The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (*Writing and Difference* 354). The transcendental signified refers to a universal truth value being placed on a word, concept, or context. Meanings and connotations place words, and by extension, texts, in constant flux. Because of this there can be no universal truth that governs the meaning of words. The words that would be used to express a universal truth are themselves in constant flux, which gives credence to the idea of the absence of a transcendental signified.

The master/servant binary opposition that Adichie sets up for Ugwu’s character ultimately deconstructs itself in that there is an absence of a transcendental signified that would anchor the signifiers that represent both sides of the binary opposition. Because of this decentering a fixed interpretation of Ugwu’s character cannot exist. Adichie introduces his character using this binary opposition. All of Ugwu’s actions throughout the novel, therefore, are predicated on the initial characterization of him as a subaltern. In turn, this characterization

assumes that a universal understanding of servant as subaltern exists. As discussed, this sort of universal understanding is flawed in that words, concepts, and contexts have no stable center to which a meaning is fixed. Through the lens of *différance*, the construction of Ugwu's identity is deconstructed. What this means, then, is that a system of play is embedded within the text.

Ugwu's identity can carry any interpretation.

The same theory can be applied to both Olanna and Richard. As stated earlier in this paper, Adichie goes to great lengths to give nuance to her characters that occupy subordinate positions within the colonizer/colonized binary. The characters of Olanna and Richard are fraught with ambivalence. As is the case with the scene that was examined earlier in which Olanna and Richard are intimate. In that scene, slave imagery is tied to Olanna: The scene is described using metaphorical shackles and pins. As she and Richard unite during physical intimacy,

Everything changed when he was inside her... it was as if she was throwing shackles off her wrists, extracting pins from her skin, freeing herself with the loud, loud cries that burst out of her mouth. Afterward, she felt filled with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace. (Adichie 291)

In my earlier close reading, I suggested that Adichie, in effect, is crediting Richard, a white British man, with liberating Olanna, a Nigerian woman, from the emotional slavery that consumed her. Given that a colonizer/colonized binary underscores the entire novel, this scene further supports the idea of white superiors dictating the lives (and in Olanna's case, the happiness) of Nigerians.

In order to demonstrate how this part of the text deconstructs itself, it is important initially to reexamine Richard's role within the hierarchy. For his part, I originally interpreted

Richard's role in this scene as 1) the colonizer liberating the colonized and 2) the colonizer who becomes equal to the colonized due to the reinstated power of the colonized. In this one scene with Olanna, Richard is seen as both being superior to and then equal to Olanna. In order to illuminate the collapse of this part of the text onto itself, I will point to the unraveling of Richard's positionality at a critical point in the text.

The scene in which Richard speaks with the old woman in Umuahia in an attempt to locate Eberechi stands out as a small, yet pivotal moment in Richard's character development. The text states that "It surprised Richard; he was used to his Igbo-speaking whiteness being noticed, being marveled at" (Adichie 534). My initial interpretation of this scene suggested that Richard's reaction showed a sense of entitlement: Richard believes he is special because he is white and speaks Igbo. He expects that he will stand out as important due to "his Igbo-speaking whiteness." Richard's shock at the old woman's nonchalance is indicative of a superiority complex that can most likely be attributed to Richard's positionality at the top of the societal hierarchy.

The ease with which Richard reverts back to his position of racial and social privilege, is indicative of the existence of a transcendental signified that touts a universal meaning pitting colonizer in direct binary opposition to the colonized. Richard's surprise, which in my initial interpretation is born out of arrogance, exists on a hollow, unstable assumption that a colonizer/colonized binary dictates that the language, culture, and general existence of the colonized, i. e., the Igbo should matter so little to the colonizer, i. e., the British that an Englishman certainly would not take the time to embrace any component of the Igbo culture. Since Richard takes the time to embrace the culture, he believes this demonstrates his transcendence above a binary opposition that he ironically continues to perpetuate through his

arrogance of being surprised that the old woman from Umuahia does not acknowledge his transcendence.

But of course, the irony of Richard's situation is based on an assumption that a fixed meaning exists, which predetermines the colonizer/colonized binary opposition. The deconstruction of the following text will show that, in fact, a transcendental signified does not exist that would frame Richard's show of arrogance: "It surprised Richard; he was used to his Igbo-speaking whiteness being noticed, being marveled at" (Adichie 534). If we consider this text as having no center, that is, having no binary opposition that frames it, then the text loses any direct meaning that may imply that a power imbalance exists. Derrida emphasizes this point when he states, "that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions structure came into play" (*Writing and Difference* 353-54). The deferral of meaning in perpetuity is what decenters and effectively dismantles the colonizer/colonized binary that frames Richard's interaction with the old woman. Because words, concepts, and contexts have no definitive universal meaning that govern them, the play that occurs within the text has an equalizing effect on any power imbalance. By demonstrating that the center is unstable, this removes the power structure that effectually places Richard at the top of the hierarchy.

Looking again at the scene between Olanna and Richard, there is no longer a definite interpretation that suggests the symbolism in the scene is governed by the colonizer/colonized binary. Richard's inherent superiority as a white Englishman no longer carries as much weight for freeing Olanna from her metaphorical shackles and pins because multiple interpretations can be applied to the scene. In effect, my initial interpretation of the scene is subverted by the decentering of the binary opposition that acted as an anchor for a close reading of the text.

The différance that operates within Adichie's text allows for a complete subversion of the colonizer/colonized binary that frames the narrative. A close reading interpretation of the novel illuminates the role of the British in 1) arbitrarily constructing Nigeria and 2) being indirectly responsible for the Biafran War and the suffering of the Biafran people. Intersecting with that is the deessentializing of the Igbo/Biafran people that Adichie constructs through Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard. All of these big ideas rely on a stable center that assumes a definitive universal meaning that involves power imbalance. Différance operating in a manner of infinite deferral of meaning subverts this idea of definitive meaning, which in turn, deconstructs the text. What is left are infinite interpretations that paradoxically can also be deconstructed.

CHAPTER THREE: REVEALING THE TRACE IN *AMERICANAH*

Adichie uses *Americanah* as a vehicle for cultural commentary that examines the impact that Westernization has on people from African countries. As with her previous two works, Adichie uses *Americanah* as a space to analyze the power imbalances between the Western hegemony and the “other.” Adichie’s commentary in *Americanah* differs from that of her previous two works in that she closely examines the double-consciousness that characterizes the lives of blacks in America. This double-consciousness saturates the identities of those who are citizens of a nation that refuses to acknowledge their worthiness. Blacks in America find themselves caught between a desire for acceptance into the mainstream culture and the solidarity that they must maintain as a collective in order to counter the very culture into which they seek acceptance. DuBois speaks on this point in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He states, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DuBois 8). Indeed, Black Americans are forced to view themselves through the eyes of the dominant society.

One can see that the fundamental components of American life are governed by white hegemonic influences, and it is the dominant society that establishes societal norms. In discussing the reactions of the American dominant society to immigration, Leo R. Chavez notes that “Indeed, the proponents of restricting immigration often view today’s immigrants as a threat to the ‘nation,’ which is conceived of as a singular, predominantly Euro-American, English-speaking culture” (Chavez 8). These white hegemonic influences are evident in all aspects of American life: financial, educational, social, and political. The dominant society controls the model of success for each of these areas. Marginalized populations, in turn, internalize the

idealized way of American life--because America, too, is their country. Ingrained in the minds of the marginalized population is the idea that in order to survive and prosper in America, one has to achieve success on the terms laid forth by the American dominant society. Of course, the issue then becomes whether or not marginalized peoples can ever achieve the level of success enjoyed by the dominant society. Being marginalized already positions them in direct contrast to the dominant society. Moreover, marginalized peoples become a group unto themselves, united by one common factor: being seen as the “other.” It is at this point that the double-consciousness becomes a reality and an identity marker for marginalized peoples. As DuBois speaks on double-consciousness, it is in reference to the African American experience. Adichie reveals the issue of double-consciousness through her African American and Non-American black characters in *Americanah*.

Ifemelu, the protagonist of *Americanah*, encapsulates the double life that is experienced by blacks in America. She poignantly captures her double life in her blog that is based on her observation of race relations in America. What Ifemelu comes to realize after a relatively short time in America is that the dominant white society, categorizes all blacks as one group based solely on phenotypical likenesses. Lombardi speaks to this point: “The acculturation experiences of West Indians and new-wave Africans have proven more difficult than those of non-black immigrants because of American social perceptions and understandings of blackness” (Lombardi 2). No consideration is given to the plethora of cultures and nationalities that are embedded in this broad, amalgamated category of blacks. Therefore, Ifemelu finds herself navigating not just the double-consciousness of being black in America but also being a Non-American black in America.

Adichie captures the double-consciousness of Black America particularly well and expounds on it through the character of Ifemelu. Adichie continues to frame her work using a binary opposition that pits the dominant white society in direct contrast to blacks in America. However, to acknowledge and examine this inequitable power structure is to give power to a structure that stands on falsity. In other words, double-consciousness is grounded in the transcendental signified--mentioned in the previous chapter--that Derridean school of thought subverts the inequitable power structures that create binary oppositions.

But more importantly, *Americanah* subverts double-consciousness that has definitive meaning that places whites in a superior position to blacks. I will show how upsetting binary oppositions and acknowledging the infinite deferral of meaning and the decentering of a transcendental signified reveal what Derrida refers to as the trace, or the “always-already-there.” The trace is that which is exposed after a text has unraveled itself. Once the transcendental signified that has acted as the crux of a binary opposition has been decentered, what is left behind in the wake of the deconstruction is an unveiling of the perpetual trace of what defines and contradicts the concept.

As is typical of Adichie’s work, *Americanah* begins with a temporal disruption that immediately alerts the reader of a major upheaval in the protagonist’s life. Ifemelu has decided to give up her successful blog and move back to Nigeria from America. When the novel opens, Ifemelu is at an African braiding salon having her hair braided. The hairstylists at the braiding boutique give us our first look at the double-consciousness that plagues blacks in America--whether they are African-Americans or Non-American blacks. Aisha, Ifemelu’s Senegalese hairstylist, engages Ifemelu in numerous questions ranging from Nollywood films to the

marrying practices of Igbo people. In one exchange Aisha and Ifemelu discuss the protocol for distinguishing between African countries:

She know many Igbo people in Africa. She sell cloth.

Where is she?

In Africa.

Where? In Senegal?

Benin.

Why do you say Africa instead of just saying the country you mean...

...You don't know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say,

Where is that? My friend from Burkina Faso, they ask her, your country in Latin

America.... (Adichie 15)

Although essentializing African countries in the way that she does is a conscious choice on Aisha's part, it was one that is forced on her by the essentialist views of the dominant society in America. DuBois notes that "...a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (DuBois 8). This statement rings particularly true in this instance.

Though Aisha is fully aware that Africa is comprised of multiple countries, peoples, cultures, languages, belief systems, etc., she nonetheless alters the ways she refers to the continent. She acquiesces to the ignorance of the dominant society, and begins to essentialize people from Africa. However, her explanation to Ifemelu about why she essentializes Africa implies that she at once sets herself apart from dominant society while acting in a way that is consistent with its beliefs. When Aisha says, "You don't know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, Where is that," she uses the term American in a way that suggests

her exclusion from the group. However, the contradictory action of using Africa as a blanket location for all African countries evinces the double-consciousness that characterizes Aisha. She understands that she is seen as the “other” in American society, but she still admires American culture and most likely longs for success by American standards. Aisha is impressed when Ifemelu tells her that she has been in America for fifteen years. More telling of Aisha’s reverence for American culture is the fact that she cannot understand why Ifemelu wants to return to Nigeria.

Ifemelu’s keen observations of American life give us a broad view of the impact that double-consciousness has on Non-American black immigrants. Even though being an immigrant compounds the immigrant double-consciousness, the framework can still be applied. Those from African and Caribbean countries are trying, just as African-Americans, to be accepted in mainstream American society (read: white American society). Auntie Uju is an important example of this concept. The summer that Ifemelu moves to America, she stays with Auntie Uju and Dike in New York. Immediately, Ifemelu notices differences in her aunt’s personality. As they are driving in the car, Auntie Uju mispronounces her own name when she takes a call. Adichie continues this scene with an exchange between Ifemelu and Auntie Uju:

Is that how you pronounce your name now?

It’s what they call me. (Adichie 105)

Just as we see with Aisha, Auntie Uju appears to give in to the American perception of who she is. Because she is traveling the road to American success, she chooses to make her travels smoother by ignoring bumps along the way--namely, the correct pronunciation of her name. Just as with Aisha, we also see Auntie Uju simultaneously acknowledge her otherness while submitting to the identity that the dominant society has created for her. Auntie Uju’s response to

Ifemelu's questioning of the mispronunciation is "It's what they call me." Using the term "they" suggests that Aunt Uju knows she is an outlier in American society, but her choice to accept the dominant society's perception of her shows that she considers the dominant society to be superior to her.

Aunt Uju again shows her willingness to bend to the ways of the dominant society when she, Dike, and Ifemelu are at the grocery store. Ifemelu observes the way Aunt Uju speaks when she engages in conversations with white Americans. "'Dike, put it back,' Aunt Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. *Pooh-reet-back*. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing" (Adichie 109). Ifemelu who is unschooled in the nuances of racial politics in America, observes, through unfiltered eyes, the double-consciousness that pervades Aunt Uju's personhood. It becomes clear in Chapter 9 that Aunt Uju has fallen prey to a self-consciousness that is the byproduct of systemic racism. In the voice of Stuart Hall, Aunt Uju has been made to see herself as "other." One possibility for this is that Aunt Uju does not achieve immediate success in America despite her training and expertise as a physician. Considering she has the knowledge and skill to perform the duties of a physician, what she likely internalizes is that she is not "American enough" to be a physician in America. DuBois speaks to this point when he says, "...from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence" (136). As Aunt Uju attempts to hold on to parts of her identity--dignity, belief systems--she simultaneously tries to mimic the dominant society. What results from this duplicity is a degradation to the self that, ironically, keeps Aunt Uju in a subordinate position.

It does not take long for Ifemelu to acquiesce to the same state of double-consciousness as Aunt Uju. In Chapter 14, Adichie describes Ifemelu's encounter with Cristina Tomas on her first day at college. Cristina Tomas patronizes Ifemelu because of her Nigerian accent, and this becomes Ifemelu's first encounter with feeling like the Other. Adichie writes, "Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas's before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf... And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent" (Adichie 134-135). In this scene, Ifemelu goes from a self-assured, assertive individual to an insecure subordinate. There are several levels of power imbalance in this scene. First, Adichie gives a detailed description of Cristina Tomas's whiteness: "Cristina Tomas with her rinsed-out look, her washy blue eyes, faded hair, and pallid skin... Cristina Tomas wearing whitish tights that made her legs look like death" (Adichie 134). Adichie firmly establishes that Cristina is white, and this careful characterization cultivates a dichotomy that contrasts whites and blacks. Second, within the context of this scene, Adichie positions Cristina in a place of authority: It is Cristina from whom Ifemelu needs information and assistance. Ifemelu is decidedly at a disadvantage in this scene.

This scene can be magnified so as to examine the symbolism that makes it more than an uncomfortable and condescending encounter between a white student and a black student. In fact, Cristina symbolizes America for Ifemelu. At this point, Ifemelu already realizes that America is not all glitter and gold and high-gloss as she had imagined. Similarly, Cristina is characterized as rinsed-out and faded. Cristina's ignorance becomes representative of many encounters that Ifemelu has with American whites, so Cristina's behaviors can be taken as representative of white America as it is portrayed in the novel. With Cristina being a symbol of white America--the dominant society--Ifemelu is immediately placed in a subordinate position.

Ifemelu needs Cristina's (America's) help in order to gain entry into her college life (American life). Moreover, Cristina (America) has relegated her to a position of inferiority based on her otherness. Ifemelu's subsequent remedy for her subordinate position is to practice her American accent, which is the beginning of her journey into the double-consciousness that absorbs the lives of blacks in America.

Hair is a motif that Adichie uses to solidify the concept of the double-consciousness. In *Americanah*, systemic racism is camouflaged in superficial ideals (e.g. standards of beauty, skin complexion, hairstyles). All members of American society strive for these ideals, but Adichie illuminates the particular struggle of black women in America to adhere to superficial ideals. What she reveals is that for black women superficial ideals can decide the fate of one's success in America. Ifemelu realizes this when Curt, her well-connected white boyfriend, uses his connections to secure her a job in corporate America. Ifemelu informs her career counselor, Ruth, about the job prospect in Baltimore. Ruth's advice to Ifemelu is to "[l]ose the braids and straighten your hair" (204). Having already felt the sting from mainstream America because of her appearance, Ifemelu immediately agreed to straighten her hair. After walking away with a job offer, Ifemelu wonders "if the woman would have felt the same way had she walked into that office wearing her thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro" (207). Adichie's handling of Ifemelu's suspicion about why she got the job mirrors reality. In many cases, blacks and other minorities can only suspect that they have been discriminated against. However, it does not matter whether or not Ifemelu's suspicions are correct. What is of concern is that the suspicion exists in the first place. The fact that Ifemelu has to wonder about whether or not her assimilated looks are what landed her a job is the fundamental issue at the core of the double-consciousness of blacks in America. In describing the tension of the double-consciousness, DuBois writes,

“...this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment” (136). The “peculiar sense of doubt” is pervasive in the psyche of blacks in America because always underscoring their lives is a lingering doubt of whether or not enough has been changed of their natural essence to gain access into the dominant society.

Adichie uses Ifemelu’s blog as a platform for critiquing race relations in America. Scattered throughout the narrative, Ifemelu’s blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, allows us to understand racial politics from the point of view of one who considers herself an outsider-- whether or not Ifemelu is an outsider is debatable given the essentialization of all blacks (American and non-American alike) by the white, dominant society. Adichie uses Ifemelu’s blog posts to essentially echo the position of DuBois regarding double-consciousness. In the blog post titled, “Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Do WASPs Aspire To,” Adichie writes, “So whiteness is the thing to aspire to... many minorities have a conflicted longing for WASP whiteness or, more accurately, for the privileges of WASP whiteness” (Adichie 207). Earlier in this post, Ifemelu explains that each minority group in America believes it occupies the lowest rung in America’s societal hierarchy. In response to Professor Hunk who argued that no one’s oppression is worse than anyone else’s, Ifemelu retorts, “But there IS an oppression olympics going on” (207). She goes on to say that blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Jews are all marginalized groups but “[e]ach believes that it gets the worst shit” (207). Looking at this excerpt through the lens of double-consciousness, Adichie is suggesting that while minority groups are aware that their oppression can be “traced back to whiteness (and all of the systemic racism that comes with that term), they nonetheless, aspire to achieve the privileges of whiteness. In other words, there is a duality in the consciousness of blacks in America--they

loathe the whiteness that oppresses them, but they want to be part of that whiteness and receivers of the appurtenances of white America.

In keeping with the framework of her other texts, Adichie examines the racial inequities that plague the collective consciousness of blacks. Adichie's 2009 Ted Talk articulates the stylistic approach of her work. Using personal anecdotes, Adichie emphasizes the problem with essentializing others. Considering only one side of a story, she contends, limits us in understanding the vastness of one's identity. A single story also tightens the clutches of oppression that choke those who are likely to be essentialized. Indeed, Adichie refrains from telling only one side of a story. This is evident in all three of her major works. In *Americanah*, Adichie analyzes race relations from all perspectives--African-Americans, Non-black Americans, Nigerians, whites, among others. Despite the different stories Adichie gives us, they all are contingent on a dominant/subordinate binary opposition that ultimately, always gives power to the dominating force.

According to Derrida, the word trace, "...relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified presence" ("Differance" 288). If we drill down this nebulous description of trace, what becomes apparent is that Derrida maintains the idea that words, concepts, and contexts are defined only by what they are not. The trace is what facilitates this meaning-making of words, concepts, and contexts. Captured within the trace is the otherness that gives significance to textual definitions. The trace is the ultimate, primordial otherness that is always-already-there because it defines what *is* there by being what is not there. A word, concept, or context always carries with it what has been deemed its opposite -- this is the trace.

In uncovering the trace in *Americanah*, we have to consider the framework of tension that Adichie has created between whiteness and blackness. Whiteness, as I use it here, refers to the systemic racism that is embedded in American culture--that which privileges those of white European descent over any others. Additionally, I consider whiteness to be any byproduct of this embedded systemic racism. For example, non-whites who oppress other non-whites because of a paradoxical loyalty to whiteness would be considered a byproduct of whiteness. The other side of the tension that Adichie constructs in *Americanah* is that of blackness. For the purposes of my argument, I will use blackness when referring to the collective consciousness of blacks in America who experience marginalization and oppression because of the societal hierarchy that positions whiteness as superior to blackness. In *Americanah*, the subordinate position that characterizes blackness is evident in the self-perception of blacks. Self-perception, as is demonstrated in several scenes in *Americanah*, affects every aspect of one's life.

The construction of a whiteness/blackness binary opposition by Adichie rests on the assumption that whiteness is unequivocally superior and more powerful than blackness and for all intents and purposes, always has been more powerful than blackness. In examining the trace that is implicit within the signification of whiteness, we have to consider that whiteness, as a concept, has meaning only because of all other concepts to which it has been set in opposition. The same principle applies to blackness. Blackness, as a concept, has meaning due to everything it is not. Because these differences can be infinitesimal in scope, the trace becomes an unending referential network of possible significations. The limitlessness of possible significations contributes to the instability of the text.

The scenes that I used in my first reading focus on the characters Aisha, Auntie Uju, and Ifemelu. In all three cases, each character experiences the marginalization and oppression forced

upon them by the whiteness that centers the American hegemony. At the same time, the marginalization and oppression experienced by each character defines the blackness that characterizes the “other” in America. Part of Derrida’s deconstruction project revolves around subverting Levi-Strauss’s notion of speech being superior to writing. Derrida states, “All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind...” (*Of Grammatology* 11). I apply this same concept to the binary opposition in *Americanah*. Because of its inferior positionality within the American hegemonic infrastructure, blackness becomes a derivative, a special case of whiteness. What results, then, is that the blackness that defines the identities of Aisha, Aunt Uju, and Ifemelu become a derivative of whiteness. Being a derivative of whiteness reduces the concept of blackness in such a way that it (blackness) becomes contingent on whiteness.

While acknowledging that power imbalances certainly exist, examining the trace in *Americanah* offers an alternate interpretation of the text. One interpretation of the meaning of *Americanah* is that when considering the instability of language, and the trace specifically, a dismantling of both concepts--whiteness and blackness—attenuates the power of the binary opposition. A power structure becomes an impossibility when considering the otherness (the trace) that each term carries with it. These things have been with the dominant society from the beginning. trace, as it relates to whiteness (which Derrida also refers to as the “always-already there”) precedes the concept of whiteness because the trace--that otherness that defines the concept of whiteness--had to exist first in order for whiteness to be dominant. A dominant force cannot enforce power without something to dominate. That something had to have already existed - already have been there. If it was already there, then by the very nature of temporality

(coming first) this eliminates the idea of the other (in this case, blackness) being a derivative of whiteness.

Connecting this back to the characters of Aisha, Aunty Uju, and Ifemelu will require a discussion of temporality and trace. Derrida discusses this point when he says, “The fact that nonpresence and otherness are internal to presence strikes at the very root of the argument for the uselessness of signs in the self-relation” (*Speech and Phenomena* 66). Presence refers to a state of being: whiteness as a state of being, blackness as a state of being. “Nonpresence and otherness are internal to presence” signifies that within these states of being lie the otherness that is supposed to be in direct opposition. Ifemelu’s encounter with Cristina Tomas is an example of how the whiteness/blackness binary that colors that scene is rendered meaningless because of the “uselessness of signs” that serve as the centering and stabilizing force of that binary. Cristina Tomas’s condescension of Ifemelu is grounded in the systemic racism, the whiteness, that reduces Ifemelu to a state of otherness. Cristina Tomas, being an example of oppressive whiteness, acts upon her internalized belief systems of the American hegemony that have conditioned her to believe in her superiority over immigrants (blacks? black immigrants?). Cristina Tomas’s whiteness, though, is signified by the nonpresence and otherness to which she believes herself superior. Consequently, the concept of whiteness that is manifested through Cristina Tomas is an intertwining of Ifemelu’s blackness because whiteness cannot be defined without blackness. Whiteness, encompassing the trace--the infinity of otherness--is rendered meaningless. Moreover, the blackness of which Ifemelu suddenly becomes aware through her encounter with Cristina Tomas is also deconstructed because it, too, is signified by an infinite otherness that makes a finite interpretation problematic.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida states, “Since past has always signified present-past, the absolute past that is retained in the trace no longer rigorously merits the name ‘past’” (*Of Grammatology* 66). To put it another way, we can only consider events of the past in the context of our present consciousness. Therefore, the present constantly contains “traces of the past. “The trace no longer rigorously merits the name ‘past’” because the trace is infinitely compounded. Both Aisha and Aunt Uju exhibit a willingness to submit to the subordinate positionality that is forced upon them by the American hegemony. Aisha makes a conscious choice to essentialize Africa, while Aunt Uju engages in self-abasement so as to adhere to hegemonic standards that place her in a position in which she feels it necessary to compromise her dignity.

Aisha and Aunt Uju, coming to America as immigrants, enter into a societal structure that appears to have been solidly constructed and grounded prior to their arrival. Aisha has become apathetic to the essentialization of Africa by the American hegemony. She submits to categorizing her own countrymen and neighbors as one, nondescript collective. Aunt Uju has acquiesced to the societal norms of the American hegemony despite her personal belief system and values. She even compromises her dignity as well as her identity in order to submit to hegemonic ideals. They are walking into a society and a culture that already has predetermined societal norms and hierarchies. What is not immediately evident in the scenes with Aisha and Aunt Uju is the instability of such a structure. The American hegemony, rooted in whiteness, is arbitrary and its meaning is compromised: There is no definitive source that grounds its meaning. In his interpretation of Derrida’s deconstruction project, Abrams posits “that the differential play...of language may produce the "effects" of decidable meanings in an utterance or text, but asserts that these are merely effects and lack a ground that would justify certainty in

interpretation” (Abrams 58). The whiteness that demoralizes and compromises Aunty Uju and makes Aisha apathetic is unstable and its meaning compromised.

The present structure of American racial politics into which Aisha and Aunty Uju enter is defined not by a universal definition that says society is structured finitely but by the retention of all significations contained within the trace as well as by the anticipation of future significations. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida states, “To be sure, what is anticipated in protention does not sever the present any less from its self-identity than does that which is retained in the trace” (*Speech and Phenomena* 64). The implication that this temporal understanding of trace has for Aisha and Aunty Uju, and for the binary tension in *Americanah* as a whole, is that the trace preexists and transcends the presence of the present state of American societal structures. As Derrida states, “Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around” (“Structure, Sign, and Play” 369). The trace is the source point for meaning in the text, which means the source point contains infinite meaning instead of a fixed one. Taking into consideration that the trace contains significations ad infinitum, any possible significations of the text are undecidable. Subsequently, any single interpretation of *Americanah* is undecidable in that the whiteness/blackness binary opposition that Adichie constructs is unstable and decentered by the infinite play of the trace.

CONCLUSION

After deconstructing Adichie's body of work, it becomes clear that a definitive interpretation of the postcolonial identity is problematic. Papa Eugene's power as a Christian is defined through his ties to Igbo. The subaltern status of Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard is compromised because of the infinite deferral of meaning that defines these characters as everything and nothing simultaneously. Aisha, Aunty Uju, and Ifemelu's identities are part of the trace that encapsulates meaning *ad infinitum*, which shows that there is no definitive way of interpreting their identities. Western literary tradition seeks to establish meaning through interpretation. Interpretive meanings depend on an overarching framework to which meaning can be referred. What I have shown is that these overarching frameworks are unstable and thereby textually meaningless. Without a stable center to support a single, textual interpretation, words, concepts, and contexts carry with them an infinite meaning.

I have continued the postcolonial discourse by offering a reinterpretation of the postcolonial identity. My contention is that there cannot be a fixed or finite description of the postcolonial experience. Furthermore, I argue that postcolonial literary theory inadequately defines the postcolonial identity because it attempts to engage in interpretation and reinterpretation within the context of a binary opposition that is unstable, baseless, and meaningless. I have used Adichie's work to demonstrate the instability of any single interpretation. Additionally, I have dismantled and subverted binary oppositions that create power imbalances. In all, I have shown that the postcolonial experience cannot be defined. To me, this reflects the complexity, contradictions, and inconsistencies that first produced what we think of as postcolonial peoples. Adichie says in her TED Talk that "Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity." I demonstrated this point by

first showing how a postcolonial reading of a text perpetuates the very binary opposition that it seeks to counter. Ultimately, I showed that in order to repair the broken dignity, we have to seek out the instability that is inherent in all interpretation. Once that is done, the postcolonial identity is no longer postcolonial. Instead, it is a baseless concept that is trapped in a referential network of meaning.

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