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WHEN THINGS FALL APART:
UNDERSTANDING (IN) THE POSTCOLONIAL SITUATION

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) published his major novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), in postcolonial Nigeria. In it he presents a colonial narrative using English as its primary mode of communication. However, his use of native Igbo words and the world they invoke problematizes a eurocentric assumption of the totality and universality of a given language, in this case, English. He employs acts of translation and introduces hybrid languages in order to engender dialogue that subverts the dominance of any one language and the world that it creates for its speakers. In a parallel fashion, this thesis uses two different theoretical approaches that have not typically been placed in dialogue with each other — postcolonial theory and hermeneutics — to view and interpret the nuances present in Achebe's text that neither could illuminate on its own. This dialogical approach reveals insufficiencies in the independent theories and allows them to mutually supplement each other. Together these theories show how the novel subverts the presumed authority of the English language and universalizing discourses in order to identify the confrontation of lived linguistic worlds and horizons in the postcolonial context. The novel reorients those structures of understanding and interpretation around a subject that has historically been denied a voice.

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Finally, I would like the thank the Humanities Honors class of 2015-2017. Their encouragement has relieved an incredible amount of stress and cultivated an unparalleled environment for exploration and learning.

I cannot thank you all enough.

"Being that can be understood is language."

— Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

Things Fall Apart:
Language in Translation

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

—W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"
quoted in *Things Fall Apart*

Chapter twenty-two of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* marks a pivotal moment of linguistic contact and intervention. The novel centers on the protagonist Okonkwo, the missionary reverend Mr. James Smith, and their interpreter Okeke, who makes their generally tumultuous communication possible. Okonkwo, the son of a disgraced but content Igbo man, was exiled from his community Umuofia as a result of his murderous crimes.[1] When he returns to his village seven years later, he realizes the arrival of missionaries, representing the Church of England, has dramatically changed his community and culture. The final section of the novel relates his attempt to rescue and restore the Igbo way of life in the midst of colonization. The interpreter, Okeke, who is neither English nor a member of the Igbo village,[2] is tasked with translating those languages and world-views, with both of which he is unfamiliar, in order to sustain productive communication between the alienated parties and facilitate their understanding of one another. The linguistic and ideological encounter, shaped by overt and covert power structures, involving these three parties is the focus of this thesis.

The final confrontation between these parties is motivated by an Igbo man named Enoch, characterized as an "over-zealous" Christian convert, who committed a sacrilege against Umuofia's religious elders, the *egwugwu*.[3] In response, the elders sought to rectify his actions in accordance with traditional cultural values. In this encounter between Mr. Smith, the *egwugwu*, and Okeke the "interpreter" caught in-between, two distinct languages and three separate modes of communication are in action. The linguistic barrier between Mr. Smith (who represents the

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[1] These crimes are specifically addressed in the section entitled "The Textual Modality of Death in *Things Fall Apart*."

[2] Okeke is "a native of distant Umuru" (190).

[3] In the glossary he provides, Achebe defines the *egwugwu* as "a masquerader who impersonates one of the ancestral spirits of the village."

colonial entity) and the *egwugwu* (the colonized) is indicative of a fundamental

misunderstanding of each other, as well as an inability to fully reach each other, insofar as

language is the only medium for contact. Okeke, as the interpreter or translator, is culturally

distant from both parties, yet cultivates a greater familiarity with both than either can of each

other. In listening to not only the language of both parties but the cultural context in which they

are situated as well, Okeke manages to produce a mode of communication that neither party

intends, but both accept.

 A culture, or world, is only made and made known by the language that speaks it into

being. Languages and worlds maintain a cyclical relationship insofar as they inform and produce

each other. Thus, an act of translation that recognizes two diametrically opposed cultures, and

bends to both, produces a new world in the process of its formulation and speaking. This world

and its production are embodied in Achebe's character, Okeke, who speaks a hybrid language

and thus reflects the text's linguistic metanarrative. A hybrid language necessarily maintains the

framework of the dominant language or that which it is being translated *into*; however, any effort

to translate necessarily subverts the inherent dominance of both structures. The translation does

not forget or fully relinquish either structure, rather it decentralizes everything but what it seeks

to communicate, hence Yeats's assertion: "the center cannot hold."

 In translating Mr. Smith's words to the *egwugwu*, Okeke displaces Mr. Smith by changing

his identification from either his name or title to "the white man."[4] In this way, the *egwugwu* do

not recognize Mr. Smith as he may recognize himself, but they are communicating. In the

beginning of this interaction, the Igbo warriors identified Mr. Smith and Okeke as strangers and

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[4] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York, Anchor Books: 1994), 191.

therefore ignorant of their culture, or world, and yet end this last encounter acknowledging both parties do not understand one another. Mr. Smith does not express the same conviction, emphasizing the translative process that had occurred. Okeke had only translated ("*wisely*") Mr. Smith's words for the *egwugwu*, and never the *egwugwu*'s words for Mr. Smith. Thus, the linguistic contact was isolated in a single direction; Mr. Smith had no access and no contact to or with his Other.

At this moment in the narrative, three processes of linguistic translation are occurring: Okeke is translating Mr. Smith's language into his own, and then again into that of the Igbo, which occurs within Achebe's metanarrativized translation from his native tongue to English. According to the postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha, "Translation is the preformative nature of cultural communication. It is language in *actu* (enunciation, positionality) rather than language *in situ* (enonce, or propositionality)."[5] The event of translation is then a type of production in which the unfolding culture at the center is preformed and transformed in language and ultimately made known in its subsequent reception and interpretation. Further, "the 'time' of translation continually tells, or 'tolls' the different times or spaces between cultural authority and its preformative practices. The 'time' in translation consists in that movement of meaning that […] 'puts the original in motion to decanonize it, giving it the movement of fragmentation.'"[6] The translation absorbs and displaces the "original." Translation becomes a mode of cultural transformation, transmission, and diffusion insofar as it practices the "communication" of which Bhabha speaks. The translator Okeke is always charged with not only recognizing the two

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[5] Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 228.

[6] ibid., 228.

cultures with which he works, but also situating one in the linguistic framework of the other

without losing fully the meaning and significance of the first. While this transition never retains

a fully authentic cultural image, symbol, or meaning, the space left over is the site of production

for something new. This is the "movement of fragmentation" Bhabha identifies, while his notion

of "decanonizing" evokes Achebe's "decentering."

The *egwugwu*s's burning of the church immediately following their interaction with

Okeke and Mr. Smith indicates a sort of "falling apart;" merely "a pile of earth and ashes"[7] are

left in their wake. Insofar as the church symbolizes colonial culture, its burning represents its

metamorphosis and fragmentation. The empire is not destroyed; the Igbo warriors allow Mr.

Smith to remain. However, the empire is changed inasmuch as it is understood in a "metonymic

transference," or expansion of, meaning. According to Raoul J. Granqvist in his work on

postcoloniality, this "transference occurs between objects that are associated in an imaginary

without being similar. It is a way of stretching out for new partners by highlighting (juxtaposing,

supplementing, reconnecting) cultural events or linguistic elements making them emblematic or

syntagmatic)."[8] The transference of meaning creates a simultaneous fragmentation and

production of culture insofar as it is represented and produced symbolically, particularly through

the church and the Igbo and English languages. Okeke's participation in the dialogic encounter

realizes Granqvist's claim "that no translation can rehearse an 'original' without altering it, but

that this altering, in fact, warrants its survival as a unique artefact."[9] Okeke manages to alter the

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[7] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 191.

[8] Raoul J Granqvist, "Postcolonial Grammar of Translation," in *The Creative Circle: Artist, Critic, and Translator in African Literature* (Africa World Press, 2004), 61.

[9] ibid., 61.

colonial culture in his translation of it, and in doing so preserves its being, albeit not in its

original conception. This was never repeated reciprocally in an effort to translate the Igbo culture

for Mr. Smith, and thus the *egwugwu* gain a perspective and understanding of the worlds Mr.

Smith is denied. He never seeks to rectify this, hence the novel's ending in which Mr. Smith

plans a chapter in his own work regarding the Umuofia community entitled, "The Pacification of

the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger,"[10] revealing a continued fundamental disconnect on the

part of the colonizer. While in Yeats's poem, "the falcon cannot hear the falconer," Achebe

subversively revises the direction of the dynamic, illustrating the inability of the colonizer (the

falconer) to hear the colonized (the falcon).

Achebe's narrative, as a postcolonial text, actively resists universalizing interpretations in

order to preserve the heterogenous situations at the center of its particular historical condition.

However, in *Decolonising the Mind*, African literary theorist Ngugi wa Thiong'o refers to a

universal language of struggle.[11] This struggle is apparent in Okeke's attempt to make two

opposed entities linguistically known to each other, and only succeeds for one, insofar as the

Igbo people continually attempt to make their culture known to the Christian men who have

come to destroy their religion. Instead, their culture was reinterpreted, albeit forcibly. This

struggle is visible in the Igbo culture itself as father and son, leaders and their subjects, strive to

make themselves known to each other, a process exacerbated in the colonial context. It is further

apparent in Achebe's attempt to make his narrative known on a global level, and he does so by

translating his own tongue into one recognized on the world stage. His narrative is necessarily

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[10] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 209.

[11] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (New York: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1981), 108.

altered for this stage but does not suffer solely a loss. It produces something in the process: a

hybridity of languages, of cultures, and of worlds, made on his own terms. However, the

untranslatable remains in Achebe's work, arriving by means of Igbo words, alienated from the

global community while reasserting the solidity and resistance of the community from which

these words come.

The "Post" Condition

"The past can be seen only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and it is never seen again. [. . .] For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatened to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself in that intended image."

<div align="right">

— Walter Benjamin, *The Angel of History*

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Chinua Achebe wrote his novel *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, after the formal move to

decolonize Nigeria began in 1946. Due to the historical situation in which it was written,

regardless of the colonial narrative, the text is often read through the paradigm of postcolonial

theory, which seeks to make clear a certain "post" condition, especially as it has inherited a

particular historical tradition. In confronting this tradition, Achebe uses the English language as

the primary symbol of Nigeria's (and others') colonial inheritance. While the African literature

debate tended toward using native tongues to tell native stories in an effort to resist continued

colonial power,[12] Achebe employs English in a paradoxical effort to subvert this language's

ideological control, primarily through the inclusion of the Igbo language. Postcolonial theory

provides a necessary lens to read *Things Fall Apart* as its particular discourse reveals a nuanced

legacy otherwise obscured by a colonial historical tradition; however, the theory is independently

insufficient. This thesis will use the theory of interpretation embedded in the discourse of

hermeneutics, with full recognition if its western inception and development, to supplement

postcolonial theory in an effort to further identify historically obscured linguistic and ideological

boundaries and reorient both English and hermeneutics around those subjects they have

previously denied.

The most general objective of postcolonial theory is to elucidate a particular social,

economic, and political phenomenon whose intricate details, which constitute a lived experience

for so many and arguably a much larger global condition, have been misrepresented or

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[12] In his *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o delineates the politics behind African Universities' English Departments and the effort to either include authors beyond English descent or abolish English Departments altogether as they fundamentally exhibit an "assumption that the English tradition and the emergence of the modern west were the central root of … Africa's consciousness and cultural heritage. They rejected the underlying notion that Africa was an extension of the West" (89).

disregarded in contemporaneous conversations, like post-structuralist and feminist theory.

Postcolonial studies as a discourse provides a specific formation by which certain images of the

past may be "recognizable" or legible and rescued from an abyssal, unintelligible history.

However, the term itself, and the conversation it signifies, is endowed with ideological constructs

that counteract its intended project. Postcolonial feminist theorist Ella Shohat questions the

theory's "ahistorical and universalizing deployments, and its potentially depoliticizing

implications."[13] While the term "postcolonial" maintains a multiplicity of rhetorical associations

and deployments, it paradoxically avoids denoting a multiplicity of phenomena and experience

within the diverse "post"colonial sphere, and it linguistically reinforces a traditional binary of

chronology that carries with it a silencing effect of a Western past it seeks to deny. Postcolonial

studies, while seeking to illuminate the "past [as] the scene of those who have vanished" and

elevate the "stories [of those] still to be heard,"[14] remains compromised by the antithetical

discursive power inscribed in its formation.

In the context of post-structuralism and in association with its tenets, considering the

rhetorical affiliation of the "post" signifier, post-colonialism implies an attempt to deconstruct

long-held and formative discursive binaries that characterize previous, historicized eras.

However, "post" necessarily indicates a before and an after, constructing a chronological binary

that imposes continuities and discontinuities onto an otherwise uninterrupted schematic. This

rhetorical move reveals a eurocentric lineage as it seeks to construct time in an ordered and linear

model that inevitably influences notions of temporality, agency, revolution, and hermeneutic

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[13] Ella Shohat, "Notes on the Postcolonial," in *Social Text* no. 31/32 (1992), 99.

[14] Max Silverman paraphrases Frantz Fanon in *Texts in Culture, Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press: 2005), 40.

endeavors to explore and reveal a presumably lost history. This type of construction, present in

Augustinian philosophy through to Hegel and Marx, produces a teleological progression of

history and a homogeneity of past, present, and future, which informs the interpretation of the

events that occur, how they are remembered, and how they interpreted after the fact within this

framework. Theorist Frantz Fanon, whose writing precedes formal postcolonial theory, produced

a "notion of time [as] interrupted time, the time of 'now.' It is a notion influenced by Marx's idea

of history as praxis, concrete activity as the essence of an origin of man. Though the

revolutionary praxis is of national emancipation, the man of color will become a historical

being."[15] While Fanon maintains a type of progression that suggests a teleology, he shifts the

focus from the colonizer to the colonized and reorients time around this changed focal point.

Despite an inherent progression, he renders the present as always "becoming" and "a 'time of

history' in which the fundamental event is always in the making and whose goal is not in the

future but always already in the present."[16] This type of perpetual becoming informs the "post"

condition as that which grapples with a simultaneous loss of history and rediscovery of history

on different terms, allowing various narratives and voices to emerge. However, Fanon's indicated

progression still relies on a predominantly western construction of time.

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[15] ibid., 39., In *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Paul Ricoeur addresses the notion of the "historical being" in his delineation of the narrative discourse, "which encompasses both the 'true' narrative of the historians and the 'fictional narrative of storytellers, playwrights, and novelists," both of which engage in what Wittgenstein calls the "language game." He recognizes that history and fiction deal with "'reality'" differently, but "they refer nonetheless, each in its own way, to the same fundamental feature of our individual and social existence, [characterized by the term 'historicity'] which signifies the fundamental and radical fact that we make history, that we are immersed in history, that we are historical beings" (274).

[16] ibid., 39-40.

Despite its contested relationship with its own historical tradition, postcolonial theory relies rhetorically and conceptually on those discourses that have preceded it. The notion of history as praxis, present in Marxist theory and adopted by Fanon, appears in the contemporary discussion insofar as it maintains the project of becoming and unfolding in the historically implied postcolonial spheres and condition(s). Postcolonial studies sustains the ontological polemic mirrored in this appropriation of theory as it seeks to elucidate the *being* of the postcolonial and this condition's global effect. Both of these discursive reconfigurations reflect a phenomenological attempt to interpret and make known the historically implied present. According to Paul Ricoeur, "action includes saying inasmuch as it is a doing, ordinary action inasmuch as it is an intervention into the course of things, [and] narration inasmuch as it is the narrative reassembling of a life stretched out in time."[17] Experience and subsequent (re)action as phenomena constitute postcolonial studies as it provides space for agencies, voices, and narratives that were otherwise denied, which are capable of changing the general understanding and implications of the tradition in which the contemporary figure has been thrown. For Ricoeur, active narration and intervention into the course of things also sustains the "capacity to impute to oneself or to others the responsibility for acting."[18] Rhetorical agency, which recognizes historical and cultural value and its presence in preceding traditions, emerges as a characteristic of postcolonial writing and resistance.

While the event of speaking and acting in reaction to particular historical colonial procedures and their contemporary effect is interpreted phenomenologically, this schematic

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[17] Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1994.

[18] ibid, 1994.

yields a deeply eurocentric generalizing consequence that blurs distinctions and distanciations[19] in the global realm. In its attempt to deconstruct binaries, postcolonial studies simultaneously and inadvertently constructs a new chronological binary, while destroying other boundaries, rendering postcolonialism a global condition rather than a regional or local one. Postcolonial theorist Arif Dirlik, addresses this discursive turn:

> Unlike other "post" marked words, postcolonial claims as its special provenance the terrain that in an earlier day used to go by the name of Third World. It is intended, therefore, to achieve an authentic globalization of cultural discourses by the extension globally of the intellectual concerns and orientations originating at the central sites of Euro-American cultural criticism and by the introduction into the latter of voices and subjectivities from the margins of earlier political and ideological colonialism that now demand a hearing at those very sites at the center. The goal, indeed, is no less than to abolish all distinctions between center and periphery as well as all other "binarisms" that are allegedly a legacy of colonial(ist) ways of thinking and to reveal societies globally in their complex heterogeneity and contingency.[20]

A homogenizing legacy, implicit in "binarisms," is at risk of being mirrored in the abolishment of key differentiations between the colonizer and the colonized. Generalizing and universalizing the schematic so much as to lose track of the subject of the colonial empire in the global context maintains the potential to further dilute the subject's voice and rhetorical agency. In his article, "When Was 'The Post-Colonial?' Thinking at the Limit," Stuart Hall echoes Ella Shohat's concerns regarding the postcolonial as "politically ambivalent because it blurs the clear-cut

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[19] See glossary

[20] Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," in *Critical Inquiry* 20 no. 2 (1994), 329. See also, Ajaz Ahmad's "Postcolonial Theory and the 'Post-Condition.'" In *Socialist Register*, Volume 33, (1997): 353-381.

distinctions between colonisers and colonised."[21] According to both theorists, this type of

ambivalence "dissolves the politics of resistance because it 'posits no clear domination and calls

for no clear opposition'. Like the other 'posts' with which it is aligned, it collapses different

histories, temporalities and racial formations into the same universalising category."[22] Binaries

and other discursive categories are regarded by post-structuralists as the legacy of structuralism

and modernism that produced the environment needed for the colonial empire and its series of

oppressions. However, attempting to immediately abolish and avoid such categoricalizations

disregards their lasting presence and effect in the lived, historically implied, reality of the

colonized.

The phenomenological rendering of action and agency in this discourse is not limited to

the voices and narratives that emerge here, rather this includes the space from which they

emerge. Postcolonial theorist Kwame Anthony Apiah sheds light on the discursive action of

"space clearing." He suggests that the postcolonial, like the postmodern, "can be seen as a

retheorization of the proliferation of distinctions that reflects the underlying dynamic of cultural

modernity, the need to clear oneself a space."[23] This type of "space clearing" is reflected in

Martin Heidegger's notion of knowledge formation:

> knowledge establishes itself as a procedure within some realm of what is, in nature or
> history. [. . .] Every procedure already requires an open sphere in which it moves. [. . .]
> This opening up is accomplished through the projection within some realm of what is.

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[21] Stuart Hall, "When Was 'The Post-Colonial?' Thinking at the Limit," *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 242.

[22] ibid., 243.

[23] Kwame Anthony Apiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical* Inquiry, 17 no. 2 (1991), 346.

The projection sketches out in advance the manner in which the knowing procedure must

bind itself and adhere to the sphere opened up. [. . .] Through the projecting of the ground

plan and the prescribing of rigor, procedure makes secure for itself its sphere of objects

within the realm of Being.[24]

Space clearing as a procedure establishes boundaries, distinctions, and distanciations in order to

secure an independence from what surrounds it or is even associated with it. In this way, subjects

and their voices and narratives may gain a presence and recognition that would not have

otherwise occurred, and thus open up a world otherwise unseen. Postcolonial theory seeks to

accomplish this discursive phenomenon and elevate "third world" voices and narratives to the

forefront of the global sphere. However, this type of methodological knowledge formation

exhibits distinct characteristics of the structuralist and modern eras, characteristics that writers in

the "post" fields have actively strived to deconstruct, considering how such procedures change

the knowledge that is revealed or produced and how they affect any subsequent hermeneutic

endeavor, especially as it is historically situated. And yet, such deconstructionists are confronted

with the reality that all knowledge requires distinction and difference from what surrounds it, and

this is the only way by which an "image" of the past may again be recognized.

The boundaries and characteristics that secure postcolonial studies as its own discourse

and source of knowledge formation remain contested by critics with an affinity for

deconstruction like Shohat and Hall. Indeed, what differentiates postcolonial theory as its own

and not of something else? The periodization this term suggests is problematic considering its

reinforcement of the privileged Western construction of time and the binary of "before" and

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[24] Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture" *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, (New York, Harper and Row, 1977), 118.

"after" it perpetuates. It also antagonizes itself with the strictly colonial in its own sort of binary, discursively revoking voices and narratives arising from specific contemporary regions that maintain a traditional colonial presence. Among these constructions, the well established "Self" and "Other" binary comes into view in the space now cleared by postcolonial studies. Blurring such distinctions, a ubiquitous trait in this discourse along with the unintentional creation of others, runs the risk of confusing the colonizer with the colonized or placing all subjects on the same categorical field, which homogenizes their voices and subsequent narratives. According to Dirlik, who is referencing historian of modern India, Gyan Prakash, in the following, "postfoundational history ["which is also postcolonial history"] approaches 'third-world identities as relational rather than essential' ("PH," p. 399)".[25] This notion is a distinct departure from a Marxist essentialism that promoted a historical totality, which privileges the whole, or the appearance of a whole, over the intricate parts that compose it.

This departure is reflected by Bhabha who, in reaction to Jurgen Habermas's project of modernity, claims the project of postcolonial theory "seeks to explore those social pathologies - 'loss of meaning, condition of anomie' - that no longer simply 'cluster around class antagonism, [but] break up into widely scattered historical contingencies.'"[26] The antagonism between the whole and its parts, insofar as they are situated in this specific discourse, is implied in the hermeneutic circle formulation. Fundamentally, one cannot be understood without its other, but promoting a hierarchy here (Marx considering the whole to be supreme while postcolonialists value much more highly the parts, or individual narratives of history) establishes its own sort of

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[25] Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," 335.

[26] Jurgen Habermas quoted in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 171.

binary. In such a construction intended for knowledge formation, these questions remain: what image of the past is or can be recognized? and in what way or at what cost does this recognition occur?

History as an object of study has long been met with various methodologies that strive for some theoretical perfect understanding. The legacies of such theorists as Schleiermacher, Droysen, Dilthey, and in many ways Kant, have been critiqued for their tendencies to promote a perfection which requires assimilative and homogenizing practices in order to recognize and understand the past through the lens of a European tradition. Postcolonial theory, while attempting to estrange itself from its own European lineage, embraces a perceived multiplicity of differences in order to suppress fundamental binaries; however, these binaries are still not and cannot be resolved in the present social conditions. The theory's "dizzying multiplicity of positionalities," as Shohat claims does not inherently lend itself to an elucidation of a "politics of location" and, for that matter, tradition and history in any independent region. Colonialism, neocolonialism, and postcolonialism is not lived, experienced, or voiced in the same way between afflicted regions; and those concepts deployed by this discourse, while allowing for new voices to emerge, maintains a homogenizing effect as these are used globally regardless of local specificity.

The tenets of the postcolonial discourse have managed to produce, in various cases, those mechanisms of speaking, viewing, and interpretation it seeks to reject, namely inadvertent binarisms. In its endeavor to clear a new space for a discourse that illuminates and elevates voices and narratives yet to be heard, it maintains the traditional tenets of discourse and the Foucauldian power this engenders. It utilizes a methodology to determine which regions are and

are not "post"colonial and which writers and the literature they produce may or may not identify in this way. However, all knowledge formation and subsequent meaning requires differentiation and distanciation in order to be made known. Postcolonial studies now is charged with merging or modifying its intended project with or in recognition of the criticisms by which it has been challenged.

Discursive formations by nature abide by a fundamental schematic in order to maintain an isolated, yet relational stance from all that it distinctly is not. This is the method by which meaning and knowledge comes into being. Postcolonial studies as a discourse is by no means immune to this social, linguistic, and hermeneutic phenomenon; however, it has managed to illustrate the malleability and insidious nature of such constructions and the way in which they influence what is seen, heard, and interpreted. The term postcolonial discursively suggests its own sorts of constructions situated in the contemporary world, marred by the "post" condition. In this way, the contemporary construction of history itself is shaped by the "after" in the binary.

According to Prakash, however, "postcoloniality is not born and nurtured in a panoptic distance from history. The postcolonial exists as an aftermath, as an after. [. . .] Criticism formed in this process of the enunciation of discourses of domination occupies a space that is neither inside nor outside the history of western domination but in a tangential relation to it."[27] The historicist approach to history is launched from a presumed removed and objective position from ground level events, a type of historian "god," as well as requiring an objectification of history based on a prescribed methodology that supposedly ensures uniform and perfect understanding. The post condition has rendered this approach baseless and instead has sought to regard history

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[27] Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," 333.

as lived and experienced. Any knowledge that arises from such arrives by means of the rhetorical agents whose narratives may be heard, interpreted, and understood in some way, globally. Postcolonial studies has cleared a space, a space which is by no means infallible or independent of its Western lineage. However, its objective to let emerge those narratives and the worlds they imply, which have been historically ignored or repressed, remains, and with it an opportunity for interaction, interpretation, and understanding between those parties that may otherwise be indefinitely estranged.

Confronting the Translation Polemic:
"Language as a Horizon of Hermeneutic Ontology"[28]

"Language is not its elaborated conventionalism, nor the burden of pre-schematization with which it loads us, but the generative and creative power to unceasingly make this whole once again fluent."

— Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

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[28] This is the title of the third section of Part Three of *Truth and Method*

The tradition of hermeneutics has a long and extremely nuanced trajectory, beginning, according to the Gadamerian scholar Jean Grondin, as early as "the patristic period, if not the Stoic philosophy (which developed an allegorical interpretation of myth), or even to the tradition of the Greek rhapsodes."[29] Within the last couple centuries, the discourse expanded well beyond the boundaries of its long-held study of Biblical scriptures, beginning in the middle ages, and applied itself to the broad field of human encounters, textual and otherwise. Gadamer's specific tradition begins arguably with Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) who compromised the assumption that language lay at the whim of its user who is fully able to bend the medium to his will. Nietzsche reverses this equation, rendering man the subject of the language he speaks. As a consequence, this undermined any assumption of a specifically universal or ultimate truth and automatic interpersonal understanding. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) joined the conversation Nietzsche invoked (under highly problematic and criticized conditions) and merged, sometimes inadvertently, the phenomenon that is language with hermeneutics, going as far at times to render the two synonymous.[30]

In a published debate entitled "On the Way to Language" (1959), Heidegger, in seeking to explicate hermeneutics as a concept, returns to the "Greek verb *hermeneuein*, which means 'the exposition which brings tidings because it can listen to a message.' Prior to every

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[29] Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press: 1994), 1.

[30] Heidegger's participation in the conversation occurred in the midst of Germany's growing Nazi regime. His formal membership with the party creates a highly problematic and thoroughly criticized context for his writing. His magnum opus, *Being and Time*, was first published in 1927 and he worked as the rector for the University of Freiburg from 1933-1934. He was banned from teaching from 1945-1951. An interview with *Spiegel* given a decade before his death in 1966, published immediately after his death in 1976 upon his request, provides the only specific clarification Heidegger ever offered regarding the issue. It remains insufficient.

interpretation, the hermeneutical manifests itself as 'the bearing of message and tidings.'"[31] He

later radicalizes the idea of temporality, acknowledging the repression needed to forget one's

own finitude in order to assume a universal or ultimate truth. This repression is that which

prevents understanding and devalues the primary act of interpretation. Instead, the interpreter is

expected to embrace his finitude and "[work] through the structure of prejudice as positive

ontological characteristic of understanding in order to perceive our genuine possibilities in our

very situatedness."[32] From here, Heidegger proposes understanding, which arises within these

conditions, as "[always] including self understanding—indeed, self-encounter."[33] At this point in

the conversation, language is understood as fluid and mutable, bearing the weight of a tradition it

expresses, and mediating all encounters, internal and external. Likewise, hermeneutics as a

discourse abandons the methodology, historicism as it were, to which it previously ascribed and

embraces a temporal structure in which the only universal element that remains is ontology.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) published his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, in

1960, firmly situating himself in this ongoing conversation. As the name suggests, Gadamer

tends extensively to the element of methodology, adopted by the human sciences primarily from

the natural sciences, and expands Heidegger's contention with historicism and its promoted

objectivity. For Gadamer, interpretation and the potential for subsequent understanding rest not

on the ability of the interpreter to suspend his subjectivity and "prejudices" (or for Heidegger

"fore-understanding"), but in his capacity for self-understanding, wholly situated in his

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[31] Martin Heidegger quoted in Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 104., See *On the Way to Language*, specifically the section "A Dialogue on Language: between a Japanese and an Inquirer."

[32] Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 107.

[33] ibid., 115.

temporality within an ongoing tradition, a necessary precondition for any meaningful interpretation. However, Gadamer recognizes "'understanding' to be more than merely a procedure to uncover a given meaning. In view of the scope of understanding, the circularity that moves between the one who understands and that which he understands can lay claim to genuine universality."[34] Here, he reformulates the conception of the universal, removing its claim to the metaphysical in favor of the temporal and communal. Gadamer's universal resides in individual encounters and the subject's ability to employ his fore-understanding or critiqued prejudices in the interpretation of a newly encountered being. Thus, "perfect" or secure understanding is not guaranteed; however, this reformulated definition also eliminates the previous "guarantee's" homogenizing effect of interpretation. Here, the subject is free to produce his own "genuine" interpretation of that which he encounters. This interpretation however, is never fully solidified and always subject to challenge, evolution, and change, hence the aforementioned embrace of temporality.

To the extent that language is the fundamental mode of a hermeneutic endeavor, a formulation to which both Heidegger and Gadamer ascribe, it is important to note its role is by no means a passive one. For Gadamer, and for many others, to have a language is to have a "world": "Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, it depends on the fact that man has a *world* at all. […] Not only is the world world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it."[35]

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[34] Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard Palmer, *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, (New York, State University of New York Press: 1989), 26.

[35] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Joel Weinsheimer trans., *Truth and Method*, (New York, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc: 2003), 443.

Furthermore, the "*hermeneutic experience* [must then] *be verbal in nature*."[36] The subject is simultaneously the interpreter and the speaker, using a language that presupposes him, a language that is endowed with ideology and historical tradition. Language offers only a prescribed set of symbols (subject to evolution and change) needed for expression: the expression of self, and the world it refers to and brings into being. The subject is not fully autonomous here, but he is also not entirely limited by language.

Speaking for the subject, specifically in dialogue, becomes the primary space for interpretation and understanding. Speaking presents the speaker with an opportunity to be engaged and implies the ability to encounter something other to himself. This encounter necessarily involves risk for Gadamer, in that it maintains the potential to challenge existing prejudices. In fact, "genuinely speaking one's mind has little to do with a mere explication and assertion of our prejudices; rather, it risks our prejudices," an experience that allows "a potentiality for being other [*Andersseins*] that lies beyond every coming to agreement about what is common."[37] Language is embedded in dialogue, which is the space in which hermeneutic practice exists. It provides the medium by which understanding is made possible, but this coming to an understanding is not without "temptation" and not without "risk."

Gadamer's much contested aphorism, "Being that can be understood is language," involves this relationship between language, dialogue, and hermeneutics. He claims, understanding only arrives by means of engagement (dialogue) and that engagement occurs linguistically and discursively, as language and discourse presuppose all encounters with another.

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[36] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 443.

[37] Michelfelder, *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, 26.

In explicating this premise further, he says "that which is can never be completely understood. This is implied insofar as everything that goes under the name of language always refers beyond that which achieves the status of proposition. That which is understood is that which comes into language."[38] Perfect understanding, a modernist and structuralist legacy, is not only impossible, it detrimentally limits the hermeneutic endeavor, which is never in fact fully complete. This lack of perfection, however, may imply that two alienated beings are separated by an impenetrable barrier. The interpreting subject encounters a world and tradition brought forth in a language alien to him, but he can never fully grasp the world-view presented in the dialogue in which he is engaged. He is only able to merge what is presented and what he understands with his existing "horizon of understanding," as Gadamer puts it.

This polemic culminates in the field of comparative linguistics. According to Gadamer, "what is here considered a limitation and a shortcoming […] is, in fact, the way hermeneutical experience is consummated. It is not learning a foreign language as such but its usage, whether in conversation with its speakers or in the study of its literature, that gives one a new standpoint 'on one's worldview.'" Further, "it has not only its own truth *in itself* but also is own truth *for us*."[39] The mediation of encounter provides boundless possibilities for Gadamer. It provides the capacity to bring into being new realities and new worlds that might not otherwise be seen, or ever constructed. It proves the agency and validity of subjectivity for the individual interpreter as he exists in the whole of history, made known in the languages that preserve it.

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[38] Michelfelder, *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, 25.

[39] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 441-442.

It is the field of comparative linguistics and postcolonial theories that uniquely problematize notions of objective understanding as they reveal, both actively and passively, the limitations of each linguistically and discursively constructed and lived world. Language permeates every corner of the world it creates, presenting itself in its totality and obscuring its own boundaries, limitations, and contested relationship to a "real" world as it exists outside of language. This process is epitomized in the colonial language as it seeks to make legible and represent the colonized on its own terms, covertly privileging its own tradition and own interpreter over the "other" in its midst. The discursive conclusion that different and diverging world views and perspectives do not circulate and refer to some imagined, typically eurocentrically conceived, *natural* world, coincides with Ngugi's characterization of literature studies for African children. Canonized literary studies in Africa render "Europe … the center the universe. The earth [moves] around the European scholarly axis. The images children [encounter] in literature [are] reinforced by the study of geography and history and science and technology where Europe [is] once again the centre."[40] These world views, rather, are the sites of finite ontologies that refer to their own unique world-making and house hosts of cultural anthropologies as well as the distinct ability to resist the dictation of a single, common center to which it must refer.

Such worlds and the ontologies that exist here are permeable and contact between multiple different entities is possible and always occurring. Achebe's citation of Yeats's "The Second Coming" refers to this phenomenon of an assumed common world, which everything else signifies. The poem claims "the *center* cannot hold" (emphasis added); understanding the

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[40] Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 93.

"center" as this imagined natural world around which all else circulates, "turning and turning in the widening gyre," Achebe subverts its presumed stability. The center here must be understood as fundamentally stable, supporting all that exists beyond itself; thus, in denying its stability, Achebe denies its existence, at least as it has been understood. This collapses the entire apparatus and challenges the totality of the world, its language, and the presumed objective understanding it has promoted. The lack of a common center or common object of reference is a Nietzschean theme which asks, as Gadamer characterizes it, "does the given exist from whose secure starting point knowledge can search for the universal, the law, the rule, and so find its fulfillment? Is the given not in fact the result of interpretation? It is interpretation that preforms the never fully complete mediation between man and world."[41] The "center" is a linguistic and discursive creation made on behalf of the colonizer for the colonized in order to maintain a role in determining the intelligibility of its other, in effect altering anything that is made known and comes into being through it.

While Achebe deconstructs the positionality and singularity of a presumed "center," he does not ignore its existence and this existence's effect on the worlds it influences. Achebe merges his own linguistic world with its colonizer's and, in doing so, changes the direction of power the dynamic it once boasted. Thiong'o asks, "from what base do we look at the world?,"[42] after having already established that language, with the cultural values and power dynamics by which it is imbued, provides the foundation for the launch of any hermeneutic endeavor or

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[41] Michelfelder, *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, 29-30.

[42] Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 94.

critique. His answer is English, and with it "the world expressed and implied by that language."[43] And yet Achebe, using primarily the English language, presents a world alien to it. His speaking alone brings himself and his world into being, while his speaking in English renders the being accessible to an audience whose power he seeks to subvert. This is not an organic process; the language and the discourse used to communicate meaning alter what is said and understood. However, "speaking is not a mere reification of intended meaning, but an endeavor that continually modifies itself"[44] and requires a constant engagement on behalf of the interpreter to act "as his or her own translator of this language."[45] This orientation towards language and, in this case, the text operates by means of the temporal nature of narrative and the subject(s) who speak it and are implicated within it.

Temporality, characterized earlier as the necessary precondition for meaningful interpretation, in fact motivates all interpretation and distinguishes the site of Achebe's production of meaning where he blends two different discursive and temporal structures, not in an effort to reveal one world as it is lived and experienced, but to bring into being a new world capable of transforming his own lived and experienced world as well as the colonizer's. *Things Fall Apart* intervenes in the course of historical narratives unfolding within and around an imagined center and demands a recognition of being made possible by its fragmentation of the assumed totalization of the English language and world. In an interview at St. John's University, Thiong'o spoke of postcolonial critic Aimé Césaire's "exchange of oxygen between civilizations

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[43] Fanon quoted in Brandon Brown, "Subversion versus Rejection: Can Postcolonial Writers Subvert the Codified Using the Language of the Empire?" 1977.

[44] Michelfelder, *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, 26.

[45] ibid., 24.

… based on equality. [It is] a dance of centers that are equidistant from the human center." For both theorists, there remains a center. Much like Gadamer's paradoxical recognition of a universal when no universal can exist, Césaire and Ngugi claim all worlds as centers in and of themselves and maintain the capacity to contact and exchange with each other in a relation the previous schematic denied. Achebe's transformation of worlds by means of a dialogic narrative requires, however, a risk, insofar as the self and its world are linguistically and discursively understood. It is this understanding Achebe is willing to jeopardize for himself and, in turn, demands of his colonizer.

The element of risk that permeates Gadamer's philosophy is the product of a Hegelian tradition, more specifically, his "master-slave dialectic." This formula operates on the foundation of negation and necessarily involves violence; in fact, Gadamer, "unfolded the structure of self-consciousness and of 'self-knowledge in the Being of the other' as the dialectic of recognition and sharpened this into a life and death struggle."[46] Postcolonial linguistics resides in this "life and death struggle," as it has been forced to merge and negate itself (the world it speaks into being). It simultaneously resists complete annihilation in the face of an Other who did not participate in this negative process, or struggle, (as presented in the aforementioned scene from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*). Postcolonial linguistics now demands that the dialogue works both ways. It largely does not seek to eliminate the dialogue fully, rather, it seeks to reformulate it and encourage the negation of its colonial entity. The primary endeavor then is to eclipse the contemporary, homogenized global world-view with its own, almost forgotten and still to be found, world-view.

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[46] ibid., 27.

The Violence of Negativity:
Ontological Negation and Rhetorical Resistance

"What matters is not to know the world, but to change it."

— Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

The master-slave dialectic (translated more accurately as the "lord" and "bondsman"

dialectic), as a schematic intended to describe intersubjective recognition, contains an inherent

paradox implicit in its requirement for an unequal relationship between the involved parties: the

self and its Other. The "master" relies on his dialectical "slave" to provide him recognition and

affirmation and he necessarily fails to return this favor, rendering the "master's" value inherently

dependent on the devaluation of his "slave." French philosopher, Alexandre Kojève, argues in his

landmark interpretation of an excerpt of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*,[47] that this

"recognition" is no recognition at all. The phenomenon of recognition can only occur if the

dynamic is equitable and mutual. Thus, neither the "master" nor the "slave" ever gains the

dialectic humanity they seek and struggle for. This struggle, for many, constitutes the human

condition. However, further, the "slave" is better situated than the "master" to enact a

transformation of his world out of a greater discontent, which requires risk, including a risk of

ontological (or physical) death.

Returning to Heidegger's radicalized temporality in which he abandons a metaphysical

nihilism in favor of a finite material existence, he recognizes that death is an always impending

horizon, which for him motivates dialectics, hermeneutics, and the practicing subject. According

to Achille Mbembe's interpretation of Hegel, Hegel's "account of death centers on a bipartite

concept of negativity. First, the human negates nature (a negation exteriorized in the human's

effort to reduce nature to his or her own needs); and second, he or she transforms the negated

element through work and struggle."[48] This is the procedure by which man creates a world for

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[47] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of the Spirit*, (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press: 1969).

[48] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics" *Public Culture* 15 no. 1, (2003) 14.

himself in language. However, in creating a world "he or she also is exposed to his or her own negativity … In other words, the human being truly *becomes a subject*—that is, separated from [him or herself]—in the struggle and the work through which he or she confronts death (understood as the violence of negativity)."[49] In this way, the subject is not only charged with recognizing his other with the intent to gain recognition externally, the subject must also be willing to be exposed to his own negativity, to risk himself in order to recognize himself. Temporality, or finitude, is the cornerstone of a dialectical and hermeneutical relationship with the subject, his Other, and his world.

In objectifying himself in language and accepting the inherent risk in confrontation, the subject has an opportunity to accomplish both internal and external recognition. Achebe manages to further nuance this schematic. He objectifies his narrativized self at the intersection of multiple linguistic worlds, creating a kaleidoscopic image teeming with the potential for negative experience. In risking himself, he also risks the colonizer to the extent that the presented worlds challenge the assumed authority (or "totality") of the colonizer's world, made known through the colonizer's language. The subject is always linguistically mediated, thus language becomes the sole medium and site for this negative experience, rendering a collision of languages as simultaneously unstable and productive. Further, "language (in relation to death and negativity) is the site and ground for 'anthropology,'" which, for Kojève, is the "human existence and language as radically interpenetrating each other, each simultaneously the ground and annihilation of the other."[50] Dialectics concurrently separate the subject from his world who then

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[49] ibid., 14.

[50] Daniel J. Selcer, "The Discursivity of the Negative: Kojève on Language in Hegel," *Animus* no. 5, (2000), 185.

seeks reconciliation by the only means available: language. However, with every reconciliation, a fragmentation, negation, or a "death" in that way must necessarily occur.

Achebe's novel takes advantage of this linguistic condition and disrupts the supposed stability of his colonizer's language through fragmentation, made possible by the inclusion of the "untranslatable." He then reorients this language in order to decenter the subject by whom it was made and made for and place at the center those subjects it has historically denied. He engages here in the universal language of struggle of which Thiong'o speaks, "the universal language underlying all speech and words of our history, or language and our being."[51] The *being* of the subject emerges in the language he speaks (here, composed of struggle) and the discourse that constitutes his communicative (dialectic) situation, which Achebe thoroughly illustrates. Both Mr. Smith and Okeke unfold not only in language, but also in their respective discourses and uniquely as these discourses merge, effectively destabilizing one another (though the emphasis is applied specifically to the dominating entity embodied in Mr. Smith). While language constructs a world and makes this world known, discourse structures this world and enables communication endowed with a constantly evolving meaning and thus the *Being* that exists here. The relationship between fragmentation and totalitization realized in *being-in-the-world*, as Heidegger so famously coined, is constituted for Kojève in correspondence between languages and their discourses. In this way, the decentering of the colonial entity in Achebe's novel occurs two-fold: in language and in discursive formations. Meaning is alienated and reconstructed subversively on the terms of the colonized.

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[51] Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 108.

The Textual Modality of Death in *Things Fall Apart*

"Factically, Dasein is dying as long as it exists, but proximally and for the most part, it does so by way of *falling*."

<div align="right">Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*</div>

Achille Mbembe's landmark "post"colonial text "Necropolitics," using Foucauldian biopolitics as a paradigm, interrogates moments of death and dying as they occur in colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial contexts, and in doing so characterizes such conditions as "necropolitical." For him, a colonial "sovereignty" means controlling who must live and who must die and then instrumentalizing the body and its death to further maintain and expand control, which forces the colonized to experience death even in life. His integration of a Hegelian mode of negative experience and assertion that the subject must confront death is a subversive response to the necropolitical colonial regime. An understanding of death and the subject's struggle with and against it endures a drastic evolution in *Things Fall Apart*. The balance between life and death and the ability for both to interpenetrate each other in a highly revered process forms what Gadamer calls "tradition,"[52] and constitutes the center around which all else operates for the Igbo people. The erosion of this balance and understanding, and inherited historical tradition from which it emerges, is the erosion of the center of the world presented in the novel, which contributes to the sovereignty the colonial entity is building throughout the latter half of the story. Mbembe's restoration of an understanding of death, as that which ensures the possibility of agency, allows for a reinterpretation from apparent tragedy to a restoration or "rehabilitation"[53] of Igbo tradition and, thus, the world and language both composed by and generative of this tradition.

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[52] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 277.

[53] In Part II of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer tends to the "Rehabilitation of Authority and Tradition" (277). He does not however, address any element of (biopolitical) power in the recognition of authority or the inheritance of tradition from which colonial subject may be estranged but forced to practice and understand. Buried in the footnote 206, however, he does write, "True authority does not have to be authoritarian" (280).

The final chapter of *Things Fall Apart* presents the suicide of Achebe's supposedly "tragic" hero, Okonkwo. Suicide is characterized in the story as the highest offense in Igbo culture, one that renders the dead body "evil" and "desecrates" the Earth on which it occurred.[54] Okonkwo is no stranger to death; in the course of the novel he kills three men, including himself. The latter two were met with traditional, cultural responses intended to maintain social stability and respect for the spiritual. Okonkwo's illicit killing of Ikemefuna, the boy from another clan who called him "Father," is not reconciled with a blood sacrifice and becomes an offense against the goddess Ani. The involvement of the spiritual in the lived reality of the people of Umuofia is made apparent in Okonkwo's inadvertent killing of Ezeudu's son. In the wake of Ikemefuna's illegitimate death, the death of Ezeudo's son is rendered an atonement, enforced by the goddess herself. Unlike the former killing, the people of Okonkwo's village follow traditional customs, and they demand his seven-year exile and cleansing of the earth he had previously occupied. This period of exile marks a narrative transition from traditional spiritual practices to a European introduction of institutional Christianity and its metaphysical implications.

When Okonkwo returns home, he recognizes a palpable change.[55] In his absence, two more deaths occurred, the first perpetrated by an Igbo man against a fellow clan member and who understood the earth's and community's necessary response to his crime. The white man's own response to this crime prevented a traditional reconciliation, and instead the offender was imprisoned and executed by hanging, in accordance with European cultural and metaphysical

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[54] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 207-208.

[55] Achebe characterizes these changes as inherently effeminate, calling the men of the village "soft like women" (183), revealing a deeply embedded patriarchal system in which the Igbo culture operated. As a result, a wide range of feminist critiques have addressed the novel.

terms. This act of putting to death instrumentalizes the body, in the terms provided by Mbembe in his characterization of the necropolitical, as it establishes the sovereignty of the colonizer over the colonized. For Mbembe, the "ultimate expression of sovereignty" in terms of the nation-state, or those "institutions empowered by the State" "resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty … To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power."[56] A sovereignty of this nature claiming authority over a culture acutely concerned with the nature and balance of life and death produces a unique struggle and disruption of cultural values in that it violates and disintegrates its "center," generating a "falling apart."

According to Okonkwo's friend, Obierika, the white man, then embodied in the figure of Pastor Brown, "has put his knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."[57] Obierika's characterization of the colonizer's involvement in Umuofia offers a paradoxical interpretation of a destabilization of the center, insofar as this center is the inherited historical tradition that provides the apparatus by which knowledge and being-in-the-world are formed. While the novel itself and its linguistic orientation undermines the colonizer and its language as the perceived center (Europe) around which all else circulates, Achebe's work does not abandon the mode of a center itself. The Igbo culture has a center in the beginning of the narrative, which stabilizes its own social system. The enforced collision of spiritualisms causes the "falling apart" of which Obierika speaks, producing an enigmatic function of death.

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[56] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 11-12.

[57] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart,* 176.

The instrumentalization of the hanged man's body effects all others who now exist under the sovereignty of the colonizer who has the ability to not only put to death, but to control the moment of dying and the memory of the dead. The execution of the Igbo man denies his subjecthood and asserts an objectification of the body as well as all those in his stead. A transition between life and death, once a sacred and revered process regardless of crimes committed in life, becomes a demarcation of authority over mortality and immortality. According to Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "control over the dead body, the economy of life and death, and of life in death, and the racism embedded in the division that separates the other regulate the ability to 'put to death' and the ability to die in dignity."[58] In traditional Umuofia culture, death is not an end, rather the being of the person continues in a spiritual realm made known materially through memory and cultural practices. This is not the "life in death" of which Shalhoub-Kevorkian speaks, rather a colonial interpretation of life in death becomes maintaining a controlled memory of the dead in order to preserve that entity's sovereignty. Much of this is accomplished not only in the act of putting to death, but the control over the burial of the lifeless body. Denying traditional burial rites not only renounces traditional cultural agency, it makes impossible the transition from the material to the spiritual according to Igbo beliefs. The being of the man disappears for the Igbo people, leaving his life after death entirely in the hands of the colonizer. The stabilizing center is in this way distorted and marginalized in an effort to enact authority over the Other.

Throughout the novel, Umuofia demonstrates a dedicated relationship to the balance of life and death. The existence of the spiritual world implies a belief in life both after and

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[58] Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Death and Colonialism: The Sacred and the Profane," *Security Theology, Surveillance and the Politics of Fear* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2015), 117.

independent of a mortal death. Spiritual intervention in the material events of the novel, as well

as the involvement of mortals in the spiritual, delicately blurs the line between one and the other,

which is epitomized in the *egwugwu*, the physical embodiment of ancestral spirits. In Igbo

culture, life permeates death as much as death permeates life, and yet there is a preserved balance

that ensures social stability. It is disrupted not only in the colonizer's execution of a perceived

criminal, but also in the killing by way of unmasking a *egwugwu*. Achebe describes this killing

committed by an Igbo man acting as a representative of the colonizer as "one of the greatest

crimes a man could commit," and it throws Umuofia "into confusion."[59] The unmasking of the

egwugwu is the visual dismemberment of its material body, reducing its subjecthood to

objecthood, and asserting further the authority of the colonizer over life, death, and life after

death. The phantom-like nature of the *egwugwu* corresponds with Mbembe's characterization of

the way the colonizer views and understands the colonized who "appear to be phantoms, unreal

and ghostlike … who lack the specifically human character, the specifically human reality."[60]

This understanding of the Other accomplishes two things: it denies a physicality of the human

being and asserts only the material existence of the instrumentalized (dismembered in this case)

body, while also marginalizing the Other's constructed world and mandates its own world be the

focal point of everything else.

The response to the ancestral spirit's murder recalled a cultural tradition not yet lost. The

elders attempted to rectify the offense by destroying the compound of the offender, Enoch, and

then the white man's church his actions represented. After which, at least "for the moment[,] the

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[59] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 186.

[60] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 24.

spirit of the clan was pacified."[61] Seeking to reestablish its authority and quell any further violent reactions, the church sent a Umuofian convert as a messenger to break up a meeting of empowered Igbo warriors. Okonkwo kills this messenger, dismembering him by decapitation, using the necropolitical tactic of the colonizer against itself. Killing however, remains an offense in Umuofia, and his action is met with confusion rather than the overthrow of the white man and his authority over the village. This is the last Okonkwo is seen alive himself; in the following chapter the reader finds he has hanged himself in his own compound. An initial reading of his suicide suggests that it is a tragedy, and retroactively the novel as a whole. Okonkwo's death is fundamentally a sacrifice, not necessarily an escape from the consequences for his crime. Suicide is a far greater crime with far greater consequences than his initial killing. In killing himself, he makes impossible the possibility of his life after death.[62]

Okonkwo renders his own body "evil" and thus untouchable by the rest of his people, and in doing so redeploys a colonial tactic against the colonizer, but must sacrifice himself in the process. Okonkwo alone falls to his death, but does he "*fail alone*" (emphasis added)[63] as his father once forewarned? His suicide is simultaneously a final but brief realization of agency and the strongest affront to his own culture, complicating a suggestion of resistance. Mr. Smith in fact uses this event as evidence in his own writing entitled "*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*." In accordance with Obierika's response to his friend's death, "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be

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[61] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 191.

[62] This is an appropriation of Jacques Derrida's reading of Heidegger's impossibility of the possibility of Dasein. (In his *Aporias*, Derrida interrogates Heidegger's conception of the impossibility of death giving way to the passibility of Dasein).

[63] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 207 and 25 respectively.

buried like a dog. . . .”[64] This reaction renders Okonkwo a martyr who is denied being after death

despite the Commissioner's attempt to reinstrumentalize the body for his own purposes. His

desire to control the memory of the dead is eclipsed by the novel as a whole; two documentations

of this death exist and only one recognizes "the power and value of the body [that results] from a

process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity."[65] Achebe ensures Okonkwo's realization

of eternity in memory in recognizing the agency embedded in the moment of his fall.[66] Further,

"the martyr, having established a moment of supremacy in which the subject overcomes his own

mortality, can be seen as laboring under the sign of the future. In other words, in death the future

is collapsed into the present."[67] Thus, Okonkwo fulfills his earlier declaration that he "shall

survive anything."[68]

Okonkwo's suicide is an indirect and ambiguous attempt to restore a distorted tradition,

as his action recalls a mode of cultural interpretation and understanding (praxis), that preceded

colonization. Like Achebe, he employs the terms of his colonizer in an effort to reveal their

limitations and dismantle their authority over the colonized and reinstitute a prior mode of being

and temporality. His death embodies tradition inasmuch as it is a translation of it. It is then not an

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[64] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 208.

[65] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 37.

[66] In addition to "thrownness," Heidegger characterizes *being-in-the-world* as disclosed in "falling" (a belonging to "everydayness," in "idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity"), and writes, "In falling, Dasein *itself* as factical Being-in-the-world, is something *from* which it has already fallen away. And it has not fallen into some entity which it comes upon for the first time in the course of its Being, or even one which it has not come upon at all; it has fallen into the *world*, which itself belongs to its Being" (*Being and Time* 221).

[67] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 37.

[68] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 27.

end of Being, rather it is a revival of Being and tradition insofar as both continue to unfold beyond the moment of his fall and beyond the understanding of the colonizer.

Conclusion

"The shadow of the colonized man splits [the image of the post Enlightenment man's] presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being."

— Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

Achebe's colonial narrative written in the postcolonial context engenders its own sort of restoration of tradition well beyond the level of the plot. The postcolonial discursive suggestion of a delineation between colonization and postcolonization admits a particular chronological interpretation of tradition and the history from which it emerges. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe complicates the historical discontinuity imposed by these contexts in identifying an ongoing and unfolding colonial legacy. Language in the novel becomes a literal manifestation and metaphorical symbol for this lineage, while the temporality of being implied and interpreted here endures its own transformation as cyclical rather than existing in a eurocentrically devised teleological progression. The novel itself transgresses two historical moments, revealing an ideology of colonization which remains, "turning and turning in the widening gyre."[69]

By means of its linguistic hybridity, the novel clears a space intended to engender a dialogue between multiple worlds. The introduction of this conversation alone undermines the dialectical hierarchy demanded by the colonizer and destabilizes the presumed totalitization of his language and world. Despite being the novel's primary medium of communication, English is not the center around which the Igbo language and its speakers revolve, rather English is reoriented around its colonial Other and which consequently must then *recognize* colonized on his own terms. The linguistic (and textual) mediation of the interpretation of self and other plays out at the intersection of multiple voices and the worlds of which they speak and call into being, and yet the unfolding act of interpretation only results in understanding for the colonial subject.

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[69] The inclusion of Yeats is itself doubly ironic. Achebe uses this poem to initially to indicate the imposition and ubiquity of European literature in the African education system (of which Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes extensively in *Decolonising the Mind*), but it also reveals a facet of the postcolonial subject as well, heightened by Yeats's own experience of colonization as an Irish poet. However, Achebe goes on to reinterpret Yeats and thus recreate the poem on his own terms by reversing the power dynamic, explained more thoroughly on page 11.

The colonizer, in refusing to recognize his Other, fails to see and understand himself in the process and thus never achieves the dialectical affirmation he seeks and strives for.

Historically, the same can be said about hermeneutics as a field of study, even this study's contemporary form. This thesis has intended to focus hermeneutics on those subjects it has typically refrained from recognizing insofar as its assumptions do not, at best, seek to represent the colonized condition and, at worst, disregard entirely the colonial situation and the power structures that necessarily alter or inhibit the schematic of interpretation it presents. Similar to Gadamer, colonial and postcolonial theorists like Ngugi wa Thiong'o recognize that learning a language and subsequently speaking it allows or forces a subject to inherit the world it implies, including its culture, values, assumptions, et cetera. Should two languages meet on equal footing, a substantial Gadamerian assumption, an expanded horizon of understanding may be produced; however, two languages meeting in a prescribed hierarchy changes fundamentally what is and what can be produced. For Gadamer, alterity, dialogue, and interpretation form a hermeneutic universal, while Ngugi illustrates that for the colonized, the only universal is the language of struggle. These two tenets are not mutually exclusive, yet they reflect a major difference in approach to the theorization of language.

Embedded in both hermeneutics and postcolonial studies is the opportunity to challenge normative or preexisting modes of understanding as well as any claim of objectivity. The presumed authority and centrality of the English language reflects an assumption of objectivity and access to a "real," prelinguistic world, thus the constitutive power structures required to sustain and reproduce this world are consequently hidden in the backdrop. However, for hermeneutics, and arguably postcolonial theory, "what is at issue in understanding is not the

phantom of an absolute foundation — that child of positivism and ultimately metaphysics — but Dasein's increased awareness of the possibilities at its disposal. The quest for universally valid truth undeniably threatens to conceal the reality of understanding and orient it toward a cognitive ideal that it can never in fact realize."[70] In his novel, Achebe confronts this cognitive ideal, reveals the boundaries within which it operates, and offers a glimpse of what lies beyond it. This "absolute foundation," which may be understood also as a colonial legacy, disintegrates on the pages of the novel. *Things Fall Apart* simultaneously destroys and restores a tradition at risk and subsequent interpretation and understanding, as the event is no longer methodologically structured to ensure a prescribed result. In doing so, Achebe exposes that center which cannot hold,[71] and consequently, a universe of possibilities beyond a singular, colonial world.

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[70] Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 107.

[71] A reference to Achebe's epigraphical use of Yeats's poem.

"Catch only what you've thrown yourself, all is
mere skill and little gain;
but when you're suddenly the catcher of a ball
thrown by an eternal partner
with accurate and measured swing
towards you, to your center, in an arch
from the great bridge building of God:
why catching then becomes a power—
not yours, a world's."

— Rainer Maria Rilke
quoted in *Truth and Method*

Glossary of Terms:

Note: For the purposes of clarity, the following terms are listed here with the corresponding definitions that best suit their use in this thesis. Each term maintains the possibility of being employed differently in different contexts and discourses with varying degrees of similarity to the definitions provided here.

Discourse: According to Michel Foucault (*The History of Sexuality*), discourse is a grid of intelligibility that defines and substantiates subject positions. It is imbued with power that formulates the boundaries of what is possible to conceive, speak, and visualize in any given environment; it is the vehicle by which meaning is communicated.

Distanciation: (in terms of *belonging* and *appropriation*) According to Paul Ricoeur, the "complex interplay between belonging to a tradition and distancing oneself from it forms the matrix for extending the theory of interpretation to the sphere of history. Historical experience is fundamentally the experience of belonging to a tradition that is received from the past."[72] Thus, the distance in between the interpreter and his text and/or the interpreter and his historical tradition, provides the space in which understanding occurs.

Hermeneutics: A theory of understanding which Freidrich Schleiermacher (1768-1864) expanded from the strict study of theological and scriptural interpretation to all texts,[73] to which later Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) "proposed was central to understanding in general, … he connected the apprehension of Being and the dynamics of language as co-constituents."[74]

Historicism: (sometimes called relativism) requiring "that every particular phenomenon must be conceptualized within the context of its age … [in order] to avoid judging other times by the standards of our own, and instead to interpret historical events immanently as expressive of *their* time."[75] This creates an impossible paradox by which the interpreter's historical situation must then be subject to the same principle, devaluing hermeneutics in the study of history.

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[72] Ricoeur, Thompson ed., *Hermeneutics and the Human Science*, 16., See also Gadamer's "The Hermeneutic Significance of Temporal Distance" (291). In this section he writes, "the meaning of 'belonging' — i.e., the element of tradition in our historical-hermeneutical activity — is fulfilled in the commonality of fundamental enabling prejudices. … Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness, [regarded as] the language in which the text addresses us, the story it tells us, between being a historically intended, distanciated object and belonging to a tradition. *The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between*" (295).

[73] Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 64,

[74] Leitch, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 83.

[75] Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 77., See also Gadamer's "The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding" (265), specifically section (B) "Prejudices As Conditions of Understanding" (277).

Ontology: Referring to the nature of being. Ontological hermeneutics then is to make known the self and the world in which this self is situated, as well as their relationship, constituting the fundamental condition of man.

Postcolonial Linguistics: A field of study concerned with the development and production of language in "post"colonized regions whose languages express a type of hybridity unique to these cultures.

Temporality: Referring here to any interpreter and interpretation as embedded in time and the historical tradition composed thereof. Martin Heidegger's radicalized conception of temporality marks a deviation from hermeneutic's previous occupation with the metaphysical, and roots interpretation instead in the finite.

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