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OF LANGUAGES AND BORDERS: CHINUA ACHEBE AND NURUDDIN FARAH

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**Abstract**

As African writers working in the postcolonial period, Nigeria's Chinua Achebe and Somalia's Nuruddin Farah engage the colonial legacy in their novels. However, Somali and Nigeria experienced two different colonialisms embedded in each country's unique history. In the fiction of the African novel, making sense of issues of personal identity and greater national culture after colonial intervention is central. Farah's protagonist Askar grows up to understand how his Somali ethnic identity is constructed around and maintained by the singular Somali language spoken in different neighboring territories. Meanwhile, Achebe's protagonist Obi Okonkwo, via diglossia, manipulates language to affirm his identity as an ethnic Igbo. Both writers point towards investigating the way language and border attach themselves to each other as ethnic markers in the post-colony to define personal and cultural identity.

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## Introduction

Chinua Achebe's novels have long been regarded as modern Africa's essential emergence out of the literary silence of colonial oppression. The publication of his first English language novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is often hailed as an authentic African representation that corrects English misrepresentations of Nigerian cultural identity. He has followed that work with many other novels, such as the sequel *No Longer at Ease* (1960), which will be discussed here. His less-studied contemporary Somali writer Nuruddin Farah has also written extensively about the post-colonial reality of his respective country of Somalia. He is best recognized for his novel *Maps* (1986) which underscores the restructuring of national Somali identity after colonialism. Comparatively, both works are underlined by the question of how African writers should speak about identity in the new post-colonial African country. What mechanisms are in place to sustain and maintain borders, how is membership relegated, and what validates each emerging countries' new cultural identity?

Post-coloniality is as complex as it is diverse and wide-reaching across Africa. However, this business of the African writer speaking back, about, from, and of his cultural identity is useful to arrive at the two points where some certain trends about ethnic and cultural membership manifest. *Language*, the way people communicate with each other, becomes tied to how people recognize the *border* around their newly-formed country, and how ex-colonized subjects in return recognize each other as countrymen in the post-colony. In such an environment, language identity is central. Where ethnic nationalism is concerned, anthropologist Bonnie Urciuoli asserts, "The genesis of the notion of language and border lies in the shared "imagining" of spacially bounded, linguistically homogenous nations."<sup>1</sup> As professional writers

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<sup>1</sup> Urciuoli, Bonnie. "Language and Borders." p. 257

of Africa, Achebe and Farah are especially sensitive to the relationship between language and border in colonized spaces where such items are often times either both externally imposed and internally contested.

*Maps*: or Nuruddin Farah and Somali Ethnic Identity

“It's as if they left their minds back in Somalia,” reports Nuruddin Farah on displaced Somali populations in an interview given to Kwame Anthony Appiah, “and brought only their bodies with them—it is because they're still connected to Somalia.”<sup>2</sup> Despite having spent most of his intellectual life outside of his native country, the Somali-born author of *Maps* (1968) has dedicated the body of his literary production to investigating the emergence of a post-colonial transnational Somali border that is sustained by a singular Somali language.

Nuruddin Farah's native East African country of Somalia is an unusual postcolonial site. It is the only African nation to merge out of West European colonialism speaking its own singular ethnic language and practicing its own singular religion of Sunni Islam. Nevertheless, as another victim of the New Imperialism of the late nineteenth century, the Scramble for Africa partitioned Somalia among three European powers: to Italy went Southern Somalia, France claimed the northwest territory which today is recognized as the nation of Djibouti, and Britain annexed what has become Somaliland in the north. After her defeat in the First World War, Italy's territory was gained by Britain. Upon decolonization and Somalia's independence in 1960, Britain imparted the southwest region to Ethiopia. That region is known as the Ogaden desert and it has been transformed into the Somali district of Ethiopia. It is still to this day an

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<sup>2</sup> Kwame, Anthony Appiah, “Nuruddin Farah,” p. 59, 2004.

area of high contestation between the neighboring countries.<sup>3</sup> Another similar Somali territory exists in Kenya.

Without the consent of the indigenous people, the body of Somalia was externally shaped by arbitrary borders. Consequently, various Somalis populations that fell outside of these borders were swallowed up by neighboring nations. Moreover, Somalis of such regions like the Ogaden desert fail to recognize the legitimacy of their borders. Rather, these displaced populations floating on the margins desire unification and wholeness with Somalia, and await liberation from their occupiers. Despite the reality of their space, they maintain their identity and life-worlds as inherently Somali. In this spirit, Somalia has consistently petitioned—through violence and other political means—for the unification of its fragmented territories. Sociologist Immanuel Waller Stein writes:

Since most Africans are ethnically very variegated, most find their stability in asserting the validity of present borders and reject any attempt to re-carve borders on the grounds of ethnic nationality. Somalia is the prime exponent of the opposite view, representing the exceptional case of a country which is virtually homogenous *and* has large ethnically related groups outside its borders.<sup>4</sup>

At the center of the Somali flag rests a five-point star. Despite the fragmentation of the Somali-speaking territory, the official flag of Somalia dramatizes the Somali people's hope for unification, with each point on the flag representing a territory that was once connected to the country. Or, as the character Hilaal, from Farah's novel *Maps* Uncle Hilaal explains to his nephew, the inquisitive Askar:

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<sup>3</sup> Mohamed Farrah Aidid. *Somalia*. The self-styled president of Somalia (1934 to 1966) and former general in the Somali army produced his account of Somali history. Although obviously biased for political reasons, he does provide an account of colonialism in Somalia.

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *Africa: The Politics of Independence and Unity*, p. 76. There are two books within this volume. This particular quotation is located in the second book

‘Somali identity,’ he went on, “is one shared by all Somalis, no matter how many borders divide them, no matter what flag flies in the skies above them or what the bureaucratic language of the country is. Which is why one might say the soul of the Somali is a meteor, shooting towards that commonly held national identity.”<sup>5</sup>

Hilaal explains that Somali national identity exists beyond the confines of borders, and implies that it resides in the Somali imagination. To be Somali requires access to and participation in this “commonly held national identity” that hovers beyond the reality of the fragmented nation. Whereas the Somali people are physically separated by circumstance, they are united by a shared abstract ethnic nationality. Hilaal’s essentialist model for Somali national identity parallels the DuBoisian concept of double-consciousness. Like the African-American, the Somali, to appropriate DuBois’s concepts, wears his own *veil* and utilizes his own *second-sight* and *two-ness*, and displays “a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”<sup>6</sup> His double-conscious stems from acknowledging himself as a Somali in a bordered space, and recognizing his participation in an abstract greater Somali national identity. Hence, Somalis by necessity have held dual membership in two worlds.

National identity is derived from the nation. Unfortunately, the trauma of displacement and fragmentation has denied the Somali people a central national state. Yet, how is it possible for Somalis to maintain a persistent claim to an ethnic nationality that no longer exists except in the past?

In order to answer this question, the significance of ethnicity with regards to Somali nationalism must be broached. What form does this ethnic relationship that binds Somalis to each other take? The structures of power in the West have historically differentiated ethnicity

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<sup>5</sup> P. 166

<sup>6</sup> W.E.B. DuBois. “The Souls of Black Folk.” *Literary Theory*, p. 869.



from race in the service of oppression. Up until the mid seventies, race was popularly championed as biological: “A local or geographic population distinguished as more or less distinct group by genetically transmitted physical characteristics.”<sup>7</sup> And ethnicity has been defined as an individual’s cultural characteristics inherited from birth such as language, food, fashion, etc. These categories served to oppress groups by maintaining rigid controls on social mobility while oppressing them. For example: this social configuration was designed to allow for a Caucasian to indulge in the language, food, and cultural characters of a non-Caucasian without the risk of contamination and absorption by non-Caucasian status.

However, this strategic political division between race and ethnicity does not exist in the Somali life-world. Ethnicity is divorced from race as such a concept is illegitimate in this context. Instead, ethnicity in Somalia stands closer to Max Weber’s definition of “ethnic groups as ‘human groups (other than kinship groups) which cherish a belief in their common origins of such a kind that it provides a basis for the creation of a community.’<sup>8</sup> If the Somali claim to an ethnic relationship is placed within the framework of Weber’s definition, the separated Somali territories can be understood as a community legitimized by a shared Somali history. Hence, this ethnic relationship is possible despite the closed off national borders. It is an ethnic relationship that stems out of the pre-colonial era that can viewed as resistance to the physical separation of the land. Farah’s narrator openly discuss the arbitrariness of the borders in the Somali mind: “For the first time you would cross a border that has never been well spoken of among Somalis, for such borders deny the Somali people who live on either side of it, yes, such borders deny these

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<sup>7</sup> Richard A. Jones, “Race and Revisability,” p.620. Jones draws his definition from the *American Heritage Dictionary*

<sup>8</sup> E. Ike Udogu, “The Issue of Ethnicity and Democratization in Africa,” p. 791.

people their existence as a nation.”<sup>9</sup> However, it is more interesting to look at the strategies by which this community maintains itself.

Benedict Anderson has defined the modern nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>10</sup> Anderson has of course in mind the origin and formulation of nationalism in centralized Western states. As the author discusses the imaginary nature of nations, his ideas address culturally homogenous sovereign nations like Britain that formed out of approximate heterogeneous communities. His aim is to arrive that the arbitrariness of any form of nationalism within a sovereign nation. Moreover, language is central to Anderson’s theory of nationalism. He argues that language—specifically print-capitalism—is the means in which modern nations have to imagine their identity as “inherently limited and sovereign.” Anderson writes: “The lexicographic revolution in Europe, however, created, and spread, the conviction, that language (in Europe, at least) were, so to speak, the personal property of quite specific groups—their daily speakers and reader—and moreover these groups, imagined as communities, were entitled to their autonomous place among a fraternity of equals.”<sup>11</sup> Then Anderson is aware of the spatial limits of his theory—he is concerned with Europe.

Sovereignty is a slippery issue to engage when it comes to discussing the five Somali-speaking territories as an imagined community. Two of the territories are sovereign nations, two are areas that have been absorbed by neighboring nations, and one is an emerging but international unrecognized nation. However, Anderson’s theory still applies if a few conditions are taken into consideration. For the purposes of this discussion, how this community is imagined as inherently *sovereign* is irrelevant. Rather, this study seeks to understand how it is

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<sup>9</sup>Nuruddin Farah, *Maps*, p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.6.

<sup>11</sup> p.84

imagined as *limited*, and come to terms with the role of language in binding and shaping its borders. Or, how does language possibly regulate membership into this ethnic nationality.

“The nation is imagined as *limited*,” observes Anderson, “because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps even a billion human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.”<sup>12</sup> In the Somali life-word, the Somali language acts as both this boundary and the vehicle for Hilaal’s “commonly-held national identity. Because we cannot equate the community of these territories to the politics of a cohesive and singular modern nation, we must look towards Anderson’s discussion of the pre-national state. The Somali language, for its speakers who identify with it, performs in the same way as the pre-national sacred religious languages of Latin, Chinese, and Arabic:

Take only the example of Islam.

If Maguindanao met Berbers in Mecca, knowing nothing of each other's languages, incapable of communicating orally, they nonetheless understood each other's ideographs, because the sacred texts they shared existed only in classical Arabic.<sup>13</sup>

The Somali language presides over the imagined Somali community—facilitating this commonly held national identity—in the same the Arabic language allowed the Maguindao and Berbers to understand each other based on a commonly held Islamic identity. However we must conceded, as Anderson does, the important fact that the Berbers and the Maguindanao are primarily speakers of their own indigenous languages, and they be “incapable of communicating orally” in Arabic. Nonetheless, Arabic with its ideographs is still the sight for their imagined community.

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<sup>12</sup> P.7

<sup>13</sup> P. 13

This is an important point to draw attention to because the primary language of the subjects of the imagined Somali community is Somali. Language is a third-party mediator between two different groups. That is what Anderson is trying to argue. Our argument has its premise in Anderson's discussion of sacred languages. Yet, the way the Somali language has come to imagine a national identity for Somalis is slightly different. Unlike Anderson's model, there is no need for the intervention of a written medium in the lives of the illiterate masses. Latin, Arabic, and Chinese were the written languages of sacred texts which the illiterate masses—despite being unable to read—recognized and revered. Up until its independence in the sixties, the Somali language was without written script, but carried a rich oral history. This particular language, for its native speakers, does not derive its sacredness from divinity. Rather, it makes an ethnic relationship between Somalis because of its connection to the culture of the past. We can locate Uncle Hilaal's definition of a Somali as “a man, woman, or child whose mother tongue is Somali. Here, mother tongue is important, very important” (166).

Hilaal places such an emphasis on the primacy of the Somali language because of the function of language in preserving culture. With the destruction of the pre-colonial culture and partitioning of colonialism, language acts as the space where the indigenous culture is preserved. Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiongo has observed that: “Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.”<sup>14</sup> If an individual's first tongue is Somali, then it means that that particular person has inherited the history and culture and culture of Somalia. That person will have linguistic tools that will help shape his life-world. Despite the borders that separate these Somali bodies, they come together—like the five-point star—through an ethnic relationship that is sustained by the Somali language itself. This ethnic nationalism is not any

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<sup>14</sup> Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 16.

citizenship in a concrete and actual centralized Somali state. However, the dispersal and mapping of the Somali bodies of East Africa has resulted in the emergence of a common Somali identity, accessed with a language that all Somalis recognize.

In this sense, Somalia can be considered special. Unlike other colonized African people, the Somali has survived colonialism with his indigenous cultural identity somewhat intact, and his language present. Furthermore, he can boast of the tenacity of his people, and, despite a physical nation to embody it, the persistence of the Somali national identity that still thrives. When then is this model of national identity for Somalis problematic for Nurudin Farah? Would not this readily available ethnic nationality for every Somali body in the post-colonial work help Somalis forego the various identity issues that arise for colonized people?

Farah's text sets out to the question the oppressive nature of this ethnic nationality as a model for identity formulation in Somalia. As Hilaal explains this commonly held national identity and defines Somaliness, his nephew Askar listens intently. However, this is not Hilaal's story but Askar's journey of self-discovery to arrive at a stable identity. But because of the various post-colonial realities of Somalia, Askar's search is complicated by this predestined compulsory ethnic nationality.

As the central character of the narrative, Askar is marked by self-consciousness that gestures towards his role as problem for the status-quo. Farah opens the text by introducing Askar contemplating his very existence:

It appears you as though you were a creature given birth to notions formulated in heads, a creature brought into being by ideas; as though you were not a child...whose activities were justifiably part of a people's past and present experience.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> p.3

The protagonist, in his initial appearance in the narrative, is not described as a human being with a corporeal body. Rather, Askar's very existence is questioned by a second-person narrator who describes him "a creature brought into being by ideas." Askar, at this point, has no stable sense of self and identity. Mirroring the reality of Somali bodies in their post-colonial situation, Askar is unhinged from time and place—not "part of a people's past and present experience. He is nothing but "ideas" and "notions." This rhetorical strategy sets up the stage for Askar to insert himself into the post-colonial world: a situation where there is no one single centralized Somali space.

Askar is born into the world as an anomaly. He seemingly comes to exist in a world in which he shouldn't exist. Born in the desert Somali Ogaden territory of Ethiopia, the protagonist is found as a baby by the Oromo-Ethiopian servant of his uncle's compound. His mother dies in childbirth. His founder was a celebrated member of the Western Somali Liberation who passed away fighting against the Ethiopian occupation. Of his mother he knows next to nothing, except for the fear that he might have killed her. On the other hand his father connects him to idea of this ethnic Somali nationalism, and provides him with a model for identity formation.

Throughout the text, his father and his dedication the struggle becomes another notion or idea he struggles as he imagines himself into existence. Askar's work of imagining himself from a notion to a human being begins as soon as he enters the world. His surrogate mother Misra comments upon how self-consciousness when she found him: "He was like a sculptor whose hands were caressing a self-portrait, an artist whose eyes lit up with self-adoration."<sup>16</sup>

However before he recognizes himself as a Somali, the protagonist is raised by Misra. As his childhood with Misra begins, Asker is unable to comprehend any difference between his Somali body and Misra's Ethiopian body:

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<sup>16</sup> P.23

I was with Misra, and she was my universe, she was the one who determined the circumference of my cosmos, her body was an extension of mine, my body her third leg as we slept and snored away time...<sup>17</sup>

His only company at that age as a child in the Ethiopian desert, Misra becomes Askar's world. Nevertheless it is Misra who introduces Askar to difference, and thus language as a facilitator of difference. Without the knowledge of Askar's relations in the community, Misra indulges her native tongue of Amharic behind closed doors, and inadvertently emphasizes for Askar her cultural difference.<sup>18</sup> Misra is marked as someone –as Hilaal has described—whose mother is not Somali, and is denied access to this national identity because of this fact: “For years, [Askar] had had enormous difficulties pronouncing his Somali gutturals correctly, since he learnt these wrongly from her.”<sup>19</sup>

Growing up and becoming less dependent on Misra, Askar quickly moves away from her. He begins to more actively engage difference in order to establish his own identity. The protagonist finds comfort, instead, in the same. His consciousness grows to recognize himself as a Somali citizen within a Somali-speaking territory. Attaching himself to the ideals of the liberation movement of his home from Ethiopian rule at the time, Askar becomes to understand himself in terms of the struggle of the Somali people.<sup>20</sup> In a way, the Ogaden War itself brought this cultural difference to the forefront. During Ethiopia's struggle to maintain the desert territory, he aggressively sought to assimilate its Somali population in order to control dissidence. Language was at the center of their campaign. Farah's narrator provides a brief account “[Somali children] were sent to different schools in the non-Somali speaking regions of

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<sup>17</sup> P.232

<sup>18</sup> P.10

<sup>19</sup> P.54

<sup>20</sup> The Ogaden War was fought by Ethiopia and Somalia between 1977 and 1978 for the Somali-Speaking territory of the Ogaden desert which is between both countries.

the country, so they would lose contact with Other Somalis and with each other.”<sup>21</sup> As soon as he comes to understand cultural difference, he becomes another Somali “shooting towards that commonly held national identity.” By virtue of the Somali language, it becomes easier for Askar to imagine Somalia’s efforts to regain its lost territory as a personal Somali project to reunite all those share this identity. Charles Sugnet observes that Askar becomes weary of Misra’s small world, and quickly begins to see his body as political by “playing guerrilla war-games with a band of young companions.”<sup>22</sup>

Within the text, language also performs as a sign of kinship. The Somali language is not only how individuals of Somali heritage insert themselves into Somali national identity.

Moreover, the Somali language is also the measure in which one is either granted or denied membership. One of the more interesting character’s of Farah’s text is Cusman’s tutor. He is automatically disliked by Askar because of his difficulties with the Somali language. Although he is Somali, it is insinuated that the tutor is from Tanzania. When confronted with such a person, Askar makes an intriguing distinction between native speakers and non-natives: “For non-native speakers of Somali have difficulties similar to those most foreign learners face when they learn German.”<sup>23</sup> For no other reason other than his language difficulty, Askar proceeds to describe with contempt the man as possibly a “traitor, although he concedes that he “was respected greatly by foreigners.”<sup>24</sup>

As Asker gradually settles into his ethnic identity as a trans-national Somali, Sugnet continues to observe that, in the story “narrative direction is interrupted.”<sup>25</sup> Asker eventually leaves the Ogaden desert to live with his Uncle Hilaal and to be educated in Mogadiscio during

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<sup>21</sup> Nuruddin Farah, *Maps*, 84

<sup>22</sup> Charles Sugnet, “Nuruddin Farah's Maps: Deterritorialization and "The Postmodern," p.741.

<sup>23</sup> Farah, *Maps*, p. 161.

<sup>24</sup> Farah, *Maps*, p. 161.

<sup>25</sup> Sugnet, p.741



his adolescence. And the Somalis lose the war, and it remains in Ethiopian hands. Upon his eighteenth birthday, a time in which he is contemplating whether to enroll in the University or join the liberation Army, Misra arrives to visit. And following her are serious allegations of treason against the Somali cause for an Ethiopian lover. This is the point of tension by which Askar's torn between two forces: his love for Misra and his growing national loyalties to Somalia.

However since text that is concerned with the formulation of Somali identity in the postcolonial Somali life-world, Sugnet's narrative interruption occurs when Misra is unexpectedly murdered, and, possibly, by members of the liberation movement who Askar idolizes. Ultimately, *Maps* provides no answers; Misra's murder is never solved, and Askar is still questioning who he is. Farah does not and is not interested in positing a model for Somali identity in post-colonial Somalia. Sugnet writes: "By the end of the novel, Askar "has neither joined the Liberation Front nor enrolled at the university to help liberate his people with knowledge and a pen, but has become a sort of artist-criminal, a subverter of authority, enemy of the state, and a perpetual asker of questions."<sup>26</sup> However, what he does achieve is through this text is expose this commonly held common identity—or ethnic nationalism—as inefficient and limited in navigating the post-colonial world. Because this concept of an ethnic identity conceptualizes the world in terms of the past, it is not adequate in imaging a future for Somalis within and outside of Somalia.

*No Longer at Ease: or Chinua Achebe and the National Self and his Cultural Other*

The colonial encounter, and its experience by the Igbos of Nigeria, is nothing short of an internal struggle for cultural and national identity in the face of English domination. Colonial

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<sup>26</sup> Sugnet, p. 741.

subjugation by Britain in 1901 destroyed regionalism and tribalism in this West African area occupied by various indigenous ethnic groups, and introduced the new unified and centralized British Protectorate of Nigeria. Indigenous peoples who were once separated by language, culture, and politics found themselves, simply by virtue of their proximity towards each other, carved into a cohesive nation-state under a mutual distant and foreign power. The establishment of the colonial nation forced small autonomous groups and villages to break away from their communities and migrate into colonial cities in search of work and/or political voice. However Nigeria gained its independence some fifty-nine years later and emerged as a bordered multi-ethnic and multilingual territory, with English as its official language.

Albert Chinualomogu Achebe (later Chinua Achebe), born into colonial Ogidi, Nigeria in 1930, is product of this time in his nation's history. Raised in a Christian family, he is the beneficiary of a mission school education. He went on to earn his college education in English literature at the University College at Ibadan, Nigeria. In other words, there is nothing pre-colonial, traditional, or indigenous Igbo about his upbringing. Nonetheless Chinua Achebe as an author has come to be widely received as Nigeria's premiere national writer. In 1958, he published his internationally successful novel *Things Fall Apart*. Having lived through the turmoil of Nigeria's transformative colonial phase, he fashioned himself as a cultural witness of Nigeria and founded his literary career on reporting the humanizing truths about Igbo cultural identity absent and/or misrepresented by the English literature of the metropole. Thus he describes his work as close to ethnography and professes: "if someone is in search of information, or knowledge or enlightenment about the total life of these people—the Igbo people—I think my novels would be a good source".<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> This is from a 1980 interview that Kalu Ogbaa conducted with Chinua Achebe. The text of the interview can be found in *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, p 64

As successful and revered as his first work is, it is not until Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), that the author's vision of a national, cultural and ethnic identity for Nigeria as a post-colony surfaces. Like Farah, Achebe's understanding of ethnic identity in his country is informed by language and border. However Nigeria differs from Somalia in that the problem is no longer one singular language spread over many adjoining national borders sustaining a transnational identity. Rather, Nigeria's border herds many indigenous ethnicities, cultures, and languages, along with English colonists, under one common denominator: the state's official language of English.

Edward W. Said's work *Orientalism* has demonstrated the theory of the cultural other in the colonized world.<sup>28</sup> He describes imperialism as a system of power encompassing the political, social, and cultural relationships between the colonizing West and colonized Asia. In a place such as colonial Nigeria where the English exercised power over their black subjects it is not difficult to see the parallels and how, 'In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on the flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient [Africa] without ever losing him the upper relative hand.'<sup>29</sup> But Achebe is an African writer who is interested in reversing the direction of this relationship, and his intellectual work is concerned with speaking back. And he approaches the task with the same method as Farah: making sense of identity through language and border.

*No Longer at Ease* continues *Things Fall Apart*'s revolutionary turn in English literature of presenting an African character/protagonist as the national self and appropriating the English subject as a culture other. Language acts as a cultural marker in this narrative. The protagonist

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<sup>28</sup> The concept of the Other originated out of German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Frederick Hegel's discussion of the Master-Slave dialect in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.  
<sup>29</sup> In his work *Orientalism*, p. 3. Edward W. Said specifically discusses the West's relationship with the Orient. Our argument observes that the West has also historically observed the same relationship with Africa—practicing an Africanism.

Obi Okonkwo, by way of diglossia, is able to assert and define a border around his Igbo ethnicity. Through code switching and the use of language, Obi and other Nigerian Igbos are able to exclude the self from the other.

If we look Anderson's theory, we can view the Nigerian colonial state as an "imagined community" which is maintained by border and language, as it is only real, complete, and intact, in the mind of the outsider.<sup>30</sup> However Nigerians did not initially recognize it as such. While acknowledging that neighboring villages are under the rule of the same British power, each village kept to itself and attempted to continue with its pre-colonial way of life. To them, the idea of a national administering government was an extrinsic force gradually encroaching upon their village life. There was a lack of communication between the people who cannot imagine themselves as a nation and the colonial administration that neither understands nor cares for their interest. Achebe emphasizes this native ambivalence and ignorance to the machinations of the invading colonial administration in Obi's memories of village childhood. It becomes apparent from Obi's recollection that his childhood village was completely cut-off from the rest of the Nigerian colony: the only source of information arriving through the sensationalized stories of soldiers. For their connection to the outside world and affiliation with the world of colonial administration these soldiers are revered and mystified: "It was said that if you touched a soldier, Government would deal with you" (15). To the villagers, Government is a specter haunting the village—something everyone knows exists but cannot fathom. The state from the Nigerian perspective was an imagined community.

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<sup>30</sup> Anderson, Benedict. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson argued that nationhood is an imagined phenomenon that has no intrinsic validity.

However the village life of pre-colonial Nigeria operated as a real community in which, due to its relative small size, individuals who were familiar with each other on a daily basis practiced the same communal way of life. The villagers initially did not recognize or even speak the language of their so-called government. Nevertheless they were well versed in the laws, customs, and culture of the village. Lloyd W. Brown in his study of post-colonial fiction including Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* surmises that only the morality and ethics of the village are real to the colonized. Their indifference to government and the regulation of the state is due to the fact that they have 'been accustomed to think of a central authority in terms of powerful, alien exploiters' (33). The border has been drawn by an aggressive foreign power in an unfamiliar foreign language. The complete, British Protectorate of Nigeria was only real—during the colonial era—to the British. An Igbo Nigerian recognized himself as ethnically and linguistically separate than another Nigerian citizen from the Hausa ethnic group; and both understood their relationship to the colonizing English.

Although Clara is excluded as an undesirable marriage option for Obi, she is not excluded as an Igbo. Linguistically she proves her ethnicity and her place as one of his group. It is interesting to look at Obi's courtship of Clara. Abroad in England, he attempts a cordial friendship with her in English, which for them provides dry and impersonal connotations. As they return on ship to Nigeria, however, he tries to initiate a more intimate relationship by engaging her in the Ibo language:

“Good morning,” he said, smiling broadly.

“Good morning,” she said, and made no pass.

“Thank you for the tablet,” he said in Ibo.

“Did they make you feel better?” she asked in English.<sup>31</sup>

Clara initially refuses to enter in an intimate conversation with Obi by remaining by invoking English. Diglossia defines the new national cultural identity for Nigerian subjects. This linguistic ambivalence allows Obi and Clara to divide their life-worlds in two. It allows them to maintain their ethnic identity as Igbos, but at same time participate in Nigerian national culture. The language of the Igbos borders and safe-guards their ethnic identity: to engage in Ibo is to demonstrate kinship and membership in this ethnic group. Both Clara and Obi are aware of this rule, and their courtship episode showcases this. Ultimately, Clara returns advances and develops a relationship with him that leads to engagement, only to be rejected by his family as an unsuitable. Clara is an *osu*, a member of a particular patrilineal line that is shunned by the village. She is not an example of a cultural other to the Igbo ethnic group, but rather she simply stands an undesirable variable within the culture.

In one other telling scene, Obi begins working as the secretary to a scholarship board which grants federal scholarships to worthy student candidates to study abroad. Before long, he is visited by a stranger, who introduces himself as Mr. Mark. The stranger has arrived to task for Obi's assistance, in the form of a bribe, in order to have his sister awarded the scholarship. Since they are in a government building with government and English professionals present, he, however, becomes uneasy about communicating his message. The official language of the country is English, but that of course leaves him vulnerable. It also shuts down any form of intimacy based on kinship or ethnic ties he could pull upon to secure his favor. However because of the English people present in the room with them, namely Miss Tomlinson, and the sensitivity

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<sup>31</sup> P. 29

of his subject, Mr. Mark is conscious about how he presents his case. He invokes language to navigate the dangerous waters of his situation: he initially engages Obi in English to greet him.

In our scene, Mr. Mark exercises a power that he consciously shares with Obi. It is the power to create ethnic borders using language. It allows him to open, close, and navigate between two worlds through the use of language. Unlike Mrs. Tomlinson who only has access to English—recognizing her language as the only legitimate language worth learning, the Igbo is not limited to only one mode of communication that might compromise his message. The native Igbo speaker communes between two worlds. Within the confine of this scene, Mr. Mark recognizes that there is a sphere for privacy, reserved for fellow Igbos, and a sphere for public exposure. As the colonizing language, English is spoken by both Africans and Europeans. It is also has the effect of undercutting the language barrier between the various ethnic tribes of Nigeria. Moreover, the shared language becomes a very public mode of communication. However Igbo is a language unique to the Igbo culture and its people. For Mr. Mark and various other Igbo speakers who use it the same way, the Igbo language becomes a private place—a retreat for the Igbo self from the prying ears of the English cultural other. Mr. Mark clearly speaks perfect English as evident by his introduction to Obi. He resorts to Igbo as both a necessity and a luxury. As a member of Igbo society, a culture which takes pride in its difference, Mr. Mark finds security in his native tongue. His apprehension about using English to communicate such a topic as shameful and illegal as bribery is evident in his action of whispering: “Words like *school certificate* and *scholarship*.”<sup>32</sup> English as the language of government is the language of the law. However Igbo recalls a common ethnic connection that existed before the colonial law, steeped in tradition and ancient customs. This diglossia is Mr.

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<sup>32</sup> P. 98

Mark's challenge to Obi to forsake his obligations to the colonial government for fellow Igbo and kin. English does not provide the same security. In this sense the Igbo language takes the form of a border put up by Igbos to communicate under the gaze of English hegemony.

In the conversation between Obi and Mr. Mark, language is used to initiate intimacy. English is played off as a cold, objective, and formal interaction. Igbo, on the hand, is personal and satisfying, signifying kinship and understanding. It is the reason and method behind why Mr. Mark others Miss Tomlinson is to establish kinship and familiarity with his fellow Igbo. By enclosing Obi and himself in this contained world of the mother tongue that Miss Tomlinson cannot penetrate with her English, Mr. Mark is reclaiming the physical space conquered by the British, linguistically. Nigeria can then be re-evaluated as an area of contention between Igbo, a native tongue, and the colonizing English: a struggle between others. And in order to emphasize this connection and set both of them in opposition to the English Other, Mr. Mark uses the Igbo language to reaffirm his shared status with Obi as Igbo subjects. Upon entering Obi's office, Mr. Mark notices Miss Tomlinson and is quickly started as he recognizes her as a threat to the imagined fraternity he shares with Obi. He side-steps this obstacle with not only the Igbo language, but also he does it with a rhetoric of inclusiveness.

The familiarity he assumes with Obi is also understood by Anderson's work. As soon as he initiates the Igbo language, he delves into the sad story of his sister's situation as if Obi's own experiences and perspective correlate with his own. Simply by virtue of their shared ethnicity, Obi is expected to understand and perform a favor in the name of an imagined fraternity. Mr. Mark remarks, "We are both Ibos and I cannot hide anything from you" (99). He says this confidently as if there are no secrets between Igbos; as if the Igbo language is a mutually shared safe zone away from the mutual enemy of the English Other. He continues to confide in Obi: "It



is all well sending in forms, but you know what our country is” (99). The rhetoric of inclusion continues as he juts in the inclusive “our country” into his speech. Mr. Mark falls into the same trap of nationalism that Anderson warns of, the trap of imagining and assuming that individuals in the same “space” have a similar understanding and experience of reality. All this comes even after Obi establishes that he “didn’t think [that Mr. Mark was even] Ibo” (98). It is the Igbo language that informs Obi of Mr. Mark’s identity as an Igbo. If either one had, for some reason, forgotten the Igbo tongue and spoke only English there would be nothing to connect them to each other, since there are many other black ethnic groups in Nigeria. They would simply pass each other on the street without being aware of their common Igbo heritage. Their cultural sameness depended on their shared language.

### Conclusion

Through the intersection of border and language, Farah and Achebe engage post-coloniality. It is difficult for any writer, subaltern or otherwise, to attempt or claim to capture the cultural consequence of colonial intervention in Africa without running the risk of essentializing a complex and multifaceted life-world. By pointing towards the central position that language has taken in post-colonial Africa, both writers excel at providing clues and hints at how individuals conceptualize the personal self and the national cultural body. In *Maps*, we encounter a national language without ecology. Despite the violence of maps, Farah demonstrates an ethnic culture vehemently maintaining itself through a singular language, with a border visible and recognized to its subject. This language allows its speakers to assert a claim on the territory that’s been denied to them by the rest of the world. The motif of the violence of and resistance also appears, less subtlety, in *No Longer at Ease*. In the Nigeria of the text, ethnic groups like the Igbos do not feel a genuine connection to the carved border and the official language of the

country. However, they recognize that it exists. This is where characters like Obi Okonkwo are useful in point to the new cultural identity of the Nigerian post-colony. Obi's diglossia allows him to acknowledge the external arbitrary border and participate in the new national identity. He, nonetheless, reaffirms his ethnicity and establishes difference away from that identity by code-switching to his ethnic Igbo language. As a marker of Igbo ethnicity, language permits Obi to recognize his own community from the various populations inhabiting the new Nigerian state. Like Somalia's singular language ethnicity, Nigeria's diglossia works against the violence of the post-colonial map. The difference between Nigerian's and Somali's approach to preserving ethnic integrity lies in that Nigeria's diglossia lends itself with a compromise between the past and the present. In this approach, Nigerians like Obi maintain their ethnic identity while operating in the new post-colonial work.

Somalia, on the other hand, has failed at this regard. Because of its reluctant demand and campaign to unite what no longer exists in the post-colonial world. Somalia has been less successful in posteriority. Farah takes issue with this in work, the motif of Somali citizenship rings throughout the text. Askar and Misra's relationship is greatly strained when Askar realizes that Misra will be unable to achieve the Somali citizenship that he greatly desires for both of them. When he achieves his citizenship in Mogadishu and asks Uncle Hilaal if Misra would be able to do the same, Farah pokes fun at the arbitrary ethnic link between language and border. Hilaal observes that, due to her fluency in the Somali language and physical similarity between Oromos and Somalis, Misra could easily attain citizenship. However, she does not have any Somali male kin to vouch for her. Hence her refugee status is more due to gender than ethnic ineligibility. The narrative allows Farah to maintain that the link between language and border is indeed an arbitrary coupling for ethnicity in the post-colonial Somalia. However it has emerged

as a ready and convenient method for individuals to react to the imposition of colonial intervention.

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#### **Pennsylvania Democratic Party**

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- Canvassed for Congresswoman Kathy Dahlkemper as part of PA Victory 2010
- Disseminated literature and information about the 2010 Democratic Party to citizens
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#### **Summer Research Opportunity Program (SROP)**

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The Ohio State University

- Conducted an independent research project in the English Department with Dr. Adeleke Adeeko
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#### **Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) SROP Conference 2010**

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