From Colonial Disruption to Diasporic Entanglements
Narrations of Igbo Identities in the Novels of Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chris Abani

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Abstract
With a general interest in Igbo identities, this study critically explores a set of questions which relate to the production, evolution and potential of ‘Igboness’ in literary fiction. The study approaches these questions while relying on two premises. First, it understands ‘Igbo identity’ as a highly transformative and heterogeneous category that exists in the plural. Secondly, it defines narratives as significant elements in (re)shaping and illuminating the meaning of Igbo identities. Therefore, the author of this study approaches Igbo identity as a construct created in narrative discourse and contends that to consider the question of what Igbo identity means is almost inevitably to consider what it means to write Igbo identity. While narrative construction of Igbo identities can be investigated in a wide range of texts, the present study limits its focus to Nigerian Anglophone novelistic writing and the select novels by Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chris Abani.

The overarching goal in the study is to bring narratologically informed readings to postcolonial literary studies, in a way which illuminates the dynamic between narrative form, socio-historical context and ideological content. Reading literary representations of Igbo identities from a postcolonial narratological perspective has a two-fold potential. First, it helps to understand how notions of Igbo identity result from the ways in which narrative forms reflect and refract the influences from the embedding contexts, on the one hand, and how they actively shape ideologies of the text, on the other. Secondly, the exploration of the relation between postcolonial poetics and the sociocultural, and thus the ideological in the text helps to bridge the gap between narratology and postcolonial literary criticism, in a way which provides evidence for narrative forms as variables sensitive to cultural and historical difference. While meeting these two aims, the study defines a notion of postcolonial poetics as poetics that brings together structures of narrative and an acute historical sensibility, and thus seeks to overcome the schism between reading African novels either as sociological accounts with little use of fictionalisation or as purely decorative and apolitical forms.

To achieve the above stated goals, the study focuses on Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1958), No Longer at Ease (1960) and Arrow of God (1964); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) and Americanah (2013); and Chris Abani’s GraceLand (2004) and The Virgin of Flames (2007). The literary analyses in this study thus range from the explorations of early postcolonial literary responses to colonial Orientalist discourses in the form of positive nativism; contemporary representations of Igbo identities as responses to a sense of ambiguity about the nation and an increasing imperative to question totalising discourses on tradition in post-independence Nigeria; to contemporary novels that examine Igbo identities from a transnational angle, in a way that destabilises colonial discourses of exotic and knowable African as well as early postcolonial discourses of reliable African identity. The analyses of these novels ultimately show how formal presentation of Igbo identities in fiction has never been far removed from wider questions of inequality in representation, social inclusion and exclusion, and domination and resistance.

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Snežana Vuletić
Mojoj porodici.
To my family.
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1 Introduction

“There is no better point of entry to the issue of the African intellectuals’ articulation of an African identity than through the reflections of our most powerful creative writers.” (Appiah, *In My Father’s House* 74)

The year 2017 marked the 50th anniversary of the declaration of the Republic of Biafra, an Igbo attempt to create an independent nation-state. The fact that many businesses in the Nigerian states of Anambra and Onitsha were closed on May 30th and that stay-at-home protests were organised in Enugu to commemorate the Igbo victims of the three-year war of Biafran independence testify to the continuing significance of Igbo identity. However, such displays of Igbo identification were perceived as a threat to ‘unified Nigeria’ and thus repeatedly met with determined opposition from the national government: In August 2017, Nigeria’s president Muhammadu Buhari proclaimed that “Nigeria’s unity is settled and not negotiable” and, in September 2017, the government sent the national army on Operation Python Dance II to put down “violent agitations by secessionist groups, among other crimes” (“Nigeria’s Old Wounds”). The tension generated by the commemoration of the Igbo nation illustrates the continuously controversial meaning of ‘Igboness.’

But what is Igbo identity? More precisely, what constitutes its meaning, how is this meaning shaped and sustained, and how has Igbo identity navigated through different historical and contemporary settings? Last but not least, what political valences do different notions of Igbo identity hold? These are the principal questions that motivate this study. Another driving force is the belief that part of the answer lies in narrative representations of Igbo identity: in ethnographic and historical accounts, travelogues, newspapers, literary narratives, etc. Under scrutiny in this study are, however, a set of Nigerian Anglophone novels which have significantly contributed to shaping and reshaping the meaning of ‘Igboness.’ Taking into account that my interest lies specifically in literary representations of Igbo identity, the observations and conclusions about the meaning of ‘Igboness’ that appear in this study are limited to what the novels considered make possible. I am not, in other words, claiming any authority in relation to what someone who identifies as Igbo – besides, perhaps, these three authors – might think or say.

The events around the Biafra anniversary suggest that, to understand the meaning of Igbo identity, we need to engage with the historical conditions of
its making. The strong relation implied between Igbo identity and the Republic of Biafra is telling of how social identities emerge in a particular timespace and, as such, become carriers of particular historical meaning. Reflecting on this, celebrated Nigerian Igbo writer Chinua Achebe remarked:

You can suddenly become aware of an identity which you have been suffering from for a long time without knowing. For instance, take the Igbo people. In my area, historically, they did not see themselves as Igbo. . . . And yet, after the experience of the Biafran War, during the period of two years, it became a very powerful consciousness. (qtd. in Appiah, In My Father’s House 177)

Taking the greater history into account, to trace the “invention” of Igbo identity is to return to the late 19th century, when European missionaries, traders and travellers referred to the diverse communities in the Bight of Biafra and its hinterland as ‘Igbo.’ Grouping the communities who initially saw themselves as independent peoples, an identity was fashioned that was further institutionally coded and legitimised during the British colonial rule (Onuoha 59). Since then, the contours of Igbo identity have been variously determined by the cultural nationalism of decolonisation in the 1950s, post-independence disillusionment in nationalist and nativist discourses, and, more recently, global migration and African diasporic formations.

It is no understatement to claim that narratives have played a notable role in defining Igbo identity in the singular and, subsequently, in challenging such a notion of Igbo identity in myriad ways. For example, late 19th-century accounts of the Igbo, which were predominately written by Christian missionaries of the British Church Missionary Society and the first European explorers, downplayed the evidence of cultural sophistication and social heterogeneity of the Igbo, and collectively depicted them as “heathen,” “primitive” and in need of “enlightenment” (Ajayi, Christian Missions; Ekechi; Tasie). According to Toyin Falola and Saheed Aderinto, missionary sources were “guided by racial stereotypes” rather than by any “genuine assessment of the situation on the ground” (15). Similar depictions of the Igbo are found in colonial administrative accounts. One such account is Governor-General Frederick Lugard’s Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa (1922), where the author explains that the British “are endeavouring to teach the native races to conduct their own affairs with justice and humanity, and to educate them alike in letters and in industry” (617). No less important are late 19th-century literary narratives, such as, for instance, Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1902 [1899]), where Africa’s indigenous peoples are portrayed as subject to “elevation” and “civilization.”

Such and similar narratives of the Igbo motivated a long and heterogeneous tradition of revisionist and reactive writing from Nigeria: from literature that sought to “recover” complex precolonial cultures, histories and identities as part of the 1950s and 1960s cultural nationalism, to post-independence literature that critically re-examined the role of indigenous
ethnic histories and traditions in postcolonial national settings, to, finally, 21st-century literature that explores the entanglements between indigenous ethnic cultural identities and other forms of identification. Such diverse literary discourses simultaneously emphasise the elusive meaning of ‘Igboness’ and the desire of textual representations to somehow define its meaning. Speaking about African identities more generally, Achebe described this condition as following:

African identity is still in the making. There isn’t a final identity that is African. But, at the same time, there is an identity coming into existence. And it has a certain context and a certain meaning. . . . I think it is part of the writer’s role to encourage the creation of an African identity. (qtd. in Appiah, In My Father’s House 173)

Achebe thus not only underlined that the set of meanings of African identities is infinite, but also asserted that fiction-writing plays a crucial role in realising some of those possible meanings of African identities through discursive construction.

Foregrounding, in this study, a diversity of literary constructions of Igbo identity, I argue against taking as given the idea that Igbo identity exists, that there is somewhere out there in the world a potential answer, a stable point of reference. Instead, I take fictional narratives not as spaces where some uncontroversial meaning of Igbo identity is “retrieved,” but as spaces where a range of workable meanings of Igbo identity is created in discourse. This reflects the study’s constructivist outlook on Igbo identities, which refuses to view Igbo identity as an objective or natural category. Put simply, I start from the premise that to understand Igbo identities means to tackle the question of representation. This shifts the focus away from the question of who the Igbo “really” are to what we know about the Igbo and how we know it. In other words, to consider the question of what Igbo identity means is almost inevitably to consider the question of what it means to write Igbo identity.

As indicated in the epigraph, Kwame Anthony Appiah understands African fiction as a privileged medium of inquiry into African identities. Appiah’s view is justified, insofar as African Anglophone fiction has sustained an immediate engagement with the historical conditions of the making of African identities ever since its first flourishing in the mid-20th century (Irele, “Parables of the African Condition” 69). The intimate link between Anglophone literature and history can be traced from the modern African novel that developed in the mid-20th century to “boldly challeng[e] untenable myths and stereotypes of Africa and Africans in the wider world” (EmenyGNU, “The African Novel” x) to contemporary literature that engages with themes of migration and globalisation to explore African identities that “mel[t] down and pou[r] into a field of ‘inter-subjectivity’ which is global in reach and polymorphous in shape” (Newell 186). The notion of African Anglophone literature that debunks the concept of ‘art for art’s sake’ and embraces the function of art as a socially relevant and vital force, makes Nige-
rian postcolonial literary texts highly productive points of entry into the framing and reframing of Igbo identities in changing historical contexts.

To tease out the specific role of Nigerian Anglophone literature vis-à-vis identity politics, it is necessary to clarify the notion of ‘postcolonial’ as conceptualised in this study. In line with Stuart Hall, I understand the postcolonial as primarily an ideological and not a temporal category. Hall questions how productive it is to think about the postcolonial in terms of epochal stages marked by moments of transition, “when everything is reversed . . . , all the old relations disappear for ever and entirely new ones come to replace them” (“When Was the ‘Post-Colonial’?” 247). The stagist notion of time tends to render invisible examples of continuity and entanglements, such as those embodied in the various forms of violence that represent the legacy of colonialism in postcolonial states,¹ or in the entangled identities in formerly colonised spaces.² Yet it is equally misleading to think that after decolonisation “everything has remained the same” and that colonisation “repeat[s] itself in perpetuity to the end of time” (Hall, When Was the ‘Post-Colonial’?” 252). For that reason, I adopt an approach to Nigerian Anglophone literature that is sensitive to conditions of both radical change and continuity, not only between colonial and postcolonial literary discourses, but also within Nigerian postcolonial literary discourse itself. Such an approach allows me to conceptualise postcolonial representations of Igbo identity not as a complete abandonment and repudiation of earlier (colonial and postcolonial) notions of Igbo identity, but rather as their strategic re-use, critical re-examination and, inevitably, proliferation.

To understand the framing and reframing of Igbo identity in Nigerian Anglophone literature, I rely on a narratological reading of texts, which effectively teases out the formal mechanisms that contribute to defining meaning in narrative. Rather than understanding formal strategies as structural features of a text only, it is much more productive to see them as active forces in organising, defining and delivering content in narrative. In this respect, this study is heavily indebted to Fredric Jameson’s concept of the “ideology of the form,” which suggests that formal strategies are ideology in disguise:

The study of the ideology of form is no doubt grounded on a technical and formalistic analysis in the narrower sense, even though, unlike much traditional formal analysis, it seeks to reveal the active presence within the text of a number of discontinuous and heterogeneous formal processes. But at the level of analysis in question here, a dialectical reversal has taken place in which it has become possible to grasp such formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological mes-

¹ For a discussion of the forms of violence in postcolonial states that represent the legacy of colonialism, see Mbembe On the Postcolony and Mamdani “Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities”.

² For the forms of racial and cultural entanglements in South Africa that emerged as results of the colonial contact, see Nuttall.
sages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works. (99)

As formal strategies are not simple vehicles of presentation, empty of content, but rather active agents in the shaping of content, achieving a fuller understanding of how meaning is created in narrative requires a critical reading of the forms through which that narrative is rendered. A narratological reading that assumes an intrinsic connection between form and content places centre-stage the question of the potential (and limitations) of aesthetic means of expression to frame and reframe the ways we think (about) Igbo identity.

More particularly still, in my narratological reading, I adhere to the common cultural-narratological conviction that there is an organic link between literature and culture. For example, expanding on Jameson’s notion of the “ideology of the form,” Ansgar Nünning suggests that narrative forms are not only highly semantised, but also “engaged in the process of cultural construction” ( “Surveying” 62). More precisely and in line with Paul Ricœur’s reasoning about literature (1984 [1983]), Nünning reconceptualises the relation between literature and reality from merely mimetic to intercessory: “[I]t is more rewarding to conceptualise narrative as an active force . . . , one that is involved in the actual generation of the ways of thinking and attitudes that stand behind historical development” (“Surveying” 61). In that sense, the formal properties of novels are intensely engaged with – as reflections and as active interventions in – the social and cultural norms, values and trends of the period in which those novels originated. A methodological consequence, for my study, of such cultural-narratological insights is that a close reading of the formal means of expression and the production of meaning in narrative must be supplemented by a contextual reading that takes into account the cultural and socio-political valences of narrative presentation.
1.1 Literature Overview

Despite some recent attempts to link narratology\(^3\) to some overtly socially and politically engaged fields in literary and cultural studies,\(^4\) African literary studies remains to a large extent dominated by critical readings which locate the sociocultural and ideological dimensions of a text in its theme(s). While acknowledging the notable contribution of such literary criticism to making sense of the expanding and increasingly complex African Anglophone literature, I argue that it is equally important (and fruitful) to examine narrative form, and not just content, for its entanglements with the extra-literary context and ideological underpinnings of a text. In doing so, I wholeheartedly embrace the notion that Divya Dwivedi, Henrik Nielsen and Richard Walsh put forth in *Narratology and Ideology: Negotiating Context, Form, and Theory in Postcolonial Narratives* (2018): that bringing narratologically informed readings to postcolonial literary studies is an opportunity to tease out a dynamic “in which the formal articulation of ideas, speech, and action in and through the literary work can also be a transformation of [socially relevant] meaning” (n. pag.).

A trend to favour thematic over formal readings can also be observed in the literary criticism on Nigerian Anglophone fiction. The number of critical texts reaching for theme as a way to understand the sociocultural and ideological dimensions of story worlds in Nigerian Anglophone novels boomed with the publication of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and has persisted to date, also in relation to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s and Chris Abani’s writing.\(^5\) In comparison, very few literary scholars have dedicated focused attention to the role of narrative organisation and mediation in the production of story worlds in Achebe’s, Adichie’s and Abani’s novels, and even fewer still to the contribution of narrative forms to representations of Igbo identities. Simon Gikandi expressed his concern that the formal mechanisms which inform Achebe’s narratives are “rarely examined, except on an elementary introductory level” (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 2). If Achebe’s novels have since been subject to some formal readings, Gikandi’s observation still certainly holds true for the increasingly popular writing of contemporary Nigerian authors Adichie and Abani.

\(^3\) Also known as a “science of narrative” (Todorov 10).

\(^4\) An overview of these attempts is provided in Chapter 3.

One can, however, identify some notable exceptions. In relation to Achebe’s novels, Simon Gikandi’s *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction* (1991) and David I. Ker’s chapters on Achebe in *The African Novel and the Modernist Tradition* (1997) provide illuminating discussions of the semiotic and narrative strategies in Achebe’s trilogy⁶ and have, as such, inspired other highly relevant critical readings of Achebe’s writing in terms of its formal dimension. Among those, I must mention Carey Snyder’s “The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Ethnographic Readings: Narrative Complexity in *Things Fall Apart*” (2008), Abiola Irele’s “The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” (2009) and Nicholas Brown’s “Chinua Achebe and the Politics of Form” (2011), which offer astute readings of the political ramifications, for the representation of the Igbo in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, of Achebe’s usage of the narrating instance. Balanced formal and thematic readings of Adichie’s and Abani’s novels, on the other hand, can be found in shorter yet insightful critical texts, such as Amanda Aycock’s “Becoming Black and Elvis: Transnational and Performative Identity in the Novels of Chris Abani” (2009), Christopher E. Ouma’s “Chronotopicity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*” (2012), Aghogho Akpome’s “Focalisation and Polyvocality in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*” (2013), and Madhu Krishnan’s “On National Culture and the Projective Past: Mythology, Nationalism, and the Heritage of Biafra in Contemporary Nigerian Narrative” (2013).

With their detailed inspection of the intersections between narrative form, socio-historical context and ideological content, these critical contributions provide valuable incentives for probing the multifaceted and dynamic relation between narrative form and representations of Igbo identities in Achebe’s, Adichie’s and Abani’s novels. However, there is, as of yet, no book-length study which foregrounds and subjects to sustained critical scrutiny the ways in which narrative forms in Achebe’s, Adichie’s and Abani’s novels manage their entanglement with the embedding socio-historical contexts and their inherent potential to facilitate a whole range of representations of Igbo identity. My study seeks to push this line of research forward by demonstrating the potential and benefits of reading literary representations of Igbo identities from a postcolonial narratological perspective. In other words, my study fills some of the gaps in as well as advances the existing formal criticism on Achebe’s, Adichie’s and Abani’s writing by interlacing postcolonial criticism with narratological reading to understand how representations of Igbo identity result from the ways in which narrative forms reflect and refract the influences from the embedding contexts, on the one hand, and how they actively shape ideologies of the text, on the other.

At the same time, the exploration of the relation between postcolonial poetics and the sociocultural, and thus the ideological in the text makes my

study a useful contribution to the emerging trend in narrative studies of bridging the gap between narratology and postcolonial literary criticism. To my knowledge, there is no book-length study in the field of cultural narratology, or its sub-field of postcolonial narratology, that explores the sociocultural and ideological dimensions of the formal presentations of postcolonial identities from Nigerian Anglophone literary perspective(s). A somewhat comparable attempt, albeit in diasporic Indian Anglophone literature and much smaller in scope, is Monika Fludernik’s “When the Self is an Other” (1999), where the author examines some possible formal means of representation of postcolonial identities. Examining writers as diverse as Achebe, Adichie and Abani, my study offers a focused and detailed analysis of the heterogeneous forms and functions of narrative forms in Nigerian Anglophone literature, in a way which provides further evidence for Fludernik’s claim that narrative forms are variables sensitive to cultural and historical difference, or, in other words, that narrative forms are not universal categories whose meaning, currency and validity are held as uncontroversial (“Narrative Forms”).
1.2 Aims and Outline of this Study

Distilling the most essential ideas presented in the previous section, one can say that this study has two principal aims: First, it seeks to conceptualise an approach to literary representations of Igbo identities that accounts for a close link between narrative form, ideological content and socio-historical context. An important step toward this aim, to be undertaken in Chapter 2, entails addressing the discursive character of African social identities more generally. This allows me to contemplate not only on the role of fictional narratives in the production of African identities, but also on those narratives’ sociocultural dimensions and political valences. Another important step, undertaken in Chapter 3, is to address the narrative forms analysed in this study as facilitators of the narrative emplotments of African social identities, more generally, and Igbo identities, more particularly, that question, undermine or debunk ordinarily available and commonly circulating emplotments. The underlying assumption in these two chapters is that narrations of African identities are constitutive of cultural practices which reflect and actively act upon the circulating visions of social reality. As a result, the relationship between literary representations of identities and extra-literary contexts is bidirectional: The context affects literary presentations as much as literary presentations affect the ways in which extra-literary reality is perceived. Secondly, the study explores the particular contribution Achebe’s, Adichie’s and Abani’s novels have made to producing, (re)negotiating and challenging notions of Igbo identity. This undertaking, in which I engage in Chapters 4 to 6, will ultimately provide a deeper insight into how narrative forms in Nigerian Anglophone novels embody ideologies of resistance and plurality across time and in relation to different sociocultural contexts.

To meet these aims, this study focuses on selected novels by three authors who are commonly perceived, nationally as well as globally, as representative of Nigerian Anglophone literary tradition: Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chris Abani. My choice of authors is motivated by two main reasons. First, Achebe, Adichie and Abani are not only of Igbo origin, but are also deeply preoccupied with Igbo cultural heritage in their writing: For example, Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1958), Arrow of God (1964) and No Longer at Ease (1960) rely significantly on Igbo histories, cultures and identities as a means to make sense of the colonial past and the national future; Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus (2003), Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) and Americanah (2013) explore the meaning of symbolic and material Igbo legacy in Nigeria’s culturally and socially dynamic urban spaces; and Abani’s GraceLand (2004), Song for Night (2007) and The Virgin of Flames (2007) examine the role of Igbo traditions in contexts of political violence, economic precariousness, war, transnational migration and diasporic dispersal. Through such fictional explorations, Achebe, Adichie and Abani substantially contribute to framing and reframing what it means to ‘be Igbo’ in different socio-historical contexts. Secondly, Adichie’s and Abani’s writing is in many respects indebted to Achebe’s early fiction. Not only have Adichie and
Abani openly addressed their literary relation to Achebe, but a number of scholars have critically discussed the multiple forms in which Achebe’s legacy figures in Adichie’s and Abani’s writing. For that reason, an exploration of these three authors’ oeuvres under a common interpretive framework is particularly suited to teasing out how the strategic re-use and critical re-examination of the inherited notions of Igbo identity produce continuities as well as tensions and ruptures in the Nigerian literary tradition.

While the reasons for my choice of Nigerian Anglophone writers are their active engagement with the meaning of ‘Igboness’ and strong intergenerational resonances, my choice of particular novels by these writers is motivated by a diversity of socio-historical contexts and discourses in which those novels intervene. In Chapter 4, I read Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease* as examples of modern African writing which looks at Igbo tradition in a way that creates a different order of reality, in which the Igbo are portrayed on their own terms and not through the colonial lens that cast them in the role of retrograde and passive other. In Chapter 5, I read Abani’s *GraceLand* and Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* as novels with a strong revisionist agenda directed against the totalising notions of tradition and nation that render invisible the marked heterogeneity of postcolonial experiences of ‘being Igbo.’ Finally, in Chapter 6, I read Adichie’s *Americanah* and Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames* as novels which overtly move away from the notions of nation and cultural authenticity that have haunted Nigerian literary tradition since Achebe, and toward the explorations of historical, cultural and racial entanglements that shed a new light on the meaning of Igbo identity in Africa as well as in the African diaspora. This choice of novels underlines the heterogeneity that marks Nigerian Anglophone writing, the heterogeneity that, to anticipate my argument, is reflected both in the novels’ thematic as well as formal presentation of ‘Igboness.’

The point of departure in Chapter 2 is, in the widest sense, a discussion of narrative representations of African identities. More precisely, in Chapter 2.1, I use poststructuralist, postmodernist and postcolonial critical interventions as tools for conceptualising narrative representation in relation to discourse and power, in a way that foregrounds cultural and political dimensions of the African identities as defined in colonial and postcolonial discourses. I maintain that narratives of African identities are systems of signification deeply implicated in social practices of representation, meaning-making and power relations as shaped by colonial and postcolonial contacts between different African and Western agents. Building on the notion of narratives as significant elements in the acts of representation, meaning-

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7 See Adichie “African ‘Authenticity’ and the Biafran Experience” and “We Remember Differently,” and Abani “Chinua Achebe: My Complicated Literary Father” and “Our Living Ancestor”.

8 See Boehmer “Achebe and His Influence”; Whittaker; Tunca “Appropriating Achebe”; Ogude; Ejikeme.
making and power negotiation, Chapter 2.2 explores the potential of (literary) narratives to (re)negotiate culturally circulating notions of African identities and to generate new ones. Assigning (literary) narratives a relational and generative character vis-à-vis extra-literary reality, I argue that postcolonial narratives are particularly apt tools for constructing contesting African identities that disrupt dominant perceptions of social reality.

While Chapter 2 offers a theoretical means to conceptualise postcolonial representations of African identities, Chapter 3 outlines a methodology for critically reading the narrative forms that facilitate those representations, particularly in literary discourse. To achieve this, Chapter 3 proceeds in two steps. In Chapter 3.1, I invoke arguments from cultural narratology to establish the benefits (or, rather, necessity) of close reading for the formal means of expression in postcolonial narratives in light of socio-historical developments and ideology. An important argument in this chapter is that a particular usage of narrative forms in postcolonial fiction expands our understanding of these forms, in a way that opens up the possibility to fully acknowledge the uniqueness and innovation of postcolonial writing. Chapter 3.2 continues the discussion of a narratologically informed close reading of novels that is mindful of postcolonial conditions and concerns by providing a more detailed overview of particular formal strategies as facilitators of the narrative emplotments that challenge dominant representations of African identities. I discuss exactly how formal strategies, while responding to the changing socio-historical contexts and different dominant discourses on African identities, contribute to variously defining African identities in postcolonial fiction: from coherent and readily-available categories to elusive, inconclusive and contested ones.

In Chapters 4 to 6, critical analyses of the selected novels by Achebe, Adichie and Abani become the primary focus. Each of these chapters begins with an introduction, which provides historical grounding for the literary readings that follow, and closes with a brief conclusion, which links more closely the results of the literary readings to the previously outlined historical contexts and embedding discourses. More precisely, the introduction to Chapter 4 discusses colonial Orientalist discourses, which contributed to the production of a ‘primitive’ and ‘static’ African, and early postcolonial responses to such discourses in the form of positive nativism, whose underlying thrust was the rehabilitation of Africa’s abused humanity and history. The introduction to Chapter 5 reflects on the fate of grand explanatory narratives of nation and tradition as foundations for Igbo identities in post-independence Nigeria, a country hampered by ambiguity about the nation and distrust in totalising discourses on tradition. Finally, the introduction to Chapter 6 addresses contemporary experiences of globalisation and migration as conditions radically redefining ways of thinking and experiencing ‘Igboness’ by inviting us to navigate through complex diasporic entanglements in order to better understand the sites of conjuncture between ethnic Igbo identity and other forms of social identification. The three introductions
thus address some of the most significant trajectories that have historically affected the (re)invention of Igbo identity: the colonial disruption and early postcolonial attempts to fashion an autonomous and liberated Igbo subject; the crumbling of faith, since independence, in nationalist and nativist discourses that equally essentialise collective identities; and transnational and diasporic social and cultural trajectories that fragment and destabilise unified ethnic and cultural identities.

Having sketched larger historical and discursive formations as frames for Achebe’s, Adichie’s and Abani’s novels, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 subsequently turn to investigating the contribution of individual novels to problematising, reframing and/or debunking dominant notions of Igbo identity. In Chapters 4.1 and 4.2, I scrutinise Achebe’s Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God for the ways in which their narrative strategies facilitate narratives of Igbo identity that radically disrupt colonial representations of the devilish, child-like and simple-minded ‘Other.’ In Chapter 4.3, I focus on the character perspective structure in No Longer at Ease as a means with which Achebe explores the plurality of possible national futures for Nigeria and their concomitant visions of the place of ethnic Igbo culture and identity.

In Chapter 5, I turn to Abani’s and Adichie’s novels which address the failure of totalising discourses of tradition and nation to offer satisfactory frameworks for making sense of heterogeneous and, at times, contradictory experiences of ‘being Igbo’ in post-independence Nigeria. Both of the novels analysed in this chapter – Abani’s GraceLand and Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun – express strong opposition to the nativist and nationalist discourses that construct coherent and reliable collective identities. Chapter 5.1 focuses on Abani’s use, in GraceLand, of parallel and embedded narratives as a means to stage a confrontation between different discourses of Igbo tradition, a confrontation that emphasises the limitations of totalising conceptions of tradition in the process of reproducing a sense of cultural identity. Chapter 5.2, on the other hand, discusses Adichie’s use, in Half of a Yellow Sun, of multiple character focalisation as an agent of a fragmentation of the history of Biafra into the plurality of personal stories which suggest new ways of emplotting Igbo identities. The analysis of these two novels ultimately reveals a shift in writing Igbo identity, away from coherent and reliable representations to postmodern explorations of the fissures, slippages and inconsistencies involved in the making of Igbo identities in post-independence states of crisis.

The analytical section of the study ends with Chapter 6, which deals with Adichie’s and Abani’s novels that are (largely) set in the African American diaspora. The chapter focuses on Adichie’s Americanah and Abani’s The Virgin of Flames, both of which usher in new conceptualisations of Igbo identities in the age of globalisation and ever-growing African diasporic formations. Chapter 6.1 engages with Adichie’s use of fragmented yet interconnected space in Americanah as a way to capture the multidimensional and translocal nature of ‘Igboness’ in an age of heightened mobility, and
historical, social and cultural entanglements within and outside of Africa. While Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames* also explores the trajectory of individual Igbo identity in the diasporic context, it foregrounds the experiences of disrupted cultural transfer and dislocation. Chapter 6.2, therefore, predominantly focuses on how Abani manipulates narrative time to evoke a sense of continuity and discontinuity in the protagonist’s identification as Igbo, and thus ask what ethnic Igbo identity means and how one (re)constructs a sense of it in the multicultural global context. My critical explorations of these two novels identify an emerging trend in Nigerian Anglophone novelistic writing toward searching for a new paradigm for thinking about Igbo identities, by abandoning the Orientalist logic which operates on the notion of difference and turning to globally shared phenomena as a ground for establishing contemporary meanings of ‘being Igbo.’
2 Postcolonial African Studies and Narrative Representations of African Identities

In “How to Write about Africa,” Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina satirically advises writers of African literature to always use the word ‘Africa’ or ‘Darkness’ or ‘Safari’ in your title. Subtitles may include the words ‘Zanzibar,’ ‘Masai,’ ‘Zulu,’ ‘Zambezi,’ ‘Congo,’ ‘Nile,’ ‘Big,’ ‘Sky,’ ‘Shadow,’ ‘Drum,’ ‘Sun’ or ‘Bygone.’ Also useful are words such as ‘Guerrillas,’ ‘Timeless,’ ‘Primordial’ and ‘Tribal.’ Note that ‘People’ means Africans who are not black, while ‘The People’ means black Africans.

Wainaina thus raises the question of representation of Africa. The Africa that he invokes is that of radical difference, conflict, the exotic, the natural and the authentic; the Africa that originated in the mid-19th century and that continues to persist in Europe and North America thanks to its circulation in film, television, the news media and popular culture (Krishnan, Contemporary African Literature in English 1). At the same time, much of African literature resists such an essentialist understanding of the continent, portraying instead Africa in transformation, Africa as actively participating in global social and cultural trends and Africa as a place of diverse forms of life. Those contesting visions of Africa are testimonies to the centuries-long struggle over the representation of ‘the Orient’ – metonymically standing in for the non-Western world – that has been characterised by two opposing forces: a strong impetus to define ‘the Orient’ as a “place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes” (Said, Orientalism 1) and an even stronger impetus to assert an alternative version of ‘the Orient’ that questions and subverts the Western one.

To unpack and address in greater detail the question of representation and African identities, this chapter proceeds as follows. In the first sub-section, it draws on poststructuralist insights about discourse, representation and power to tease out the social dimension of the African identities that have been shaped by colonial and postcolonial contacts between different African and Western agents. The second sub-section explores the relation between narrative and identity, with the aim to examine the potential of (literary) narratives to engender, negotiate and challenge notions of identity. Proceeding in these two steps, this chapter approaches Nigerian Anglophone writing as a practice deeply informed by its historical contexts, heavily invested in its
respect respective socio-political questions and highly significant in negotiating notions of Igbo identity, both in its individual and collective sense.

2.1 Poststructuralist Considerations in African Studies and the Question of Identity

A crucial step that the African intellectual has taken in their struggle to challenge Western representations of Africa is to denaturalise those representations, i.e. to uncover the socially constructed nature of Western notions of Africa that present themselves as naturally given and inherently rational. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza writes that “[o]ne of the most important aspects of Africa’s representation lies not in its invention per se . . . but in the fact that Africa is always imagined, represented and performed as a reality or a fiction in relation to master references – Europe, Whiteness, Christianity, Literacy, Development, Technology” (“The Inventions” 16). Suggesting that Africa is shaped through imagination, representation and performance, Zeleza denaturalises Africa and rids it of primordial authenticity and essentialism. He also adds that the given master references “reflect, indeed refract Africa in peculiar ways, reducing the continent to particular images, to a state of lack” (“The Inventions” 16). Underlining that “understanding” Africa has historically meant defining what Africa is not, or what it is imagined to radically differ from, Zeleza highlights the relational meaning of ‘Africanness.’ Zeleza’s work thus shifts the focus away from what Africa is to how Africa becomes.

Zeleza’s critical understanding of Africa strongly recalls the argument that Valentin-Yves Mudimbe put forth in The Invention of Africa (1988) and The Idea of Africa (1994), where he discussed the production of Africa through Western categories and conceptual systems. According to Mudimbe, “[a]lthough in African history the colonial experience represents but a brief moment from the perspective of today, this moment is still charged and controversial, since . . . it signified a new historical form and the possibility of radically new types of discourses on African traditions and cultures” (The Invention of Africa 14). Mudimbe went on to explain how, whether through visual art, anthropological or economy-oriented discourses of modernisation and development, the West trivialised African traditional modes of life and its spiritual frameworks, to the effect that Africa became an object of naming and of the analysis of alterity (The Invention of Africa 17, 22). This notion of Africa, Mudimbe concluded, reflected a particular Western epistemological ordering: a process of “understanding and looking at signs in terms of the arrangement of identities and differences into ordered tables” (The Invention of Africa 22). For Mudimbe, therefore, there is no underlying meaning or truth to Africa. Rather, Africa represents what Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall called a “sign in modern formations of knowledge” (348).
Zeleza’s and Mudimbe’s views of Africa are largely indebted to poststructuralism, which traces meaning to linguistic, textual and discursive practices, and explores the social, cultural and political dimensions of that meaning. If Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths define identity as “[people’s] understanding about themselves, their relationship to each other and their place in the world” (Post-Colonial Studies 58), poststructuralist criticism suggests that the way we perceive ourselves, our relationship to others and our place in the world are shaped by the social processes and practices that are embedded in particular discursive fields where language, power relations and social institutions meet (de Lauretis; Weedon; Jackson). Poststructuralism thus invites “a shift from notions of innate consciousness to a strategy of locating the subject in a system of external relations [and] . . . collectively shared symbols” (Dunn 389). One of the consequences of moving the discussion about Africa and African identities to the realm of text and discourse as well as to the domain of the social is the possibility to examine those categories in relation to representation, social meaning-making and power struggle.

Michel Foucault’s insights about discourse and social meaning-making are particularly useful in uncovering the social dimension of African identities. In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault argued that the meaning of objects and practices is constructed in discourse, whereby discourse denotes a “group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic” (Hall, “The Work of Representation” 29). In other words, social reality is knowable through discourse, which, if taken to its logical albeit extreme conclusion, implies that nothing meaningful can exist outside of discourse (Danaher et al.). However, Foucault did not mean to thus deny the existence of the physical world, but rather to argue that the meaning of things and practices is never intrinsic, but defined through social mechanisms of meaning-making. The implication of this argument for identity is that our sense of self and our relations to others are always deeply entwined with the social production, negotiation and dissemination of meaning in discourse. Establishing a strong link between identity and discourse means that no identity is transparent and neutral, but always historically contingent, socially constructed and, thus, contentious and problematic. Understanding identity in this way distances us from modernist or liberal-humanist reading of African identities as an expression of some unique, fixed and coherent essence, and keeps us alert to their historically-specific social and cultural dimensions.

Foucault’s claims about discourse played a central role in the emergence of postcolonial studies insofar as they provided the basis for Edward Said’s Orientalism (2003 [1978]), which addresses the strategies that enabled the cultural domination of ‘the Occident’ over ‘the Orient.’ In Orientalism, Said demonstrated how, through the circulation of discourse, ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’ were constructed as radically different and unequal, with ‘the Occident’ constructed as superior to ‘the Orient.’ More importantly, Said dis-
cussed how this difference was “less a fact of nature than . . . a fact of human production” (“Orientalism Reconsidered” 90). Insisting on the role of “elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts” in defining ‘the Orient,’ Said put forth the idea that “there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation” (Orientalism 21). This representation, Said continued in Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient, enabled the West to “explain the behaviour of Orientals,” “supply Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere,” and, most importantly, “see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics” (Orientalism: Western Concepts 41-42). Such representations ultimately facilitated particular ways of dealing with ‘the Orient’: “dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it settling it, ruling over it” (Orientalism 3). Said’s studies on Orientalism thus denaturalised Western representations of the non-West, while also making obvious their immense power to shape visions of social reality.

Underlying Said’s reading of the relationship between ‘the Occident’ and ‘the Orient’ is Foucault’s idea that placing human subjects in relations of production and signification necessarily means implicating those subjects in complex power relations (“The Subject and Power” 778). Embedded in discourse, representations are reflective of how the given discourse “rules in” certain ways of talking about a topic and “rules out,” limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it” (Hall, “The Work of Representation” 29). Representations are, therefore, telling of “who has the power, in what channels, to circulate which meanings to whom” (Hall, “The Work of Representation” 14). In that sense, the meaning that is shaped in representation is never a result of a faithful rendering of reality. Instead, it is a product of the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, or domination and subjection, aimed at sustaining a certain regime of knowledge that, in turn, rationalises those established forms of exclusion, inclusion, domination and subjection. In the context of Africa, Mudimbe made the connection between representation, knowledge and power obvious when he remarked that “at the end of the nineteenth century a ‘colonial library’ begins to take shape, . . . a body of knowledge constructed with the explicit purpose of faithfully translating and deciphering the African object” (The Idea of Africa xii). This body of knowledge, Mudimbe went on, “fulfilled a political project in which, supposedly, the object unveils its being, its secrets, and its potential to a master who could, finally, domesticate it” (The Idea of Africa xii).

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9 Said’s theory of orientalism has, however, been subject to severe criticism on several grounds: Amil (1985) and Ahmad (1992) claim that Said’s eclecticism leads to various kinds of inflation, conflation and misconstruction; Behdad (1994) maintains that Said paid inadequate attention to the complexities of power relations between the orientalist and ‘the Orient’; and Irwin (2006) and Warraq (2007) refer to various Western intellectual accounts of ‘the Orient’ to dispute Said’s oversimplified and, according to the authors, false notion of Western civilisation as racist, xenophobic and self-conceited.
At the same time, it is important to understand that Western colonial representations of the non-West were not mere caricatures. Representing ignorance disguised as a sort of “positive knowledge” (Said, *Power, Politics, and Culture* 25), those representations exercised power, not only through positioning a subject or set of peoples as the ‘Other’ of a dominant discourse, but also through making the non-Western peoples see and experience themselves as ‘Other.’ As Hall explains, “[i]t is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that ‘knowledge’, not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 256). The phenomenological and psychological effects of the colonial experience that “cripple and de-form” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 256) are discussed at length in Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986 [1952]) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963 [1961]), which show how the internalisation of externally-produced knowledge repeated and perpetuated dominance and oppression, leaving a devastating mark on colonised subjects.

In these processes of producing, legitimising and disseminating particular notions of social reality and their concomitant visions of identity, the importance of narratives cannot be overemphasised. As Said observed, narratives are “an integral, and not merely an accessory, part of the social processes of differentiation, exclusion, incorporation, and rule” (*The World, the Text, and the Critic* 215). Cases in point are not only colonial travel narratives, missionary accounts and ethnographic studies that disseminated the idea of the African as primitive and backward, but also contemporary travelogues, newspaper articles and development aid handbooks that perpetuate the view of Africa as “hopelessly imprisoned in its past, trapped [in] a vicious cycle of underdevelopment, and held hostage to corrupt institutions” (Gikandi, “Foreword” 9). Colonial narratives generated and disseminated a coherent story of Africa as “nonhistorical part of the world” (Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* 92), or, rather, as a non-story turned into a story with the arrival of Western civilisation. The West thus not only consolidated its regimes of representation, but also legitimised its economic, political and cultural interventions on the continent.

In the contemporary context, on the other hand, Western narratives about Africa often reflect the continuous attempts of the West to fit Africa into its own conceptual frameworks and to legitimise its own visions of Africa’s place on the world stage. A good example is the rhetoric of catastrophe in British and American news coverage of recent events in African history: Whereas the *Guardian* released an article on April 3rd, 2018 about the violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo with a headline “The Wars Will Never Stop – Millions Flee Bloodshed as Congo Falls Apart,” on the other side of the Atlantic, the *New York Times* addressed climate change in Kenya under the headline “Hotter, Drier, Hungrier” on March 12th, 2018. These and similar narratives of Africa implicitly yet effectively portray the West as
“wiser and more just,” whose intervention and guidance holds the potential to save Africa from itself (Krishnan, *Contemporary African Literature in English* 10).

Yet to fully understand how notions of African identities are produced, it is not sufficient to engage only with Western discursive mechanisms. It is equally necessary to understand the ways in which diverse populations of Africa have engaged and continue to engage with hegemonic, oversimplifying discourses on Africa. On the one hand, it is undeniable that, through representing the African as “half-devil and half-child” at the time of colonialism (Kipling) and Africa as a “place of exotic fascination and unspeakable suffering” in the contemporary age (Krishnan, *Contemporary African Literature in English* 8), the West has committed against Africa what Gayatri Spivak called “epistemic violence” (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 127).

On the other hand, African peoples have hardly remained passive in response. As Simon Gikandi explains in “Cultural Translation,” instead of focussing solely on what has been done to the African continent, understood as a passive repository of imposed values, it is vitally important to consider the ways in which actors and agents from the continent have worked within an evolving system of representation to create alternative visions of self. Hence, instead of perceiving African identities as defined only through subjection to hegemonic discourses from outside, I approach those identities as results of a complex process in which African subjects are variously positioned by the normalising power of discourses and in which they negotiate their particular positions within those discourses. One way in which this complex process has been navigated is through literatures in indigenous and European languages that explicate and define African identities in different terms but, ironically, with these hegemonic discourses as their condition of possibility.

However, what Said called “ideological resistance”10 did not always adhere to the poststructuralist idea of fragmented, unstable and ultimately unsustainable subject, whose origins are traced to the French intellectual tradition of the late 1960s. Rather, as testified by Negritude in the 1930s, Pan-Africanism in the 1950s and 1960s, Afrocentrism in the 1980s and 1990s, and Afropolitanism at the turn of the 21st century, African ideological resistance has entertained a range of different (and at times mutually contradictory) ideas, such as those of a known, continuous and reliable modern and liberated African subject in the age of anti-colonial nationalism, to a hybrid, fragmented and shifting African subject in the contemporary age of transnational migration and globalisation. Therefore, scholars have often questioned the validity of European critical frameworks for African studies, a largely empirical discipline dedicated to facilitating the continent’s cultural, eco-

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10 In “Resistance, Opposition and Representation,” Said stated that an equally important form of decolonisation as physical resistance to the coloniser is ideological resistance, “when efforts are made to reconstitute a ‘shattered community,’ to save or restore the sense and fact of community against all the pressures of the colonial system” (95).
nomic and political developments (Gikandi, “Cultural Translation” 3; Zeleza, “The Politics” 22). To address this question properly, it is necessary to acknowledge the specific appeal of poststructuralism for the African intellectual: not as a critique of structuralism, but as “a method of deconstructing existing traditions of Western thought and culture” as embodied, in particular, in anthropological, ethnographic and literary discourses (Gikandi, “Poststructuralism” 113).

In the age of cultural nationalism, which peaked in West Africa in the early 1960s and gave rise to some of the earliest prominent writing in English, the ambition to dissect, dismantle and question the validity and authority of Western narrative representations existed alongside the ambition to fashion an autonomous and liberated African subject and a grand narrative of African history that would be written by Africans themselves (Marzagora 161-162). In the attempt to “reclaim African autonomy and authenticity, rebuild African power and productivity, and rehabilitate Africa’s abused humanity and history” (Zeleza, “The Troubled Encounter” 111), precolonial African cultures were taken as repositories of authenticity, sources of individual and collective empowerment, and tools against colonial alienation. That gave shape to a politics of nativism that promoted a return to the precolonial past to define the contours of the future, free nation. In that sense, the nativist fashioning of postcolonial African identities, with its roots in precolonial Africa, was inherently entangled with the poststructuralist revelation of the constructed or ‘unnatural’ character of the symbolic and material legacies of Western colonialism. Postcolonial representations of African identities thus, at the same time, helped to constitute the modern African subject and uncovered the brutality and limitations of Western narrative representations in relation to African social realities.

In the 1970s and 1980s, decades marked by the failure of de-colonial nationalism to offer a satisfying structuring framework for postcolonial African realities, postmodern and poststructuralist ways of thinking started to gain wider currency. Civil wars, migration and exile radically challenged the nationalist paradigm in former British Africa, and ultimately left an indelible mark on discourses on African identity as well. Those discourses saw a shift from “excavating” precolonial African identities to proposing a conception of identity that emphasised difference and hybridity over the homogeneity promoted by the nation-state. The nativist emphasis on identity as “fixed, sure-footed, clearly defined” was replaced by a view of identities in the plural and as “less assured, multiple and even contradictory” (Kashope Wright 16). This conception of African identity confirms Hall’s observation that the advent of postmodernism and poststructuralism made the subject, which was “previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity,” become perceived as increasingly “fragmented; composed, not of a single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities” (“The Question” 276-277). Such a shift in thinking African identity gave rise to a new, postmodern notion of African subject as a “moveable feast” and as “formed and
transformed continuously”; a notion that ultimately rendered “the fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity” a mere fantasy (Hall, “The Question” 277).

The notion of African identities as socially constructed, infinitely transformative and inherently complex has gained particularly prominence in the 21st-century Afropolitan explorations of the connections, similarities and entanglements between Africa and the rest of the world. Massive migrations of Africans to other continents, intense cultural flows within as well as between Africa and other places, and the resulting deterritorialisation of ethnic and national communities have led to a radical questioning, in a postmodernist vein, of originary African identity, cultural purity and the significance of African traditions in a highly dynamic world. Yet they have also inspired contemporary postcolonial revisions of the assumption that Africa is a world fundamentally and uniquely different from other worlds. Mbembe, who is one of the most enthusiastic advocates of the ‘posts’ in African scholarship (Marzagora 162), invokes the fact that “Africa has been a major platform and also an agent in the making of the modern world order,” to ultimately arrive at a conclusion that “what it [Africa] is can hardly be understood outside of its entanglement with multiple elsewheres” (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 31). In the light of Mbembe’s view of Africa as a place of “global networks and worldly hybridities” (Balakrishnan, “The Afropolitan Idea”) and Africans as highly mobile subjects who “encounter, negotiate, mediate, make claims on, and give shape” to global social and cultural influences (Skinner 11), the African subject emerges as undeniably and deeply invested, together with the rest of the world, in the contemporary phenomena of globalisation and transnationalism. Afropolitan discourse thus shifts the focus away from African identities as irreconcilably different toward deconstructing African identities in search of “the frontiers of commonality and the potential of sameness-as-worldliness” (Nuttall and Mbembe 351).

It has been shown thus far how poststructuralist, postmodern and postcolonial approaches have been differently mobilised in the field of African studies to foreground the discursive character of African identities and thus shift the attention to their sociocultural dimensions and political valences. The notion of African identities as discursively produced is invaluable in the rest of this study insofar as it focuses my critical attention on the notions of Igbo identity as they are produced, negotiated and challenged in literary narratives. Taking into account the literary focus in this study, we must now examine the role that (literary) narratives play in producing, contesting and circulating notions of identity. While the present sub-section has shed some light on the relation between representation, discourse and power in (post)colonial African contexts, the following sub-section aims to tease out the potential of (literary) narratives in relation to identity. The main argument is that, as systems of signification deeply implicated in social practices of representation, meaning-making and power relations, (literary) narratives
(re)frame notions of identity in complex conjunction with extra-literary reality.
2.2 Identity and/in (Literary) Narrative

Jerome Bruner announced that “in the end, we *become* the . . . narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (“Life as Narrative” 15). If Bruner’s position might appear somewhat extreme, it is indeed reflective of strong constructivist and poststructuralist tendencies in contemporary narrative philosophy and psychology, where identities are no longer seen as “sets of characteristics that can be ascribed to individuals or manifestations of individual essences,” but as emerging “through semiotic processes in which people construct images of themselves and others” (De Fina 351). If it has failed to convince some, Bruner’s famous statement is certainly effective as a trigger for a critical dialogue on the significance and potentialities of narrative in fashioning the self.

Narratives are commonly regarded as highly effective (if not crucial) means of fashioning individual and collective identities. One reason for this is the potential of narrative structures to temporally organise events into coherent stories, which in turn ascribe significance to those events (Bruner “Life as Narrative”; Mink; Polkinghorne; Dennett). For example, Ignacio Brescó de Luna explains that we can see how past, present and future events acquire meaning through establishing a narrative link between them, the link that allows us to understand the present situation by looking at the past, and also to give new and different meanings to the past in the light of present occurrences (“The End into the Beginning”). Thus, when we participate in what Bruner calls the ‘narrative construction of reality’ (“The Narrative Construction”), stories are our central tools for understanding who we are in any given context, by enabling us to perpetually emplot and re-emplot our life experiences.

Another reason for regarding narratives as productive means of fashioning identities is the prominent role that narratives play in organising experiences in a way which facilitates the production of positive and usable notions of collective self. Crucial to the process of fashioning a collective self is narrative representation of a collective past which can be mobilised to develop a sense of collective identity. According to Aleida Assmann, because “groups do not possess a memory like individuals do,” they have to “‘make’ [memory] for themselves” by relying on “symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments” (55, emphasis added). The specific potential of narratives vis-à-vis collective memory lies in the fact that narratives offer affectively charged plots and mobilising symbols (de Luna and Rosa; Mink), as well as provide a “shared horizon for signifying processes and collective self-definitions” (Neumann and Nünning, “Ways of Self-Making” 12). Narrating a common past is, thus, never an end in itself, but a means to “usher in forms of cultural signification” that, in turn, “open a space for the construction of collective identities” (Neumann and Nünning,

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11 In 2015, Strawson issued a response to Bruner’s and similar statements about the deterministic relation between narrative and identity under a provocative title “I Am Not a Story.”
“Ways of Self-Making” 12). Moreover, through selecting and emphasising certain events (and not others), narratives are able to neatly separate useful from not useful, relevant from irrelevant memories (Assmann 55), and thereby confer collective value on certain past experiences while dismissing others. By means of their selective potential, narratives shape collective memories in a way which renders them useful for constructing or upholding a particular notion of collective identity.

Narratives have not only been credited with the power to shape our sense of individual and collective identity, but also with the potential to act as means of positioning ourselves in discourse and thus negotiating our subjectivity. Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré were the first to call attention to narratives as means of self-positioning in dynamic social discursive interaction. For Davies and Harré, who one is remains “an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one’s own and others’ discursive practices and, within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and other people’s lives” (46). Davies and Harré thus put forth not only the assumption that identity is defined through positioning oneself in embedding discourses, but also that narratives play a central role in that process. Shifting the focus away from cognitive and psychological processes to social ones, the positionality perspective on identity offers us tools for addressing the social mechanisms through which notions of identity are negotiated.

If we accept the premise that narrating as social practice is necessarily implicated in processes of representation, meaning-making and power negotiation, the question arises as to how exactly we manipulate narratives in a way that results in new, resistant or alternative notions of self. To answer this question, it is useful to evoke Alecia Jackson’s important observation that all discourses, being “part of a network of dynamic power relations,” are always fluid and “fracture at various points,” thereby creating the space for “alternative constructions of subjectivity” (674). That means that individual and collective agents are not only subject to discourse but also active subjects in discourse, who actively project and negotiate the positions available to them. In explaining the power of individual and collective agents to negotiate their subject positions, Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews give much credit to what they call “counter-narratives,” or “the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives” (1). According to Bamberg and Andrews, narrative emplotments which question, undermine or debunk ordinarily available and commonly circulating ones can serve as productive means with which individuals and collectives open new possibilities of conceptualising and performing the self (1).

Most relevant for this study, our focus on narrative and identity is limited to the literary. To tease out the specific potential of literary texts to organise and reorganise life experiences, generate visions of social reality and facilitate (reactive) notions of identity, I turn to Paul Ricoeur’s concept of the
cycle of mimesis. Through tracing the production of fictional worlds in three stages – prefiguration (mimesis1), configuration (mimesis2) and refuguration (mimesis3), – Ricoeur’s cycle of mimesis foregrounds the generative and active role of literature vis-à-vis extra-literary reality. Yet in order to fully understand Ricoeur’s contribution to my argument, it is necessary to first elucidate the idea of culture as adopted in this study.

My understanding of culture is grounded in anthropological and semiotic theories that define cultures as webs of social processes and activities translated into symbols. Clifford Geertz describes culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (89). Taking their cue from Geertz, Roland Posner and Dagmar Schmauks further distinguish three interactive dimensions of culture: the social dimension, or a structured set of sign-users such as individuals, institutions, society; the material dimension, or a set of texts; and the mental dimension, or a set of codes (364). If culture is a complex web of symbols and meanings, literature as part of its material dimension is tightly entwined with “the social practices of storytelling in institutions and the collective mental codes, models and cognitive patterns of culture” (Nünning, “Narrativist Approaches” 162). Accepting that a literary text is not a closed system, but “part of the principal signifying processes of culture, interacting with other symbol systems” (Neumann and Nünning, “Ways of Self-Making” 15), we can safely assume that the analysis of literary representations of identities can provide insights into the relation between culturally predominant ways of thinking identity and literary configurations of identity. Ricoeur’s tripartite framework of mimesis is particularly suited to breaking down the complexity of the given relation.

In mimesis1, writers fall back on their experiences from extra-literary reality to fashion fictional worlds. For example, literary texts can evoke certain identity models that circulate in the extra-literary world and either affirm or contest them. Apart from thus engaging with the social dimension of culture, literary texts also respond to the material dimension of culture through intertextuality, intermediality and inter-discursivity (Erll 151). As convenient tools for facilitating links between notions of identity across different literary texts, media and discourses, intertextuality, intermediality and inter-discursivity open communication channels between literary and extra-literary worlds. The potential comparison between those worlds can result in them legitimising one another – through displaying similarities – or de-legitimising one another – through being presented as different or mutually contesting. Finally, literary texts reflect aspects of the mental dimension of culture, not only through internalising patterns of thought, norms and values, beliefs, symbols and stereotypes, but also through internalising existing configurations such as plot structures, micronarratives or narrative patterns (Erll 151). Even though they represent already determined temporal and spatial
configurations, plot structures, micronarratives and narrative patterns can still be “poetically reconfigured” once they are separated from their original context (Erll 151). As independent textual elements, they are re-arranged and incorporated in new ways into the story world (Erll 152), thus potentially opening up new patterns of identity representation.

Whereas the concept of mimesis1 foregrounds “what precedes fiction,” the concept of mimesis2 “opens the kingdom of the as if” (Ricoeur 65; 64), which denotes the imaginative configuration of experience in the act of writing. Mimesis2 concerns narrative emplotment, in which the succession of events is transformed into “one meaningful whole” with a “sense of an ending” (Ricoeur 65). It is in the organisational power of narrative that the capacity of the plot to model and/or critically reflect on human experiences lies. As explained by Erll,

“[t]hrough their entrance into a literary text, elements of extra-textual reality are separated from their original contexts. In the medium of literature these elements may be structured anew; however, already existing structure too may be transformed by new elements or endowed with new meaning. (152)”

This syntagmatic structuring of single elements makes possible the construction of a coherent story, in the process of which meaning is (re)defined. Conversely, thanks to its potential to (re)define meaning, the syntagmatic structuring of single elements can also poetically reconstruct already existing notions of identity and construct new ones (Erll 152). As observed by Aleksandra Podsiadlik in the context of Irish literature, fictional narratives have the potential to “expand the borders of official identities, . . . re-interpret their meaning [or] experimentally confront official identity models with subversive alternative identities” (41). Furthermore, literary texts can explore relations between different models of identity and bring them into dialogue. A dialogic interplay between those models can trigger a revision of the authority of certain notions of identity and a critical exploration of alternative possibilities of self-definition (Neumann, Errinerung – Identität – Narration 147-148).

Ricoeur’s cycle closes with mimesis3, or the re-figuration in the act of reading of “the world of action under the sign of the plot” (Ricoeur 77). The processes that take place in the act of reception can affect not only the interpretation of the literary text, but also the way in which we perceive reality. The actions of individuals that may be affected by literary models, in turn, have a bearing on cultural practices and, by extension, on reality itself. For instance, literary representations of identity can offer readers new perspectives on official and acknowledged notions of identity by exploring them in a light which transforms and questions their meaning. Literary notions of identity can also foreground otherwise marginalised identities, not only by emplotting them in a narrative, but also by endowing them with the potential to contradict the established conceptualisations of identity. Thus intervening with the reader’s perception of reality, the fictive perspective has the poten-
tial to “determin[e] collective visions of the course and sense of past events, [interpret] the present, and rais[e] expectations for the future” (Erl 153).

There are two reasons why I regard Ricoeur’s model of mimesis as an invaluable tool for a study which explores the potentialities of overtly socially engaged novels to interrogate and propose notions of Igbo identity. First, Ricoeur’s model complicates the view of literature as a mimetic force and suggests instead understanding literature as a generative and intervening force. The understanding of literature as a relational, creative and active force allows us to acknowledge and critically discuss the social and political valences of postcolonial poetics. Secondly, Ricoeur’s model has us understand that, due to their potential for cultural reflection, imaginative (trans)formation and social intervention, literary texts effectively mediate between culturally prevalent, sanctioned identity models, and the possible, yet-unrealised ones. Approaching Nigerian Anglophone writing with that assumption in mind makes us be attentive not only to how literary representations of Igbo identities are anchored in a given culture (insofar as they draw on culturally prevalent modes of thinking, defining and narrating identities), but also to how they transgress those modes (insofar as they reconstruct the available notions of identity, and offer new ways of conceptualising and narrating them).

As suggested in this chapter, African identities have been objects of debate, not only in the context of discursive construction, but also in the context of critical interpretation of circulating representations. In maintaining this, the present chapter accepts Hall’s invitation to think of identity as “‘a production’, which is never complete, [but] always in process,” instead of regarding identity as “an already accomplished fact” (“Cultural Identity” 222). Tracing the meaning of African identities to discourse in the poststructuralist vein, this chapter shifted the focus to narratives as potential agents in the shaping of that meaning, as well as underlined that narrations of African identities are always implicated in social mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion. In the upcoming literary readings of Nigerian Anglophone fiction, this argument allows me to investigate the narrative forms in the selected literary texts not only as structuring narrative devices, but also as elements with crucial social and political valences.

Another aim in this chapter was to elucidate the highly significant role of (literary) narratives in (re)negotiating notions of identity. Relying on the insights from narrative psychology, which sees narratives as central to constituting our identities, I have established that narratives are not only convenient means of giving a recognisable shape to identities, but also of employing these identities as tools to negotiate subjectivity. Furthermore, I used Ricoeur’s model of mimesis to tease out the relational, generative and interscessive character of literary narratives vis-à-vis extra-literary reality, in a way which resonates with Roy Sommer’s insistence on acknowledging the world- and sense-making potential of fiction: “[F]ictions may shape individual and
collective perceptions of the world and help to come to terms with unprece-
dented situations, processes and changes” (“Contextualism Revisited” 74).
The ideas that narratives are particularly apt tools for constructing identities
and that they possess a world- and sense-making potential form the underly-
ing assumptions in my literary readings of Nigerian Anglophone fiction in
the latter part of this study.
The previous chapter sought to prepare a theoretical grounding for a discussion of the representations of identities in African postcolonial fiction in general, and the novelistic writing of Achebe, Adichie and Abani, in particular. In the present chapter, I wish to suggest a method of reading literary representations of African (Igbo) identities that pays due attention to both the poetics and politics of postcolonial writing.

Close reading is particularly useful in attentive, technically informed and fine-grained literary analysis of narrative (DuBois 2; Smith 58). With its origin in the Anglo-American tradition of New Criticism, which focused on analysing the text itself (Hickman and McIntyre), close reading has proven highly effective in shifting critical attention to and achieving a detailed examination of the individual elements that constitute the operating mechanisms of narrative. With its potential to foreground the poetics of narrative and break down complex narrative structures into their constitutive elements, close reading represents a productive means of teasing out the specific operational mechanisms of postcolonial fiction: It “put[s] fiction from the postcolonial world under the microscope, to enlarge and describe the minor details, the telltale hints and stylistic niceties that mark it out as a distinctive cultural act” (Fraser ix).

Yet, as the interventions in the 1980s from the then-emerging camps of new historicism, feminism, cultural materialism, postcolonialism and revisionist Marxism have had us understand, literary texts are not closed systems, but historically embedded artefacts that, at both formal and thematic levels, respond to the socio-cultural contexts that engender them (Barry; Bertens). This has been particularly frequently stated about early African postcolonial literatures which, as Bernth Lindfors maintains, were profoundly influenced by the conditions of slavery and colonialism: “[O]ne could argue that they have been generated and shaped by the same forces that have transformed much of the African continent during the past hundred years” (“Politics, Culture, and Literary Form” 23). Such a view of postcolonial literature implies that understanding the meaning produced in narratives necessarily entails taking into account the socio-political contexts that gave rise to those narratives. For that reason, the analysis of overtly socially and politically engaged Nigerian Anglophone literature in my study demands a revision of the traditional conceptualisation and application of close reading: As
Close reading for the formal means of expression and the production of meaning in narrative in the light of social and historical trends signifies a dismissal of the assumed apolitical and ahistorical nature of the text that is characteristic of formalist criticism. Rather, I approach African Anglophone literature with an acute awareness of the intricate relations between literary form and content, as well as literary form and context. As such, my method is informed by the ways of reading that have recently started emerging at the intersection between narratology and various fields in the study of culture, such as, for instance, postcolonial studies. What has become known as postcolonial narratology is a form of intercultural narratology that proceeds “from the related concepts of storytelling and narrative comprehension as well as from the notion of the cultural embeddedness of narrative” (Sommer, “Contextualism Revisited” 71). In that sense, postcolonial narratology, like other forms of ‘hyphenated narratologies’ such as feminist narratology or ethnic narratology, attempts to bridge the gap between the formalist and contextualist/historicist readings of texts, and thus to offer a more rigorous criticism of postcolonial fiction.

The kind of close reading that is cognisant of the ideological/political and contextual/historical dimensions of the narrative form is effective in two respects: It helps us to reveal how the aesthetic dimension of postcolonial narratives responds to socio-cultural contexts, as well as the politics underlying them. At the same time, a socially and historically informed close reading of postcolonial fiction foregrounds the central role that aesthetic means of expression play in defining how social concerns and ideology enter postcolonial texts. The value of this approach lies in its potential to account for postcolonial literature as a particular sort of poetics that is intimately related to local conflictual social and cultural histories. This approach thus addresses Elleke Boehmer’s important question: “In what sense can postcolonial writing be aesthetic and political, both at once?” (“A Postcolonial Aesthetic” 170) Postcolonial poetics as understood in this study is, therefore, a poetics that brings together structures of narrative and an acute historical sensibility, and thus seeks to overcome the schism between reading African novels either as “social documents which utilize the sources of fictionalization only superficially” or “decorative forms which seem to exist for their own sake” (Gikandi, Reading the African Novel ix).

12 Drawing on Mannheim (in Burke) and Blommaert, in this study I understand ideology in very loose terms as a systematic body of concepts that draws its social and political power from a coherently organised set of ideas, values and beliefs.
In order to offer a more rounded discussion of my method in the remainder of this chapter, I proceed in two steps. In the first sub-section, I contemplate the value of close reading for form mindful of postcolonial conditions and concerns. To this end, I lay out some preliminary thoughts on the relation in postcolonial literature between the narrative form, on the one hand, and the sociocultural context and ideologically laden content, on the other, that has been put forth by notable early contributors to the field of postcolonial narratology, such as Monika Fludernik, Marion Gymnich, Roy Sommer and Gerald Prince. These scholars’ insights serve as reference points that help me define my own understanding of postcolonial narratology. In the second sub-section, I offer an overview of concepts for a narratologically informed close reading of identities in Nigerian Anglophone novels. Reviewing narratological concepts such as narrative mediation, character perspective structure, time, space and narrative structure will give us a better sense of the potential of narrative forms to frame and reframe the meanings of Igbo identity.
3.1 Postcolonial and Narratological Readings of Narrative

The diversification that narratology has undergone in its postclassical phase\(^{13}\) has significantly refreshed the study of narrative. Several marked changes in literary and cultural theory that took place from the 1960s onwards, such as the emergence of poststructuralist, feminist, New Humanist and postcolonial criticism, expanded classical narratology to include context, cultural history and interpretation (Nünning, “Surveying” 56). Thus, despite having been diagnosed with serious crisis in the late 1980s,\(^{14}\) narratology nowadays “seems to be more alive than ever” (Fludernik, “Narratology in Context” 730). Feminist and queer, postcolonial and ethnic, rhetorical and cognitive, transgeneric and intermedial, (trans)cultural and historical approaches to fiction have all added new items to the narratological agenda.\(^{15}\) These approaches have broadened the horizons of structuralist or classical narratology by indicating new ways in which it could develop, and thus triggered the rise of a striking number of new ways to apply or further develop established narratological toolkits.\(^{16}\) The diversity of the new narratological approaches that “might make one rub one’s eyes in astonishment” (Nünning, “Surveying” 53) led David Herman to suggest that it makes sense to relegate the notion of narratology in the singular to the past (Narratologies).\(^{17}\)

Out of these developments came the impetus to construct an approach to the ever-growing and increasingly popular body of postcolonial writing that would not engage with ideological concerns and thematic analysis at the expense of narratological observations and insights. As Divya Dwivedi, Henrik Nielsen and Richard Walsh rightly observe, postcolonial literatures “also need to be studied in terms of their form, style, techniques and strategies, without which thematic analysis in the name of contextual specificity

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\(^{13}\) One way to describe the evolution of narratology is to portray its movement from the prestructuralist period (until the 1960s) to the high structuralist period (until the 1980s), to the current, poststructuralist period (see Ryan and van Alphen; Nünning and Nünning).

\(^{14}\) In “How the Model Neglects the Medium,” Rimmon-Kenan proclaimed that narratology had come to a standstill (157).

\(^{15}\) See Nünning “Narratology or Narratologies”; Sommer “The Merger.”

\(^{16}\) This broadening of narratology’s interests has led to equating narratology with narrative studies or suggesting new, ‘hyphenated’ narratologies (see Herman; Nünning “Narratology or Narratologies”).

\(^{17}\) The sheer proliferation of narratological approaches was first addressed by Herman in Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis (1999), and was reiterated by Nünning in “Towards a Cultural and Historical Narratology” (2000) and “Narratology or Narratologies?” (2003). Nünning distinguishes contextual, thematic and ideological approaches and/or applications of narratology in literary studies; transgeneric and transmedial approaches; pragmatic and rhetoric sorts of narratology; cognitive and reception-theory-oriented kinds of (‘meta’-)narratology; postmodern and poststructuralist deconstructions of (classical) narratology; linguistic approaches/contributions to narratology; philosophical narrative theories; and other interdisciplinary narrative theories.
risks being at best imprecise, at worst erroneous” (“Book Proposal”). Post-colonial narratology represents an attempt to render the technical analysis of narrative fruitful for questions of postcolonial identity, race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, language and interculturalism, to name but a few. The principles of contextualist or cultural narratology as outlined by Ansgar Nünning are thus also valid for postcolonial narratology: “By contextualist narratology I mean a kind of integrated approach that puts the analytical tools provided by narratology to the service of a cultural analysis of narrative fictions” (“Surveying” 59). Wedding the theory of narrative to postcolonial questions, texts and theories, postcolonial narratology represents a convenient means of uncovering how postcolonial forms of life are translated into, and how postcolonial meanings are produced by, particular formal narrative practices.

Enormously helpful examples of how to “put [the analytical toolkits of narratology] to the service of other concerns considered more vital for cultural studies” originated from the fields of feminist and cultural narratology (Bal, “The Point of Narratology” 729). Susan Lanser’s study on narrative voice in feminist fiction, *Fictions of Authority* (1992), lucidly demonstrated how narrative voice can be ideologically charged, socially or historically variable and sensitive to cultural difference. Another case in point is Gabrielle Helms’ study of dialogism in contemporary Canadian novels, *Challenging Canada* (2003), which develops a cultural narratology that shows how, by inscribing previously oppressed and silenced voices through dialogic relations, Canadian novels in English challenge dominant constructions of Canada from positions of difference and resistance. The tremendous value of these studies lies in the fact that they convincingly prove Nünning’s assumption that “[c]ontext and form, content and narrative technique, are, after all, more closely intertwined than structuralist narratologists have tried to make us believe” (“Surveying” 63).

Inspired by such achievements, a number of literary scholars thoroughly familiar with narratology have sought to show that, in the field of postcolonial literature, it is not necessary to have “contextualism and universalism, ideology and narratology stand face to face as binaries” (Dwivedi et al., “Book Proposal”). The earliest arguments in favour of a postcolonial narratology came from Monika Fludernik, who suggested that narratological toolkits may provide a more rounded knowledge of identity and alterity in postcolonial writing. Relying on some case studies from contemporary Indian Anglophone literature, in “When the Self is an Other” Fludernik demonstrated how identity and alterity are formally presented through descriptive and evaluative comments by the narrator, her/his social, cultural and historical location, the selection and combination of settings, character constellations, the representation of speech and the modes of focalisation. At the same time, she expressed acute awareness of the limitations of classical narratological categories in capturing the ambiguous forms of life that emerge in postcolonial texts, such as those discussed by Homi Bhabha under the
rubrics of ambivalence and mimicry. Yet Fludernik suggested that this is precisely where the benefit of postcolonial narratology lies: By making narratology encounter different practical applications of its categories, postcolonial literatures may lead to a revision and/or expansion of classical narratological categories, and thus claim the rightful place of postcolonial fiction in the study of narrative (“When the Self is an Other” 72-73).

Fludernik’s initiative to bring classical narratology and postcolonial literary criticism closer has been met with different responses. Marion Gymnich supported Fludernik’s notion of postcolonial narratology and defined its central aim as showing how not only concepts of identity and alterity, but also categories such as ethnicity, race, class and gender are “constructed, perpetuated or subverted in narrative texts” (“Linguistics and Narratology” 62). Fludernik’s insights also echo in Hanne Birk and Birgit Neumann’s vision of postcolonial narratology: Wedding narratology and postcolonial literature enables us to see how seemingly harmless stylistic and formal categories serve to construct and deconstruct political and cultural meanings in narrative (145). Following Fludernik and Gymnich, Roy Sommer, too, advocates for a truly integrative, mutually informing and generative view of postcolonial literature and classical narratology: “[T]he linking of postcolonial and intercultural discourses with narratology should initiate a lively dialogue and mutual exchange between various critical traditions interested in novels, stories, films and plays as well as in the possibilities, forms and functions of fictional storytelling in postcolonial, trans-cultural or diasporic contexts” (“Contextualism Revisited” 71). Recently published edition Narratology and Ideology: Negotiating Context, Form, and Theory in Postcolonial Narratives (2018), with a focus on postcolonial literatures, also seems to have taken up the same path. As its editors Dwivedi, Nielsen and Walsh state, they address in two ways the theoretical challenge of establishing a dialogue between narrative theory and ideological criticism: by surveying the “issues in narratological theory that may have a significant impact upon situated, contextualist and specifically postcolonial critical concerns” and by suggesting the “scope of potential interest, for postcolonial study, of narratological approaches to fictional and non-fictional narrative” (“Book Proposal”).

Whereas the aforementioned contributions foreground a mutually informing dialogue between postcolonial studies and narratology, Gerald Prince offers a notably different vision of postcolonial narratology. For Prince, postcolonial narratology means using narratological categories for textual analysis in order to “help to shed light on the nature and functioning of the ideology those narratives represent and construct” (372). Yet Prince is also quick to add that he is interested in postcolonial narratives only insofar as they “test the validity and rigor of narratological categories and distinctions” (373). While there is certainly nothing wrong with Prince’s use of postcolonial literatures to ‘inflect and enrich’ narratology, it is problematic that he does not ponder the ramifications of narratological analysis for postcolonial
literary studies. What is more, Prince’s text does not contain any references to postcolonial literary and cultural criticism, “as if the field of postcolonial studies does not exist” (Kim 239). Nor does Prince challenge the status of narrative theory as universal and abstract, whereas in reality, like the knowledge produced in postcolonial studies, all narrative theory arises out of material and historical circumstances and, as such, variously intersects with social, political and cultural domains. Postcolonial interventions in narratology underscore exactly that: By confronting narratology with “specific features of specific texts embedded in specific cultural and historical contexts” (Sommer, “Contextualism Revisited” 70), postcolonial interventions render narratology overtly historical.

My approach to postcolonial narrative is in many respects indebted to these earlier insights into postcolonial narratology. While reading closely for the formal manifestations of Igbo identities, I aim much less at re-examining narratology than at bridging the gap between narrative theory and postcolonial literary studies. More particularly, I seek to demonstrate how a close reading of literary representations of Igbo identities makes obvious the constitutive role that narrative strategies play in the production of socially and politically charged meaning in Nigerian Anglophone fiction. In this, I follow Fludernik and Gymnich, whose postcolonial narratological endeavours revealed the entangled relation between the topical foci of postcolonial texts and the formal organisation of those texts. By showing how narrative forms react to different postcolonial constellations, my approach to postcolonial narrative may be valuable to narrative theory, too: It makes the case for understanding narrative forms as dynamic and incomplete categories whose meaning is perpetually (re)defined through their engagement in different literary and social contexts. Understanding narrative forms in this way implies that we cannot talk, as Prince does, about the application of some abstract and universal narratological categories in postcolonial literature. Rather, the encounter with postcolonial literatures challenges and/or expands our previous notions of literary forms. We may then delink formal literary representations in postcolonial literatures from Western notions of narrative organisation and representation, and reach a position from which we can fully acknowledge the uniqueness and innovation of postcolonial writing.
3.2 Concepts for a Narratologically Informed Close Reading of Identities in African Postcolonial Novels

Having emerged as a corrective to what it understood as a flawed vision of social reality that was promoted through the representation of African peoples, histories and cultures in 20th-century European ethnographic and literary writing, African Anglophone literature is marked by an acute awareness of the power of representation to affect our notions of reality. As has been stated in previous chapters of this study, I proceed from the assumption that, in order to understand the question of representation in narratives, it is not enough to look at the thematic dimension of a text; it is equally necessary to take into account its formal organisation. Therefore, in the present section, I address a set of concepts that can help us to understand how postcolonial authors employ formal means of representation to stage marginalisation and (in)validation of collectives, inter- and intra-group dynamics, (de)naturalisation of world and identity models, (de)essentialisation of collective identities, continuity and change, as well as the processual nature of identity construction and memory production. It is important to note at this point that we cannot assign to each form a single function as there is no straightforward form-to-function mapping (Gymnich et al. 10; Alber and Olson 1). Instead, as Birk and Neumann suggest, the relationship between semanticised narrative techniques and their functions is complex and polyvalent, since a single meaning may be transmitted through many different narrative forms and a single narrative form may carry multiple semantic implications (116).¹⁸

Narrative mediation is one concept that explicitly raises the question of representation. The awareness that narratives are not simply there, but are delivered by a mediating instance “symbolizes the epistemological view familiar to us since Kant that we do not apprehend the world in itself, but rather as it is passed through the medium of an observing mind” (Stanzel 4). The presence of a mediating instance necessarily raises the questions of who the ‘observing mind’ is, as well as what it represents and how. In that sense, the decisions of the ‘observing mind’ about what to include and what to exclude, what to emphasise and what to obscure, and whether to deliver information through showing or telling are more than purely structural matters. Selecting, highlighting and presenting information become the means of constructing a particular version of the narrative world.

One way to mediate narratives is through the narrator, whose power of representation makes them a particularly effective means of introducing ideology into fiction. Let us consider an example of what Gerard Genette

¹⁸ The original text reads: “Vielmehr müssen die Relationen zwischen semantisierten Erzählformen und deren Funktionen als komplex und polyvalent konzipiert werden, d.h. Bedeutungsfelder werden durch eine Vielzahl von Erzählerfahren vermittelt, und narrative Formen fungieren als Träger vieler semantischer Implikationen.”
called the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator, or the narrator who is above and outside the story s/her tells (*Narrative Discourse* 244). The extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator is endowed with an omniscient point of view and thus embodies a reliable medium of narrative transmission. As an authoritative voice that claims truthfulness of his/her representation, the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator is particularly frequent in postcolonial narratives that aim to re-create the realist effect common to European literary and ethnographic writing of the 19th and 20th centuries. Employing an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator to create an impression of a realist, authoritative and reliable representation of de-colonial visions of indigenous social realities, postcolonial narratives not only legitimise alternative visions of the world, but also foreground the ideological and historical dimensions of realist modes of expression.

On the other hand, a narrative can “choose to regulate the information it delivers, not with a sort of even screening, but according to the capacities of knowledge of one or another participant in the story” (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 162). This kind of narrative mediation is known as character focalisation, another strategy that can effectively challenge the essentialist/colonial(ist) constructions of African identities. Anchoring the story in a character focaliser’s point of view, the text emphasises “the focalizer’s thoughts, reflections and knowledge, his/her actual and imaginary perceptions, as well as his/her cultural and ideological orientation” (Jahn N3.2.2.). Representing a powerful strategy for encoding subjectivities, character focalisation is particularly useful in the postcolonial narratives that emphasise African humanity and agency. Through presenting African characters as agents who play a significant role in mediating the reader’s experience of the narrative world, narratives can facilitate an individualised and complex view of African identities. Moreover, by looking closely at the relation between the agent and the object of focalisation,19 we can gain a sense of the changes in self-identification of the given character focaliser in the course of the narrative, which in turn facilitates a dynamic view of ‘Africanness.’

A specific case of character focalisation is mixed character focalisation, when the narrative is focalised not through one, but several character focalisers. If singular character focalisation highlights the specificity of individual identities, mixed character focalisation sheds light on the nature and meaning of collective identity. The presentation of collective identity that relies on “how different characters view the same facts” (Bal, *Narratology* 105) has the potential to decentralise the view of collective identity and turn it into a patchwork of multiple outlooks. If these outlooks affirm each other, the narrative legitimises the given collective identity, whereas in cases where different outlooks diverge, the given collective appears to be delegitimised.

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19 In her revision of Genette’s typology of focalisation, Bal suggests distinguishing between who sees/perceives and what is being seen/perceived (*Narratology* 171).
Mixed character focalisation is common in postcolonial narratives that, in order to inspect collective identity, engage in postmodernist explorations of collective memory: As such texts “provide insight into the memories of several narrative instances or figures,” they can effectively “reveal the functioning and problems of collective memory-creation” that have a direct bearing on the self-definition of the given collective (Neumann, “The Literary Representation of Memory” 338). Therefore, by looking at mixed character focalisation in such texts, we can gain a better sense of how those texts stage the interrogation of collective memory and the identity grounded in that memory, explore the contestation and negotiation of collectivity, and foreground the production and consolidation of collective meanings.

While narrators and character focalisers represent the effective means of countering essentialist and simplistic representations of individual and collective African identities on the level of discourse, an identical effect can be achieved on the level of story through character perspective structure. Defined by Ansgar Nünning as the “totality of an individual’s knowledge and belief sets, intentions, psychological traits, attitudes, ideological stance, and system of values and norms that have been internalized” (“On the Perspective Structure” 213), a plurality of character perspectives offers insight into a plurality of identity models. Analysing character perspective structure on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic level is, therefore, a productive way to understand the staging of heterogeneous African identities in postcolonial narratives.

The paradigmatic dimension that concerns the choice of character perspectives offers a sense of which identity models find their way into the narrative and which do not. The choice of which identity models to include and exclude, in turn, significantly affects the vision of the narrative world and the claims that the given narrative makes toward the recognition of different collectives. African postcolonial fiction has often experimented with excluding the perspectives of white characters, thereby symbolically dismissing the Western notions of African history as beginning with and existing for the white man. In narratives with a multi-perspectival character structure, an equally important question is the degree of emphasis given to each individual perspective. Just as some character perspectives can be included into the narrative while others excluded, the character perspectives that are present in the narrative can be foregrounded or made to appear less significant. The degree of emphasis can effectively indicate which identity models are validated within the narrative world and which are challenged or repudiated. In response to the representations of Africa as “a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar” (Achebe, “An Image of Africa” 2), African postcolonial writing foregrounds the perspective of black

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20 Chatman described discourse as the ‘how’ and story as the ‘what’ of narrative (19).
21 See Pfister 63; Nünning “On the Perspective Structure” 216.
characters, while the perspectives of white characters, when present in the narrative, are often challenged or serve to highlight the complex conditions of ‘being African.’

Another way to understand how character perspective structure can be employed to stage identity politics is to look at it from a syntagmatic angle, or the angle that concerns the relationship between different character perspectives. In texts containing multiple character perspectives, the perspectives may converge into a closed perspective structure, or diverge into several ideologically unresolvable perspectives that constitute an open perspective structure (Pfister 65-68; Nünning, “On the Perspective Structure” 216). According to Nünning, comparing and contrasting different character perspectives may help us to understand the structural correlations of those perspectives and gain an insight into how the given narrative conceives of a particular identity (“On the Perspective Structure” 215). African postcolonial fiction that presents conflictual relations among black characters or between black and white characters effectively demonstrates how difficult it is to arrive at a single, uncontested vision of an African identity. Such narratives define African identities as categories whose meaning is perpetually (re)constructed through dialogue, negotiation and contestation, and thus underline the shifting nature of those identities.

Literary representations of the shifting nature of African identities can also be approached in relation to how change and continuity are handled in postcolonial texts, which brings us to the concept of time in narrative. In *Narrative Discourse* (1980 [1972]) and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988 [1983]), Genette developed the concept of the speed of narrative to denote the relationship between a temporal dimension and a spatial dimension of narrative, or between a duration of the story (measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, and years) and a length of the text (measured in lines and pages). Thanks to its potential to stage a speeding up or slowing down of narrative progression, speed is particularly effective in conveying the impression of disruption, change and continuity in narrative. Events can be presented in a very detailed manner, as when very long scenes that cover only a very short time in the story produce the impression of slow narration. The detailed description of the story world facilitated by slow narration is particularly useful in depicting a gradual and meaningful transformation of a community and its self-definition. On the other hand, the narration of events can also proceed much faster, when the narrator provides a quick account of what happens in the story without elaborating on any of the individual events. In that case, the narrative is marked by ellipses, or the conditions of the “story time elided” (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 106), which can convey an impression of abrupt change, disruption and disorientation. In postcolonial narratives, such staged (dis)continuity serves as an effective means of tracing the trajectory of collective identities in the face of various forms of disruption.
Whereas the concept of speed can offer insights into the evolution of collective identities, Genette’s concept of order is useful for understanding literary representations of (the production of) individual identity. Eveline Kilian suggests that “we perceive our life as a process developing over a particular period of time and in a particular context, in other words, as a historical process situated at a particular point of history, which can be retold at any moment” (77). Therefore, Kilian proposes that developing a sense of self means constructing a coherent narrative of our life, understood in temporal (progressive) and historical terms. Such an understanding of the self highlights the importance of continuity and coherence to identity production. Yet many postcolonial narratives that engage with the kinds of disruption that affect one’s memory of the past or his/her sense of a knowable future, such as colonial intervention or (in)voluntary migration and displacement, significantly complicate the progressive notion of time in relation to identity construction. To this end, such narratives often stage anachronies, or “discordances between the two orderings of story and narrative” (Genette, Narrative Discourse 36). While prolepsis denotes “any narrative manoeuvre that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later,” analepsis is “any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment” (Genette, Narrative Discourse 36). The specific function of anachronies in postcolonial narratives is, therefore, to indicate that postcolonial identities do not operate on the idea of a neat temporal sequence where each moment succeeds and replaces the preceding one. Instead, they employ anachronies to show how postcolonial identities emerge through simultaneously reconstructing the past, experiencing the present and imagining a future. Such a notion of time invokes Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe’s description of entangled time, an “interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones” (On the Postcolony 16).

In exploring the distinctiveness of African identities, African postcolonial fiction does not rely only on the representations of disrupted temporality, but also on the representations of space. Edward Said foregrounded the relation between space and identity when he observed that identities are neither “outside or beyond geography” nor “completely free from the struggle over geography” (Culture and Imperialism 6). The significance of space in relation to the production of identity has taken centre-stage in literary representations of globalisation, fast travel and information technologies. Assuming that space is essential to storytelling and that it is shaped through a deliberate selection, combination and presentation of elements (Tally Jr. 1; Neumann and Nünning, An Introduction 61), it becomes fruitful to look at the ways in which the presentation of space in postcolonial fiction illuminates the intricacies of identity production.
In some novels, the story is situated in a single locality whose detailed description facilitates a sense of distinctiveness of the given place in terms of its socio-historical-cultural dynamic. Exploring the production of identities in a highly individualised place allows authors to underline the spatially and temporally embedded (or emplaced) nature of identity. In addressing the relation between space and identity, it is important, however, to remain sensitive to the dynamic and shifting character of both: “[T]hey (space and identity) are not unchanging and stable, but relational, constantly in flux” (Ridanpää 191). Even a single locality can appear heterogeneous and fragmented: horizontally, as a composition of different pockets whose particularity is defined through their ethnic, class and/or racial make-up; vertically, as a layered landscape that testifies to the historical dimension of the place; and ideologically, as a set of cultural imaginaries. Locality can also be presented in relational and dynamic terms: not as isolated, but as connected to other, more and less distant localities through movement, flows and networks. Finally, narratives may reveal the complex nature of locality, as a palimpsest of different spheres – private and public, rural and urban, and ethnic, national and transnational – that interconnect to offer multiple sites of belonging. Identities grounded in such localities often emerge as equally complex, insofar as they constantly undergo re-examination, re-negotiation and re-definition.

In other novels, stories are situated in multiple localities, which represents a convenient means of framing the exploration of global interconnectedness, dispersal and deterritorialisation. Shifts between different localities that may illustrate characters’ movement in both imaginary and practical terms can help the author to explore cultural and ethnic identification in the contemporary age. On the one hand, shifts between localities that illustrate the imaginary movement of a character situated in a single place represent global interconnectedness as a condition that enables identification of supposedly immobile subjects with both local and global cultural communities at the same time. In that way, narratives complicate the view of the local and the global in antagonistic terms and demonstrate that, in today’s world, thinking about the local necessarily implies thinking about its relation to the global. On the other hand, the narratives that stage shifts between localities to illustrate the practical movement of characters are suitable for exploring how ethnic identities are (re)produced in the age of long-distance travel and the territorial dispersal of ethnic communities. While movement in itself challenges the territorialised character of ethnic communities, it also helps to explore the emergence of multi-dimensional models of identity that set ethnicity in relation to other forms of (trans)local identification. Therefore, a closer look at the fragmentation, multiplicity and interconnectedness of spaces in African postcolonial novels can facilitate a better understanding of how postcolonial fiction challenges the notion of contemporary African
identities as mono-dimensional, as well as wedded and restricted to a single locality.

This approach to African identities, which is less oppositional and more open or exploratory in character, can also be identified in the structure of African postcolonial narratives. While some postcolonial narratives are presented as a unified whole, others are divided into different strands of main, parallel and embedded narratives. Thanks to their potential to mark a shift in register, mode of representation, voice and discourse, parallel and embedded narratives are a convenient means of fragmenting narrative discourse. Fragmented narrative discourse is, in turn, useful in those narratives that seek to foreground the contested meaning of African identities. As independent narrative strands that embody equally possible worlds, main and parallel narratives can function as “mutual commentaries” (Herman et al. 368). As such, they have the potential to disturb any idea of an authoritative worldview or meaning, and unsettle the seemingly knowable and well-defined notions of African identities. On the other hand, embedded narratives as narratives of second order in relation to the main narrative (Genette, Narrative Discourse 228) are always related to the world of the main narrative and thus serve to “provid[e] one more item of narrative material for the larger (embedding) narrative” (Herman et al. 369). As such, embedded narratives highlight particular items from the embedding narrative and present them in a way that “critiques or is critiqued by, negates or is negated by, relativizes or is relativized by, the embedding narrative” (Nelles 144). A mutually interrogative dialogue between the different worldviews that different narrative strands help to stage allows writers of African postcolonial fiction to simultaneously construct and deconstruct, propose and debunk, and legitimise and delegitimise notions of African identities, and thereby underline the inherently slippery, inconclusive and contested meaning of those identities.

The aim of this chapter was to contemplate a narratologically informed close reading in a critical study that explores and seeks to foreground the specific operational mechanisms behind African (Nigerian) Anglophone writing. I proposed to treat narrative forms as agents that actively shape meaning in response to social and cultural trends in the extra-literary world. I also argued that, despite the Western origin of narratology, narrative forms are not universal categories that are simply applied to different, non-Western literatures. Rather, each usage of narrative forms contributes to their (re)definition, whereby narrative forms become incomplete and, thus, ever-interesting objects of critical inquiry. With regard to postcolonial literature, I argued that applying a narratologically informed reading does not necessarily mean arriving at an apolitical and ahistorical understanding of postcolonial texts. Instead, I suggested that a narratologically informed reading can effectively tease out the political and historical dimensions of postcolonial writing.
The following chapters will demonstrate in greater detail how an exploration of the formal manifestations of Igbo identity in Achebe’s, Adichie’s and Abani’s novels can shed light on the specific character of and trends in post-colonial Nigerian Anglophone writing. How do Achebe’s early novels create the impression of an ethnic ‘authenticity’ that critically engages with colonial ethnographic discourses? How is narrative voice employed to achieve Achebe’s novels’ discursive authority in relation to their Western predecessors? How do particular character perspective structures stage racial, ethnic and cultural encounters in colonial contact zones, in a way that foregrounds the transformative nature of Igbo identity and thus challenges the colonialist notion of the ‘static native’? How does character focalisation in Adichie’s novels shed light on Igbo national identity and the place of Igbo national history in post-Biafra Nigeria? How does Abani manipulate narrative structure to explore the role of Igbo tradition in (re)producing cultural identity? Finally, what kind of spatial and temporal poetics emerges in Adichie’s and Abani’s diasporic novels, which examine ways of ‘being Igbo’ in the age of heightened social mobility, as well as deterritorialisation and dispersal of ethnic and cultural communities? Closely looking at the narrative forms of Nigerian Anglophone writing for their relation to social and cultural trends will enable us to observe not only the diverse styles that are constitutive of Nigerian postcolonial fiction, such as realist, modernist and postmodernist, but also the heterogeneity of its concerns: Nigerian postcolonial writing engages not only with the ‘orientalist and patriarchal structures’ it seeks to ‘resist, undermine or deconstruct’ (Fludernik, “Histories of Narrative Theory (II)” 45), but has evolved beyond this oppositional character to explore the plural and distinct ways of ‘being Igbo’ in the contemporary world.
Ade Ajayi poetically captured the roles of the British and the indigenous peoples of Nigeria in the age of colonisation when he wrote that “there were not really men dealing with other men, but a race of gods and heroes communing with naughty mortals; Prospero communing with Caliban, Europeans with Natives” (“The Continuity” 189). Ajayi’s statement speaks not only of an uneven distribution of power under the British colonial regime, but also of the particular roles made available to parties within it. The purpose of this chapter is to explicate the role of the modern African novel – the novel that “has grown out of the rupture created within [African] indigenous history and way of life by the colonial experience” (Irele, The African Experience 27) – in interrogating and refiguring the image of indigenous peoples as portrayed by Ajayi.

The basis for this oppositional relationship was established in the second half of the 19th century, a time of intense engagement between the British and the Igbo in south-eastern Nigeria. Seeking to ensure greater economic advantage for their country over other European colonial powers in the period after the abolition of the slave trade and the introduction of legitimate commerce, the British were eager to penetrate Nigeria’s hinterland and determine its commercial worth (Falola 53). Upon claiming the Niger delta for themselves in 1884, the British began to discover rich human and natural resources, which only further fuelled their ambition to establish more direct contact with the Igbo communities in the region (Falola 54, 40). As noted by Toyin Falola and Saheed Aderinto, such economic and political interests were legitimised by “a myriad of racially inclined ideas” (124) which defined the Igbo as “half-devil[s] and half-child[ren]” (Kipling) who would benefit from the presence of the “so-called enlightened foreigners” (Falola 40).

The view of the Igbo as ‘half-devils and half children’ can, of course, already be recognised in early European accounts, and persisted into the 20th century. “We are endeavouring to teach the native races to conduct their own affairs with justice and humanity, and to educate them alike in letters and in

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22 The most notable examples are Crowther’s Journal of an Expedition up the Niger and Tshadda Rivers in 1854 (1855) and Baikie’s Narrative of an Exploring Voyage up the Rivers Kwóra and Bimue (1856).
industry,” wrote Governor-General Frederick Lugard about the white man’s task in Africa (617). In Nigeria and elsewhere, Christianisation of the indigenous peoples was seen to support the colonial endeavour by introducing the Gospel and its ordinances to “heathen and other unenlightened countries” (L.M.S. qtd. in Muzorewa 27). Finally, European ethnography significantly contributed to consolidating the view of the Igbo as a homogenous group of primitive people, as in George Thomas Basden’s *Among the Igbos of Nigeria* (1921) and *Niger Igbos* (1938), and as inferior to Europeans, as in Sylvia Leith-Ross’s *African Women* (1939). Such representations of the Igbo in European political, religious and ethnographic discourses ultimately served as a powerful tool for “domesticating the natives” by defining them, unambiguously, as different from and inferior to Europeans (Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* 15).

The antagonism with which the Europeans and the Igbo were defined was grounded in the Western notion of modernity and its concomitant idea of cultural difference conceptualised in spatiotemporal terms. Olankule George defines modernity, understood in its Weberian sense, as “a mode of seeing that engenders a historically unique social organization, one grounded in instrumental reason and legitimated by the promise of ‘enlightenment’ and universal emancipation” (73). In the context of colonialism, modernity was presented as not simply global, but something that “became global over time, by originating in one place [Europe] and then spreading outside it” (Chakrabarty 7). The historicism integral to colonial modernity, namely the ‘first in Europe and then elsewhere’ structure of time (Chakrabarty 8), effectively constituted Europe as modern and non-European societies as traditional, static and pre-historical. In such a stagist view of history, non-European societies were perceived to be in need of European intervention in order to “catch up.”

However, the ‘first in Europe and then elsewhere’ structure also implies an ideologically-laden spatial dimension that cannot be disentangled from the temporal one: Historicism rested not only on the assumption that “not all people exist in the same Now” (Bloch, “Nonsynchronism” 22), but also on the idea that “sailing to the ends of the earth, is in fact travelling in time” (Degerando qtd. in Fabian 7). This has led Stefan Helgesson to conclude that “the European discourses of modernity posited not only a hierarchy of successive human development but also a concomitant spatialization of time” (549-550). Coupling space and time so that movement away from Europe (understood as the epicentre of civilisation) signifies taking a “peep into its (Europe’s) own historical past” (Gellner 18), Western narratives of modernity associated geographical remoteness with a sign of temporal distance, and

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23 In *Heritage of Our Times* (1962 [1935]), Bloch constructed the phrase ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’ to denote the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history.
thus of the belatedness, barbarism or savagery of the ‘Other’ (Helgesson 550).

The successful anti- and de-colonial struggle in Nigeria in the 1950s thus demanded ideological just as much as physical resistance: Indigenous societies sought to retrieve aspects of their precolonial cultures and expose the constructed nature and questionable premises of European colonial discourses. In response to the use, in colonialism, of “a kind of perverted logic . . . [of turning] to the past of the oppressed people, and distor[ting], disfigur[ing], and destro[ying] it” (Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth 210), Nigerian writers and their fellow historiographers and philosophers reached back to precolonial Nigerian cultures and histories as repositories of authenticity, sources of individual and collective empowerment and tools against colonial alienation (Falola and Aderinto; Chuku, The Igbo Intellectual Tradition). The first generation of Nigerian Anglophone writers, among whom the most prominent were Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Cyprian Ekwensi, Timothy Mofolorunso Aluko, John Pepper Clark and Flora Nwapa, were predominantly interested in “destabilising impact of European colonial debacle on Africa’s primal socio-cultural and economic formations” (Ahmad and Bhadmus 142); essentially, the authors had to engage, from various angles, with indigenous cultural heritage.24 The value of these early works in English lay in their (re)shaping of indigenous cultures, histories and identities in literature, and thus significantly contributing to the interrogation of European colonial pseudointellectual positions about Nigeria and Africa more generally.

Yet the attempts to recover a precolonial past were not simply reactions that denounced the culture of colonial modernity; they in fact heavily depended on modernity for its enabling discourses and (narrative) practices. According to Zeleza, “[t]he search for a new African narrative liberated from the epistemic colonization of Europe entailed a nationalist struggle to remake history, not within terms of their own choosing or summoned from a pristine past, but out of that very, and continuing, violent encounter with Europe” (“The Troubled Encounter” 111). Zeleza’s observation echoes Gikandi’s more radical remark that what is now considered to be the heart of literary scholarship on the continent could not have acquired its current identity or function if the traumatic encounter between Africa and Europe had not taken place. Not only were the founders of modern African literature colonial subjects, but colonialism was also to be the most important and enduring theme in their

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24 T. M. Aluko’s novels One Man, One Wife (1959), One Man, One Machete (1964), and Kinsman and Foreman (1964) explore, for instance, dialogues between modernity and tradition; Cyprian Ekwensi’s People of the City (1954) and Jagua Nana (1961) examine the rise of hybrid urban spaces and cultures, while Chinua Achebe’s No Longer at Ease (1960), Gabriel Okara’s The Voice (1964) and Flora Nwapa’s Efuru (1966) thematise the dialectic between the ‘modern’ subject and the indigenous community.
works. From the eighteenth century onwards, the colonial situation shaped what it meant to be an African writer, shaped the language of African writing, and overdetermined the culture of letters in Africa. (“African Literature and the Colonial Factor” 379)

In light of Zeleza’s and Gikandi’s insistence on defining African postcolonial writing in relation to the colonial experience, the nativist search for an authentic indigenous past emerges as never self-contained, but as always in dialogue with the culture of colonial modernity. An illustrative example is Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, a novel which relies on the ethnographic discourse, the English language and the form of the (realist) novel – which represent signs of modernity – in order to rewrite Igbo history outside of the colonial episteme. This and similar texts testify to the ambiguous nature of early writing in English, both as “the mark of the African’s humanity” and as “a point of entry into the culture of modernity” (Gikandi, “African Literature and the Colonial Factor” 380).

The entanglement between indigenous Nigerian and European cultural influences is best observed in the practice of novelistic writing as a means of decolonisation through nation-building. Imre Szeman established a firm link between literature, decolonisation and nation-building when he observed that “[t]he form in which decolonization took place was without exception through the establishment of new nations . . . that both produced and were produced by the new national literatures” (24). According to Szeman, the novel played a central role in fashioning a modern, liberated Nigerian nation. Simon Gikandi and Maurice Vanbe confirmed Szeman’s observation and added that the central task of early writing in English was to establish “a proper sense of history” (7). The modern African novel thus emerged as a dominant means of re-writing indigenous histories in a literary act of decolonisation that was envisaged as culminating in the construction of a liberated national community. If the modern African novel signified the power of native intellectuals to write African histories on their own terms, then the establishment of a Nigerian novelistic tradition represented a sign of the nation’s liberation from foreign rule. At the same time, the nation and the novel as harbingers of colonial modernity symbolised the limitations of the indigenous peoples at the cusp of decolonisation to free themselves entirely from the ruse of history that ‘conscripted’ them into modernity.25

As employed in the cultural nationalist phase, the novel symbolises the ambiguous character of African nationalism, which simultaneously signified the possibilities and limitations of constituting an autonomous and coherent African subject. Partha Chatterjee demonstrated how anti-colonial nationalism led to a split in social institutions and practices into the material and the

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25 Relying on the New World slave plantation, Scott shows how modernity was not a choice that people under European rule could exercise, but one of the fundamental conditions of choice, and ultimately concludes that those people were “conscripts – not volunteers – of modernity” (19).
spiritual domain (6). While the spiritual domain – “an ‘inner’ domain bearing the ‘essential’ marks of cultural identity” – was where a radical difference between the West and the non-West was constructed and maintained, in the material domain – “the domain of the ‘outside’, of the economy and of state-craft, of science and technology” – the difference between the West and the non-West was supposed to be eradicated (Chatterjee 6). The modern African subject was thus simultaneously dedicated to asserting difference from the coloniser in the cultural sense, and trying to reproduce the model of development set by the coloniser in the economic and political sense.

Peter Ekeh identifies yet another distinction in postcolonial societies, between the primordial and the civic public. Ekeh defines the primordial public as “closely identified with primordial groupings, sentiments and activities which nevertheless impinge on public interest,” whereas the civic public, “historically associated with the colonial administration,” is based on civil structures such as the military, the civil service and the police, and stands for the domain of rights (92). Following Ekeh’s distinction, the modern African subject is caught in a constant oscillation between national and ethnic identification that threatens the sense of a coherent self. Chatterjee’s and Ekeh’s discussions of third-world nationalism thus tease out how a vernacularisation of Western modernity engendered a new modern self (Chakrabarty; Attwell), a self that simultaneously embraced and rejected the colonial legacy (Gikandi, “Cultural Translation and the African Self” 358).

However, if we look at Achebe’s writing in Nigeria, we realise that the modern African novel did not assume a simply symbolic role in the emergence of the modern nation and new forms of subjectivity. Rather, the modern novel played an important role in those processes: Like its South African counterpart, modern Nigerian writing in English primarily served as a means to translate modernity into Nigerian terms, to accept it in qualified terms. In a country whose diverse ethnic profile made it impossible to ground the modern nation in ethnicity or a shared mythical past, the idea of nation had to be anchored “in the possibilities of African modernity” (Szeman 14). We can gain a better understanding of what Szeman means by ‘new African modernity’ by consulting Msiska:

[T]he novel offered the most capacious and flexible form in which to register the new forms of subjectivity, social experience, and even ways of being and seeing that arose out of the colonial encounter. Specifically, the novel would become one of the important sites where new discourse of the private and the public sphere would be articulated, contested, and reconstituted. It would also be in novelistic discourse that questions about the state of family relations, kinship ties, ethnic and national identity, as well as gender relations in a modern world, would be examined and worked out. Additionally, the novel would provide the means by which new political ideologies would be enunciated and interrogated. (37-38)
The novel therefore served as a means of making sense of the disruptive colonial experience by exploring the new ways of perceiving reality and the new forms of life that emerged out of that experience. The novel also represented a significant space where new political and social idiom would emerge and a postcolonial, nationalist future would be envisaged.

This chapter has provided an overview of some significant historical moments in colonial and early postcolonial Nigeria, with a particular focus on the social and cultural role(s) of different narratives of African and Igbo identities. Whereas in this chapter I claimed that the modern African novel was a particularly apt tool for deconstructing colonial narrative representations of the Igbo, and for offering alternative, yet equally authoritative, revisions that would facilitate the construction of the modern and liberated Igbo subject, in the following three chapters I demonstrate exactly how this was achieved in the fiction of one of Nigeria’s most celebrated writers, Chinua Achebe. More precisely, I examine how Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* mobilises colonial ethnographic discourse and realist writing to suggest new ways of remembering the Igbo past, thinking about their present and envisioning their future. *Arrow of God*, on the other hand, serves to show how the form of the historical novel effectively captures a moment of radical cultural change in the Igbo community, in a way that emphasises the longevity, complexity and malleability of Igbo culture. Finally, with *No Longer at Ease* I turn to the National Question in the early postcolonial Nigerian context and address how literature helped to fashion the modern nation and to conceptualise the emerging modern subject. In line with the above-mentioned goals, in the three literary analyses a particular attention is dedicated to the use of narrative strategies, such as narrative voice, narrative mode, the emplotment of ethnographic material and character perspective.

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26 In the Nigerian context, the term ‘National Question’ refers to the complex discussions surrounding the definition of national culture, national language and national identity, shaped by the ongoing tensions between the country’s different ethnic groups.
4.1 Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958): Igbo Identity as an Object of Ethnographic (Re)Construction

*Things Fall Apart* is an excellent illustration of David Attwell’s claim that “there is no escape clause from the encounter with modernity” (4). The novel subverts, rewrites and expands the category of Igbo cultural identity, which has its origins in colonial modernity. Moreover, it also engages with the very genre that shaped Igbo cultural identity: ethnographic writing. *Things Fall Apart*, however, does not uncritically adopt colonial practices and discourses, but re-examines them in a new, anti- and de-colonial light and re-appropriates them as means of de-colonial struggle. The novel takes up the remnants of colonial modernity – its genres such as ethnographic writing and its narratives of Igbo cultural identity – in order to interrogate them, challenge their authority and subvert them. If Attwell’s assumption that one cannot escape modernity is correct, then *Things Fall Apart* testifies to how early postcolonial writers found ways to challenge modernity ‘from within.’

The way in which Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* evokes colonial ethnographic discourse is through realist narration that seeks to “reproduce the look and feel of the real thing” (Brooks 3). This is accomplished by means of highly vivid descriptions, for instance, which create a strong sense of place, the way in which an impersonal yet authoritative narrator presents mundane details of the everyday life of both major and minor characters, and the focus on the inner worlds of characters. In *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, Thomas A. Schwandt confirms the tight link between ethnography and the literary techniques characteristic of realist fiction when he claims that ethnographic writing “is composed of a number of literary conventions that contribute to the construction of a representational text, that is, a text that claims to represent literally the way of life, attitudes, practices, beliefs and so on of those studied” (95). The choice of the realist novel as a means of expression enabled Achebe to produce a sense of an unmediated, authentic and reliable representation of precolonial Igbo cultural identity that evokes authoritative colonial accounts of the Igbo, such as political officer Percy Amaury Talbot’s *In the Shadow of the Bush* (1912) and missionary George Thomas Basden’s *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (1921).

Such associations to ethnographic practice in *Things Fall Apart* led to a reception of Achebe’s first novel, both within and outside of Africa, as literary ethnography. A review in the *Times Literary Supplement* from June 20th, 1958 praised Achebe for his ability to “[draw] a fascinating picture of tribal life among his own people at the end of the nineteenth century” (in Morrison 243), while *The New York Times* announced that Achebe’s novel “[took] its place with that small company of sensitive books that describe primitive

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27 For more detail on these narrative techniques as they are employed in realist fiction, see Walder; Woloch; Brooks.
society from the inside” (Rodman 28). Within the continent, Kalu Ogbaa informed teachers and students that Achebe’s novel could be regarded as “an authentic information source on the nineteenth-century Igbo and their neighbours” (xvii), whereas David Borman noted that “African students especially responded to Things Fall Apart as a book that convey[ed] inside information about Igbo culture” (n. pag.). As a canonical text not only in literature courses but also in anthropology, comparative religion and African Studies courses worldwide (Snyder 156; Krishnan, Contemporary African Literature in English 29; Gates), Achebe’s depictions of precolonial life in two Igbo villages in his first novel inspired a plethora of anthropological and sociological readings.28

Such readings have encountered fierce resistance over time from scholars eager to shift the focus away from reading Things Fall Apart as a reconstruction of the past and instead regard it as an example of how fictional worlds come into being, and thus acknowledge the novel’s literary value.29 In the late 1960s, G. D. Killam complained: “So much has been written about the anthropological and sociological significance of Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God – their evocation of traditional nineteenth- and earlier twentieth century Ibo village life – that the overall excellence of these books as pieces of fiction, as works of art, has been obscured” (1). Literary critic Ato Quayson, for instance, argued that realism in Achebe’s early novels is a “construct whose basic premises cannot be taken unproblematically” (“Realism, Criticism” 118), urging scholars to consider how the impression of realism is conveyed in Things Fall Apart and what kind of realism it is. Foregrounding the literary aspect of Achebe’s early fiction has the potential to counter what Kadiatu Kanneh calls “the long-standing habit of shunning African literature into a space outside art and literary figuration and into sociological data” (73).

The first step toward problematising realism in Things Fall Apart is taking up Francis Ngaboh-Smart’s claim that “narrating the past in a postcolonial context implies a desire to have or talk about the past, the present, and the future at once” (qtd. in Bloom 117). Once we begin to look at the novel as an entanglement of different temporalities, which usually represent different sets of ideologies and discourses, it ceases to be an unproblematic reconstruction of precolonial Igbo cultural identity and assumes the form of a creative, reactive and socially-engaged literary project instead. In other words, to fully grasp Achebe’s representation of precolonial Igbo culture, we need to consider the position and perspective from which he wrote. Having been born into a Christian family and having spent his formative years in colonial

28 These include Carroll’s Chinua Achebe (1980), Ogbaa’s Understanding Things Fall Apart (1999), Shelton’s “The Offended Chi in Achebe’s Novels” (1964) and “The ‘Palm-Oil’ of Language: Proverbs in Chinua Achebe’s Novels” (1969), and Adebayo’s “The Past and the Present in Chinua Achebe’s Novels” (1974), to name but a few.
29 See Gikandi, Reading Chinua Achebe; Booker.
Achebe’s writing was largely influenced by colonial discourses, yet not exclusively, since he was also exposed to stories about traditional Igbo world from his extended family and the written material available. These circumstances prompted Quayson to conclude that novels such as Things Fall Apart are not “merely mimetic of an African reality” but figure as “restructurations of various cultural subtexts” (“Realism, Criticism” 118). Furthermore, in line with the postcolonial perspective that Achebe adopted in Things Fall Apart, his goal in the novel was to debunk and rewrite colonial narratives so as to “help [his] society regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of the denigration and self-abasement” (Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day 44). Not considering the complexities of the time in which the novel was written and the author’s vision of the future – and the different, yet entangled discourses which thus converge – could cause the reader to miss the “revolutionary nature of Achebe’s text” (Gikandi, Reading Chinua Achebe 26).

In the remainder of the chapter, I will contribute to the endeavour to deconstruct Achebe’s realism in Things Fall Apart by looking closely at how the author’s use of narrative techniques evokes the notion of ethnographic writing which, at the same time, facilitates a postcolonial image of Africa and exposes the limitations and brutalities of colonial ethnographic discourse. I will begin by showing how Achebe’s employment of narrative voice, narrative mode and the emplotment of ethnographic Igbo material creates an impression of an objective and reliable ethnographic reconstruction of precolonial Igbo cultural identity, and how that, in turn, facilitates an authoritative narrative of Igbo cultural identity that runs counter to colonial representations of the Igbo. In the latter part of the analysis, I will show how an abrupt shift in character perspective – from the perspective of the Igbo to the perspective of the District Commissioner – places the narrative of the Igbo that is constructed thus far against a colonial ethnographic account, inviting a comparative reading of the two sorts of ethnographies that are defined in the novel.

The heterodiegetic narrator, who enjoys the privileged position outside the story, is the most prominent source of information about the indigenous Igbo. Her/his knowledge is greater than that of any character in the novel, qualifying him/her as what Genette terms an ‘omniscient narrator.’ The narrator reports on worlds both internal and external to characters, her/his

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30 For more on Achebe’s formative years, see Ochiagha.
31 In an article titled “An Image of Africa,” Achebe launched a severe attack on the literary representations of Africa from the early 20th century as “‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (783). Much of Achebe’s early writing can be understood as a response to such and similar disenfranchising notions of Africa, commonly found in, for example, Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1902 [1899]) and Joyce Cary’s Mr Johnson (1939).
knowledge spans generations, and s/he knows all that there is to know about Igbo customs and practices, institutions and worldviews. When the narrator reports that “Okonkwo wondered what was amiss, for he knew certainly that something was amiss” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 9), s/he demonstrates that s/he knows what individual characters feel and think. The narrator also demonstrates her/his insight into communal affairs, when s/he reports that “[p]eople laughed at [Unoka] because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any money because he never paid back” (Achebe, *TFA* 5). The narrator’s knowledge is not restricted to the present generation but spans several generations, which is evident when s/he reports about how the oldest generation of the members of Umuofia agreed on the most potent war medicine in the clan (Achebe, *TFA* 11). The narrator also provides exhaustive descriptions of precolonial Igbo practices and customs, such as the kola nut ritual, ceremonies and sacred dates; social and political institutions, such as the Council of Elders and the Council of Masquerades; and worldviews, such as the belief in rebirth or the menacing powers of the Evil Forest. The narrator’s all-encompassing insight into Igbo culture, history and internal worlds has led Harold Bloom to state that “the narrator appears to have an inexhaustible fund of cultural knowledge, as if combining Basden’s ethnographic curiosity with the intuitive understanding of his [or her] native informants” (125) and Isidore Okpewho to define the narrator as “claim[ing] to know all sides” (143). In both cases, the narrator is perceived as a prominent and authoritative figure in the narrative.

Closely related to the narrator’s omniscience is the question of the reliability of her/his representation of the Igbo world. Apart from being omniscient, the narrator also appears to be an objective and reliable chronicler. By referring to the community as “the Ibo,” “they,” and “these people” (Achebe, *TFA* 9, 10), the narrator claims a sort of objective distance from her/his object of narration. The narrator thereby assumes the guise of an ethnographer-observer who can produce an objective, insider account of the object of observation. In the manner of an engaged observer, the narrator at times comments on the story, such as when s/he contradicts some clan members’ statements about Okonkwo: “The oldest men present said sternly that those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble . . . But it was really not true that Okonkwo’s palm-kernels had been cracked for him by a benevolent spirit” (Achebe, *TFA* 24-25). On yet another occasion, the narrator again sides with Okonkwo when s/he notes that “Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his younger wife, who went to plait her hair at her friend’s house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal” (Achebe, *TFA* 26, emphasis added).

Such narrative commentary on the story world, especially as it is not in any way undermined within the text, only contributes to the impression of the narrator’s objectivity and reliability, and further strengthens the feeling of trust between the reader and what appears to be a well-informed narrator.
The manipulation of the two modes of presenting events in a narrative, namely showing and telling, is another narrative technique that contributes to the impression of the narrator’s objective and reliable presentation of Igbo cultural identity. Part One in Things Fall Apart abounds with detailed descriptions of precolonial Igbo worldviews, which are, in a mode of telling, simply presented to the reader. In this part of the novel, character dialogues are scarce; the focus is placed not on the action or sequence of events but on defining precolonial Igbo cultural identity in detail. A “telling” example of such narration can be found in the beginning of chapter two, when the story of the crier summoning the clansmen to a meeting the following morning is but a trigger for the narrator’s account of Okonkwo’s contemplation of the reason for the meeting, his views of the war and the Igbo understanding of the world around them. In rare instances when characters are depicted conversing, and the mode of showing prevails, the function of these dialogues is to confirm what the narrator had previously related about the Igbo. For instance, briefly after the narrator states that “among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly” (Achebe, TFA 6), Unoka and Okoye’s dialogue features a proverb to confirm the narrator’s observation. The predominance of the telling mode in presenting events in the first part of the narrative, with occasional and strategic shifts to the showing mode, both strengthens the impression of ethnographic presentation and emphasises the reliability of the narrator’s account.

Last, but not least, the incorporation of ethnographic Igbo material such as traditional folktales, proverbs and songs into the written text, termed entextualisation in ethnographic practice, contributes to the ethnographic feel of Things Fall Apart. This, too, plays an important role in making the portrayal of Igbo cultural identity seem authentic. By using ethnographic Igbo material – the nature of which is emphasised by the fact that it is more often than not presented in English – in order to describe the narrated world, the narrator embeds the characters and events from the fictional narrative in a longer Igbo tradition, which predates the novel. For instance, when describing characters and their actions, the narrator often resorts to using proverbs, such as when s/he reports that “[a]mong the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are palm-oils with which words are eaten” (Achebe, TFA 6, emphasis added) or how the Igbo say that “[w]hen the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk” (Achebe, TFA 10). Moreover, the relating of other traditional Igbo folktales is reported, as is the case with one of Okonkwo’s wives, Ekwenfi, who tells her daughter Ezinma a story of the tortoise (Achebe, TFA 87-90). And finally, the narrator not only reports how the Igbo sing their traditional songs but also includes these

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32 Silverstein and Urban define ‘entextualisation’ as a “process of rendering a given instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local context” (21). In African studies, the notion of ‘entextualisation’ was adopted and further developed by Barber in relation to African oral genres.
songs in the narrative in their original form (Achebe, *TFA* 46, 54, 107-108). Falling back on the Igbo tradition in order to lend definition to the narrated world, the narrative of Igbo cultural identity acquires historical depth, while simultaneously presenting the fictional Igbo world as part of a larger tradition serves to validate the narrator’s account.

It has been demonstrated thus far how Achebe makes use of narrative voice, narrative mode and the entextualisation of ethnographic Igbo material in order to construct the impression of a realist representation of precolonial Igbo cultural identity. The discussion of realism in *Things Fall Apart*, a realism which is highly evocative of ethnographic writing, cannot, however, end here, for the impression of realist narration as constructed in the novel is not an end in itself. Rather, it is imperative to understand that the image of the Igbo constructed through the sort of ethnography discussed thus far makes blatantly obvious the limitations and brutality of colonial ethnographic discourses and practices.

Achebe stages a radical shift at the close of the novel from the perspective of the Igbo to the perspective of the District Commissioner, thereby inviting a reflection on the nature and effects of colonial practices on the representation of the Igbo. The critical paragraph deserves to be quoted at length:

In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilisation to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make an interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details he had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: The Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger (Achebe, *TFA* 187)

The evocation of colonial ethnographic discourse confirms Quayson’s reading of *Things Fall Apart* as a novel that is primarily concerned with the ideologies, cultural subtexts and practices that shaped the historical reality of the Igbo. Particularly significant for understanding the nature of the Commissioner’s ethnographic portrayal of the Igbo are two sections of the paragraph quoted above: one is the Commissioner’s quick description of Okonkwo’s unfortunate fate and the other is the Commissioner’s decision to reduce the story of Okonkwo’s suicide from a ‘whole chapter’ to a ‘reasonable paragraph.’ Presenting the story of Okonkwo as ‘the story of a man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself,’ the Commissioner offers a strikingly rough summary of that which the entire narrative prior to the closing sce-
ne portrays. Related to that and captured in the latter section, the Commissioner’s decision to reduce Okonkwo’s story to a paragraph implies an omission of a larger portion of the (hi)story that leads to Okonkwo’s suicide. The summary and the ellipsis on which the Commissioner’s account relies point to a choice of strategies – in this case the treatment of narrative time – with a clear interpreting effect: The Commissioner’s omission of the tragic set of events that leads to Okonkwo’s unfortunate suicide means that he leaves unaddressed the devastating effects of the colonial rule on both the individual and the community, while the summary of Okonkwo as solely ‘a man who commits suicide’ means that the Commissioner overlooks the complex indigenous philosophical and cultural system that Okonkwo’s suicide activates. Dismissing the above mentioned events as irrelevant, the Commissioner removes significance from Okonkwo’s history and, by extension, the history of the Igbo community.

The Commissioner’s rough ethnographic account of the Igbo, which is starkly contrasted to the presentation of the Igbo throughout the earlier parts of the narrative, invites a comparative reading of the two kinds of ethnographies that are defined in the narrative. Unlike the Commissioner’s account, which skips events in its representation of the Igbo and thus commits a sort of narrative violence over the history of the Igbo, the ethnographic account embodied by the rest of the narrative reflects on the minute details from the lives of the Igbo. The narrator’s exhaustive knowledge about the Igbo, lengthy descriptions of the life in the Igbo communities and the generous inclusion of ethnographic material achieve a sense of depth of the Igbo world described in the narrative. Moreover, frequent narratorial comments create an impression that what unfolds before the reader is not only a lively and vivid Igbo world, but a particular ethnographic discourse, too, whose ethnographer displays a heightened level of engagement with his/her object of observation. In light of that, the parts of the novel that lead to the closing scene with the Commissioner can be read as critical responses to colonial ethnographic discourse in that they fill in the gaps which emerge in colonial ethnographic accounts as results of a generalising and crudely biased portrayal of the Igbo. Therefore, in the convergence of the two ethnographic representations of the Igbo, the colonial ethnographic account emerges as the strongly ironised one.

The fact that Achebe relies on the ethnographic discourse but develops his own idiom is reflective of the ambiguous relationship between postcolonial writers and the culture of colonial modernity. On the one hand, the culture of colonial modernity equips postcolonial writers with the necessary tools to reach Western literary markets and audiences. On the other, however, these tools are laden with meanings originally defined within the frames of colonial ideology. Within this framework, as has been demonstrated in the chapter, Achebe both makes use of and debunks the practices and categories of colonial modernity. By imitating the practices and discourses of the culture of
colonial modernity, he is able to construct an alternative narrative of the Igbo that can lay claim to the same degree of authority as any other (colonial) ethnographic narrative. However, Achebe simultaneously seeks to uncover the ideological premises and the constructed nature of the practices, discourses and narratives constitutive of the culture of colonial modernity, and thus contribute to the epistemological decolonisation of the Igbo.

Facilitating a sustainable future for the Igbo, therefore, meant engaging critically with the colonial ethnographic legacy in a way aimed at providing, as Achebe himself explained, a “second handle on reality” and a “way out when it becomes necessary to do so” (qtd. in Lindfors, *Conversations with Chinua Achebe* 168). Achebe’s auto-ethnographic literary project, directed not at uncovering any historical truth but at offering an alternative narrative to colonial representations of precolonial Igbo cultural identity, required a radical redefinition of ethnography as inherited from his European predecessors. Similarly, as in Martinican writing, where Christina Kullberg claims ethnography has been transformed into a poetics within literary genre (4), Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* also engages in a playful manner with the ethnographic by manipulating the narrative voice, narrative mode and ethnographic Igbo material in a way that ultimately cultivates an impression of realist writing. Ethnography is thus evoked not as a model of thought, but as a platform from which a peculiar dynamic between self, other and environment is staged (Kullberg 3), and which is always malleable enough to allow for representation of different realities. Turning ethnography into a means of literary expression, or a poetics, enabled Achebe to shape an alternative yet equally authoritative narrative of Igbo cultural identity. He imagined this as offering an escape from repressive colonial discourses; teaching or reminding the formerly colonised peoples of the grandeur of their precolonial history; and, perhaps most importantly, inspiring new ways of remembering the past, thinking about the present and envisioning the future.

However, Achebe’s literary attempt to insert Igbo voices into history through ethnography cannot be disentangled from understanding his efforts to challenge and subvert the authority of colonial ethnographic representations. If, as Édouard Glissant states, “the distrust we feel towards [ethnography] does not come from the displeasure of being watched, but from the resentment of not watching in return” (122), Achebe’s use of ethnographic poetics within the novelistic literary expression engenders an act of ‘speaking/writing back’ to colonial ethnographic discourse that reveals its limitations and brutality in relation to Igbo historical and social realities. Achebe’s critical gaze in the form of an auto-ethnographic narrative of Igbo history achieved a two-fold goal, neatly captured in Lanser’s remark: “[A]s [marginalised authors] strive to create fictions of authority, [they] expose fictions of authority as the Western novel has constructed it” (8). In the context of Achebe’s novel, the postcolonial narrative of Igbo history not only asserts its authority, but at the same time urges the reader to place the realism of the
Commissioner’s ethnography under critical observation, until the process of its construction, its formative influences and underlying premises, as well as its constitutive elements are successfully laid bare.

To conclude, my reading of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* as staging a contestation between two different kinds of ethnographies frames the relationship between the colonised and the coloniser in terms of a struggle over narrating, and thus defining, the Igbo. The ending of Achebe’s narrative powerfully captures the effects of colonial ethnographic practice to produce knowledge about the Igbo: A radical shift in character perspective evokes the colonial ethnographic writing which, through a careful manipulation of narrative time, removes significance and value from Igbo culture and history. The resulting portrayals of Igbo culture as undignified and the Igbo as primitive ultimately serve to justify the colonial intervention. The rest of the narrative, on the other hand, is designed to radically challenge such a notion of the Igbo. The kind of realist narration which turns ethnography into a decolonial poetics in a literary text allows for a solemn and slow deliberation on a long, complex and elevated Igbo culture, which eventually produces the notion of the Igbo as a dignified people. In doing so, Thomas Lynn remarked, Achebe “inserts the integrity and authority of the Igbo voice in a global order defined by colonialism” (1).
4.2 Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (1964): Igbo Identity as an Object of Transformation and a Site of Contestation

Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* opens with a description of Igbo culture in transformation, thus announcing the general theme of the narrative. Focalised through the character of Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of the fictional Igbo clan of Umuaro, the description reads:

Ezeulu did not like to think that his sight was no longer as good as it used to be and that some day he would have to rely on someone else’s eyes as his grandfather had done when his sight failed. Of course he had lived to such a great age that his blindness became like an ornament on him . . .

But for the present [Ezeulu] was as good as any young man, or better because young men were no longer what they used to be. (Achebe, *Arrow of God* 1)

This excerpt juxtaposes two visions of the present: the similarity and continuity between Ezeulu’s generation and his grandfather’s generation, where in both generations blindness is respected as a sign of old age, and the dissimilarity and discontinuity between Ezeulu’s generation and the younger generation of clansmen. At first sight, it might seem that Ezeulu’s deteriorating eyesight is unconnected to the notion of change that the young generation of clansmen presumably embody, namely the change in prevalent cultural forms of life. Yet, when read metaphorically, Ezeulu’s deteriorating eyesight is equally evocative of cultural change: It signals the aging of a traditional authority and invites the question of what will take its place.

While the opening of the narrative announces the theme of cultural transformation, the rest of the narrative illustrates a set of changes in cultural patterns in the clan, shedding light on both external and internal factors leading to those changes. Unlike *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* is set in an Igboland in which colonial rule is already well established. Yet apart from examining the effects of global history, i.e. the colonial intervention, Achebe also emphasises the impact of local social histories on Igbo cultural identity by including a story about a war between the neighbouring clans of Umuaro and Okperi, as well as the tensions within the clan of Umuaro that predate colonial intrusion. Granting equal attention to external and internal triggers of cultural change enables Achebe to achieve a two-fold effect: First, he challenges the Hegelian notion of Africa as being ‘outside of history’ by demonstrating how the colonial intervention meant a collision of global history as defined in Western discourses and local Igbo histories. In this way, furthermore, the novel challenges the colonial notion of African societies as inscribed into history by the West in an act of “[bringing the indigenous

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33 In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel remarked that Africa “is no historical part of the world [and that] it has no movement or development to exhibit” (99).
peoples] into the discourse of modernity as a function of imperial control” (Ashcroft, *Utopianism* 81). Secondly, Achebe attends to the complexity of cultural change in the colonial contact zone by suggesting that, in order to attain a complete picture of the dynamics of cultural change, not only the imposition of Western cultural forms of life should be considered, but also the internal cultural dynamic in the given African community.

The complexity of the process of cultural transformation is conveyed in the narrative through heterogeneous character perspective. By employing convergent and divergent character perspectives, Achebe presents Igbo cultural identity as a site of contestation and negotiation. However, in contrast to *Things Fall Apart*, where the narrative of Igbo cultural identity manifests itself in an unusually strong interpretative narrative voice, in *Arrow of God* it is the collage of different characters’ voices that shapes the presentation of Igbo cultural identity. As stated by Nicholas Brown, Achebe does not employ the extradiegetic ethnographic voice to interpret cultural dilemmas in *Arrow of God*, but turns back to the narrative and character interaction as sources of cultural information (“Chinua Achebe” 88). Moreover, the perspectives of the Igbo characters in *Arrow of God* are interwoven with the perspectives of the white characters. In the absence of a prominent extradiegetic narrative voice, the perspectives of the white characters serve as sources that ironise and relativise the notion of Igbo cultural identity as defined by the Igbo characters. Both the omission of the extradiegetic ethnographic voice and the incorporation of diverse Igbo and non-Igbo perspectives pave the way to presenting Igbo cultural identity as a site of contestation and negotiation between characters.

The remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to tackling the representation of the nature and effects of the transformation in Igbo cultural identity in greater detail, paying particular attention to how certain narrative techniques shape this representation. For instance, it will become apparent that narrative structure reflects the nature of the cultural change as thematised in the novel. *Arrow of God* has a circular structure if observed thematically, as it starts and ends with a reference to the harvesting of yams. While the circular structure promises a sense of an integrated completeness, the markedly different preparations for the harvest that are described in the opening and the closing episodes disrupt the notion of continuity and emphasise the cultural change that occurs in the Igbo community. The effects of such a transformation are thematised at the level of content as much as at the level of form, i.e. in the narrative’s temporal dimension and the nature of narrative mediation. In what follows, therefore, the speed of narration and character focalisation will be addressed as formal techniques employed to convey the idea of radical and abrupt cultural change. Finally, in order to grasp the complexity of the change at hand, character perspectives will be examined, for their convergence and divergence plays a significant role in defining Igbo culture in motion.
In the opening episode, the focus is placed on the traditional Igbo preparations for the harvest, in particular on the significance of the new moon for the event. The Chief Priest of Umuaro is described as diligently waiting for the new moon: “[Ezeulu] knew it would come today but he always began his watch three days before its time because he must not take a risk” (Achebe, AoG 1). After the appearance of the new moon, Ezeulu would eat one yam off the pile of yams from the previous year and, when finished with the old yams, would announce the New Yam Feast. During the Feast, a sacrifice is placed before the god Ulu and the harvest time is announced. The importance of the new moon in this sequence of events is emphasised both by it being ascribed agency, such as when the narrator says that the new moon “sometimes hid itself” and “played a game” (Achebe, AoG 1), as well as by how the moon incites the Chief Priest’s and his family’s excitement. While Ezeulu’s excitement is intimately connected with his authority in the clan and responsibility to announce the coming of the new moon, his wives’ and children’s rejoicing at the thought of the new moon reflects the wider community’s enthusiasm for the time of joy and plenty that lies ahead. If we understand cultural identity to rest on traditional custom and practices, then the preparations for the harvest are not only practices that enable communal survival, but also significant symbolic actions that contribute to the (re)production of Igbo cultural identity.

In narratological terms, this episode is characterised by slow narrative progression and a focus limited to the character of Ezeulu. The narrator frequently interrupts the story in order to present Ezeulu’s thoughts, feelings and behaviour, whereby Ezeulu assumes the role of central character focaliser. For instance, as soon as we learn that “this was the third nightfall since [Ezeulu] began to look for signs of the new moon” (Achebe, AoG 1), the focus of narration switches to a description of Ezeulu’s behaviour while he is waiting for the new moon. The next step in the narrative progression is marked by the narrator informing the reader that “it was getting darker” (Achebe, AoG 1), but then the narrator proceeds with a description of Ezeulu’s thoughts about his eyesight. Even when more attention is paid to Ezeulu’s actions (seeing the moon, peering more closely at it and reaching nervously for the ogene) and the events of the narrative seem to be progressing, the narrator still dedicates considerable time to descriptions of Ezeulu’s thoughts. As in the first two parts of Things Fall Apart, the deliberate slowing down of narrated time allows for an extensive exploration of the Igbo world on the part of the narrator. However, unlike in Things Fall Apart, the information about the Igbo world is presented in a highly personalised manner, as it is focalised by a character rather than simply related by the omniscient narrator.

The traditional Igbo custom of preparing for the harvesting of yams described at the beginning of the novel is altogether disrupted by the novel’s end, where it is no longer the Chief Priest and the new moon that play the
central role but the Christian church. The Igbo of Umuaro are asked to bring a sacrifice, but to the Christian god rather than the Chief Priest. They are also asked to bring not only one yam but “as many as they wish,” and not only yams but “any crop whatsoever or livestock or money” (Achebe, AoG 270). The novel concludes with the statement that “thereafter any yam that was harvested in the man’s fields was harvested in the name of the son” (Achebe, AoG 287), testifying to the degree to which Christianity becomes entrenched in the clan. Despite this immense change, the preparation for the harvest still reflects some of its traditional elements, insofar as the logic of offering sacrifice to a god with the intention to appease him/her and obtain his/her permission to harvest the crop remains unchanged. What is certainly different, however, are the instruments: The god to whom the sacrifice is offered is the Christian god and the sacrifice departs from the traditional single yam. In order to adequately interpret the nature of cultural change depicted in the novel, it is necessary to remain sensitive to such examples of cultural entanglement. The openness to reading the colonial cultural dialogue in terms of cultural exchange rather than cultural imposition (solely) enables us to remain attentive, first, to the sites of entanglement between precolonial Igbo and Western forms of life and, secondly, to the examples of indigenous agency in the colonial contact.

The change in the preparations for the harvest is formally reflected in a change in the nature of narrative mediation and speed. Whereas the opening episode is presented through the personalised perspective of the clan’s Chief Priest, the closing episode is delivered in an impersonal manner by the omniscient narrator: “The Christian harvest which took place a few days after Obika’s death saw more people than even Goodcountry could have dreamed. In his extremity many an Umuaro man had sent his son with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised immunity” (Achebe, AoG 287). The speed of narration also changes: The closing paragraphs relate the happenings at great speed, assuming almost the form of a list of events, with very little or no description provided. What occurs in the course of the narrative is thus a move away from the personal, detailed and slow narration at the onset of the novel toward a much more fast-paced and crisp style that shifts the focus from the (cultural) meaning of the events to their succession. The shortening of narrative time compared to narrated time results in narrative acceleration, which, in turn, effectively conveys a sense of abruptness and the intensity of change brought about by the colonial intrusion.

To better understand the acceleration of narrative time that occurs in the course of the narrative, it is fruitful to consult Reinhart Koselleck’s two temporal extensions of the present – the space of experience and the horizon of expectation. Koselleck understands the space of experience to encompass the “part of the past that has been incorporated, reworked, preserved, distilled, and remembered in the present” (Scott 42). The horizon of expectation, in
comparison, refers to the “hopes, fears, curiosities, desires, and so on that give point to the ‘not-yet’ of time” (Scott 42). Koselleck ultimately concludes that there is no experience without expectation and no expectation that is not grounded to some extent in prior experience (257). What happens, then, with the experience of the present in the moment of abrupt cultural change that radically disrupts the dynamic between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation, as is the case with the changes brought about by the colonial intervention?

The changes in Umuaro that occur before intense contact with colonial powers make sense in the context of the prior experience of the Igbo, and create the impression of an Igbo community with a changing yet continuous cultural identity. The changes in Igbo custom that Ezeulu’s father and grandfather introduce are a case in point; they do away with the custom of treating every child born to a widow as a slave, as well as ban the carving of faces (Achebe, AoG 164). These types of changes occur, in Scott’s interpretation of Koselleck, “slowly and in such a long-term fashion that the rent between previous experience and an expectation does not undermine the traditional world” (43). Colonial disruption, however, entails an imposition of a horizon of expectation that is entirely disconnected from the prior experience of the Igbo. Old notions of the future based on prior experience are no longer adequate and Igbo ideas about what to do with the past in the present moment are unsettled, creating a strong sense of disorientation. This becomes evident when Captain Winterbottom’s messenger Jekopu visits Ezeulu and, in their conversation, traditional Igbo ways of communicating emerge as meaningless. By insisting that the Chief Priest identifies himself, Jekopu shows great disrespect toward Ezeulu and introduces a way of communicating where it is not disrespectful, but demanded that elders, too, identify themselves. The sense of confusion triggered by the collision of traditional Igbo way of communicating and the new and utterly unfamiliar expectations imposed by the colonial regime casts the present moment as a time of disruption and a time that demands a radical re-negotiation, re-invention and re-adjustment of Igbo customs.

In addition to analysing the nature and effects of changes in Igbo cultural identity in the light of the structure of the novel and its temporal dimension, the complexity of the change in question can be examined through the employment of heterogeneous character perspective. In what follows, the perspectives of different characters within the clan of Umuaro will be explored with regard to the way in which they conceptualise traditional Igbo culture and the culture of colonial modernity. Moreover, how these different perspectives are organised in the narrative will also be scrutinised in order to show how the divergence and convergence of different perspectives contributes to constructing, challenging and re-inventing Igbo cultural identity. Finally, the perspective of the most prominent white character in the novel, Captain Winterbottom (in the novel referred to as ‘Wintabota’), will be con-
sidered. It will be shown how a character that symbolises the figure of coloniser and of cultural outsider ironises and relativises the notion of Igbo cultural identity as shaped by Igbo characters.

However, before proceeding to discuss the perspectives that are significant for understanding the change in Igbo cultural identity triggered by the contact with the culture of colonial modernity, it is important to acknowledge what is presented in the narrative as part of a long tradition of cultural introspection and re-definition in the clan of Umuaro. One telling example is a dispute between the clans of Umuaro and Okperi over the piece of land on which the clan of Umuaro was established. The fact that Umuaro’s right to this piece of land is now debated turns the story of Umuaro’s origin into a contested and unresolved narrative, which, in turn, threatens the stability of the clan’s sense of cultural identity. The clansmen’s active and conscious engagement with their religious custom also renders Igbo cultural identity an object of reflection. Ezidemili, the priest of god Idemili, and Ezidemili’s friend Nwaka repeatedly challenge Ezeulu’s right to the priesthood, causing much commotion, in particular when Nwaka “threatened Ulu by reminding him of the fate of another deity that failed his people” (Achebe, AoG 47). Such provocations on Ezidemili and Nwaka’s part invite other clansmen to reflect on the nature of (Eze)Ulu’s power: “[P]eople sometimes asked themselves how a man could defy Ulu and live to boast” (Achebe, AoG 48). Similar cases of Umuaro’s conscious engagement with its customs are when Ezeulu’s grandfather bans carving faces in the village and when his father sets aside the custom by which any child born to a widow is considered a slave (Achebe, AoG 164). All of these examples, which depict how communal tension leads to introspection and possibly changes in cultural patterns, testify to Igbo cultural identity being an object of perpetual reflection. The conversation among characters about the way to handle the newly introduced culture of colonial modernity takes place within this context of cultural self-reflection.

If Igbo cultural identity is perpetually in flux, colonial modernity becomes just another of the many influences redefining it. This is not, however, a move that aims to downplay the role of the colonial intervention as a trigger of cultural changes in Igbo communities; instead, it emphasises the longevity and complexity of Igbo culture and the collective identity rooted in that culture. Moreover, rather than presenting the Igbo agency reductively – as constituted by a unified, homogenous perspective, – Achebe presents a plethora of Igbo perspectives on the new cultural and political regime. The Igbo response to the culture of colonial modernity is thus broken down into a plurality of voices, the convergence and divergence of which serves to legitimise and delegitimise character perspectives, and to highlight their particularities.

In this regard, Ezeulu’s perspective and those of other Umuaro clansmen are particularly significant. The ways in which their perceptions of and responses to the culture of colonial modernity shape the change in Igbo cultur-
Ezeulu’s perspective is especially important for the narrative of Igbo cultural identity because it reflects a philosophy that centres on cultural sovereignty and exchange. Ezeulu makes the controversial decision to send his son Oduche to the Christian church and, soon afterwards, to the missionary school. Ezeulu explains to Oduche: “The world is changing. . . . I want one of my sons to join these people and by my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share” (Achebe, AoG 55). What motivates Ezeulu’s decision, as interpreted by Harry Garuba, is Ezeulu’s notion of tradition as something “from which you could go forth into the other world to bring its benefits to enrich your own world” (“Postcolonial Modernity and Normalisation” 25). Ezeulu’s philosophy thus allows for the co-existence of two sovereign cultural communities. The tolerance Ezeulu advocates for the plurality of cultural patterns is evident in his response to Oduche’s mother’s complaint about their son having to follow “strange ways”:

Do you know that in a great man’s household there must be people who follow all kinds of strange ways? There must be good people and bad people, honest workers and thieves, peacemakers and destroyers; that is a mark of a great Obi. In such a place, whatever music you beat on your drum there is somebody who can dance to it. (Achebe, AoG 56)

Ezeulu’s ambition to have some members of his community be familiar with the new culture is, ultimately, an example of the Igbo people’s strategy of actively, consciously and strategically engaging with different cultural forms of life, in a way which ensures their own cultural and material survival. Yet what Ezeulu does not know – and cannot know – at the given point in the narrative, Garuba observes, is that in dealing with the culture of colonial modernity “[Ezeulu] comes (up) against the exclusivist, hierarchical and binarist structure of colonial discourse,” which limits his “freedom to pick and choose, to retain and discard” (“Mapping the Land/Body/Subject” 103).

Another important notion that underlies Ezeulu’s idea of entering a dialogue with the coloniser is the notion of equal humanity. Ezeulu refers to his conversation with Captain Winterbottom, the British colonial overseer, as friendship: “It was I who sent you to join those people because of my friendship to the white man, Wintabota” (Achebe, AoG 16). Ezeulu’s rhetoric implies that he understands their conversation as one between equal partners, a notion that rests on the idea that the black and the white man are equally human. This supposed egalitarianism, furthermore, implies no imposition, but an exchange of ideas between the Igbo and the British. Therefore, Ezeulu explains to Oduche that “[y]our people [the Christians] should know the custom of this land; if they don’t you must tell them” (Achebe, AoG 16).

Ezeulu’s rhetoric of friendship does not, however, imply that he is unaware of the colonial matrix of power. Ezeulu expresses his awareness of the imbalance of power when he recounts his visit to the colonial premises in
Okperi to Oduche: “When I was in Okperi I saw a young man who was able to write his book with the left hand. From his actions I could see that he had very little sense. But he had power; he could shout in my face; he could do what he liked” (Achebe, AoG 234). For Ezeulu, sending Oduche to the Christian school to acquire Western forms of knowledge therefore signifies a way to (re)claim power for the Igbo community, or at least reach a position from which the Igbo can effectively offer resistance to the oppressive regime and eventually re-assert the fact of their humanity. Realising that the Igbo cannot stop the rapid tide of change, Ezeulu argues for moving along with it so as not to be disadvantaged in comparison to the colonial force. Ezeulu’s decision to engage with the culture of colonial modernity, metaphorically expressed in his statement that “a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time” (Achebe, AoG 234), ultimately proves that for him cultural (ex)change is a tool of resistance to the colonial imposition of power rather than an act of surrendering to cultural imperialism.

Not being endowed with the philosophical sensitivity of a Chief Priest, regular clansmen of Umuaro express a much more reductive understanding of the culture of colonial modernity, as well as its religious, administrative and legal representatives. The clansmen are highly incredulous of the new faith, calling Christianity “a seed of foolishness” (Achebe, AoG 105), while Nweke Ukpaka, speaking on behalf of his age group, expresses the clan’s distrust of the white man’s good intentions when he says that “the white man does not wish Umuaro well” (Achebe, AoG 106). Umuaro’s hostility toward the white man is also reflected in the language that the clansmen use to describe the British: The white men are described as “the stranger,” “the white ruler” and “a leper” (Achebe, AoG 164, 177.), testifying to Umuaro’s understanding of the white men as an unwanted presence, oppressors and those “potent things from which people shrink in fear” (Achebe, AoG 177). In line with perceiving the culture of colonial modernity as something indisputably evil, the clan also overtly counters Ezeulu’s rhetoric of friendship. With the support of other clansmen, Nwaka mocks it when he addresses Captain Winterbottom’s order to Ezeulu to visit the colonial premises: “[The white man] has asked for Ezeulu. Why? Because they are friends. Or does Ezeulu think that their friendship should stop short of entering each other’s houses? Does he want the white man to be his friend only by word of mouth?” (Achebe, AoG 177). The conflicting perspectives of Ezeulu and the clan reflect the clan’s reluctance to embrace Ezeulu’s politics of cultural dialogue and indicate the plurality of opinions within the clan.

Despite not wishing to engage in a dialogue with colonial representatives, the clansmen find it impossible to resist being pulled into the realm of modern colonial discourses and practices. The penetrating power of colonial modernity is well illustrated by an episode in which the Otakagu age group meets to decide how to respond to the white man’s initiative to employ the local Igbo to work on a road, without paying them. Whereas the initial reac-
tion of the Igbo is to simply stop coming to the site, thus altogether refusing to partake in the modern labour market, they soon realise that the white men would most likely imprison the leaders of the clan in response (Achebe, AoG 104). It is the intimate connection between the (spread of) culture of modernity, on the one hand, and the colonial matrix of power or, in Walter D. Mignolo’s terms, ‘coloniality’ on the other, that forces the Igbo to accept that they must go to the site. Within the confining space carved out for the Igbo by the system of colonial rule, the only thing left to the Igbo is to negotiate the conditions of their new employment. They eventually decide to demand to be adequately paid for their work, turning to the modern notion of workers’ rights in order to protect themselves from colonial exploitatiation.

That the Igbo cultural community benefits in some ways from engaging with the culture of colonial modernity is evident in the character of Moses Unachukwu. Moses is known in Umuaro as “the first and the most famous convert” and works with the catechists of St Mark’s C.M.S Church (Achebe, AoG 57). Highly knowledgeable of both traditional Igbo religion and Christianity, Moses is able to fight Western cultural imposition by using the tools provided by the culture of colonial modernity itself. Thanks to his knowledge of both cultures, Moses is engaged as mediator in a dispute between the Igbo and Christian communities when the Catechist John Jaja Goodcountry announces a “little war against the royal python” (Achebe, AoG 267). While John Goodcountry wants to do away with the Igbo belief that the royal python is a sacred animal, Moses, being very well familiar with the Bible, points to the lack of any reference to destroying the python in the Bible. Equally familiar with local religious beliefs, Moses also points to the immense respect among the Igbo for the royal python, which is considered to be “a beast full of ill omen” (Achebe, AoG 58). Ultimately, Moses hires a clerk and submits a petition on behalf of the Priest of Idemili to the Bishop on the Niger. Thanks to Moses’s knowledge of how the colonial legal system functions, the Igbo community eventually wins the case against John Goodcountry. This episode shows how the cultural middle ground can be used as a platform from which the Igbo can resist cultural colonialism. The success of Moses in defending the traditional Igbo belief ultimately makes many clansmen realise that it is useful to “have a few people like [him] around who knew what the white man knew” (Achebe, AoG 269).

At the formal level, this change in the clan’s views of the culture of colonial modernity implies a convergence of the clan’s and Ezeulu’s perspectives. There are at least two ways to interpret this convergence: in relation to the fictional world and in relation to the extra-textual reality. Within the world presented in the novel, the convergence of perspectives around the question of how to respond to the culture of colonial modernity effectively validates Ezeulu’s perspective, which advocates cultural dialogue and exchange. By recognising the impossibility of preserving the imagined “unbridgeable divide between the world of tradition and the world of the
Church” (Garuba, “Postcolonial Modernity and Normalisation” 25), as well as the potential benefits that could be reaped from strategically engaging with the culture of colonial modernity, the clan embraces Ezeulu’s notions of cultural dialogue and change. Another way to interpret the function of the convergence of perspectives in the narrative is in relation to the world external to the novel: The convergence of perspectives confirms Attwell’s claim that “there is no escape clause from the encounter with modernity” (4). By depicting the entrenchment of Christianity in the Igbo community as inescapable, Achebe hitches the fate of the fictive Igbo community to the fates of other indigenous communities worldwide in the age of colonial expansion, encouraging a reading of local Igbo history “in terms of the whole movement of world history” (Achebe qtd. in Lindfors, *Conversations with Chinua Achebe* 138).34

The convergence of perspectives is, however, only temporary, as Ezeulu’s refusal to announce the harvest earlier than the traditional custom allows once again causes his perspective and that of the clan to clash. What makes Ezeulu decide to vigorously stick to the traditional custom is his wish to punish his clan for having allowed the colonial representatives to hold him imprisoned for three weeks in the neighbouring clan of Okperi. Being detained in the ‘unfamiliar land of Okperi’ (Achebe, *AoG* 196), Ezeulu could not eat the three sacred yams that he was supposed to eat during the time of his detention. Ezeulu will be three weeks late with announcing the harvest unless he eats the three yams all at once. The Umuaro elders plead with Ezeulu to “eat those remaining yams today and name the day of the next harvest,” but Ezeulu replies that the elders cannot ask him to do “what is not done” (Achebe, *AoG* 260-261). In formal terms, what appears to be a role reversal, where Ezeulu is now the one who resists the change in traditional Igbo custom and the clan begs for the change, is another instance of a divergence in character perspectives.

While Ezeulu’s decision causes an existential crisis in the clan, namely famine, the clan demonstrates an immense power of transformation and adaptation at the moment when its material survival is seriously jeopardised. The clan departs from its traditional custom only as much as is needed for the clan to survive. First, the clansmen harvest the yams in their homestead, pretending that it is not against the custom (Achebe, *AoG* 273). Later, some regular clansmen and eventually the Umuaro men of title decide to buy yams from neighbouring clans (Achebe, *AoG* 272). When the supply of yams dwindles, the clansmen adjust even further, by making a sacrifice to the Christian god: “The Christian harvest which took place a few days after Obika’s death saw more people than even Goodcountry could have dreamed. In his extremity many an Umuaro man had sent his son with a yam or two to

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34 In *Utopian Generations*, Brown discusses Achebe’s *Arrow of God* as a historical novel in order to arrive at the identical conclusion that *Arrow of God* establishes a link between local Igbo history and global history.
offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised immunity” (Achebe, *AoG* 287). For the clansmen, as observed by Garuba, “their offer of the new yam to the new god is an existential decision to stave off starvation” and not something “earth-shattering and epistemologically significant [as Ezeulu sees it]” (“Postcolonial Modernity and Normalisation” 24). Garuba’s observation is significant, as it foregrounds how complex the novel’s treatment of the transformation of Igbo cultural identity is: Whereas Ezeulu’s perspective foregrounds the acts of highly conscious decision-making processes as forces harnessed to manage the change in Igbo cultural identity, the perspective of the clan at large highlights what Hegel called ‘ruse of History’ as a force behind the change. Denoting, more specifically, the notion that “History takes place as though it were using individuals for its own ends” (Brown, *Utopian Generations* 109), the phrase ‘ruse of History’ reflects the idea that cultural change simply befalls us.

In keeping with this reading of Ezeulu’s perspective and the perspective of the clan as depicted at the close of the novel, I would like to suggest that the ultimate juxtaposition of these two perspectives highlights the historical predicaments in which the clan and Ezeulu find themselves. On the one hand, Ezeulu’s acute awareness of the epistemological shift that the abandonment of traditional custom will trigger highlights the clan’s lack of awareness of the immensity and far-reaching effects of offering a sacrifice to the Christian god. Whereas Ezeulu seems to know that “every year thereafter his people will now be able to choose between making an offering to Ulu or making it to the new deity” and that “this ability to choose will permeate all things and become the new norm” (Garuba, “Postcolonial Modernity and Normalisation” 24), for the clansmen the offering of the new yam(s) to the new god is a one-time event that will save them from an immediate and very palpable catastrophe. On the other hand, the collective perspective embodied in the unified action of the clan emphasises the tragedy of Ezeulu as a traditional authority who is abandoned by his community because this authority has become obsolete in the new social and political context in the making. Brown emphasises that Ezeulu’s politics of managing traditional custom becomes worryingly inadequate as a way of coping with the changing social and political structures, stating, “the very move that would have solidified Ezeulu’s power once and for all turns out decisively to end village autonomy altogether” (*Utopian Generations* 111).

The analysis thus far has focused on how Igbo cultural identity can be read in light of divergent and convergent perspectives of the members of the Igbo community. Yet the narrative features another, extra-communal source of representation of Igbo cultural identity: the white man. The perspective of a very prominent white character, Captain Winterbottom, stands for the per-

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35 Hegel claimed that “[i]n world history the outcome of human actions is something other than what the agents aim at and actually achieve, something other than what they immediately know and will” (*Introduction* 30).
perspective of a cultural outsider, and his significant role in the colonial system means that his representation of the indigenous Igbo has considerable implications for how the Igbo are understood within the wider, global context. The perspective of Captain Winterbottom also serves to ironise and relativise the notion of Igbo cultural identity as it is shaped in relation to the perspectives of Igbo characters. Captain Winterbottom’s perspective thus turns the attention to the situatedness of Igbo cultural identity in the larger (colonial and racial) framework and the constitution of its meaning at the nexus between identities claimed and identities assigned.

Captain Winterbottom comes from outside the Igbo community, but his position as District Officer makes him an influential figure in shaping the representations of the people under his jurisdiction. Captain Winterbottom’s status as cultural outsider is conveyed through his lack of familiarity with the local customs and language, such as when he, as Marlow in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, refers to the sound of drums as part of some “unspeakable rites” or when he asks his steward what the local children near his house are saying (Achebe, *AoG* 36, 37). The language that Captain Winterbottom uses to refer to his surroundings and its people, such as “Africa” and “negroes” (Achebe, *AoG* 35, 133), only underlines his reductive and oversimplified view of the Igbo, which is firmly grounded in racial ideology. In addition, he regards the Igbo as backward, lazy, animal-like and child-like (Achebe, *AoG* 42, 94, 45), which, in turn, reflects a sense of colonial superiority. The incorporation of Captain Winterbottom as one of the prominent focalisers in the narrative therefore accomplishes a shift in perspective, away from an Igbo worldview toward a racialised and colonial(ist) one. Captain Winterbottom’s representation of the Igbo evokes the kind of representational violence staged at the close of Achebe’s first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. In both cases, the perspective of the white character shifts the focus from the inside to the outside perspective, from the elaborate account of the Igbo to the stereotyped and oversimplified one of a Western imperialist, and from the narrative of indigenous survival to colonial violence.

The incorporation of a perspective on the Igbo cultural community so distinctly different than the one defined in relation to the Igbo characters ultimately demonstrates that Igbo identity is not an impenetrable, natural and stable category whose meaning is solely shaped by members of the Igbo community. Rather, Captain Winterbottom’s contribution to the representation of the Igbo cultural community testifies to how Igbo cultural identity is a dialogic category shaped at the nexus between insiders’ and outsiders’ acts of representation. Furthermore, Captain Winterbottom’s perspective challenges Igbo cultural identity as a ‘given,’ insofar as it demonstrates how Igbo cultural identity always emerges within and between discourses. As such, the notions of Igbo cultural identity are shown to always reflect the ideological premises of the discursive context in which they are defined. Finally, the presentation of divergent narratives of Igbo cultural identity – indige-
nous/inside and colonial/outside – renders it impossible to ascribe Igbo cultural identity any fixed or uncontested meaning.

Understanding *Arrow of God* as a narrative that dissects the process of the transformation of Igbo cultural identity in the age of colonisation, I have shown how this transformation can be approached critically through select narrative techniques. Analysing heterogeneous character perspective, for instance, is an efficient means of examining Igbo cultural identity from both internal (Igbo) and external (colonial Western) perspectives, but also allows the Igbo cultural community to be seen as heterogeneous and dynamic. While the conflicting Igbo perspectives define Igbo cultural identity as a category that is perpetually (re)examined and (re)constructed within the community, the interplay between the Igbo and white man’s perspectives demonstrates how the category of Igbo cultural identity is shaped at the intersection between local and global histories and discourses. As a result, Igbo cultural identity emerges not only as a site of contestation and negotiation, but also as a dialogic, discursively shaped and fluid category.

The structure of the narrative, speed of narration and the nature of narrative mediation can provide important insight into the nature and effects of the colonial encounter on the evolution of Igbo cultural identity. The juxtaposition of slow narration and the employment of character focalisation at the beginning of the narrative and narrative acceleration and the shift to impersonal narration at the end of the narrative conveys a sense of the radical transition from the ‘traditional’ to the ‘modern’ social, political and cultural order. Whereas a slow, detailed and intimate presentation of the Igbo cultural world provides the reader with deeper insight into the meaning and function of traditional customs and practices, the more rapid and impersonal delivery of the succession of events at the end of the narrative signals the declining authority and importance of traditional ways of living and knowing in the new system grounded in the culture of Western modernity.

If, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe resorts to ethnographic realism in order to benefit from the discursive authority of the already well-established forms of textual presentation such as the realist novel and ethnographic writing, he does the same in *Arrow of God* by making use of a “certain form of the historical novel,” namely “one which takes as its central theme what Georg Lukács called the ‘downfall of gentile society’” (Brown, “Chinua Achebe” 89). Connecting his literary representation of the fate of a fictional Igbo community with a globally acknowledged form of representation of “the destruction of older ways of life and their direct incorporation into larger, capitalist circuits of production” (Brown, “Chinua Achebe” 89), Achebe connects his own project to world literature and invites a reading of his novel not (solely) as a particular but (also) a paradigmatic example of the process of radical cultural change (Brown, “Chinua Achebe” 90). Reading Achebe’s *Arrow of God* in such a way implies that the transformation of Igbo cultural identity as depicted in the novel has the potential to extend beyond its imme-
diate context and invites a critical reading that attends to its wider, global resonance.
4.3 Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* (1960): Igbo Identity and the Emergence of a Nation

Published just as Nigeria became formally independent of British rule, Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* was an overtly socially engaged piece of writing that responded to the most urgent social matters faced by the young country at the time. Douglas G. Killam has underlined the social dimension of Achebe’s second novel by explaining that the author explores “on the one hand, the nature of ‘modernity’ – in terms of its social, political and economic implications – imposed through colonial action in Nigeria, and, on the other, the price Nigerians have paid for it” (37). Another prominent literary scholar, Robert M. Wren, points to Achebe’s engagement with the individual, too, by claiming that Achebe is interested in “the mere anarchy loosed upon the world when things fell apart through depicting the effects of corruption on a young educated mind like [Achebe] himself” (63). The novel is, therefore, commonly read as an exploration of the meaning and effects of late colonial modernity, both on the collective and the individual level.

That the individual and the collective realm are, however, considered intimately related is announced at the very opening of the novel. It opens with three separate scenes, all of which are related to a single event – the trial to which the protagonist Obi Okonkwo is brought because he has been accused of bribery. Setting the opening scene in a courtroom illustrates that Nigeria portrayed in the novel is becoming a modern state, organised around the rule of law and the associated regime of rights and punishment. In the courtroom, Obi is described as facing a large group of people who have come to witness the outcome of the trial: “Every available space in the court-room was taken up. There were almost as many people standing as sitting. The case had been the talk of Lagos for a number of weeks and on this last day anyone who could possibly leave his job was there to hear the judgement” (Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* 1-2). The description conveys the impression of an individual set against a wider collective, to which he is held accountable for betraying the law that regulates its behaviour.

Yet the following two scenes complicate the notion of the unified collective that is projected in the opening scene. The collective in the narrative is, it is suggested, split in two. On the one hand, there is a collective symbolically represented by the character of colonial administrator Mr. Green: civil society (*Gesellschaft*), defined as a mechanical social construct that is held together by common interest (Tönnies in Harris) and the language of civil rights (Mamdani). Nigerian civil society is in a process of formation facilitated and directed by Mr. Green and other colonial administrators. On the other hand, however, there is a collective embodied in the Umuofia Progressive Union:36 an ethnic communal entity (*Gemeinschaft*), understood as an

36 Hereafter referred to as ‘the UPU.’
organic social construction based on common ethnic ancestry, common land and common tradition (Tönnies in Harris). The UPU is a traditional ethnic entity that advocates communality and seeks to preserve its authority in the moments of critical social and political change. These two public collectives allow the initial scene, in which an individual faces a collective, to be reframed as an individual facing two different, yet simultaneously operating collectives. By structuring the opening of the novel in such a way, the stage is set for exploring how an individual mediates their simultaneous belonging to two different collectives at the time of nation formation in the rest of the narrative.

The opening of the novel thus confirms Simon Gikandi’s observation that *No Longer at Ease* is, first and foremost, a narrative about the nation (*Reading Chinua Achebe*). The narrator’s attitude toward the Igbo community in the moment of national awakening confirms this observation. The narrator is not impartial to the Igbo, but speaks about Umuofia with subtle irony:

Somewhere on the Lagos mainland the Umuofia Progressive Union was holding an emergency meeting. Umuofia is an Igbo village in Eastern Nigeria and the home town of Obi Okonkwo. It is not a particularly big village but its inhabitants call it a town. (Achebe, *NLaE* 4, emphasis added)

The narrator’s distance is accentuated through his/her use of “they” and “those” when referring to the Umuofians. By creating distance from his/her object of narration, the narrator opens up a gap between the perspectives of the Umuofians and his/her own perspective. Such distance allows the narrator to, Gikandi concludes, “simultaneously represent the Umuofian ethos and question it, too” (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 84). Moreover, the narratorial ambivalence toward the ethnic Igbo community begs the question of how the nature and role of ethnic communities was changing at the time of the emergence of the nation-state. The narrator’s proximity to the Igbo world, expressed in his/her role as ethnographer of the Igbo world as well as his/her deliberate distancing through irony and the use of third person plural create a tension between the national and the ethnic sphere that is never resolved in the novel. In other words, the ‘divided narrative posture,’ to borrow Gikandi’s phrasing, is a formal means of expressing a conflict-ridden relationship between the emerging national sphere and the traditional ethnic sphere.

In this chapter, I intend to analyse the formal contribution of character perspectives to staging the relationship between the national and the ethnic sphere. I will demonstrate how different and contesting character perspectives – the perspectives of Mr. Green, the UPU and Obi – represent different ways of perceiving the modern nation, as well as the related dynamic between ethnic identity and national identity. The perspectives of Mr. Green and Obi are similar insofar as both characters insist on transplanting the Western model of the modern nation to Nigerian soil. This premise around which the two characters are constructed leads them to either remain entirely oblivious of ethnic identification as a constitutive part of the modern nation,
as is the case with Mr. Green, or intentionally dismiss ethnic identification, as is the case with Obi. The perspective of the UPU, in comparison, illustrates the dynamic nature and active role of ethnic Igbo community in the process of social and political transformation. As such, the perspective of the UPU radically challenges Mr. Green’s and Obi’s perspectives, which assume that ethnic identification is an obstacle to the formation of a national society.

Mr. Green, Obi’s superior in the Federal Ministry of Education, embodies the change in the focus of the colonial project from, to borrow Basil Davidson formulation, “inventing tribes for Africans to belong to,” in early colonialism, to “building nation-states” at the time when possible independence was looming ahead (11-12). The fact that Mr. Green “put in his resignation when it was thought that Nigeria might become independent in 1956” (Achebe, NLae 105), but decided to withdraw it when it did not happen, testifies to this. Moreover, Mr. Green is portrayed as a dedicated contributor to the project of nation formation: “Rain or shine, he [Mr. Green] was in the office half an hour before the official time, and quite often worked long after two, or returned home in the evening” (Achebe, NLae 105). Thus linked with the project of nation formation, Mr. Green emerges as an epitome of late colonial modernity.

The defining characteristics that shape Mr. Green’s perspective are, therefore, his position as a foreigner and the specific task that he adopts in late colonial Nigeria. Mr. Green’s foreignness is emphasised by a number of suggestive symbols: He wears “a light-yellow sweater over his white shirt” and plays tennis with colleagues from the British Council (Achebe, NLae 2). Mr. Green’s insistence on wearing light colours and the reference to an indelibly English sport associate him with both whiteness and foreignness. His awkward presence in Nigeria is, however, justified by what he understands as his duty to help the colonial state transition to a modern nation-state. The sense of responsibility that Mr. Green feels is made explicit by such comments as: “In a country where even the educated have not reached the level of thinking about tomorrow, one has a clear duty” (Achebe, NLae 95). These comments testify to the deeply ideological nature of Mr. Green’s presence in Nigeria and ensure his perspective on Nigeria is neither analytical nor based on the country’s historical reality.

Lacking any sensitivity to the historical specificity of nation formation in Nigeria, Mr. Green fails to register ethnic differences and the various ethnic initiatives that shape the emerging modern nation. Instead, Mr. Green’s perception of the Igbo is utterly simplified and shaped by a colonial understanding of the ‘Other’ as a homogenous lot. When, referring to Obi, Mr. Green says that “the African is corrupt through and through” (Achebe, NLae 3), he obliterates vast ethnic difference between African peoples and promotes a reductive image of them as one homogenous mass. The only regard in which Mr. Green is ready to acknowledge difference between Africans is by thinking about them in terms of national communities. Mr. Green thus refers to
Obi at times as ‘Nigerian’: “There is no single Nigerian who is prepared to forgo a little privilege in the interest of his country” (Achebe, *NLaE* 139). Both the colonial (racial) and the national perspective, therefore, rest on an intentional dismissal of ethnic difference and a disregard for it as a constitutive element in emerging Nigerian society. As such, Mr. Green’s perspective on modern Nigeria is reflective of more ideological than historical ways of thinking, insofar as it fails to account for the (changing and influential) forms of ethnic presence in the emerging national structure.

At the same time, the changing form of ethnic presence at the time of nation formation is illustrated in the perspective of the UPU. Testifying to the power of collectivity in the emerging national context, the active and strong ethnic presence and the transformative potential of ethnic tradition, the UPU offers an entirely different perspective on modern. United around a firm belief in the progress of their (ethnic) community, the UPU defies the notion that the modern nation necessarily has to be free(d) from ethnic identification and ethnic collective ambitions. The UPU, instead, actively participates in the formation of the modern nation and illustrates the adaptive nature of ethnic Igbo community in the face of a radically changing social and political context. As such, the UPU offers an alternative conception of the modern nation, one that does not place the notion of individuality or citizenship centre-stage, and which is shaped by constant ethnic interventions into the national sphere.

In its relation to Nigeria, the UPU acts as a collective, as opposed to a simple aggregation of people. The use of the ‘we’ mode of narration is the first clue that contributes to the impression of collectivity. During the first meeting of the Union, its members refer to themselves with the first-person plural:

> We paid eight hundred pounds to train him in England . . . But instead of being grateful he insults us because of a useless girl. And now we are being called together again to find more money for him. What does he do with his big salary? My opinion is that we have already done too much for him. (Achebe, *NLaE* 5)

This exemplifies the UPU’s collective stance on the accusations of bribery against Obi. Whereas the speech is obviously delivered by a single person, that person is the Union’s President and is, therefore, a designated member who speaks about and on behalf of the Union. In Uri Margolin’s terms, the President functions as a singular “we” sayer authorised to speak for the collective (“Telling in the Plural” 604). In this type of collective context, “any ‘we’ assertion made by th[e] individual represents something that the group as a whole is ready to endorse” (“Telling in the Plural” 604). In other words, the perspective, outlook and ambitions expressed by the President are representative of the perspective, outlook and ambitions of the entire collective.

The impression of the UPU as a collective is, furthermore, conveyed by the employment of “we” agential situation (Margolin, “Telling Our Story”),
which is reflected in the joint actions, shared goals and joint commitment of its members. The joint actions undertaken by the UPU include the meetings they hold, the discussions they have, the events they organise and the projects they initiate. Yet, as observed by Margolin, no joint action would be possible without shared goals (“Telling Our Story” 127). And indeed, the Union has devised goals to “join the comity of other towns in their march towards political irredentism, social equality and economic emancipation” and to enable “an endless stream of students . . . to drink deep at the Pierian Spring of knowledge” (Achebe, NLaE 28, 29). And finally, shared goals are made possible because of a joint commitment and a readiness to place common goals above individual ones (Margolin, “Telling Our Story” 127). The joint commitment of the members of the UPU is evident, for instance, in their decision to “tax themselves mercilessly” throughout years, so as to “collect money to send some of their brighter young men to study in England” (Achebe, NLaE 6). These examples of joint actions, shared goals and joint commitment testify to the strength of collectivity on which the UPU is based.

And finally, a sense of collectivity is formally created by presenting the UPU as a collective narrative agent both in relation to the argument and the predicate position. According to Margolin, the argument position designates a “collectivity, plurality, or group of some kind” (“Telling in the Plural” 593). In the context of the UPU, the word ‘union’ that appears in its name is a most obvious hint at its collective nature. The idea of collectivity is, however, additionally emphasised by the descriptions of the Union as “congregation” (Achebe, NLaE 6) and by references to it in the first-person and third-person plural, such as “we” and “our” (Achebe, NLaE 5, 6) and “they” and “their” (Achebe, NLaE 4). The predicate position in the case of collective narrative agents, as suggested by Margolin, is occupied by “cumulative or . . . nondistributive predicates . . . which apply to a group as a whole, as one unit” (“Telling in the Plural” 593). That the UPU members are “called together,” invited to “convene” and “share among [themselves]” (Achebe, NLaE 4, 51, 80) confirms the Union’s collective nature. The portrayal of the UPU as a collective narrative agent ultimately serves to emphasise that the UPU is a tight and cohesive entity.

Yet the UPU cannot be defined in unambiguously singular terms. Rather, through their active engagement with both ethnic and national spheres, the UPU significantly complicates the neat divisions between the ethnic and the national community. For example, the UPU members frequently migrate between the rural and the urban space: Umuofians “leave their home town to find work in towns all over Nigeria,” where they “start a local branch of the Umuofia Progressive Union,” but they “return to Umuofia every two years or so to spend their leave [there]” (Achebe, NLaE 4). In the context of the novel – in which the village of Umuofia stands for a specifically ethnic (Igbo) space, whereas the city of Lagos stands for a space where the national
ethos is shaped— the movement of the UPU members between the two spaces challenges the conceptualisation of the ethnic and national spheres as mutually exclusive. By inhabiting both spaces, the UPU members demonstrate how the ethnic and the national sphere can be made to complement each other, rather than solely come into conflict.

In more philosophical terms, the fluid relationship between urban and rural spaces can be understood to reflect an equally fluid dialogue between modernity and tradition. To the UPU members who live between Umuofia and Lagos, modernity and tradition are not opposing forces limited to the urban and the rural space, respectively, but forces that co-exist and intertwine within both spaces. For instance, once they have saved enough money, the UPU members who are permanently located in Lagos because of work “build a ‘zinc’ house on their family land [in Umuofia]” (Achebe, NLaE 4). In the context of the novel, a zinc house is not only a sign of prosperity, but also a sign of modernity in the rural space. The idea of rural space as unchanging and old-fashioned is challenged as much as the idea that urban space as national space is necessarily modern. The Union meetings in Lagos, which are framed in specifically Igbo terms, accomplish this: The meetings begin with the traditional Igbo ceremony of sharing a kola nut, its members speak in Igbo proverbs and members such as Joseph and Christopher embrace Igbo custom (osu and bride price) and wear Igbo traditional clothing (agbada) during ceremonies. The examples of modernity in the rural/ethnic Igbo space and the performances of traditional Igbo custom in the urban/national space call into question the understanding of modern and traditional as mutually exclusive and binary terms.

This entanglement between rural and urban, ethnic and national, and traditional and modern is portrayed in the narrative as a defining and distinctive feature of postcolonial Nigeria. The UPU’s decisions to have its members receive Western education and to send workforces to the city, on the one hand, and to insist on practicing its traditional custom, on the other, testify to a strategic manipulation of what Partha Chatterjee described as the material and the spiritual sphere. The material, suggests Chatterjee, is “the domain of the ‘outside,’ of the economy and of state-craft, of science and technology,” whereas the spiritual is “an ‘inner’ domain bearing the ‘essential’ marks of cultural identity” (6). Thinking in terms of these two spheres allows ethnic affiliation and national affiliation to be conceptualised in terms of their interplay rather than opposition.

By engaging with the civil service, Western education and the market economy, the UPU members show that they allow the logic of late colonial modernity to penetrate the material domain of their lives. The Union readily sends its members to occupy “European posts” in Lagos and, through networking, secures recommendations for other members being considered for similar posts (Achebe, NLaE 6). In order to occupy such posts, however, Western education is a prerequisite, which is why the UPU is just as ready to
send its outstanding young members to receive foreign education through its scholarship system. Finally, the UPU recognises the rise of the capitalist market in the urban space and the increasing tendency of people to migrate from rural to urban areas in search for jobs that are better paid. As one member of the Union explains, “it is money [and] not work” that attracted them to Lagos (Achebe, NLaE 72). If the UPU thus confirms Chatterjee’s observation that “[the material] is the domain where the West has proved its superiority and [the Rest] has succumbed” (6), then the Union certainly creates its own domain of sovereignty within the emerging national culture by preserving its traditional cultural identity. To that end, the UPU meetings are marked by distinctly Igbo customs: The Union members frequently employ Igbo proverbs, and the collective strongly criticises Obi’s decision to marry Clara, whose status as osu in Igbo traditional community does not allow her to marry a free-born. In distinguishing between the material and the spiritual sphere in this manner, and strategically responding to the culture of late colonial modernity in each of these spheres, the UPU undermines the modular, Western idea of the modern nation and offers a perspective on how the ideas of modernisation and preservation of ethnic cultural difference can be reconciled.

That the UPU preserves a clear distinction between the two spheres is evident in the way in which its members express their identification, or lack thereof, with the national community. Not once in the novel do the Union members refer to themselves as Nigerians or claim the national identity for which Obi vehemently fights. On the contrary, the Union members voice their discomfort in the urban (national) space by describing themselves as “strangers in [Lagos]” (Achebe, NLaE 6). They also refuse to identify with the national government by proclaiming that “[i]n Nigeria the government was ‘they’” (Achebe, NLaE 29-30). While strategically manipulating spaces (urban/rural), ideas (modernity/tradition) and forms of identification (national/ethnic) for the sake of self-preservation and self-development, the UPU remains at all times aware of their respective meanings and implications. The perspective of the UPU is significant, therefore, in that it illustrates not necessarily how ethnic Igbo communities challenge the promises of late colonial modernity, but rather how they strategically employ late colonial modernity so as to ensure their own cultural and material survival. The UPU’s perspective on nation formation in Nigeria is one of a flexible and active ethnic community rather than a group that chooses to absent itself from and oppose a national structure.

In stark contrast, the perspective of Obi Okonkwo illustrates how promising individuals mediate the competing discourses and demands of community and society, as well as tradition and modernity. If the UPU is dedicated to empowering the ethnic sphere, Obi is engaged with supporting the creation of a society based on the rule of law and an associated regime of rights rather than the language of ethnicity and tradition. As such, Obi’s perspective is a
convenient means by which to explore the emergence of the modern citizen, a process defined by a strong push-and-pull between the existing ethnic and the emerging national structure.

Davidson’s observation that “[p]ostcolonial independence would have to be in the hands of literate and civilized men who understood constitutional law and practice, and could move at ease in the world of nation-state sovereignties” (33-34) stresses the values that Obi stands for, such as education, the struggle for independence and a good understanding of the modern political and social system. Being educated in England, Obi belongs to a rapidly growing fraction of a Nigerian society – the highly educated middle-class. His education in the colonial centre is meant to equip him with the knowledge necessary to help his home country in its transformation from a colonial state to a modern, free nation-state. And, indeed, Obi’s engagement with the UPU and his paper on the public service in Nigeria, written in England, testify to his active contribution to the process.

And yet, while Obi believes that he is well prepared to help usher in the modern nation, his ideas of Nigeria in transition are repeatedly challenged and exposed as idealised and seldom grounded in Nigeria’s lived reality. While Obi’s national awareness emerged in England, the reader is informed that “the Nigeria [Obi] returned to was in many ways different from the picture he had carried in his mind” (Achebe, NLaE 13). Obi’s idea of Nigeria was shaped, in fact, by a story of Lagos as a place where “at night the electric shines like the sun [and where] people are always walking about” but a place where “[i]f you don’t want to walk you only have to wave your hand and a pleasure car stops for you” (Achebe, NLaE 14), and the wish to counter the colonial fantasies of Africa. Upon his return to Nigeria, instead of bright electric lights and motorcars, Obi witnesses various forms of physical and moral decay. Gikandi interprets Obi’s confusion of “his (imaginary) romance of the nation [with] the national community” as an indicator of the “unformed character of the national community” (Reading Chinua Achebe 81, 86). Indeed, in the absence of an established Nigerian national community, Obi develops an idea(l) of one.

Infatuated with the idea(l) of the nation, Obi sees ethnic identification as a fundamental threat to the fashioning of a modern national society. When discussing the process of nation formation, Mahmood Mamdani explains that “national (multiethnic and countrywide) movements are legitimate in that they carry forward the legacy of the nationalist struggle, whereas tribal (ethnic and local-specific) movements are illegitimate because they detract from national unity” (Citizen and Subject 187). Taking up this rationale, Obi seeks to suppress the prominence of ethnic identities by criticising any attempt at ethnic clientelism and by steering the philosophy of the UPU towards the national rather than the ethnic cause. For instance, when Mr. Marc, who is of Igbo origin, visits Obi in his office and asks Obi to support his sister in a competition for a Federal Scholarship for studies in England,
Obi refuses to do so (Achebe, NLaE 78-89). The fact that common ethnic identity plays a central role in this episode is underlined by Mr. Marc and Obi conversing in the Igbo language. Obi’s response to Mr. Marc is highly symptomatic of Obi’s strong dedication to the formation of the nation and his wish to overcome strong ethnic identification in the national space: Obi first switches to English, the language of a modern, unified nation, then asks Mr. Marc to leave his office. Such a reaction demonstrates Obi’s uncompromising dedication to eradicating corruption as a major ill in the emerging nation and going beyond ethnic affiliation as an imperative part of the process of ethnic unification within a modern nation.

Obi’s attempts to steer the philosophy of the UPU towards the national cause also testify to his goal to facilitate the construction of a national society. During a reception organised in Obi’s honour upon his return from England, a UPU member expresses the Union’s ambition to contribute to the country’s “march towards political irredentism, social equality and economic emancipation” but then adds that “the importance of having one of our sons in the vanguard of this march of progress is nothing short of axiomatic. Our people have a saying ‘ours is ours, but mine is mine’” (Achebe, NLaE 28-29). The latter part of the speech shifts the attention away from the national project, towards ethnic interests in the emerging national sphere. When Obi is invited to address the audience, however, he refrains from referring to the ethnic concerns and concludes the speech by reiterating the centrality of the nation: “With our great country on the threshold of independence, we need men who are prepared to serve her well and truly” (Achebe, NLaE 29).

The tension between Obi and the UPU that increases in the course of the narrative can be understood in terms of a relationship between an individual and what Peter Ekeh defines as ‘primordial public.’ As explained by Ekeh, the primordial public is “closely identified with primordial groupings, sentiments and activities which nevertheless impinge on public interest” (92). It is governed by duties, seen by the individual as “moral obligations to benefit and sustain a primordial public of which he (sic) is a member” (106). Opposed to the primordial public is the civic public, which Ekeh defines as “historically associated with the colonial administration, based on civil structures: the military, the civil service, the police, etc.” (92). Defined in this way, Ekeh’s civic public resonates with Tönnies’s notion of society (Gesellschaft).

In the light of Ekeh’s insights, Obi’s changing relationship with the UPU that is illustrated through his repeated failures to perform his duties can be interpreted as a sign of Obi’s dwindling identification with the primordial public. Obi’s duties to the UPU entail making use of the knowledge that he gained in England to settle disputes between Umuofia and its neighbours, to repay the loan that he received to go to England, so that other members of the community could be awarded the funding, and to follow the traditional
Igbo custom. Yet Obi not only fails to repay his loan but he also radically goes against the will of the Union when he decides to marry Clara. Despite being familiar with the cultural implications of taking Clara as his wife, Obi decides to marry her, challenging traditional Igbo custom and openly showing resistance to the primordial public. Obi’s struggle against strong ethnic identification becomes problematic in the face of the UPU’s insistence that he adhere to traditional Igbo custom because acquiescing contributes to the empowerment of the ethnic sphere. On the other hand, Obi’s insistence on changing traditional Igbo custom is his contribution to eliminating that which he sees as old-fashioned and to constructing a solid base for a modern national culture. Finding it “scandalous that in the middle of the twentieth century a man could be barred from marrying a girl just because her great-great-great-great-grandfather had been dedicated to serve a god,” Obi decides to act as a “pioneer” and “show the way” to changing ethnic Igbo custom (Achebe, NLaE 65, 75). Obi’s break with the primordial community is, hence, not an end in itself, but his contribution to national modernisation.

Obi’s perspective on the modern nation and the closely related question of the modernisation of ethnic traditions is challenged by other UPU members. Joseph and Christopher, for example, express their doubts about how applicable the normative idea of modernisation is to the actual situation in Nigeria. Whereas Joseph says that “in future, when we are all civilised, anybody can marry anybody,” Christopher tells Obi that he does not think that the Igbo “have reached the stage where [they] can ignore all [their] customs” (Achebe, NLaE 75, 144). By bringing the gap that they feel exists between the discourse on modernisation and the form in which it occurs (or, does not occur) in reality into the discussion, Joseph and Christopher question the meaningfulness of the prescriptive notion of modernisation advocated by Obi.

As demonstrated thus far, Obi’s perspective illustrates what is involved in the process of the emergence of a modern citizen in a context in which two publics (primordial and civic), two kinds of collectives (community and society) and two supposedly competing discourses (tradition and modernity) come to co-exist and acquire equal validity and authority. Working towards a programmatic goal of forming a national society based on citizen rights and not on ethnic origins, Obi perceives ethnic Igbo identity as an obstacle. Yet the fact that the task of eliminating ethnic awareness and affiliation proves to be difficult ultimately testifies to how deeply the notion of ethnicity is etched in the foundations of Nigeria as a modern nation.

As No Longer at Ease abandons the portrayal of the insular Igbo world in favour of a complex national context, in which the Igbo world is just one constitutive element, it reflects a shift in the Nigeria of the early 60s away
from ethnic nationalism to civic nationalism. The openness of the Nigerians to the idea of the modern nation, however, meant engaging with more than the exploration of ethnic worlds as isolated totalities and of ethnic pasts. It also meant exploring the place and function of ethnic worlds within the larger, national structure, as well as the possible futures of the young nation. Achebe composed a novel that, as demonstrated in the analysis, tackles the meaning(s) of modernity, the modular and organic forms of the modern African nation-state, and the transformation of ethnic Igbo tradition, community and identity, with a vision of a sustainable national future in mind.

In order to explore the dynamic between ethnicity and nationalism, Achebe chose to incorporate a set of character perspectives that challenge one another, each bringing to light the omissions, misconceptions and pitfalls of the other. Mr. Green’s perspective, for instance, centres around an idea of normative nationalism that entirely disregards the ethnic factor as a force that shapes the process of nation formation in Nigeria. Mr. Green’s radical omission is, however, brought to the fore by Obi’s perspective, in which there is a strong (negative) awareness of ethnicity. And finally, the perspective of the UPU dramatically undermines the normative notions of the modern nation as defined in relation to the perspectives of Mr. Green and Obi, demonstrating how “the most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in . . . Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a difference with the ‘modular’ forms of the national society propagated by the modern West” (Chatterjee 5). Using conflicting character perspectives to approach a of related issues from different angles, No Longer at Ease was a critical reflection on the range of ways in which (the future of) the young nation had been and could yet be imagined and realised.

The plurality of perspectives offered in No Longer at Ease is in line with Achebe’s understanding of literature not as a means of providing clear answers to dilemmas, but as a tool with which to reflect on the diversity of forms that things take in life: “We must dramatize [the man’s] predicament so that he can see the choices and choose right” (in Lindfors, Conversations with Chinua Achebe 75, emphasis added). Interpreted in this light, the multiple and conflicting character perspectives are a means of engaging with a variety of ways in which the modern nation has been and can be conceptualised, and are also an invitation to think carefully about the choices to be made. Indeed, at a time when “the discourse of national identity was still seeking forms through which to express itself” (Gikandi, Reading Chinua Achebe 79), Achebe could only explore the possible ways to imagine the modern nation. In the process of imagining a national future, Achebe credited literature with a central role: “How do we transmit a national culture to

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37 While ethnic nationalism assumes that membership of the group is limited to those who share primordial or inherited characteristics (Greenfeld), civic nationalism maintains that “a nation should be composed of all people who subscribe to the nation’s political creed” (Fedorenko).
Nigerians if not through works of imagination?” (in Lindfors, *Conversations with Chinua Achebe* 75). Understanding literature as a potentially efficient means of fashioning a sense of national community and identity, *No Longer at Ease* can be seen as a literary contribution to a sustainable national future.
4.4 Temporality and Historicity as Means of Representational Decolonisation

Achebe’s early fiction was written in response to the colonial context that operated by the dichotomy between – in Ajayi’s words – “a race of gods and heroes” and “naught mortals,” “Prospero” and “Caliban,” “Europeans” and “Natives” (“The Continuity” 189). Yet, rather than simply reversing these roles, Achebe’s literary project was much less simplistic: He sought to offer a portrayal of Africa “as a continent of people – not angels, but not rudimentary souls either – just people” (Achebe, An Image of Africa” 13). Ultimately opposing detrimental descriptions of Africans while, at the same time, also resisting oversimplifying romantic ones, Achebe’s early novels illustrate how the authors writing on the cusp of decolonisation and in its immediate aftermath navigated charged social and cultural contexts to develop a new African subjectivity outside of the colonial episteme.

Strikingly obvious in Achebe’s early writing is that he reached for time and history as a means to assert an alternate valid perspective to dominant colonial ideas. To this testifies his mobilisation of ethnographic and historiographic discourses, which traditionally relied on time to construct the image of Africa’s indigenous peoples as ahistorical and static. Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God are good examples of how Achebe manipulated narrative time to the effect of undermining colonial notions of Igbo history. The author expanded narrative time (by way of long descriptions) to enable detailed representations of the Igbo that testify to their long and complex precolonial history. He also contracted narrative time (by way of ellipses) when he wished to invoke colonial discourses on Africa or capture the effects of colonisation that led to a disrupted and incoherent experience of reality among the indigenous population. Therefore, Achebe’s development of ethnographic and historiographic literary discourses in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God is not just an illustration of the continuing (and inescapable) legacy of colonial modernity, but also of how colonial legacy is appropriated in anti-colonial literary projects. Shaping postcolonial notions of time and history, Achebe’s novels represent significant interventions in the long and predominately European history of defining the Igbo in writing.

Achebe’s choice to mobilise ethnographic and historiographic discourses in his writing can also be explained with reference to the complex question of authority and power that characterised the relations between Nigeria and Britain in the decades around decolonisation. If Lanser is right to claim that what she calls ‘discursive authority’ is produced interactively, meaning that it must be “characterized with respect to specific receiving communities” (6), then Achebe’s choice of ethnographic and historiographic fiction was a strategic move envisaged to earn him the attention of wider, Western audience. Discursive authority is a particularly complex issue in the colonial context, where the marginalised author’s claim to authority is entangled with
being credited authority by the group(s) responsible for her/his marginalisation in the first place. Achebe approached this impasse by employing colonial discourses and practices to dismantle and debunk the forms of colonial authority vested in them. Lanser explained such and similar strategic moves in the following way:

[N]ovelists who challenge the authority are constrained to adopt the authorizing conventions of narrative voice in order, paradoxically, to mount an authoritative critique of the authority that the text therefore also perpetuates. Carrying out such an Archimedean project . . . necessitates standing on the very ground one is attempting to deconstruct. (7)

An incarnation of this impasse in Achebe’s early fiction is the narrator-ethnographer in *Things Fall Apart*, whose realist narration lends his account of the Igbo an aura of academic writing. Such pseudo-scientific sort of writing in turn functions as a source of discursive authority that enables Achebe to “write [his narrative] into Literature without leaving Literature the same” (Lanser 8).

The nativism embodied in Achebe’s early novels is not the kind that leaves the Igbo in the past, but that propels them to the future. What best testifies to this is *No Longer at Ease*, where the ethnically-coloured perspective of the Umuofia Progressive Union provides an insight into how a post-colonial African polity can work with rather than against ethnic cultural heritage. While engaging with the emerging national sphere, the UPU adapts to change, i.e. it negotiates traditional Igbo forms of life in relation to contemporary reality. In that sense, the Igbo community does not represent an obsolete and unsustainable form of social and cultural organisation, but an utterly adaptive and just as significant element in the development of the modern nation. Illustrative of how indigenous forms of life can figure as central to the future-oriented nationalist project and the constitution of a modern Nigerian subjectivity, the perspective of the UPU carries an important ideological message: It rejects the oversimplifying notion of linear trajectory from tradition to modernity by demonstrating how what is defined as ‘tradition’ plays a significant part in constituting the ‘modern.’

Implicit in Achebe’s narratives is the notion of literature as intervention in extra-literary reality by exploring the possible, yet unrealised visions of social life. For example, Achebe’s representation of multiple and mutually contesting character perspectives in *No Longer at Ease* turns our attention not only to a wide range of experiences of and responses to colonial modernity among the Igbo, but also to the very different kinds of social reality that those responses could generate. Through portraying different kinds of understanding the relation between tradition and modernity as well as the ethnic and national communities from the perspectives of Obi, Mr. Green and the UPU, Achebe explored the possible ways of fashioning a modern Nigerian/Igbo subject. The given novel, therefore, responded to the disruptive co-
lonial experience by exploring the new ways of perceiving reality and the new forms of life that could emerge out of that experience.

Through re-emplotting Igbo and Nigerian histories, Achebe engendered alternate visions of indigenous identities that challenge colonial(ist) representations. Particularly productive in this endeavour was the creative incorporation of ethnographic and historiographic discourses, which opened a communication channel between literary and extra-literary worlds. In turn, this allowed Achebe to denaturalise and delegitimise the visions of Igbo social realities that were shaped in European ethnographic and historical discourses, as well as to re-negotiate the positions available to the Igbo within those discourses. Achebe’s postcolonial aesthetics, shaped by colonial cultural heritage revised in the light of the author’s ‘ideological resistance’ to colonialism (Said, “Resistance, Opposition” 95), enabled him to resituate the Igbo within an epistemological context shaped by Enlightenment rationality, secularisation and modernisation.
Modern Nigerian Anglophone writing emerged as a response to colonial rule, to whose overthrow it sought to contribute. With predominantly European novelists as literary predecessors in the domain of novelistic writing, authors such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Cyprian Ekwensi, Timothy Mofolorunsa Aluko, John Pepper Clark and Flora Nwapa had the difficult task of inventing a literary idiom fit to express complex social realities in Nigeria, and thus to write Nigeria’s peoples outside of the European colonial episteme. Contemporary Nigerian writing, often broadly designated as ‘third-generation writing’ (Adesanmi and Dunton; Garuba, “The Unbearable Lightness”; Tunca, Stylistic Approaches), is, in a particular respect, a continuation of modern literary tradition: In its own search for a deeper understanding of Igbo identity, contemporary Nigerian literature strongly engages with its immediate social and political context and develops an overtly oppositional character towards what appear as oppressive dominant discourses. While exploring the historical conditions in contemporary Nigeria, writers such as Okey Ndibe, Chigozie Obioma, Chika Unigwe, Akin Adesokan, Uzodinma Iweala, Chris Abani and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie often revisit the foundations of postcolonial Igbo identities: the nation and tradition.

However, in other respects, contemporary writing represents a notable shift in Nigerian literary tradition. For example, unlike in modern writing, opposition in contemporary fiction is rarely defined in terms of conflict between indigenous and foreign communities. Instead, contemporary fiction displays a decidedly inward turn, conceptualising opposition as negotiation and contestation between the parties and/or discourses within Nigeria itself. Cases in point are Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus (2003) and Unigwe’s Night Dancer (2012), which depict Nigerian women’s encounters with oppressive patriarchal traditions. Moreover, while modern novels sought to “retrieve” precolonial traditions and histories and facilitate the production of nationalist discourse, contemporary novels reflect increasing distrust in the totalising discourses of tradition, history and nation that, in the age of anti-colonial nationalist movements, defined knowable, stable and reliable African identities. Elleke Boehmer writes that Achebe and his contemporaries “traced trajectories of national emergence” (Postcolonial Poetics 124). In comparison, Madhu Krishnan observes that contemporary writers transcend a na-
ationalist and nativist imperative: Contemporary writing breaks with the grand narratives of the nation and positions tradition as an open signifier (“On National Culture” 196). Finally, and strongly related to the previous argument, contemporary writers often employ postmodern narrative expression in order to capture the problematic and puzzling character of the nation and tradition in the contemporary context.

In the aftermath of the political unrest in Nigeria in the late 1960s, which led to the three-year Nigeria-Biafra war, the repressive political regimes involving military rule and the severe economic crisis in the 1980s, which resulted in the interventions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the form of structural adjustment programs, writing about Nigeria has begun to mean contemplating the potentialities, promises and failures of nationalism. Whereas, for the earlier generations of Nigerian writers, national commitment was “a crucial means for consolidating support in the wake of independence” and “central to the assertion of nationhood beyond the grasp of neo-colonial intrusion” (Krishnan, “On National Culture” 195), for contemporary writers, nationalism is a deeply ambiguous matter. This holds particularly true for the Igbo, for whom the Republic of Biafra has come to symbolise both a devastating failure of Nigeria to achieve a sense of nationhood after the independence and an idealistic project underpinned by a remarkable faith in the (Biafran) nation-state as a mode of social and political organisation. Obi Nwakanma relates the ambiguity toward the nation in the aftermath of the Nigeria-Biafra war to a distinct engagement with the idea of nation in Nigerian Igbo writing by claiming that Igbo novelists “continue to grapple with . . . the search for a coherent meaning of the idea of nation and national belonging” (3).

Yet, for the Igbo, Biafra is not only a symbol of an unrealised and idealised nationhood, but also of a struggle against dominant nationalist discourses. The refusal to discuss the time of Biafra that has characterised Nigeria’s post-war political scene has made it one of the most ignored periods in Nigerian postcolonial history (Siollun 167; Falola and Ezekwem 7). Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem explain that, in the war’s aftermath, “the [Nigerian] government controlled the organization of the civil war records,” whereas “books that confronted issues surrounding the war were discouraged” (2). In that sense, the official national discourse on Biafra suppresses Nigeria’s internal tensions and contradictions. At the same time, the few accounts of Biafra that emerged after the conflict, predominantly in the form of literary narratives, are often understood as reductive or elitist (Amuta, “The Nigerian Civil War”; Amuta, “History, Society and Heroism”; Ouma, “Composite Consciousness”). As such, they fall short of providing sufficient information for understanding the different experiences that constituted the history of the Igbo nation. The focus that is, in contemporary writing, placed on personal experiences and subaltern histories is a mode of rejecting master narratives and re-articulating previously marginalised experiences as counter-
narratives. Telling examples are Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Abani’s *Song for Night* (2007), whose re-examinations of the history of Biafra from marginalised perspectives of child soldiers represent significant interventions in both Nigerian and Igbo cultural memory.

Another readily re-examined discourse that has historically been central to the production of Igbo identity is tradition, with its related notion of authenticity. The categories of tradition and authenticity were defined in colonial discourses of modernity, as well as in anti-colonial discourses that sought to “retrieve” a suppressed and idealised past after the colonial disruption. As Lyn Innes reminds us, “Africa has been ‘read’ by outsiders for many centuries, all too often as unreadable, a blank, a dark continent” (318). The production and deployment of authenticity and tradition as markers of what emerged as ‘Igboness’ significantly contributed to this conundrum. In colonialist and missionary discourses, tradition and authenticity were employed to relegate Africans to the realm of the retrograde, static and/or exotic. In those discursive contexts, tradition and authenticity were “transfigured into anthropological essences, stripped of their discursive instability” (Krishnan, “On National Culture” 28). On the other hand, African discourses, such as Négritude, directly engaged in anti-colonial cultural struggle, shaping a form of nativism that rewrote ethnic traditions, but that equally reified and essentialised them. As shown by Bernard Cohn in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (1996) and V. Y. Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa* (1988), African peoples redeployed tradition in its objectified forms to claim positions of authority within and against colonial disciplinary practices. Yet those resisting acts more often than not themselves produced notions of tradition as static and exoticised as those in colonial discourses.

Influenced by postmodern and postcolonial criticism, since the 1980s, African intellectuals have begun to re-examine tradition and authenticity, exposing their fluidity, dynamism and instability. A significant contribution to this trend is Terence Ranger’s “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa” (1983), which demonstrates how the notion of African tradition as repository of local beliefs and customs was invented in opposition to so-called modernity in colonial administrative and ethnographic discourses. Moreover, Joan and Jean Comaroff’s ethnographic work in Southern African contexts has proven that African traditions have always been in flux. As Jean Comaroff explains,

> in making real a ‘tradition,’ in making it live in the world, in putting things into practice, in translating it (in every sense of the word translation), you’re also reforming that tradition, whether it’s an actual declaration of reform, or through the pragmatic re-vision of its components; which renders it almost the same, but not quite. (160)

Those ways of thinking have established a new paradigm for conceptualising tradition, not as readily definable, but as an open signifier whose meaning is,
by definition, unstable and expansive. In contemporary Nigerian literature, the trend to deconstruct tradition is particularly prominent in Abani’s *GraceLand* (2004) and Obioma’s *The Fishermen* (2014), which create a cultural context that “exceeds a singular notion of authenticity and [Igbo] tradition” and thus “question[s] the veracity, as well as the utility, of these very terms” (Krishnan, *Contemporary African Literature in English* 97).

This section has outlined some of the trends that characterise post-independence Nigeria, such as a sense of ambiguity about the nation and an increasing imperative to question totalising discourses on tradition. It has also sketched how contemporary Nigerian Anglophone writing is related to those trends. Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton’s observation about contemporary Nigerian novels expresses well the argument in this chapter: Contemporary novels “are born into the scopic regime of the postcolonial and the postmodern, an order to knowledge in which . . . the tropes of Otherness and subalternity are being remapped by questioning erstwhile totalities such as history, nation, gender, and their representative symbologies” (15). In the following two chapters, where I conduct a close reading of Abani’s *GraceLand* and Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, we see that, rather than dismissing nation and tradition, contemporary Nigerian authors engage with these critical categories to ultimately produce distinct ways of thinking about contemporary Igbo identities. It becomes apparent that the Igbo identities that occupy centre-stage in the chosen novels are not reducible to neat or reliable categories, but are perpetually re-negotiated in relation to heterogeneous social realities in postcolonial Nigeria, as well as its hybrid and malleable traditions.
5.1 Chris Abani’s *GraceLand* (2004): Igbo Tradition and the Production of Cultural Subjects

*GraceLand* follows the development of a young protagonist, Elvis Oke, from his childhood in the small, predominantly Igbo town of Afikpo in southeastern Nigeria to his adolescence in Lagos. Elvis’s coming-of-age process revolves around how he defines himself as a ‘cultural subject’ (Ouma, “Navigating the Lagos Cityscape” 141). The production of Elvis’s cultural identity is depicted as a deeply historically contingent process, firmly embedded in the different sociocultural contexts that he inhabits. Dismissing any static or essentialised notion of culture, Abani describes the two settings in the novel—Afikpo in the 1970s and Lagos in the early 1980s—as a “mélange of the traditional and the modern, the historical and the present, the inherited and the commercial” (Aycock, “An Interview with Chris Abani” 5).

In the cultural communities caught between continuity and change, tradition emerges as an utterly contested referent that, nevertheless, plays a significant role in the (re)production of cultural subjects. The chapters set in Afikpo portray the “striking moments, snapshots in which a critical step in Elvis’s development takes place” (Aycock, “Becoming Black and Elvis” 13). One such moment is Elvis’s initiation into manhood, a ritual deeply embedded in Igbo tradition, which is meant to help Elvis achieve a “fuller understanding of the world and [his] place in it” (Aycock, “Becoming Black and Elvis” 13). The chapters set in Lagos trace Elvis’s journey through the socioeconomically turbulent and culturally vibrant city, where the socioeconomic and cultural havoc is met with an urgent need for some sort of anchor. Here, Elvis always carries his mother’s diary with him, hoping that it will help him reconnect with the traditional Igbo world that is defined in the diary and that, for him, signifies coherence and order.

Believing, however, that “what we call tradition is a refusal to examine history in all its context” (Abani qtd. in Aycock, “Becoming Black and Elvis” 6), Abani does more than simply address the role of Igbo tradition in defining cultural identity: He also critically explores different discourses that reflect essentialist and empirical ideas of Igbo tradition, particularly through the novel’s complex structure. The parallel and embedded narratives, which complement the main storyline, integrate official and private discourses of Igbo tradition into the novel. Notwithstanding the differences between these two types of discourses, which will be addressed in greater detail below, both define Igbo tradition as a stable and reliable cultural referent. This idea is, however, revis(it)ed in the main storyline, in which Igbo tradition is depicted as subject to perpetual refashioning to adapt to shifting circumstances.

Although the three narrative strands can certainly be read independently, reading them in dialogue with one another is a much more productive approach: A dialogic reading foregrounds different modes of presenting tradition and the ways in which different notions of tradition interrogate the oth-
er’s claims to truth and authority. The parallel narrative takes the form of epigraphs that appear before each chapter and invoke official ethnographic discourses of Igbo tradition. Regarding the inclusion of epigraphs in the novel, Abani states they are “written in the voice of an ethnographer, who believes that if you can figure out this one ritual, you can understand the Igbo, the way that anthropologists do” (qtd. in Aycock, “Becoming Black and Elvis” 8). The embedded narrative, in comparison, is presented in the form of diary entries. Consisting of recipes, medicinal herbs, snippets from Onitsha market literature and excerpts from the Bible, the diary invokes unofficial, private discourses of Igbo tradition. As Aycock explains, the diary complements the ethnographic discourse by contributing the vast amount of Igbo or Nigerian or even African experience that is usually dismissed in official ethnographies (Aycock, “Becoming Black and Elvis” 14). Decontextualised discourses of Igbo tradition are explored in context in the main narrative, where the Igbo tradition as projected in the ethnographic accounts and the diary is subverted either performatively or by being exposed as romantic, untenable and unproductive in reconnecting Elvis with the traditional Igbo world.

In offering a coherent and stable interpretative frame for individuals to orient their sense of cultural identity, the Igbo tradition as defined in the ethnographies and the diary is a powerful system of cultural signification in the main narrative. In traditional ethnography, James G. Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski and Arnold van Gennep show that rites of passage as practical manifestations of the discourses of tradition play an important role in the ‘enculturation’ of individuals. Re-reading traditional ethnography in light of the production of ‘local subjects,’ or subjects with a deep sense of belonging to a particular community, Arjun Appadurai emphasises the central role of tradition in facilitating one’s sense of (cultural) identity: “[Rites of passage] are not simply techniques for social aggregation but social techniques for the production of ‘natives’” (Modernity at Large 179). In light of Appadurai’s insights, Elvis’s initiation ritual and his carrying his mother’s diary can be read as acts aimed at embedding Elvis in the Igbo cultural community.

My investigation of GraceLand is dominated by two questions: How does the representation of Igbo tradition in the main narrative reframe the notions of Igbo tradition defined in the ethnographies and the diary? More generally, what does this representation of Igbo tradition imply about tradition as a referent in the process of defining Igbo cultural identity in the postcolonial context? In order to tackle these questions, it is helpful, however, to first turn

38 Hoebel defines enculturation as a “conditioning process whereby man [sic], as child and adult, achieves competence in his [sic] culture, internalizes his [sic] culture and becomes thoroughly enculturated” (qtd. in Culbertson).
39 Appadurai uses the term ‘native’ to denote subjects representing a particular ‘cultural authenticity’ associated with continuity and traditions (“Putting Hierarchy in Its Place”).
to the parallel and embedded narratives as embodiments of authoritative discourses of Igbo tradition.

The Parallel Narrative and Ethnographic Discourses of Igbo Tradition

Each chapter is framed by two epigraphs that seek to capture the essence of the traditional Igbo kola nut ritual. Both ethnographic accounts lay claim to truthfulness and authority, imposing themselves as reliable frames of cultural reference. The two accounts differ, however, in the degree of ethnographic distance they imply and the style of ethnographic description. These differences serve as indicators of the discourses invoked by the ethnographic accounts, one of which is indigenous and one of which is Western.

With the discrepancy in ethnographic distance, Abani makes the distinction between indigenous and Western ethnographic voices crystal clear. The ethnographer behind the first account identifies with the Igbo community. The sense of identification is reflected in the ethnographer’s use of “we” and “us” when s/he speaks about the Igbo: “This is the kola nut. The seed is a star. The star is life. The star is us” (Abani, *GraceLand* 3) and “[w]e worship in different ways” (Abani, *GL* 17). The other ethnographer, on the other hand, assumes a cultural distance from the Igbo community by referring to its members as “the Igbo”: “The Igbo hold the kola nut to be sacred” (Abani, *GL* 3) and “[t]his number is the key to the Igbo mathematical system” (Abani, *GL* 24). Not only is the latter ethnographer obviously a cultural outsider, but his/her frequent references to European cultural heritage, such as Catholicism and the Greek mathematical system (Abani, *GL* 17, 89), make it likely that s/he is a Western ethnographer. By using ethnographic distance to distinguish between the indigenous and Western ethnographic voices while simultaneously weaving a narrative of Igbo tradition with these voices, Abani defines Igbo tradition as an object of discursive contestation rather than a fixed category.

Indigenous and Western ethnographic accounts also offer different styles of ethnographic description. Whereas the indigenous ethnographer’s account does not provide an explanation of rituals, the account of the Western ethnographer explicitly clarifies them. For instance, the relevance of the kola nut for the Igbo community is presented as follows:

(1) With your finger on the King’s head, trace the star. See? The lobes fall where its reach points. This is the first truth.

(2) The King’s head is the kola nut’s apex, or head. The start is the design of lines clearly imprinted on it that determine the number of lobes the kola nut will have. The number is the key to the Igbo mathematical system. The number holds the truth of the clan. (Abani, *GL* 24)
The indigenous ethnographer’s account (1) lacks an explanation of what the King’s head, the star and the truth are, while the Western ethnographer’s account (2) adds an explanation with the intention of facilitating cultural understanding. The additional information or the lack thereof in the ethnographers’ accounts offers clues as to who the intended audience is: In the case of the first ethnographic account, unlike in the second ethnographic account, the intended audience is arguably the Igbo. By juxtaposing accounts that portray Igbo tradition as something familiar and evident, in the former case, and something that requires explanation or definition, in the latter case, Abani takes up two impulses behind ethnographic writing: the impulse to fix the meaning of Igbo tradition and the impulse to define the meaning of tradition in order to fix it. Taking different routes, both ethnographic accounts arrive at the same end point: They arrest the meaning of Igbo tradition and present it as a reliable frame of cultural reference.

Despite their differences, both ethnographic accounts reflect the view that a description of the central Igbo ritual facilitates insight into Igbo culture, and seek to establish the authority of their respective representations of Igbo tradition as well as pin down its meaning. As such, the two accounts offer what Stuart Hall has defined as “stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” that create an impression of “cultural oneness” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 223). The ethnographic discourses thus project an idea of Igbo tradition as an eternally valid and coherent category that can provide solid ground for the (re)production of cultural identity.

The Embedded Narrative and Private Discourses of Igbo Tradition

If the epigraphs evoke official discourses of Igbo tradition, Beatrice’s diary is an embodiment of the unofficial, private discourse of Igbo tradition. Composed of traditional recipes, medicinal herbs and excerpts from popular Igbo pamphlet literature, the diary is a cultural artefact that embodies rather than describes Igbo tradition. As such, the diary entries are “not just equally as authentic and compelling as recorded history, they are more so” (Aycock, “Becoming Black and Elvis” 14). As a personal account that complicates, challenges and diversifies official discourses of Igbo tradition, Beatrice’s diary undermines the idea that officially sanctioned discourses are the only sources of cultural meaning.

Just how the diary challenges ethnographic discourses is made clear in the presentation of Beatrice’s diary not as belonging to an independent reality – like the ethnographies – but as part of the ontological world created in the main narrative. As parallel narratives, the ethnographies function as independent authorities on Igbo tradition. The authority of the diary, however, as an embedded narrative, is established within the reality depicted in the surrounding narrative:

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Beatrice had her journal open on her lap, pen poised to write . . . Elvis closed his book and watched as Beatrice wrote down a recipe for an herbal treatment that Oye was dictating to her. He watched her spidery handwriting spread across the page as though laying claim to an ancient kingdom. (Abani, *GL* 44)

The portrayal of Beatrice as she documents her mother’s knowledge of Igbo tradition makes the diary a symbol of cultural authenticity and cultural legacy with which human connection is possible (Aycock, “Becoming Black and Elvis” 14). The diary thus frames Igbo tradition as a comprehensive and practical system, defying ethnographic representations of Igbo tradition as an abstract system of signification. Moreover, the portrayal of Igbo tradition as transmitted from person to person equates tradition with family inheritance and challenges notions of tradition defined by officially sanctioned discourses.

Furthermore, while the ethnographic accounts present Igbo tradition in the form of a connected string of entries, Beatrice’s diary presents it as a patchwork: A bitter-leaf soup and pounded yam recipe is followed by the uranjila herbal remedy, which is, in turn, followed by the yam pepper soup recipe, and so on. The lack of coherent organisation emphasises the heterogeneity of cultural influences that make Igbo tradition. Moreover, the elements pieced together in the diary include both Igbo and non-Igbo cultural influences, thus highlighting the impure nature of tradition. As such, Igbo tradition as portrayed in Beatrice’s diary debunks the notion of cultural authenticity, and emerges as much more dynamic and complex than in the ethnographies.

While diverging from official, ethnographic discourses in terms of what it presents as Igbo tradition, the diary’s emphasis on tradition as family inheritance and as something heterogeneous nevertheless depicts Igbo tradition as something definable in and available as a text. “Freezing” Igbo tradition in the written form reflects the intention underlying ethnographic discourses: The diary, too, attempts to endow Igbo tradition with stable meaning and define it as a reliable system of cultural signification in relation to which a sense of cultural identity can be effectively formed. As such, the diary represents a discourse of Igbo tradition that appears as authoritative as ethnographic discourses, but its authority rests on a different set of ideas about how tradition is defined, presented and preserved.

The Main Narrative and the Examination of Igbo Tradition in Context

Focussing on Elvis’s extended family, the chapters set in Afikpo paint a picture of life in a community with a prominent sense of Igbo cultural identity. However, far from being depicted in static or essentialist terms, the cultural community in Afikpo is defined by a blend of foreign and local cultural influences. The Igbo characters indulge in watching the circus promising
“American wonder,” in following international films in cinemas and in visiting drive-in cinemas sponsored by an American tobacco company (Abani, *GL* 66, 98, 146). In response to the rapid cultural change brought about by globalisation, Elvis’s family recreates traditional Igbo heritage through songs and ceremonies, witchcraft, magic and traditional belief in an attempt to reclaim their ethnic cultural identity (Abani, *GL* 68, 124). In this way, Afikpo is depicted as a dynamic cultural context where a sense of Igbo cultural identity has to be carefully maintained.

A major means to this end is Elvis’s initiation into manhood, a ritual deeply embedded in Igbo tradition. The initiation ritual nominally consists of the person being initiated catching and killing an eagle in the company of men from the community, then being carried by the men to hang the eagle among other birds sacrificed to local gods. When it is reported that “the young men from the neighbouring hamlets . . . had come to welcome Elvis on his first step to manhood as dictated by tradition” (Abani, *GL* 18, emphasis added), a reference is made to Igbo tradition as represented in the ethnographic discourses of the parallel narrative. Invoking authoritative ethnographic discourses in the main storyline invites readers to interpret the initiation ritual as part of a clearly-defined and stable system of cultural significations, but it also has the potential to interrogate Igbo tradition as defined in the ethnographic discourses.

Thus established, the dialogue between the main narrative and the parallel narrative makes evident the different modes of representation: showing and telling. While the ethnographic accounts feature prominent ethnographic voices that interpret the Igbo ritual, the fictional narrative does not offer an equivalent interpretive authority: In the ethnographic accounts, the kola nut ritual is related by authoritative ethnographers, whereas in the main narrative the initiation ritual is performed before the reader. The absence of the interpretative layer in the main narrative frames Igbo tradition as defined through performance rather than authoritative description.

Depicting Igbo tradition as performance, in turn, allows Abani to examine the fluid and generative nature of tradition. Although, according to the authoritative accounts of Igbo tradition, Elvis is supposed to catch and kill an eagle all by himself, the main narrative portrays Elvis’s uncle Joseph catching and almost killing a chicken, and passing it on to Elvis:

‘It is alive,’ Elvis said.
‘Of course it is. You just shot it,’ Joseph replied.
‘I didn’t.’
‘You did,’ Sunday said.
‘Is this an eagle chick?’ Elvis asked.
Joseph laughed. ‘Elvis, you funny. No, it is chicken, eagle is too expensive.’ (Abani, *GL* 19)

That Elvis does not perform the central part of the ritual, namely the killing of the eagle, turns the Igbo tradition into a parody of itself, but the fact that
Elvis openly addresses this dissolves even the illusion that tradition can be unproblematically reproduced. Elvis’s performance of the initiation ritual simultaneously has, in line with Butler’s sense of performativity (2007 [1990]), a subversive and a generative potential: Performance is never a purely mimetic act, but an act that leaves enough room for a difference from the original to be staged. The performance of Igbo tradition as depicted in the main narrative undermines the very model on which this tradition is based and thus contributes to a constitution of a new cultural form.

The transformative and generative nature of Igbo tradition is depicted as a response to the dynamic socioeconomic context in which the tradition is performed: Uncle Joseph decides to substitute the eagle with a chicken, because the chicken is more affordable. The fact that Igbo tradition is presented as negotiable debunks the idea that the authority of tradition is derived from the fixity of traditional ritual. Instead, as suggested by the performance of the initiation ritual, tradition derives its authority from its ability to actively respond to socioeconomic change and adapt to the given context. In that sense, deviating from the Igbo tradition as defined in authoritative, ethnographic accounts is not a denunciation of tradition, but rather an illustration of the mechanism by which it is preserved: Igbo tradition can retain its meaningful role in the production of cultural subjects only by existing as malleable and responsive dimension.

It has been established thus far that the main storyline subverts the validity, reliability and authority of Igbo tradition as defined in the official ethnographic discourses by presenting tradition as performance: Elvis’s performance of a traditional Igbo ritual underlines the constructed and transformative nature of tradition, thereby radically undermining the notion of fixed Igbo tradition as defined in the epigraphs. The parallel and the main narrative thus come to exemplify a dialogue between modern ideas of tradition as something static and a postmodern questioning of the grand narratives of tradition that reframes tradition as a perpetual invention.

Whereas, in Afikpo, Igbo tradition as defined in official ethnographic discourses is revis(it)ed in the portrayal of tradition in performative terms, in Lagos Igbo tradition as defined in Beatrice’s diary is interrogated for its relevance and meaning in the culturally dynamic and socioeconomically unsettling postcolonial urban space. The need for some sort of traditional anchorage is made that much more urgent by the sense of existential disorientation created by an overwhelming mixture of cultural influences, systematic and everyday violence, complex social realities and severe economic hardship. As Elvis carries his mother’s dairy in his Fulani pouch on his journey through Lagos, he hopes that the diary will help him reconnect with the traditional Igbo world in which he was “safely ensonced . . . by his mother and grandmother” (Krishnan, “Beyond Tradition and Progress” 100). Igbo tradition as manifested in Beatrice’s diary figures here as a system of cultural signification with a deep connection to Elvis’s sense of cultural identity.
Lagos as depicted in *GraceLand* is the epitome of the global city, representing a crossroads of cultural influences from all over the world and offering the possibility of reinvention. The highly dynamic cultural landscape in Lagos is reflected in the heterogeneity of literary, music and film products described there: Elvis reads Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* and Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* just as eagerly as he reads Onitsha romantic literature; he listens to highlife music as much as to Bob Marley, Elvis Presley and Al Green; he is exposed to American western films as well as to the Nigerian TV sitcom *Basi and Company*; and he consumes American cigarettes and Coca-Cola as eagerly as stories from India. This hotchpotch of local and foreign cultural influences testifies to the fact that Lagos is a “metropolis in a globally connected world” (Dannenberg 44). In Chielozona Eze’s view, in such a global city, “people lose their primary attachment to blood in its closed, ethnic sense” as the possibility arises to adopt more global identities (108).

An illustrative example of the creative potential in Lagos is Elvis’s ambition to become a professional impersonator of Elvis Presley. Yet Elvis’s dressing up as Elvis Presley testifies to more than just the possibility of reinvention; it demonstrates the limits of transgression that are part of the nature of globalisation. When Elvis dresses up as Elvis Presley and performs for Western tourists, they complain that “he doesn’t look like any Elvis [they] know” (Abani, *GL* 12). Elvis’s unsuccessful transformation into Elvis Presley is, in fact, a successful illustration of how global models of identity become glocalised – absorbed and appropriated in local contexts. Seeking to reproduce the identity of a global icon, yet reconfiguring that identity in the process, Elvis evokes Homi Bhabha’s notion of ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ (“Unsatisfied”), a cosmopolitanism that emerges from the adaptation of foreign, dominant cultural forms in ways that make those cultural forms functional in local contexts and for marginalised groups (Ouma, “Navigating the Lagos Cityscape” 144), Elvis’s performative identity illustrates, therefore, how “globalisation is not the story of cultural homogenisation” (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 11) but rather the story of hybridisation and pluralisation of cultural forms.

However, *GraceLand* refuses to present the global city in purely celebratory terms. As Michael K. Walonen writes, while the urban culture may provide new opportunities for rural migrants like Elvis, it does so at the expense of psycho-geographically deracinating them and exposing them to different sorts of brutalities (96). On his bus ride through Lagos, Elvis learns about “the spirits of the road [who] danced around the buses trying to pluck plump offerings, retribution for the sacrilege of the road, which apparently, when it was built, had severed them from their roots” (Abani, *GL* 9). Not simply a matter of the past, forceful relocations of the poorest are depicted as continuously happening in the slums of Lagos. One such event is the demolition of Maroko, the slum where Elvis and his father live after they move to Lagos.
The narrativisation of the demolition, which evokes the “Operation Sweep the Nation” that occurred in Lagos in 1990 (Agbola and Jinadu), shows urbanisation as a sign of global modernity, highlighting the form it takes in areas where social inequality meets political violence – as gentrification and displacement of the city’s poorest. This urbanisation attached to systematic, state violence is reflective of the nature of global modernity in the postcolonial, where urban development also implies the social oppression of those at the margins of society.

Another feature of Lagos that complicates the celebratory narrative of global modernity in the postcolonial urban space is the unevenness of global capitalism, which appears as stark socioeconomic inequality. The discrepancies in the way areas of the city develop are reflected in the descriptions of the living conditions in one of the biggest slums (1), Maroko, which is contrasted with rich neighbourhoods such as Ikoyi (2):

(1) Elvis stood by the open window . . . Across the street stood the foundations of a building; the floor and pillars wore green mold from repeated rains. Between the pillars, a woman had erected a buka, no more than a rickety lean-to made of sheets of corrugated iron roofing and plastic held together by hope. (Abani, GL 3-4)

(2) Lagos did have its fair share of rich people and fancy neighbourhoods . . . There were beautiful brownstones set in well-landscaped yards, sprawling Spanish-style haciendas in brilliant white and ocher, elegant Frank Lloyd Wright-styled buildings and cars that were new and foreign. (Abani, GL 7-8)

As the two quotes from the novel illustrate, the discrepant temporalities of global capitalism are embodied in what appears as a contradictory amalgam of archaic or traditional with more contemporary or progressive forms of life. A remark made by Redemption as he observes the lights of Ikoyi across the lagoon testifies to the inextricable connectedness of the nominally non-contemporaneous forms of life: “Because though dey hate us, de rich still have to look at us. Try as dey might, we don’t go away” (Abani, GL 137).

The different temporalities that coexist in Lagos challenge “the idea of change . . . as one which entails a linear movement from a traditional past toward a modernized future” (Gusfield 351). Instead, they testify to how modern forms of life do not supplant traditional forms of life, but are “governed by a socio-historical logic of combination” (Warwick Research Collective, Combined and Uneven Development 12), or, in Ernst Bloch’s temporal terms, the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’ (Erbschaft dieser Zeit).40

The open international markets enabled by neoliberal globalisation, the pervasive and disruptive presence of state violence, and economic precari-

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40 Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen.
ousness are depicted as generative of particular urban subjectivities. One example is Redemption, the character alluded to above and Elvis’s former schoolmate and close friend, who epitomises a neo-liberal mythology of development. Aware of the fact that “[d]is world operate different way for different people” and that he is confined to the margins of the postcolonial urban society (Abani, GL 242), Redemption is ready to do anything to make a profit. Commodifying everything, including information, Redemption embraces any opportunity to earn money: He “knew everyone, heard everything and could procure everything, for a price” (Abani, GL 25). Possessing valuable information, Redemption manages to find odd jobs here and there, most of which entail “employing clandestine, half-legal tactics” (Nnodim 324): He wraps drug packets for export and participates in the transportation of human organs. In a world devoid of ethical sensitivity and governed by the drive to make money, Redemption sees people, and not solely information, as objects of commodification and consumption: After Redemption finds Elvis a job as an escort in a club, he teaches Elvis that Elvis is there to “keep [the women] entertained, no more, no less,” to “move from woman to woman” and be “disposable” (Abani, GL 95). Embracing material gain, commodification and consumerism, Redemption symbolises the culture of neoliberal capitalism, which is built around change and flexibility, individualism and subjectivity defined not in relation to any ethnic tradition but to the laws of the market.

Elvis is disoriented by an environment that threatens to disembed him from the traditions he knows, that brims with danger and violence, and that rids him of any moral compass. This sense of disorientation, in turn, makes Elvis’s need for a reliable anchor in which to ground himself that much more urgent. Removed from the clearly defined Igbo cultural community in Afikpo and landing in a frenzied space in Lagos, it is Igbo tradition that holds the promise of coherence, stability and embeddedness in a knowable world for Elvis. Elvis finds an embodiment of Igbo tradition as a grounding force for individual identity in the character named the King of the Beggars, a passionate artist and an ideologue Elvis meets while wandering through Lagos. Believing in the power of tradition to transform rough Lagos into a liveable place, the King preaches remembering “the beauty of the indigenous culture” (Abani, GL 154-155). To this end, the King stages theatre performances, holds public speeches and recites poetry, all of which invoke traditional Igbo culture. Calling for a “return to the traditional values and ways of being” (Abani, GL 155), the King’s philosophy appeals to Elvis because it affirms his belief in the possibility of reconnecting with the traditional Igbo world. Even though Elvis is well aware that the King’s theories do not account for the “inherent complications he [Elvis] knew were native to [Nigeria]” and that there is “no way of going back to the ‘good old days,’” he is still “mesmerised by the richness of the King’s voice” (Abani, GL 155). Elvis’s fascination with the King is an indicator of his “anxiety and desire to
connect with familial and cultural heritage from which [he] is cut off in the city” (Crowley 137) as much as of the power of discourses of tradition to be imposed as interpretative frames for reality.

As a symbol of the hope that reconnecting with the traditional Igbo world is possible, Elvis’s mother’s diary is extremely valuable to him; he is feverishly obsessed with the diary, frequently checking if it is still in his Fulani pouch (Abani, GL 191), and he often falls asleep “rubbing his left fingertips against [its] worn leather” (Abani, GL 46). To Elvis, the diary provides a sense of comfort that stems from the promise of cultural rootedness it symbolises: “[Elvis] stared at the page he had open [the diary] to and read the recipe as though it were a fortifying psalm” (Abani, GL 11, emphasis added). Elvis’s perception that the diary provides bits of Igbo tradition that can protect and empower him illustrates how strong his wish is to find anchorage in the traditional Igbo world and acquire a more defined sense of self in the disorienting urban environment. The question remains as to whether Beatrice’s diary is effective in helping Elvis do these things. Following Appadurai’s assumption that cultural subjects are successfully produced when their acts are rendered meaningful in the given cultural community, and vice versa (Modernity at Large 181), one way to approach Elvis’s search for a stable sense of cultural identity is to look at how meaningful the diary appears to be in the cultural environment in Lagos.

Throughout his life in Lagos, which is marked by physical violence and economic precariousness, Elvis frequently turns to his mother’s diary and contemplates its meaning(fullness). The more Elvis thinks about the diary, however, the more sceptical he grows of its usefulness. Not only does Elvis never make use of any of the herbal remedies and the recipes contained in the diary, but he increasingly questions their utility in his mother’s life, too. Elvis asks himself “if any of the herbal remedies in the book actually worked” and observes how “he couldn’t remember his mother ever having cooked” (Abani, GL 80, 137). With its connection to real life potentially undermined, the diary becomes a problematic cultural signifier in that it turns into a symbol of a purely abstract world. The abstractness of the traditional world is also underlined by the fact that Elvis often forgets about those who, for him, embody that world: “With surprise [Elvis] realised that he had not thought of Oye, or his mother, for so long . . . With a guilty pang, he reached into his backpack and touched his mother’s journal” (Abani, GL 136). The instances that bring Elvis to realise that the diary cannot serve as a meaningful artefact challenge the inherited notion of tradition as an eternally reliable system of cultural signification.

When a life lived in accordance with the values of neoliberal capitalism proves too dangerous and an escape into traditionalism is no longer viable at all, Elvis decides to accept Redemption’s US visa and leave Nigeria. While at the airport, Elvis stumbles across his mother’s diary and regretfully concludes: “It had never revealed his mother to him. Never helped him under-
stand her, or his life, or why anything had happened the way it did” (Abani, GL 320). This leads Elvis to contemplate the nature of the world more generally, eventually to realise that “nothing is ever resolved” and that “[i]t just changes” (Abani, GL 320). As a sort of confirmation of the transformative reality, the novel closes with Elvis becoming Redemption: “‘Redemption,’ the airline clerk called. Elvis, still unfamiliar with his new name, did not respond. ‘Redemption!’ the clerk called louder. Elvis stepped forward and spoke. ‘Yes, this is Redemption’” (Abani, GL 321).

At a superficial level, the scene depicts Elvis’s acquisition of a new identity, signifying a fresh start in the US (Krishnan, “Biafra and the Aesthetics of Closure”; Omelsky), but the scene also reveals something more: Metaphorically, the flight to the US is Elvis’s redemption from both the neoliberal notions of development and the mythologies imposed by ethnic traditionalism. Krishnan’s observation that, when talking about *GraceLand*, “[n]o statement wholeheartedly supporting any totalizing discourse may be maintained” is therefore right on point (“Beyond Tradition and Progress” 106). Instead, with its emphasis on transformation, the novel invites a reading of postcolonial Igbo cultural identity not as reducible to any coherent or rigid system of signification, but as characterised by ambivalence, instability and the perpetual transgression of established frames.

Relying on postmodern techniques, discourse in *GraceLand* is splintered, which ultimately enables an examination of different discourses of Igbo tradition. When read independently, the discourses of Igbo tradition in the parallel and embedded narratives appear self-evident and go unchallenged. However, reading the two narrative threads in dialogue and, furthermore, in relation to the main storyline, uncovers the problematic nature of any totalising discourse of tradition. An increasing distrust in the normative representations of tradition and move toward an interrogative approach is evident in the trajectory taken by the novel from official narratives of tradition (ethnographies) to personal narratives of tradition (Beatrice’s diary) and, finally, to a literary exploration of Igbo tradition (the main storyline). Moreover, the way in which one discourse contests the other turns Igbo tradition into a sign whose signified becomes increasingly destabilised.

By problematising authoritative ideas of Igbo tradition in the process of defining contemporary cultural subjects, the novel makes two claims. First, it makes a case against Igbo tradition as a stable system of cultural signification: Igbo tradition is spelled out in the ethnographic accounts, only to be subverted in the main narrative, which reveals it to be a category that is fluid and perpetually reinvented. Secondly, the failure of Beatrice’s diary to facilitate Elvis’s connection with the traditional Igbo world in the main narrative suggests that contemporary cultural subjects cannot be reduced to the roles inherited notions of tradition grant them. Where does *GraceLand* leave us then with regard to Igbo tradition and the production of Igbo cultural identi-
ty? Proposing that Igbo cultural identities in their contemporary form always produce a surplus of meaning that the already established systems of signification cannot address, the novel suggests that contemporary Igbo cultural identities ought to be understood as in some way transgressive and thus necessarily a challenge to the culturally available systems of reference and meaning.

To narrate Igbo cultural identity in transformation, Abani stages conversations between different, non-contemporaneous discourses on Igbo tradition. In the chapters set in Afikpo, Elvis’s ritual of initiation into manhood references the ethnographic discourses on Igbo tradition that are presented in epigraphs, whereas, in the chapters set in Lagos, Elvis is depicted as aimlessly wandering through the city with Beatrice’s account of the Igbo tradition as his unsatisfactory source of certainty. In both cases, inherited discourses on Igbo tradition are evoked at critical moments in Elvis’s life, when his sense of cultural belonging and identification is at stake. Those evocations of inherited discourses and their concomitant notions of Igbo tradition produce a collision, both at the level of narrative mediation and content, of discrepant temporalities. Reading the novel in such a way tallies with Warwick Research Collective’s (WReC) conceptualisation of the novel in the age of global capitalist development as an artefact which ‘registers’ the entanglements, both in form and theme, between residual, archaic forms and modern, progressive forms within a single time and space.41 Examining the continuous (re)production of Igbo cultural identity in the light of such entanglements proposes a notion of ‘Igboness’ as ambivalent and perplexing, deeply rooted as it is in traditional symbolic systems, yet simultaneously transgressive of those systems as result of socio-historical change.

41 As explained by Jennison, WReC has put forth the idea of literary narratives as “rooted in the political economies of a world system undergoing tumultuous and ceaseless rearrangement, especially in response to crises within the system” (98). More specifically, the WReC collective conceptualises the novel as a “literary form in which combined and uneven development is manifested with particular salience, due in no small part to its fundamental association with the rise of capitalism and its status in peripheral and semi-peripheral societies as a ‘modernizing’ import” (“WReC’s Reply” 535-536).
5.2 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006): The Igbo Nation as a Patchwork of Small Stories

*Half of a Yellow Sun* alternates between the early 1960s, the pre-war period, and the late 1960s, the time of the Igbo war for independence, in the process reflecting on both the causes and effects of the ethnic tensions in newly independent Nigeria. The history of the Igbo nation or the Republic of Biafra is presented in three narrative strands, each told by the same, unnamed extradiegetic narrator, but alternatively focalised through three central characters: Olanna, a British-educated university lecturer, Ugwu, a young man from an Igbo village, and Richard, a white British journalist who moves to Nigeria to do research on Igbo-Ukwu art. The experience of Biafra presented through each character focaliser is unique; they allow the Igbo nation to be presented in a fragmented narrative consisting of multiple voices.

The choice of narrative mediation in the novel, namely ‘figural narration,’ is essential to creating a polyvocal narrative of the Igbo past. What figural narration in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, or the situation in which the mediating narrator is replaced by three character focalisers (Stanzel 5), achieves is a shift to particular and limited angles from which the actions in the narrative are presented (Bal, *Narratology* 263-296). The effect of such narration is a heightened sense of immediacy, subjectivity and plurality that triggers an active and affective engagement with the narrative. The multiplicity of personal experiences in its turn enables Adichie to contemplate a range of ‘histories from below,’ or marginalised, excluded, subjugated or forgotten histories that constituted the brief but highly contentious period in Nigerian and Igbo histories. In the manner of what Jean-François Lyotard defined as ‘small stories’ (72), the three narrative strands rely on a notion of history as an assortment of manifold, interdependent narratives that provide space for the personal experience of the emergence of a nation to be recounted, invented, heard and played out. Through the perspectives of Olanna, Ugwu and Richard, the voices of a woman, a villager and a foreigner are granted a significant place in the literary act of reconstructing the history of the Igbo nation. As such, Adichie’s novel deconstructs the History of Biafra into the plurality of stories and suggests new ways of emplotting the past.

The fact that literature not only draws on pre-existing discourse systems but also productively influences these systems renders *Half of a Yellow Sun* a potentially active force in reconstructing the already existing narratives of the Igbo nation. Jürgen Straub suggests that the form of the novel, with its conventionalised plot lines and highly suggestive myths, provides powerful, often normative models for our interpretation of the past (“Psychology, Narrative”). In light of this, *Half of a Yellow Sun* can be said to productively interfere in the process of cultural memory production by offering alternative models of the past. I wish to suggest that Adichie’s novel does this not only
within the national sphere by evoking the suppressed history of the Igbo nation, but also within the ethnic Igbo sphere by insisting on the value of small stories and subaltern voices in understanding the controversial past. More precisely, in encouraging an active engagement with Biafra, *Half of a Yellow Sun* counters Nigerian national discourses that seek to silence the traumatic period of the national past. However, the novel also enters a dialogue with the Igbo literature produced before it about Biafra: With its emphasis on affective experience, the novel challenges the representations of the history of the Igbo nation in a predominantly documentary manner.\(^\text{42}\) Last, but not least, by foregrounding the voices of marginalised citizens, the novel offers an alternative to more mainstream narratives of the past through elite consciousness.\(^\text{43}\)

If Chinua Achebe was right to claim that the Nigeria-Biafra war sharpened the sense of Igbo identity (qtd. in Appiah, *In My Father’s House* 177), then Adichie’s reconstruction of the history of Biafra 40 years afterwards begs for a critical discussion of what effects her representation of Biafra has on understanding Igbo identity. Birgit Neumann has observed that literary texts dealing with memory are, in fact, more about the present than about the related past: “[They] are concerned with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present, they re-examine the relationship between the past and the present, and they illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfil for the constitution of identity” (“The Literary Representation of Memory” 333). She goes on to add that, when relating the past, the teller is necessarily involved in the selection of memories, which, in turn, “tells us more about the rememberer’s present, his or her desire and denial, than about the actual past events” (“The Literary Representation of Memory” 333). Keeping Neumann’s insights in mind, in this chapter I will address *Half of a Yellow Sun* as an instance of fictions of memory, or a narrative that stages a return to the past, that suggests ways to retroactively conceptualise the history of the Igbo nation and that inspires a dialogue about Igbo identity.

**Literary Staging of a Return to the Past**

A return to the past is already staged in the very first pages of the novel, with the inclusion of two short texts that frame the narrative: (1) a dedication to Adichie’s grandfathers who died in the Nigeria-Biafra war and to her grandmothers who survived it, and (2) an excerpt from Achebe’s poem “Mango Seedlings,” published in his collection *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems* (1973):

> My grandfathers, whom I never knew,  
> Nwoye David Adichie and Aro-Nweke Felix Odigwe,

\(^\text{42}\) For a discussion of the documentary nature of the early literature on the Biafran war, see Amuta, “The Nigerian Civil War”; Feuser 150; Nnolim 78.

\(^\text{43}\) Ouma proposes a similar argument in “Composite Consciousness.”
Did not survive the war.

My grandmothers, Mwabuodu Regina Odigwe and Nwamgbafor Agnes Adichie, remarkable women

[both, did.

This book is dedicated to their memories:

Ka fa nodu na ndokwa.

And to Mellitus, wherever he may be. (1)

Today I see it still –

Dry, wire-thin in sun and dust of the dry months –

Headstone on tiny debris of passionate courage. (2)

A return to the past staged through the invocation of ancestral memories and incorporation of Achebe’s poem hints at Adichie’s intention to revisit the part of Nigerian national history that is, in her words, “steeped in denial, in looking away” (“Hiding from Our Past”). Moreover, the fact that the past is refracted through a specifically Igbo lens announces the perspective through which that past is revisited in the narrative.

That the two texts play a significant role in framing Adichie’s literary project is borne out by a closer examination of the nature of these texts. Jan Assmann’s distinction between communicative and cultural memory is highly illuminating in this regard. In line with Jan Assmann’s typology, Adichie’s dedication, as a text that foregrounds her ancestors’ memories, evokes the notion of communicative memory, or memory that is “non-institutional [and] not formalised or stabilised by any forms of material symbolisation” but “lives in everyday interaction and communication” (111). Achebe’s poem, in comparison, as a literary text written by a canonical Igbo Anglophone author, belongs to the realm of cultural memory, or memory that is “a kind of institution; . . . exteriorised, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that . . . are stable and situation-transcendent; [and] may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another” (Assmann 110-111). The poem and the dedication represent the memories to which Adichie’s novel is largely indebted, on which it bears and to which it speaks back. These two sorts of memory and their coupling at the beginning of the novel do not only situate Half of a Yellow Sun with regard to institutional and non-institutional Igbo memory. They also inform the reader about the nature of narration in Adichie’s novel, the relationship with the past that the novel embodies, and the dialogue between the novel and contemporary cultural and literary contexts in Nigeria.

Contemporary scholarship on Half of a Yellow Sun is highly conscious of the interplay between the historical and the literary aspect in the novel, addressing both in the attempt to define the style of narration in the novel.44

44 See Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 69-112; Tunca 64-99, Stylistic Approaches; Uwasomba; Krishnan, “On National Culture”.

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Interpretations that consider both the historical and the literary aspect of the style of narration are certainly encouraged by the author herself, who explained that she “invented a train station in Nsukka, invented a beach in Port Harcourt, changed the distance between towns, changed the chronology of conquered cities but... did not invent any of the major events” because it was important that she “get[s] the facts that mattered right” (Adichie, “The Story Behind the Book”). The interplay between fact and fiction is already hinted at in the texts that frame the novel: While the dedication to ancestral memories evokes factual knowledge, Achebe’s poem evokes literary or fictional knowledge. What originates in a context where “the ideas of truth, facts and fiction become blurred” is ‘narrative truths’ or ‘imaginative truths’ (Ouma, “Chronotopicity” 43).

Apart from suggesting that the relating of the past in Half of a Yellow Sun relies on both fact and fiction or, expressed differently, acts of remembering and inventing, Adichie’s evocation of her ancestors’ and literary predecessors’ narratives about the war also hints at the relationship with the past embodied by the novel. Unlike Achebe and Adichie’s grandparents, Adichie belongs to a generation of Nigerian Igbo who were born after the war but who grew up with heightened awareness of the Igbo national project, which was transmitted to them through official (public) and unofficial (private) narratives. As such, for Adichie’s generation, the Igbo war for independence represents what Marianne Hirsch has defined as ‘postmemory,’ or memory “transmitted to [the younger generation] so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (107). That Half of a Yellow Sun emerged against the backdrop of a whole range of memories of Biafra is explicitly addressed in Adichie’s note at the end of the novel, where she acknowledges all the narratives and/or memories that helped her in writing the novel.45

The strongly intertextual nature of Adichie’s narrative discourages readings of Half of a Yellow Sun as an unmediated reconstruction of the past. Indeed, the novel asks for awareness of the author’s imaginative and organisational engagement, not really with the past itself, but with the memories of that past, ultimately aimed at producing a new narrative. While Hirsch is careful to point out the overwhelming hold memories have on the imagination in the younger generation, the potential to produce new narratives about the past lies in the specific nature of the engagement of the younger generation with these memories – as “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (107). This is suggested by Paul Ricoeur’s cycle of mimesis (1984 [1983]), too, which assumes that literary representations of the past are always prefigured by culture-specific ways of remembering and representing.

45 In “Writing Biafra: Adichie, Emecheta and the Dilemmas of Biafran War Fiction,” Hodges defines Adichie’s list of narratives of Biafra in her note as incomplete and discusses a more extensive list of fictional and non-fictional accounts that might have helped Adichie reconstruct the history of Biafra in her novel.
memories, but that, on the textual level, novels indeed produce new models of reality through the processes of configuration, editing and reorganising the elements of culturally given discourse. In this regard, Adichie’s dedication to her grandparents, Achebe’s poem and the author’s note testify to the overwhelming influence of the memories and/or narratives that inspired Adichie’s engagement with the past. At the same time, they do not hinder Adichie’s organisational power, or the power to reconstruct the narratives about the past in ways that bring to light that which has previously been neglected, silenced and dismissed.

Finally, the incorporation of the dedication and the poem suggests how the novel engages with contemporary Nigerian literary and cultural contexts, in particular with respect to carving out the space for a specifically Igbo literary tradition. The lines Adichie selects from Achebe’s poem are dedicated to one of the most celebrated Igbo poets, Cristopher Okigbo, who died while fighting for Biafra. By choosing those lines precisely, Adichie traces and affirms an indelibly Igbo voice in Nigerian Anglophone literary tradition. Moreover, the choice of poetry over any other genre capturing the history of the Igbo nation is consistent with the marked shift away from novelistic to poetic expression among the Igbo authors after the war. As noted by Obi Nwakanma:

The trauma of the civil war, expressed in terms of a separation from the idealized space of the nation, is clearly reflected in the evident paucity or even absence of Igbo imaginative figuration of the nation between 1970 and 1983, using the mode of the novel. . . . This absence equally marks the character of production of the Nigerian novel in that period: in sum, only a few significant works of fiction came out of Nigeria in this moment, although it witnessed, ironically, a flourishing of poetry and drama.

By using a poem Achebe dedicated to Okigbo to carve out a specifically Igbo literary tradition within the larger, national literary context, Adichie refers to a literary tradition into which she inscribes her own novel. If the evocation of canonised Igbo authors such as Achebe and Okigbo enables Adichie to trace Igbo literary tradition in the national context, and inscribe herself into that tradition, then the fact that she adds her grandparents’ memories to her narrative can be read as a push toward taking into serious consideration communicative forms of memory, too.

If Neumann defines fictions of memory as narrative texts that expose the workings of memory and explore the effects of those memories on the present (“The Literary Representation of Memory” 333), then *Half of a Yellow Sun* qualifies as such a fiction, insofar as it is an excellent illustration of how the Igbo nation is remembered and how such memories affect our understanding of Igbo identity in the aftermath of Biafra’s collapse. The short texts that frame Adichie’s narrative illuminate the process of remembering: They demonstrate how remembering always entails both retrieving and im-
agining, and how a journey into the past is a process directed at making sense of or making changes in the present. To understand the contribution of *Half of a Yellow Sun* to an understanding of Igbo identity in the war’s aftermath, it is, however, necessary to first consider how the history of the Igbo nation is presented in the novel.

Reconstructing the History of the Igbo Nation

In staging the history of Biafra, Adichie relies on distinctly postmodern narrative devices, including fragmented narrative structure, prominent character focalisation, fragmented temporal structure and embedded narratives. These devices are semanticised to the extent that they implicitly convey ideas about how to reconceptualise the national past and understand the notions of Igbo community and identity. The narrative device on which this analysis focuses is multiple focalisation, which allows the reader to interpret the story through multiple perspectives. Adichie’s manipulation of her narrative of the Igbo nation through character focalisation raises a number of questions: Which stories of the Igbo nation are articulated and how? Do these stories converge or diverge? And, what are the implications of such stories for our understanding of Igbo community and identity in the war’s aftermath?

Initially, none of Adichie’s character focalisers displays any identification, in the case of Richard, or strong identification, in the case of Olanna and Ugwu, with the Igbo community. Richard’s status of a newcomer to Nigeria places him unambiguously in the position of an outsider in relation to Nigeria’s ethnic communities. Olanna’s subversive attitude toward ethnic affiliation causes her to frequently challenge Igbo identity. Ugwu, for his part, displays but scant consciousness of identity politics. The Igbo war for independence, however, prompts each of the three characters to redefine their relationship with the Igbo community, and in the process the notion of Igbo identity is framed and reframed in different ways. A narrative constellation in which three focalising perspectives embody different ways of forming, reforming and performing Igbo identity at the time of a critical political transformation invites a conversation about Igbo identity.

Educated in England, speaking with a perfect English accent, once romantically involved with a Muslim Hausa and contributing to her family’s cross-ethnic businesses, Olanna is the epitome of a modern middle-class Nigerian citizen who imagines postcolonial Nigeria as shaped by ideas of human rights and national citizenship rather than ethnic and religious affiliations. When Olanna’s cousins from Kano make fun of how the Sardauna was killed in the Igbo coup, justifying the act of killing with a clear reference to ethnicity by saying that “the Sardauna was an evil man [who] hated [the

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46 This is a reference to Ahmadu Bello, who was the most important Islamic religious and political leader in Nigeria and who was commonly referred to as the Sardauna of Sokoto. He was assassinated on January 15, 1966.
Igbo]” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 130), Olanna directs the conversation away from the question of ethnicity toward the question of human rights and good governance: “‘They should not have killed him,’ Olanna said quietly. ‘They should have put him in prison’” (Adichie, *HoYS* 130). Creating a character that initially strongly identifies with the Nigerian national community, only to shift her affiliation to the Igbo national community after the proclamation of independence, allows Adichie to examine the intricacies involved in the process of developing a sense of Igbo national identity.

Before the formation of the Republic of Biafra, Olanna’s focalisation primarily foregrounds the constructed nature of ethnic Igbo identity. When on a plane to Nsukka, Olanna becomes an object of ethnic scrutiny. A man seated next to her says: “‘Are you Igbo?’ . . . ‘But you have the face of Fula-ni people’” (Adichie, *HoYS* 227). The man’s statement is illustrative of his view of ethnic identity as a trait inscribed on one’s body, but at the same time undermines the validity of such a view, because the man wrongly assumes that Olanna is a Fulani. Olanna, on the other hand, is amused by the possibility of fluid ethnic identity: “She could be a Fulani woman on a plane deriding Igbo people with a good-looking stranger” (Adichie, *HoYS* 227-228). As opposed to the man, who perceives ethnic identity as a natural category into which one simply falls, Olanna toys with the idea of dismissing one ethnic identity to make room for another. What we witness in this scene is therefore a shift in presenting Igbo identity as a natural category to presenting it as a matter of (mis)interpretation and (self-)definition.

As ethnic tensions heighten and the question of ethnic belonging becomes a matter of life and death, Olanna performs ever more acts that denaturalise Igbo identity. When Olanna is fleeing the northern Nigerian city of Kano because the Igbo are attacked by local Hausa Muslims, she is directed by her ex-boyfriend Mohammed to “[not] raise her face” (Adichie, *HoYS* 148), lest she be recognised as an Igbo. Underlying Mohammed’s advice is the notion that ethnic Igbo identity is something that can be read on Olanna’s body; as such, it invokes the view expressed by the man on the plane. Yet Olanna dismisses the definition of ethnic Igbo identity as something that one is simply born into: She places a long scarf over her head and winds it round her neck, jokingly concluding that she “look[s] like a proper Muslim woman” (Adichie, *HoYS* 147). In this way, Olanna reframes ethnic identity as a question of bodily performance rather than something defined by birth. In masking her own features to appear as a Hausa Muslim, Olanna evokes Butler’s notion of identity as constructed through performative acts as opposed to something that is simply given (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”; *Gender Trouble*).

However, it is not only bodily performance but also language that emphasises the constructed dimension of ethnic identity. When Olanna and her cousin Arize are surrounded by armed men at an open market in Lagos, they are ordered to identify themselves as Igbo. As in previous examples, Olanna
dismisses Igbo identity by rapidly switching to “fluent, loud Yoruba” (Adichie, *HoYS* 132). Such a reaction eventually causes Olanna to contemplate how easy it was to “deny who they were, to shrug off being Igbo” (Adichie, *HoYS* 133). In this example, Olanna treats ethnic identity as a series of ‘symbolic enactments that are semiotically indexed through speech’ (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xvi), relativising Igbo identity by challenging the notion of it as an inescapable and determinate category.

As shown thus far, by toying with the possibilities to present herself as a Fulani, a Yoruba and a Hausa, Olanna frames ethnic identity as a shifting category. Moreover, Olanna’s acts of bodily and linguistic performance de-naturalise Igbo identity and emphasise its socially constructed nature. A de-essentialising and denaturalising of Igbo identity invites the question, then, of how Igbo identity becomes a naturalised category, or how one comes to internalise Igbo identity. I wish to show here how Olanna as focaliser can be read in the light of this question. Through the manipulation of the object of Olanna’s focalisation or, more precisely, that which is brought to the fore and that which is relegated to the background, a sense of belatedness is created in Olanna’s identification with the emerging Igbo national community: Whereas Olanna foregrounds her private experiences and family matters, she relegates the emergence of the Igbo nation to the background. The fact that the emergence of the Igbo national community is relegated to the background is a formal expression of Olanna’s belated identification with the emerging Igbo national community, which, in turn, allows the narrator to trace the process of how Olanna becomes part of that community.

The shifts in the object of Olanna’s focalisation are initially away from public displays of Igbo nationalism to private experiences. After General Ojukwu’s announcement that the Republic of Biafra is officially established, Olanna at first observes how “Odenigbo and Baby were moving round and round . . . singing off-key, a song he had made up – ‘This is our beginning, oh, yes, our beginning, oh, yes’,” only to then abruptly shift her attention to “the cashew-juice stain on the front of Baby’s dress” (Adichie, *HoYS* 162). The impression of abrupt shifts in the object of Olanna’s focalisation is confirmed in the very next scene, when Olanna watches Odenigbo raise his arm and shouts that “Biafra is born,” but thinks about “how awkwardly twisted Aunty Ifeka’s arm had looked, as she lay on the ground, how her blood had pooled so thick that it looked like glue” (Adichie, *HoYS* 163). On yet another occasion, when Olanna and Odenigbo are part of a political rally, Olanna first watches “Odenigbo sing [Biafra win the war] lustily,” only to immediately shift her attention to a sharp pain in her knee (Adichie, *HoYS* 275). The shifts away from public displays of Igbo nationalism to private experiences indicate that Olanna cannot yet imagine the formation of the Igbo nation. Instead, she shivers when she thinks how “[s]he had wanted the secession to happen, but now it seem[s] too big to conceive” (Adichie, *HoYS* 162).
Olanna’s inability to conceive of the Igbo nation extends to how she experiences the present, in a way that sharply differs from how the wider Igbo community experiences it. Olanna notes how “nobody talk[s] about things left behind” and how “[members of the wider Igbo community] tal[k] about win-the-war effort,” while she finds it “difficult to visualise anything concrete . . . that did not feel like life being lived on suspended time” (Adichie, HoYS 185). While the wider Igbo community has evidently translated into their present what it expects to happen in the future, gathering around the common goal of gaining independence and formally confirming the birth of the Igbo nation, Olanna remains trapped in the past, with her “memories of Arize and Aunty Ifeka and Uncle Mbaezi” (Adichie, HoYS 185). The wider community experiences the Igbo nation as ‘future made present,’ which, in turn, strengthens the sense of communal Igbo identity, whereas Olanna’s view of the present as ‘time suspended’ implies a kind of a void that signifies ‘future not yet.’ Olanna’s perception of the present as time put on hold is indicative of the interruption in her experience of historical time, when she cannot imagine nor, arguably, identify with the Igbo national community.

Olanna’s experience of historical time as interrupted is evocative of Antonio Gramsci’s definition of interregnum, as a time of crisis when “the old [system] is dying and the new cannot be born,” which causes “a great variety of morbid symptoms [to] appear” (276). In the period between the collapse of ‘one Nigeria’ and the official establishment of the Republic of Biafra – the time marked by a raging war – Olanna’s life is characterised by an exceptionally prominent fear of death:

The siren did not go off early in the morning, and so when the fierce wah-wah-wah sounds of the bombers appeared from nowhere, as Olanna dissolved corn flour to make Baby’s pap, she knew this was it. Somebody would die. Perhaps they would all die. Death was the only thing that made any sense as she hunched underground, plucked some soil, rubbed it between her fingers, and waited for the bunker to explode. (Adichie, HoYS 279-280)

The fear of death paralyses Olanna to the point that she cannot participate in everyday communal life. Olanna’s experience of the present in terms of the possibility of dying as something personal, immediate, instinctive and almost tangible is at odds with the wider community’s experience of the present as the time of nation-formation, collective effort and coming together to survive. While Olanna “exist[s] limply, waiting to die” (Adichie, HoYS 208), the wider Igbo community enthusiastically participates in the Igbo national project. Consider the short conversation between Olanna and Mrs. Muokelu, an embodiment of the wider Igbo community:

‘Did you hear that we shot down their bomber around Ikot-Ekpene?’ Mrs Muokelu asked.
‘I didn’t hear.’
‘And this was done by a common civilian with his hunting gun! You know, it is as if the Nigerians are so stupid that whoever works for them becomes stupid too. They are too stupid to fly the planes that Russia and Britain gave them, so they brought in white people, and even those white people can’t hit any target. Ha! Half their bombs don’t even explode!’

‘The half that explodes is enough to kill us,’ Olanna said. (Adichie, HoYS 278)

In the conversation between Mrs. Muokelu and Olanna, two ways of experiencing the present are juxtaposed: Whereas the Igbo community experiences the present as part of a larger historical frame, namely the formation of the Igbo nation-state, Olanna remains trapped in a much more reduced frame, namely that of the war, and cannot imagine anything beyond it.

In keeping with this, the beginning of Olanna’s strong identification with the Igbo nation is depicted as a synchronisation of her perception of the present with that of the wider Igbo community. The process of synchronisation begins with Olanna’s realisation that there is nothing terminal in the present and that it is but a moment in the longue durée of history: “If she had died, if Odenigbo and Baby and Ugwu had died, the bunker would still smell like a freshly tilled farm and the sun would still rise and the crickets would still hop around. The war would continue without them” (Adichie, HoYS 280). Olanna’s realisation that the time of the war is, in fact, not ‘time suspended,’ but a time that precedes another time and so on, causes her to move from seeing herself as a victim to an agent in history: “Olanna exhaled, filled with frothy rage. It was the very sense of being inconsequential that pushed her from extreme fear to extreme fury. She had to matter” (Adichie, HoYS 280).

After that, Olanna begins to produce soap for her homestead (Adichie, HoYS 278), indicating thus that she is ready to partake in the communal acts of solidarity, perseverance and survival. The shift in Olanna’s perception of the present also implies a shift in the historical frames within which she imagines herself. While Olanna initially experiences the present as the time of the war, after the shift she begins to experience the present as the time preceding the establishment of the Igbo nation: “Until Biafra won, the vandals would no longer dictate the terms of her life” (Adichie, HoYS 280).

Olanna’s successful integration into the Igbo national community is confirmed at the formal level, too. The public is no longer strictly distinguished from the personal as the formation of the Igbo nation acquires a more prominent role in Olanna’s focalisation. The depictions of Olanna’s active participation in the collective cause, at the same time, continue to highlight the constructed nature of Igbo identity. Olanna’s enthusiastic participation in political rallies and her visits to her sister’s refugee camp, for instance, testify to the fact that she has claimed Igbo identity by physically occupying spaces that have a symbolic status in the new nation. Olanna also engages with the Igbo community through linguistic acts that reflect nationalist sentiments, such as when she teaches her pupils about the Biafran flag and the
symbolism of colours on it, thereby inspiring others to describe her engagement as “forcefully speaking about the cause” (Adichie, HoYS 278). Olanna’s embodiment of Igbo identity through bodily and linguistic performance is particularly emphasised when she joins the Igbo women in singing and dancing for Biafra: “Olanna joined them, buoyed by the words – Who will win? Biafra will win, igba!” (Adichie, HoYS 332). As these examples demonstrate, Olanna’s catching up with the rest of the community, in a sense of developing an identification with the emerging nation, is presented in terms of her participation in collective acts that reflect national solidarity and affiliation.

Like Olanna, Ugwu also captures the transformation of the Igbo community and shows how the transformative process shapes his self-identification as Igbo. While Olanna’s identification with the Igbo community is initially presented as belated in comparison with the wider Igbo community, Ugwu’s sense of Igbo identity is portrayed as a gradual development. What is peculiar about Ugwu’s coming-of-age process is that it is intimately connected with the life of the Igbo nation: It mirrors the stages in the emergence of the Igbo nation, which serves to emphasise the historical dimension of Igbo identity. Ugwu’s coming-of-age process reaches its peak when he assumes the role of an authorial figure behind the book that documents the fall of Biafra (book-within-a-book). The gradual collapse of the Igbo nation thus provides the background for Ugwu’s personal development.

Ugwu is introduced as a poorly educated young boy from the Igbo village of Opi, who comes to work as a houseboy in the home of a politically-engaged university professor, Odenigbo. Ugwu’s conception of the world, and arguably his position in it, is very much contained and limited to the local, which testifies to his lack of education and experience. Ugwu comprehends the modern life in Odenigbo’s home only by comparing it with his former life in the village: “Ugwu held back from reaching out to touch the cement wall, to see how different it would feel from the mud walls of his mother’s hut” (Adichie, HoYS 4). Ugwu’s knowledge of Nigerian colonial history is just as limited and he cannot “comprehend people that looked like Mr Richard taking away the things that belonged to people that looked like him, Ugwu, for no reason at all” (Adichie, HoYS 213). The narrative perspective of an uneducated young boy from a village who moves to Nsukka – one of the centres of Igbo political activity during the war for independence – serves as a convenient means by which to examine the meaning of Igbo identity that is shaped, first, by the growing ethnic tensions in Nigeria and, then, by the life of the Igbo nation.

As soon as he begins working in Odenigbo’s home, Ugwu displays an immense eagerness to learn. He begins his education in the form of Odenigbo’s lessons and, later, by attending a school. Odenigbo’s lessons influence Ugwu’s emerging awareness of being an African, a Nigerian and an Igbo. Ugwu’s first lesson is in geography:
‘This is our world, although the people who drew this map decided to put their own land on top of ours […] Our world is round, it never ends. Nee anya, this is all water, the seas and oceans, and here’s Europe and here’s our own continent, Africa, and the Congo is the middle. Farther up here is Nigeria, and Nsukka is here, in the south-east; this is where we are.’ [Odenigbo] tapped with his pen. (Adichie, HoYS 10)

The lesson invites Ugwu to imagine himself in relation to Europe, other African countries and within Nigeria. Ultimately, with the pen landing onto Nsukka in south-east Nigeria, Ugwu is invited to position himself in Igboland and imagine himself as a member of the Igbo community. Odenigbo’s lessons, therefore, lay the foundation for Ugwu’s rising awareness of his national, ethnic and racial identity. But much more than that, they shape Ugwu’s focalisation in the rest of the narrative, insofar as Ugwu turns into an important critical interpreter and chronicler of the Igbo nation.

Ugwu’s identification with the Igbo community develops gradually and is to a great extent determined by the changing socio-political context. At the time of the first coup and the military takeover of the Nigerian national government, Ugwu displays very little interest in ethnic politics and remains neutral to the ethnic politics espoused by Odenigbo and his guests: When he listens to Odenigbo and his friends discussing the coup and ethnic politics behind it, Ugwu predominantly focuses on his catering tasks and understanding the relationships between the guests (Adichie, HoYS 124-125). Yet the situations in which Ugwu is passively exposed to national and ethnic politics serve ultimately to inspire Ugwu’s more political engagement. With the sharpening of ethnic tensions in the country, Ugwu begins to identify with the Igbo community in an ever more politicised and overt manner, as illustrated by his comment to Olanna that “[they] are not like those Hausa people” (Adichie, HoYS 177). Such statements demonstrate that Ugwu has not only begun to identify with the Igbo community, but that he also has started to define the Igbo in terms of a strong opposition to the Hausa. Ugwu thus becomes an active part in the heated ethnic conversations in pre-war Nigeria.

The gradual formation of the Igbo national community during the war shapes Ugwu’s first steps toward openly performing Igbo identity. He begins to express Igbo nationalism in his amazement at how Igbo soldiers “looked distinguished in their khaki uniforms, boots shining, half of a yellow sun sewn on their sleeves,” only to soon afterwards exclaim how he wishes “he could join the Civil Defence League or the militia” (Adichie, HoYS 179, 198). Such an engagement with the emerging Igbo nation stands in stark contrast to Ugwu’s distancing from the Nigerian national sphere: “[Ugwu] wished he could feel sorry for [Olanna’s] friend the politician who had been killed, but politicians were not like normal people, they were politicians . . . Whenever he drained a pot of boiled beans, he thought of the slimy sink as politician” (Adichie, HoYS 126). Going from distancing himself from na-
tional politics to overtly participating in it during the war is a signal of Ugwu’s maturing, primarily in a political sense.

Ugwu’s sense of Igbo identity becomes more militant as the war for independence becomes fiercer. It is at the point in the narrative when Ugwu performs Igbo identity as militant identity that his maturing process most overtly reflects the fate of the Igbo nation, not least of all because it is when Ugwu’s focalisation provides a direct glimpse into the Igbo national project. Once in the war, Ugwu’s naïve perceptions of the Igbo national project crumble in the face of its harsh realities, where he is made to participate in a gang-rape of an Igbo girl working in a bar, witnesses inexcusable violence towards Igbo civilians as well as the corruption within the army, and has his book torn and used to roll cigarettes. Such acts of brutality do not only contribute to the loss of innocence that is necessary for Ugwu to mature; they also reflect the decaying nature of the Igbo national project. If Ugwu’s coming-of-age represents the Igbo national project, the explosion in which Ugwu nearly dies can also be read as the implosion of the Igbo nationalist dream.

The collapse of the Igbo nation triggers a final shift in Ugwu’s relation to Igbo identity. He moves beyond performing it as militant identity toward performing it by documenting the history of Biafra. “When they listened to Radio Biafra,” the reader is informed, “Ugwu would get up and walk away” because “the shabby theatrics of the war reports, the voice that forced morsels of invented hope down people’s throats, did not interest him” (Adichie, HoYS 399). However, Ugwu does not dismiss Igbo identity altogether, but finds other ways of performing it. He writes a book called Narrative of the Life of a Country, in which his sense of Igbo identity finds expression in the act of documenting the failed nation:

[Ugwu] sat under the flame tree and wrote in small, careful letters on the sides of old newspapers, on some paper Kainene had dome supply calculations on, on the back of an old calendar. He wrote a poem about people getting a buttocks rash after defecating in imported buckets, but it did not sound as lyrical as Okeoma’s and he tore it up; then he wrote about a young woman with a perfect backside who pinched the neck of a young man and tore that up too. Finally he started to write about Aunty Arize’s anonymous death in Kano, about Okeoma’s smart-fitting army uniform and Professor Ekwenugo’s bandaged hands. He wrote about the children of the refugee camp, how diligently they chased after lizards, how four boys had chased a quick lizard up a mango tree and one of them climbed up after it and the lizard leapt off the tree and into the outstretched hand of one of the other three surrounding the tree. (Adichie, HoYS 397-398)

The paragraph underlines how inextricably Ugwu’s process of maturing – epitomised in his role of a chronicler-insider – is related to the fate of the Igbo nation: While the emergence of the Igbo nation helps to define Ugwu’s sense of ethnic identity, the collapse of the Igbo nation is what causes Ugwu to become a prominent critical voice in the Igbo community.
Ugwu’s coming-of-age thus culminates in the emergence of a historical narrative of the Igbo nation, the kind of a narrative written by a member of the national collective that comes from its margins. Moreover, in terms of its relationship with the main narrative, Ugwu’s history of Biafra legitimises the three small stories of Biafra – Olanna’s, Ugwu’s and Richard’s – insofar as Ugwu relies on the material from these three stories to tell the national history. In this sense, Ugwu’s history of Biafra illustrates the incorporation of subaltern voices in the national history and the democratisation of the national past. By making Ugwu both a focaliser through which we gain insight into the small histories of the Igbo nation and an insider chronicler of the history of Biafra, the individual and national domains become intertwined. The fact that their relationship is marked by mutual validation rather than representations of the history of the Igbo nation that are at odds with one another undoubtedly confirms the importance of an acknowledgment of personal stories in the official accounts of the national past.

Richard’s focalisation, like Olanna’s and Ugwu’s, reveals the ways in which individuals engage with the changing Igbo community and how their engagement shows the malleable nature of both Igbo community and Igbo identity. Inspired by his romantic relationship with Olanna’s sister Kainene, as well as his friendship with Olanna and Odenigbo, Richard makes insistent efforts to reinvent himself as member of the Igbo community. Initially defined as an outsider (white and British), Richard begins to be perceived differently as the terms of inclusion and exclusion change with the refashioning of the Igbo community as national community. Focussing particularly on the dynamic of claiming and assigning identities as well as on the acts of performance involved in this, in the following I address how the formation of the Igbo nation affects the processes of inclusion and exclusion of foreign subjects and how that, in turn, facilitates the reshaping of Igbo community in a way that accommodates other ethnic (British) and racial (white) identities.

The very first chapter in which Richard appears as character focaliser portrays him as different from the other white expatriates he meets at the parties he attends with his partner, Susan. Richard feels “awkward” when he is around other white expatriate men, who are “mostly English, ex-colonial administrators and business people from John Holt and Kingsway and GB Ollivant and Shell-BP and United Africa Company” (Adichie, HoYS 53). Richard, on the other hand, introduces himself as a writer and journalist interested in the local Nok art (Adichie, HoYS 54, 55, 64), which makes him stand out in a white collective of businessmen. While Susan and other expatriates embody whiteness as foreignness, coupled with a sense of superiority to Nigeria’s local communities, aloofness from local worldviews and lifestyles, and simplified understandings of Nigeria’s complex social realities, Richard’s attempts to disaffiliate himself from the white community challenge these representations of whiteness. Richard is both part of the white expatriate community and an outsider in that community because of his en-
agement with local lifestyles. He does not display any sense of superiority and is annoyed by simplistic ways of understanding Nigeria’s complex social realities. As such, he complicates any understanding of the relationship between the white European community and Nigeria’s local communities as strictly oppositional.

The dichotomy of black/white and Igbo/European is no more evident than when he attempts to infiltrate the Igbo community in pre-war Nigeria. When Richard visits the village where Igbo-Ukwu roped pot was found, he is treated as a stereotypical white foreigner. At the end of his interview with Pa Anozie, his informant in the village, Richard asks about kings as part of Igbo culture, causing both Pa and his son Emeka Anozie to laugh: “Papa said he thought you were among the white people who know something” (Adichie, HoYS 71), alluding thereby to the fact that the Igbo have no kings. And when Richard does not take a photo of Pa Anozie upon leaving, Pa Anozie’s son comments: “Papa is asking what kind of a white man is this” (Adichie, HoYS 72). The responses of the Igbo characters demonstrate that the Igbo perceive Richard primarily in terms of whiteness that equates with foreignness; an entire set of expectations, such as the kind of knowledge he possesses and the code of conduct, is imposed on Richard even if he is critical of them.

That Richard’s identity is constructed at the intersection between acts of claiming and assigning identities is also emphasised in his conversations with Major Madu, Kainene’s Igbo friend from childhood, when, on a couple of occasions, Major Madu makes negative references to the British. First Major Madu complains how the British seem to be freely “moving to [Afri- can] countries” while having themselves decided to “control the immigration from the Commonwealth,” in response to which Richard is described as “chew[ing] his rice slowly and examin[ing] the bottle of water for a moment, as if it were wine whose vintage he wanted to know” (Adichie, HoYS 79). Later, Major Madu adds how his battalion in the Congo lost the battle while being commanded by the British colonel, making Richard’s “fingers feel stiff” (Adichie, HoYS 80). Richard’s responses reveal his acute awareness of and discomfort with the ethnic and, arguably, racial identity assigned to him, both of which place him undeniably in the role of an outsider.

In response to such acts of exclusion, Richard begins to learn Igbo, hoping that it will gain him access to the Igbo community. As in the case of Olanna, the view underlying such a decision is that language as a performative act can contribute to the construction of a particular social identity. However, when Richard tries to use Igbo in order to define himself as part of the Igbo collective, Major Madu responds in English: “I went to Zaria last week, and it seemed that all everybody was saying was second coup, second coup. Even Radio Kaduna and the New Nigerian, [Richard] said in Igbo. ‘What does the press know, really?’ Madu replied in English” (Adichie, HoYS 136). Major Madu’s reply in English shows that he also recognises the symbolic role of language in the process of identity formation, which is why
he forces Richard to revert to English and thus denies him access to the Igbo community.

The emergence of the Igbo national community radically changes the terms of inclusion and exclusion, in that the Igbo community in transition becomes more accommodating toward the supporters of the national cause. In a context in which becoming a member of the Igbo national community means showing solidarity with the Igbo national cause, Richard’s attempts to speak in Igbo are perceived rather differently than in his conversations with Major Madu before the official secession. When Richard addresses an Igbo customs officer at the airport in Kano in the Igbo language, the customs officer responds excitedly: “Eh! You speak [Igbo]! I na-asu Igbo!” (Adichie, *HoYS* 151). The man also “took Richard’s hand in his moist one and shook it warmly and started to talk about himself” (Adichie, *HoYS* 151). Unlike before the secession, Richard’s linguistic performance in Igbo is effective in earning him the acceptance of the Igbo community.

Yet Richard’s ever stronger involvement with the Igbo community does not entirely put him at ease with the Igbo community. Every time Richard tries to write about the Igbo nation, his fundamental separateness from it is emphasised: “Richard put the article away. It frightened him that he slept well at nights, that he was still calmed by the scent of orange leaves and the turquoise stillness of the sea, that he was sentient” (Adichie, *HoYS* 167). Richard is obviously tormented by the awareness that he cannot experience the conflict in the same way as the Igbo people do, and the reason for this is, in Richard’s mind, his whiteness:

He didn’t believe that life was the same for all the other people who had witnessed the massacres. Then he felt more frightened at the thought that perhaps he had been nothing more than a voyeur. He had not feared for his own life, so the massacres became external, outside of him; he had watched them through the detached lens of knowing he was safe.

(Adichie, *HoYS* 167-168)

Richard is utterly aware of an impasse that he cannot resolve: He desperately wishes to belong to the Igbo community, yet he is aware of the limitations imposed on that sort of belonging by his racial identity. By creating this impasse around Richard’s character, Adichie underlines the role played by Europeans in the conflict while, at the same time, also argues strongly for the Igbo to reclaim agency and present their own version of history.

Richard’s ambivalent position to the Igbo community becomes most apparent when he admits to Ugwu that writing a history of the Igbo nation has never been his task, despite the fact that he feels part of the nation:

“‘The World Was Silent When We Died.’ It is a good title.

‘Yes, it is. It came from something Colonel Madu said once.’ Richard paused. ‘The war isn’t my story to tell, really.’

Ugwu nodded. He had never thought that it was. (Adichie, *HoYS* 425)
By agreeing with Richard, Ugwu confirms Richard’s ambivalent position to the Igbo community: Ugwu acknowledges Richard’s status as outsider but, at the same time, does not deny Richard’s identity as member of the Igbo national community. The scene is a reversal of the ironic twist at the end of Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, when the white District Commissioner claims the right of representation of the Igbo; Richard granting Ugwu the right to representation restores order and recognises the Igbo as subjects in, rather than subject to, the representation of history.⁴⁷

Although the impasse remains unresolved in the narrative, it is handled in a way that does not hinder Richard’s reinvention as Biafran. Interestingly, another member of the Igbo community, Major Madu, is responsible for the manoeuvre that ultimately confirms Richard’s reinvented identity by reconciling the notions of whiteness and ‘Igboness.’ Major Madu extends an invitation to Richard to write for Biafra’s Propaganda Directorate, giving Richard a way beyond the dichotomy between whiteness and ‘Igboness.’ When Richard confronts Major Madu with an accusation that he offered him the job because Richard is white, Major Madu redefines whiteness as constitutive of the new, Igbo nation: “Of course I asked because you are white. They will take what you write more seriously because you are white” (Adichie, *HoYS* 425). Major Madu thus acknowledges that Richard’s racial identity implies an authoritative voice in the international space and, as such, is crucial for the survival of the Igbo nation. Richard is accepted as a member of the Igbo nation because, rather than in spite of, his racial identity. This move ultimately shows how, before the war, Richard’s whiteness was perceived as something outside of the Igbo community, whereas the emergence of the Igbo national community makes room for new ways of positioning whiteness with regard to ‘Igboness.’

Thus far, it has been shown how Richard engages with the Igbo community in transformation by manipulating linguistic and racial identity. His integration into the Igbo community lays bare the social mechanism behind nation formation and presents malleable identity politics as a significant factor that ensures the survival of the Igbo community. Richard’s focalisation is similar to Olanna’s and Ugwu’s in that it also ends with successful identification with the Igbo national community. However, Richard’s focalisation is unique in that it raises the questions of the right to representation and the agency of the Igbo in managing changes in their community.

Adichie’s organisation of the narrative of the Igbo nation into three small stories allows her to examine the history of Biafra from multiple angles. And yet, no matter how different Olanna’s, Ugwu’s and Richard’s experiences of the time of the Igbo nation are, the perspectives of the three character focalisers eventually converge; each character is successfully integrated into the

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⁴⁷ For other references to Adichie’s rewriting of Achebe in this scene, see Hawley 21; Andrade 92-93.
Igbo national community. The multi-perspectival representation of the Igbo nation therefore offers a panorama of Igbo subjectivities that are unified by a common experience. If Neumann is right to observe that “the degree of convergence of the individual perspectives generally correlates with the stability of the shared creation of meaning” (“The Literary Representation of Memory” 339), then the intersubjective validation of character perspectives in Adichie’s novel offers a composite image of the collective past. In the final section, we will see how such a narrative of the Igbo past can be read in light of *Half of a Yellow Sun* as an intervention into both Nigerian and Igbo cultural memory.

Cultural Memories and Igbo Identity in the War’s Aftermath

Classifying *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a fiction of memory means reading its reconstruction of the history of the Igbo nation not simply for how the past is represented, but also for the novel’s relationship both to the time in which it was written and to a possible future. Benefitting from hindsight and temporal distance, Adichie’s portrayal of the history of Biafra is essentially an imaginative engagement that re-emploits the past to generate new views of Nigeria’s social reality. The active role thus ascribed to literature is based on the notion that literary texts are not simply a means of reflecting reality, but also a means of actively shaping visions of reality: “[L]iterature, as a part of the prevailing processes of creating memory, is endowed with a (memory-)cultural effectiveness and can contribute to a new perspectivisation of extratextual orders of knowledge and hierarchies of values” (Neumann, “The Literary Representation of Memory” 341). Adichie’s novel, understood as an act of historical reconstruction with the effect of opening up new horizons, fulfils what Wole Soyinka identified as the prime function of art in its social context: “the visionary reconstruction of the past for the purposes of a social direction” (*Myth, Literature* 106).

In relation to Igbo cultural memory specifically, the portrayal of the Igbo community, at the time of Biafra, as flexible and fragmented along gender, race and class lines is not so much a repudiation of the notion of collective Igbo identity as it is a way to draw attention to the necessity to re-evaluate the meaning of it as defined in the body of Igbo literature on Biafra. Shifting the focus from homogeneous elite voices to heterogeneous, previously silenced ones, Adichie constructs an image of a unified Igbo community, yet a community whose unity does not rest on the idea of homogeneity but on the idea of ‘dynamic and heterogeneous structure’ (Krishnan, “Biafra and the Aesthetics of Closure” 194). In relation to national cultural memory, more generally, by advocating for the recognition of subaltern voices in national narratives, *Half of a Yellow Sun* indirectly makes the case for incorporating the history of Biafra, which is usually dismissed, in the collective national memory. Linking Nigerian hegemonic discourse to the unacknowledged
versions of the national past, the novel challenges the boundary between remembering and forgetting that Gowon’s ‘no victor, no vanquished’ speech established and thus reinforces new concepts of collective national memory.
5.3 Fragmented Narrative Discourse as a Tool for Destabilising Meaning

While Achebe’s generation imaginatively reconstructed Igbo precolonial culture and history as anchors of modern Igbo subjectivity, third-generation Nigerian writers critically re-examine the foundations of postcolonial Igbo identities. In doing this, contemporary writers look back at earlier literary and non-literary texts and discourses that have indelibly shaped present-day perceptions of Igbo identities. In this section, we have identified narratives and discourses on tradition and modern nation as principal forces that have given meaning to postcolonial Igbo identities. Yet, in the context of what Benita Parry describes as a “deplorable and disheartening” post-independence era (17), when native governments largely failed to “translate independence to socio-economic bliss” (Okuyade 141), to revisit the foundations of postcolonial identities is almost inevitably to critically re-think their contemporary value. *GraceLand* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* have served as examples of contemporary fiction which re-examines authoritative notions of Igbo nation and tradition to address their problematic legacy in post-independence Nigeria. Embodying a transition from literature as a means to facilitate cultural nationalism to literature as a means to interrogate post-colonial states of/in crisis, third-generation Nigerian writing testifies to the evolving nature of postcolonial literary dealings with immediate socio-political realities.

The Igbo fraction among contemporary Nigerian writers is particularly engaged in paying critical attention to and initiating public debate about dominant representations of the history of the Igbo nation. Inaccessible but through limited and often censored narrative representations, the time of Biafra figures nowadays as a symbol of a silenced yet persistent history of Nigerian national break-down and the short-lived Igbo nationalist ideal. Madhu Krishnan rightly observes that, rather than prioritising immediate material and psychic recovery from the civil war through rehabilitating a national collectivity (as was the case in the second-generation Nigerian writing), third-generation Nigerian writing revisits the failed nation in order to raise the currently urgent questions of the meaning of tradition, national and ethnic cultures, and identities (“On National Culture” 206). Therefore, the unresolved national past inspires contemporary writers’ active engagement, whose principal impetus behind the imaginative excursions to the past is to use the history of Biafra as a prism through which to understand Nigerian national community and the status of Igbo identity, culture and history in that community in the war’s aftermath. Contemporary Nigerian writing thus echoes Wole Soyinka’s notion of the past in literature as that which “is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence,” but which “clarifies the present and explains the future” (“The Writer in an African State” 13).
However, the literary lens through which contemporary authors look at the national past is fractured. It embodies a postmodernist outlook which foregrounds the heterogeneity (and incommensurability) of experiences and dismantles metanarratives. The use of mixed character focalisation in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is an illustrative example of how heterogeneity and resistance are translated into narrative form: Mediating the story of Biafra through the perspectives of child-soldiers, women and foreigners, Adichie explores a range of possible subaltern histories that are lost between the cracks of official national history and politics. Adichie’s writing is thus emblematic of the third generation of Nigerian writers, who, as Krishnan claims, “seek to make sense of the present tensions and ethnic strife in their country through an interrogation of the past, putting special significance on the human scale of trauma and the individually negotiated state of belonging and community engagement” (“Biafra and the Aesthetics of Closure” 187).

As contentious as dominant representations of the postcolonial nation is the notion of tradition that, in early postcolonial discourses, served as validation of Africa as a place with rich and intricate cultures. As the first generation of Nigerian Anglophone writers was reinventing indigenous cultures by revitalising precolonial customs and traditions, they were also producing notions of tradition and cultural identity that were often at risk of being reduced to already existing, ready-made and coherent categories waiting to be “excavated” from the ruins of colonialism. In comparison, contemporary Nigerian writers’ engagements with the inherited notions of tradition expose those notions’ myth-like character and re-evaluate their role in the (re)production of postcolonial cultural identities. Contemporary writing thus marks a notable shift in the writing of tradition: Instead of foregrounding the continuity and coherence of tradition as the basis for reliable cultural identity, it refers to the transformation of tradition as a continuous source of new forms of subjectivity.

In formally managing the transformative and elusive character of traditions and the cultural identities anchored in those traditions, contemporary Nigerian writers often reach for postmodern narrative strategies. An exemplary case is Abani’s *GraceLand*, where fragmented narrative discourse triggers a dialogue about the contesting notion of tradition and an understanding of Igbo cultural identity as always containing an excess, or something that continually eludes narrative representation. Invoking tradition while at the same time underscoring the shifting nature of traditional forms of life in everyday contexts, postmodernist writing destabilises the notion of cultural identity as complete and reliable at any one point. Instead, literary texts as Abani’s *GraceLand* have us confront the fluidity, dynamism and instability of traditions that makes the cultural identities grounded in those traditions subject to perpetual renegotiation and change. Thus “unveiling the traces of alternative discourses and unsettled foundations” (Krishnan, *Contemporary African Literature in English* 30), contemporary Nigerian novels challenge
the nativist discourses which promote the idea of the anthropological exotic, or that which offers “a more or less transparent window onto a richly detailed and culturally specific, but still somehow homogenous . . . African world” (Huggan 37).

Intertextuality and interdiscursivity in Adichie’s and Abani’s novels additionally underline the postmodernist outlook that these writers adopt on the Igbo nation and tradition that have been defined in earlier (non-)literary discourses, as well as the associated Igbo identities. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie invokes (literary) ancestral stories of Biafra, whereas, in *GraceLand*, Abani stages a conversation between a literary discourse on Igbo tradition and the ethnographic discourses invocative of Achebe’s modernist “excavations” of tradition. Once invoked, earlier representations of the Igbo nation and tradition are subsequently imaginatively re-emplotted and reconstructed, in ways that transgress or at least seriously complicate limited nativist and nationalist visions of Igbo identities: Rewriting the Igbo nation and tradition as palimpsests of different and potentially contesting voices, contemporary literary counter-considerations propose alternative notions of Igbo identity that fully acknowledge its heterogeneous, evolving and transformative nature. The ultimate goal of revisiting the past is, therefore, not to offer a corrective to previous representations but to use those representations as points of departure in the attempts to understand the present views of what it means to be Igbo.

In their continued explorations of the nation and tradition as foundations for postcolonial Igbo identities, Adichie’s and Abani’s works mark a shift in focus from a modernist “retrieval” of coherent identities to a postmodernist consideration of the textual or discursive mechanisms which define the meaning of those identities. In this sense, contemporary Nigerian writing indicates interest not only in historical events as forces behind identity formation, but also in the texts or discourses that have historically shaped the perceptions of Igbo identity. The engagement with texts and discourses in turn allows contemporary writers to challenge “the totalising tendencies of any one discursive representation of the African world” (Krishnan, “Beyond Tradition and Progress” 98) and thus open up space for imagining the ways of ‘being Igbo’ that would otherwise remain critically unattended.
6 Narratives of Igbo Identity in the Contemporary African American Diaspora

Whereas some contemporary Nigerian Anglophone novels squarely situate their exploration of Igbo identities in the postcolonial nation-state, others engage with Igbo identities from an explicitly transnational angle, by foregrounding the experiences of globalisation and migration (Ahluwalia; Dwivedi and Kich; Horta and Robbins). While the previous section of this study addressed this first type of contemporary Nigerian writing, the current section closely examines the latter sort of novels, where the African diaspora occupies centre-stage. These novels, commonly designated as diasporic novels, move away from “discourses about national identity and authentic ‘Africanness’” and explore instead the “themes of migration, existential anguish, and cultural intermingling” (Newell 183). Yet Africa’s ethnic and national cultures, traditions and histories are not absent from these texts; instead, they figure as important repositories of symbols that play a significant role in constructing a sense of self.

In African studies, critical exercises that approach African identities through the prism of difference have given way to attempts to tease out fundamental connections between Africa and an elsewhere. As explained by Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, the time has come for Africa “to revisit the frontiers of commonality [with the rest of the world] and the potential of *sameness-as-worldliness*” (351). For example, while reflecting on his childhood in Ghana, Anthony Appiah demonstrates how Africans inhabit multiple scales of places, and thus offers a vision of the world in which the African is, like others, “a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of one’s own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people” (“Cosmopolitan Patriots” 318). More recently, in an interview with Sarah Balakrishnan, Mbembe declares that “Africa has been a major platform and also an agent in the making of the modern world order,” which ultimately leads him to conclude – in line with Appiah – that “what it [Africa] has become can hardly be understood outside of its entanglement with multiple elsewhere[s]” (“Pan-African Legacies” 31). Such discourses on connections between Africa and an elsewhere abandon the paradigms of self-other and orientalism, foregrounding instead the worldly character of African forms of life.

The interest in the worldliness of African forms of life has given rise to new ways of thinking ‘Africanness.’ An illustrative example is Afropolitan-
ism, a notion that invites a critical examination of the conditions, in the plural, of being “of Africa and of other worlds at the same time” (Gikandi, “Foreword” 9). Afropolitanism is far from an uncontentious term, however. One of its conceptualisations is associated with Ghanaian novelist Taiye Selasi, whose 2005 essay “Bye-bye Babar” claims Afropolitanism for the realms of popular discourse and arts, and for the Africans or children of Africans who moved to the West in the 1960s and 1970s (Makokha 16). Another is the Afropolitanism as defined by Mbembe, namely as the “paradigm of itinerancy, mobility and displacement,” but which is not restricted to diasporic contexts and the contemporary age (“Afropolitanism” 27). If, as Ryan Skinner has remarked, Afropolitanism is not a clear idea, it is certainly “good to think with” (3): Rather than relating ‘Africanness’ exclusively to tradition, the past or a single, originary locality, Afropolitanism encourages us to think of African life forms as rooted in specific local geographies while, at the same time, also transcending them. In Gikandi’s words, “[t]o be Afropolitan is to be connected to knowable African communities, nations, and traditions; but it is also to live a life divided across cultures, languages, and states” (“Foreword” 9). Thinking African identities in terms of a multiplicity of identifications, both local and global, means to transcend a nativist understanding of ‘Africanness’ and, as Sarah Balakrishnan explains, to “dissolve ‘Africa’ into the world” (“The Afropolitan Idea”).

The African diaspora has occupied a prominent place in the explorations of the dialectical relation between Africa and elsewhere. The focus on the diaspora can be justified by considering Nigeria, which represents a striking example of contemporary transnational migration: The United Nations International Migration Report estimated that more than one million people migrated from Nigeria in 2017. Similar instances of massive migration have led Bill Ashcroft to remark that “[t]here is no doubt that the route for post-colonial studies in the twenty-first century lies now in the dispersal and constant movement of diasporic populations” (“Introduction” xxvi). Massive migration outside of the continent has triggered extensive debates in African studies about the effects of transnational mobility and globalisation on the production of contemporary African identities, both in the individual and collective sense. Rather than being perceived solely as liberating phenomena related to the spread of the ideologies of global market and global civil society (see Selasi), communal dispersal and social movements have also been examined as conditions that cause anxiety, a sense of displacement and a problematic notion of ethnicity (see Okpewho et al.; Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*; Lee).

However, current Afropolitan discourses address not only diasporic forms of life, but also the historically constitutive role that the flow of people, cultures and capital has played in defining the ways of living and being in Africa. In other words, rather than relating Afropolitanism solely to the Africans who can afford to live outside of Africa, Mbembe claims that Afropolitan
forms of life have always been characteristic of Africa: “Africa has for long been a destination for all sorts of population movements and cultural flows” (“Afropolitanism” 27). In this sense, Afropolitanism allows us to think not only about the forms of life characteristic of the internationally mobile upper(-middle) classes, but also about the worldly forms of life that exist in Africa at all social levels. Reflecting on this, Skinner remarks that some of the work on Afropolitanism “accepts the normative notion of a geographically and socially mobile middle-class subject, of which Africans are said to be representative exponents,” while the rest “interrogate[s] the status of this ‘traditional’ cosmopolitan subject by attending to the agency, experiences, and no less worldly modes of identification engendered and enacted within the (post)colonial and diasporic contexts of a complexly African world” (6). Acknowledging the worldliness of the forms of life in Africa ultimately ‘modifies and resignifies’ the master trope of cosmopolitanism, in a way that effectively “signal[s] the potential of apparently peripheral and provincial subject positions to act globally” and “shift[s] the center of global agency to such peripheries and provinces of the global social and spatial order” (Skinner 6).

Particularly useful for conceptualising the forms of global subjectivity that emerge in local contexts in Africa is a recently developed notion of translocality, which draws our attention to multiple forms of mobility without losing sight of the importance of local environments (Oakes and Schein 1). It is important to note early on that, in the discourse on translocality, ‘mobility’ designates not only physical movement across localities, but also symbolic movement across places, enabled by media and electronic communication. If translocality means, as Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein suggest, a mode of simultaneously engaging with local places, regions or provinces and other, distant ones (2), then it represents a productive means to transcend the discussions of African identities in terms of the rootedness/rootlessness binary and to engage in a critical examination of scale. Suggesting that translocality “draws our focus to local scales of activity while not losing sight of the broader scales of interaction that link the local to the regional and national scales” (10), Oakes and Schein make an important contribution to understanding contemporary African identities. Rather than emplaced in a single locality or affiliated with global rootlessness, contemporary ‘Africanness’ emerges in the act of “translat[ing] identity into various scales simultaneously, by identifying with multiple localities in both practical and imaginary ways” (Oakes and Schein 10).

The debates over translocal identity have made the nature and role of ethnicity particularly pressing questions. We have become increasingly aware that our sense of origin in and belonging to a single, territorially-bound community is complicated by the fact that we define our sense of self in relation to both immediate and far-away localities, as well as the communities and identities associated with these localities. Speaking of Africa, Skin-
ner explains that “we should be attentive to the variety of ways in which contemporary Africans, from all walks of life, act on and in the world, across multiple scales of place and through multiple modes of being” (12). Conceptualising identity as translocal and multi-layered opens a way to bypass pitting mobility, hybridity and multiplicity against localised and shared forms of identification. As Gikandi explains, “the hybridity of Africa and the cosmopolitanism of its subjects does not imply the negation of horizontal social relationships, local affiliations and the modes of knowledge that they generate” (“Foreword” 10). The effect of such arguments is a radical delinking of ethnic identity from any primordialist visions and turning it into an “open, complex [and] unfinished” resource which is “always under construction” (Hall, “Culture, Community, Nation” 362).

This section aimed to introduce the current debates that are changing the way African identities are conceptualised, from territorially-bound and originary to deterritorialised, multi-layered and shifting. It is in the light of such debates that the next two chapters consider Adichie’s Americanah and Abani’s The Virgin of Flames, novels that engage with visions of the world where the questions of origin, belonging and identification are both urgent and difficult. More precisely, I closely read narrative representations of how the experiences of globalisation, mobility and migration affect the (re)production of ethnic Igbo identity. Stephanie Newell has stated that contemporary African identities are “global in reach and polymorphous in shape” (186). If we take our cue from Newell’s observation, it becomes important to ask, first, how the Igbo produce a sense of globalised and polymorphous identity and, secondly, how the process of producing such an identity is formally represented in contemporary Nigerian Anglophone literary discourse.
6.1 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013): Ethnic Igbo Identity at the Time of Global Migration

*Americanah* opens at a turning point in the life of protagonist Ifemelu. After thirteen years in the United States, Ifemelu is about to return to Nigeria: “So here she (Ifemelu) was, on a day filled with the opulence of summer, about to braid her hair for the journey home” (Adichie, *Americanah* 8). While sitting in Mariame’s hair salon in Trenton, New Jersey, Ifemelu recollects some significant moments from her life in Nigeria and the US. She remembers the life of her Igbo family in Lagos, her studies at Nsukka University and her romantic relationship with Obinze. Ifemelu’s memories of Nigeria are interwoven with her memories of the US: the time she spent with her father’s sister Aunty Uju and her nephew Dike, her path to education and employment and her several romantic relationships. The concept of timespace that Ifemelu’s memories embody is neither singular nor linear, but shot through with memories of other times and spaces.

The perception of timespace in terms of interconnected fragments plays out not only at the thematic level, but also at the level of form. As it traces Ifemelu’s trajectory, the narrative provides insight into three different settings: Nigeria before Ifemelu’s move to the US, the US after Ifemelu’s move there and Nigeria after Ifemelu’s return. These stages are not related chronologically, however. Ifemelu’s life in Nigeria before her departure and her life in the US are described through memory-elicited analepses at the time when Ifemelu is about to return to Nigeria. Shifting between the hair salon in Trenton, and the Nigeria and the US from earlier in Ifemelu’s life, the narrative undergoes rapid spatiotemporal shifts that seem to collapse boundaries between the different timespaces defined in it.

This chapter engages with the forms and meanings that ‘being Igbo’ assumes in this fragmented and interconnected world. To this end, particular attention is paid to how the structure and nature of spaces in the novel inform the production of ethnic Igbo identity and how the production of ethnic Igbo identity illuminates our understanding of space in the contemporary world depicted in the narrative. In the parts of the novel that deal with Nigeria before Ifemelu’s move to the US, national space is refracted through the lens of ethnicity, class and gender, and depicted as a site of convergence of local and translocal cultural imaginaries that problematise ethnic cultural community as the only locus of cultural identification. In the portions set in the US, on the other hand, space is presented in terms of different social imaginaries that engage differently with ethnic difference.

In the remainder of this chapter, which is organised around the novel’s three spatiotemporal settings, I first demonstrate how Nigeria’s dynamic social space engenders a plurality of Igbo identities in the national context and how the fluid cultural contexts characterising the age of heightened social mobility and global cultural flows link ethnic cultural identity to identi-
ficication with other, translocal cultural communities. Links between ethnic identity and other, (trans)local forms of identification receive additional attention in the second section of the analysis, where I show how the production of African diasporic identities in the US demands a renegotiation of the meaning of ethnicity that takes into account multi-dimensional and multi-scalar identification. Finally, the closing section of the analysis, in which I engage with Nigeria after Ifemelu’s return from the US, addresses the role of emplacement in the production of contemporary (ethnic) cultural identity in Nigeria. My critical examination of the (multiple) forms and meanings of Igbo identity in different spatiotemporal contexts invites us to understand ethnic Igbo identity in Americanah as a contextual, intersectional and unstable category.

The Plurality of Igbo Identities in the Nigerian National Context

Ifemelu’s recollections of Lagos and Nsukka expose contemporary Nigerian society as socially-stratified, gender-conscious and mobile, as well as possessing dynamic culture. Diversification of forms of life in Nigeria due to class and gender differences does not leave ethnicity intact, either: Criss-crossed with class and gender identities, ethnic Igbo identity becomes fragmented into many ways of ‘being Igbo.’ Furthermore, the representation of the Nigerian cultural landscape as an entanglement of different multi-scalar and (trans)local cultural imaginaries makes it impossible to talk about identification with an ethnic cultural community without referring to other communities that exist beyond, next to and vis-à-vis the ethnic community. In what follows, I will show how Adichie represents Nigeria as a space that engenders a plurality of Igbo identities unique to the national context.

Ifemelu’s memory of her father’s relationship with their house helps frame contemporary Nigerian and Igbo communities in terms of class distinctions. However, Adichie denaturalises class identities by embedding them in a particular locality and rooting them in a particular ethnic history. As such, the episode foregrounds the ‘emplaced’ – definitionally contextual and necessarily spatial (Smyth 14) – character of contemporary Igbo identities. Ifemelu recalls a moment when their maid, Jecinta, came excitedly to her in the kitchen and said: “You should have heard your father’s big word now! O di egwu” (Adichie, Americanah 47). Whereas the phrase at the end of Jecinta’s message signals that the maid speaks in Igbo, Ifemelu’s father replies in “formal, elevated English” (Adichie, Americanah 47). Through the microhistory of Ifemelu’s family, Adichie invokes the historical condition that underlies the association of the Igbo language with the uneducated, lower class and the English language with the educated, middle class. The larger history becomes more apparent when Ifemelu remembers how she sometimes “imagined [the father] in a classroom in the fifties, an overzealous colonial subject wearing an ill-fitting school uniform of cheap cotton, jos-
tling to impress his missionary teachers” (Adichie, Americanah 47). By closely relating education in Igboland in the colonial times to the present-day class dynamics at Ifemelu’s home, Adichie emphasises that Igbo identify is subject to place, history and class.

While the portrayal of the father in this episode as the synecdoche for the educated middle class and the woman as the epitome of the uneducated lower class merely hints at the gendered dimension of contemporary Igbo identity, the way in which ethnicity and gender are entwined in contemporary Nigeria is explored in greater detail in Aunty Uju. Ifemelu remembers how Aunty Uju, who is originally from a village in Igboland, moves to Lagos to finish her medical studies while financed by Ifemelu’s father. Aunty Uju thus embodies a marked trend among the Igbo of migrating to Nigerian cities in search of education and work. However, because of deep-seated corruption and the high rate of unemployment, Aunty Uju cannot find a job as a doctor and instead joins other young disadvantaged women seeking men able to support them. She becomes involved with the General, who finds her “a new job as consultant at the military hospital in Victoria Island, and a new house in Dolphin Estate” (Adichie, Americanah 45). While the General accepts his role supporting Aunty Uju, she expresses her gratitude to him by being available and looking beautiful for him at all times. This relationship, in which the General is the benefactor and Aunty Uju performs femininity as sacrifice and submission, illustrates how middle-class Igbo identity can assume different forms at its intersection with the gender structures in place.

Adichie is careful to not present the Igbo identities that emerge at the intersection between ethnicity, class and gender in any fixed terms; she constantly emphasises that they are highly contextual. Whereas, in the relationship between the General and Aunty Uju, it is the man who is the benefactor while the woman is the beneficiary, this constellation is reversed in the relationship between Aunty Uju and Ifemelu’s father. Ifemelu recalls how Aunty Uju gave Ifemelu’s father money for two years’ rent. The idea that Igbo women are exclusively at the receiving end is thereby subverted. Even though this subversion foregrounds class as the central organising principle behind social relations in contemporary Nigeria, when considering why Ifemelu’s father is fired from his job, the link between class and gender is once again foregrounded. While Aunty Uju’s middle class status is achieved in her relationship with the General through her performance of femininity, Ifemelu’s father’s deteriorating economic status results from his refusal to

48 In Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1960, Chuku offers an enlightening discussion about the role of colonial education in Igboland in creating class divisions among the Igbo (146-147).
49 In a study on Igbo migrants and the Nigerian economy in the twentieth century, Mgbeafulu singles out the Igbo as “the only ethnic group found in large numbers everywhere in Nigeria” (5). His study reiterates the findings presented in the Nigerian Migration and Urbanisation Survey from 1993 that define the Igbo as the most mobile ethnic group in Nigeria.
compromise his masculinity in the relationship with his new female boss, whom he refuses to call “Mummy” (Adichie, Americanah 47). The novel thus simultaneously addresses the gendered social structures that assign women the position of dependency and the men the position of superiority, and the failure of those structures to account for the complexity – and at times contradictions – involved in being a middle class Igbo woman and man in Nigeria.

While Ifemelu’s memories of the dynamics in her family illustrate the plurality of Igbo identities defined at the intersection between ethnicity, class and gender, Ifemelu’s recollections of her relationship with Obinze shift the focus to the meaning of Igbo identity in a culturally fluid national context. Unlike Ifemelu, who “didn’t know what it meant to ‘be on your mother’s passport,’” whose mother “didn’t even have a passport” and whose family “didn’t have a phone” (Adichie, Americanah 66), Obinze embodies a very different experience of ‘being Igbo’ in Nigeria: As Ifemelu observes, “[t]o be here, among people who had gone abroad, was natural for [Obinze]” (Adichie, Americanah 67). Unlike Ifemelu, Obinze is exposed to American films, shows, magazines and literature, which causes him to experience the national space not only in terms of convergence between ethnic and national cultural imaginaries but also in terms of transnational cultural imaginaries. Obinze thus becomes a subject participating in the global circulation of images, resulting in the production of what Arjun Appadurai defines as ‘mediascapes,’ or structures that offer a means of engaging, in imaginary ways with other localities and cultural communities (1996). With Obinze, Ifemelu discovers a Nigeria that is a site of layering of local and translocal cultural imaginaries linking ethnic cultural identification to identification with communities that operate at different national and transnational scales.

Rather than dismissing the significance of the locale for the production of cultural identity, translocal identification as defined in the narrative exists alongside a strong commitment to local ethnic identity. Ifemelu remembers how she and Obinze reached out to the Igbo villages of Abba and Umunnachi, from which their families originated, as localities with the potential to anchor them in a situated (and common) cultural community. In that case, translocal identification does not supersede but exists alongside the localisation of cultural identity. In their edited volume on translocality, Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein suggest as much when they claim that the (imaginary) movement between and beyond spatial boundaries and the movement between scales characteristic of translocality do not necessarily imply “the effacement of place, region, province, or their accompanying identities” (2). Rather than irrelevant, for Ifemelu and Obinze the Igbo village is highly significant in the reproduction of Igbo identity: Bound up as it is with cultural heritage, the Igbo village embeds contemporary Igbo identity in an actual geographical place imbued with symbolic meaning. Reconciling local and translocal cultural identification, Americanah demonstrates how, instead of
rendering localising cultural identity superfluous, the timespace compression characteristic of the age of global connectedness enables cultural identity to be understood on a number of scales and in terms of an identification with multiple localities simultaneously.

While the ethnic colonial histories, class stratification and gender structures appearing in the novel underline the importance of locale-specific conditions for the evolution of contemporary Igbo identities, the portrayal of how the Igbo youth oscillate between traditional ethnic and transnational cultures illustrates the influence that global trends exert on the perception and dynamic of locality and, by extension, the identities grounded in that locality. While Ifemelu’s memories of her life in Nigeria complicate the singular notion of Igbo identity and hint at the co-existence of localised, ethnic identification and translocal identification, her memories of the US deepen our understanding of the meaning of Igbo identity in the context of multi-dimensional and multi-scalar identification in the African diaspora.

The Meaning of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora

Ifemelu’s observation that she only became black when she came to America (Adichie, *Americanah* 290) simultaneously speaks to the contextual nature of black identity and suggests the potentially immense transformative effects of migration on self-identification. At the same time, her movement through the US testifies to the fact that diasporic identity has multiple dimensions, both local and translocal in character. Ifemelu’s self-identification as Igbo, Nigerian, African and black problematises the understanding of African diasporic identity as grounded in a singular place and community and invites a re-examination of the place of ethnicity in the context of multi-scalar and translocal identification. However, the fact that the exploration of African diasporic identity generally and of Igbo ethnicity in the diaspora specifically is conducted in a part of the world that shares a history of racism and centuries-long social, economic and cultural exchange – the world that Paul Gilroy famously termed ‘the black Atlantic’ (1993) – asks us to remain sensitive to the particular ways in which contemporary Igbo identities are (re)produced in relation to racialised social imaginaries and the larger history of African dispersal.

The portrayal of private and public spaces as essentially distinct contexts provides the first clue as to the nature of diasporic identity and the place of ethnicity in the diaspora. At Aunty Uju’s home in the US, Aunty Uju and Ifemelu take up Igbo tradition by speaking in Igbo (Adichie, *Americanah* 109, 116, 219), cooking the food they used to eat in Nigeria (Adichie, *Americanah* 115) and invoking local Igbo imagery when engaging with diasporic realities, such as when Ifemelu describes Aunty Uju’s partner Bartholomew as “one of those people who, in his village back home, would be called ‘lost’ . . . He went to America and got lost, his people would say” (Adichie, *Americanah* 290).
icanah 116). By reproducing the cultural practices, language and modes of thinking characteristic of their Igbo community in Nigeria, Aunty Uju and Ifemelu participate in the ‘symbolic reconstruction’ of the Igbo community in the diaspora (Cohen). However, in the public sphere, Aunty Uju teaches Ifemelu that she must conceal her ethnic cultural identity and adjust to the dominant culture of the host society if she wants to improve her socioeconmic status. Like Aunty Uju, who begins pronouncing her name like an American, switches from Igbo to American English in the supermarket and uses relaxer on her hair (Adichie, Americanah 104, 108-109, 119), Ifemelu dedicates herself to adopting a perfect American accent (Adichie, Americanah 134). Aunty Uju and Ifemelu’s characters testify to the split nature of diasporic identity and the highly reflexive ways in which migrants mobilise cultural identity in different social spaces. Recreating but confining Igbo cultural identity to the private sphere, Aunty Uju and Ifemelu simultaneously invite a rethinking of the notion of ethnicity rooted in assumptions about the inevitability of assimilation and hint at the oppressive identity regimes in the US public space that advocate such assimilation.

The fragmentation, in Americanah, of the US public space in different social imaginaries and the exploration of how characters that embody those imaginaries engage with ethnic difference provides a better sense of the types and mechanisms of oppressive identity regimes. According to Joane Nagel, ethnic identity is as much a result of individual and group action as of external social, economic and political structures. Ifemelu’s engagement with different social imaginaries in the US offers insight into exactly how sociocultural context defines the sense of ethnicity among African immigrants. For example, Ifemelu’s contact with the white middle class American and African American communities sheds light on how the social imaginaries that foreground race influence the reformulation of the Igbo immigrant’s sense of ethnicity. Ifemelu’s contacts with the two communities of African immigrants at the African Students Association50 and Mariama’s hair salon emphasise how Igbo immigrants employ ethnic identity alongside other forms of (trans)local identification to fashion their diasporic self.

In her contact with the white middle class American community, embodied by her first employer Kimberly and Kimberly’s sister Laura, Ifemelu is subjected to a social imaginary that reduces all ethnic difference to racial difference. After Kimberly finds out that Ifemelu has “such a beautiful name” (Adichie, Americanah 146), she is careful to pronounce the name correctly. Yet Ifemelu realises that Kimberly’s enthusiasm does not mean that Kimberly acknowledges Ifemelu’s ethnic cultural heritage. Kimberly in fact racialises and exoticises ethnic difference:

Ifemelu would come to realize later that Kimberly used ‘beautiful’ in a peculiar way. ‘I’m meeting my beautiful friend from graduate school,’

50 Hereafter referred to as ‘the ASA.’
Kimberly would say, or ‘We’re working with this beautiful woman on the inner-city project,’ and always, the women she referred to would turn out to be quite ordinary-looking, but always black. (Adichie, *Americanah* 146)

Subsuming Ifemelu under the rubric ‘beautiful,’ Kimberly invokes and applies to Ifemelu the romantic and simplistic notion of ‘blackness’ popularised by the black power movements in the 1960s and the 1970s in the US. Kimberly’s sister Laura demonstrates even more overtly how a racialised social imaginary obliterates ethnic difference: “In graduate school I knew a woman from Africa . . . , I think she was from Uganda. She was wonderful, but she didn’t get along with the African American women in our class at all. She didn’t have all those issues” (Adichie, *Americanah* 168). Laura seems unaware of the fact that the African Americans and contemporary African immigrants do not share a collective memory of racial segregation and subordination, which means that the latter do not necessarily see themselves through a racial prism. Categorising African immigrants and African Americans as black, Kimberly and Laura disregard the ethnically specific and diachronically different histories of African dispersal that have shaped the manifold ways of being black and African in the US.

A social imaginary that recognises ethnic difference but defines it in essentialist terms is embodied by the African American community with which Ifemelu establishes contact through her partner Blain, a professor at Yale University. Discussing inter-racial romantic relationships in England and the US, Blain’s sister Shan remarks that only a small portion of white American men would only date black women (Adichie, *Americanah* 320). When Ifemelu points out how she, in fact, gets a lot more interest from white men than from African American men, Shan sarcastically explains: “I guess it’s your exotic credential, that whole Authentic African thing” (Adichie, *Americanah* 320). An exchange between Ifemelu and one of Blaine and Shan’s friends, Michael, provides a better sense of the actual meaning of ‘African authenticity.’ When Ifemelu jokingly says that most of the money she earns in the US goes to her “hungry relatives back in Nigeria,” Michael replies how good it must be to “know where you’re from,” to have a sense of “[a]ncestors going way back” (Adichie, *Americanah* 327). For the African American community, ‘African authenticity’ is wedded, therefore, to the origin in a knowable ethnic community in Africa. Yet the theory of ethnicity implied by the notion of authenticity assumes a natural and unchanging native self that effectively feeds into the definition of ‘Africanness’ as static and connected solely to roots.

The perceptions of African diasporic identity in racialised, homogeneous and mono-dimensional terms, in the case of the white American community, and in static and essentialist terms, in the case of the African American community, are challenged by the portrayal of the identity dynamic at the African Student Association (ASA) and Mariama’s hair salon. This dynamic
challenges racial classification, fixed territorial belonging and the idea that one can have a single origin. Relying on different social imaginaries, the ASA and Mariama’s hair salon foreground the multi-dimensional and multi-scalar character of African diasporic identity. Reframing African diasporic identity in such a way shows how African immigrants work with and through ethnic difference to facilitate the formation of different diasporic communities that make the African diaspora infinitely heterogeneous.

Ifemelu’s experience of her first meeting at the ASA emphasises a whole range of dimensions that constitute African diasporic identity and testify to its (trans)local and multi-scalar character. Ifemelu notices how, on the one hand, members of the ASA self-identify in national and ethnic terms: They define themselves as Nigerians, Ugandans, Kenyans, Ghanaians, South Africans, Tanzanians, Zimbabweans, and Congolese, while some speak in Swahili to mark their ethnic or regional identity (Adichie, *Americanah* 140). National and ethnic identification both affirms the significance of the locale in defining one’s sense of self in the diaspora and testifies to the multiple scales that the locale may signify. On the other hand, Ifemelu hears one of the ASA members, Mwombeki, suggest: “Try and make friends with our African American brothers and sisters in a spirit of true pan-Africanism. But make sure you remain friend with fellow Africans, as this will help you keep your perspective” (Adichie, *Americanah* 140). Mwombeki’s instructions demonstrate how identification with situated ethnic and national communities in Africa is, in diasporic contexts, tied to developing pan-ethnic, African identity and/or pan-African identity that is constructed through alliances with African Americans. African identity, as a category that transgresses ethnic boundaries yet remains firmly grounded in a particular locality understood in continental terms, is able to simultaneously speak to the common situation of African immigrants in the US and provide room for distinctions between African immigrants from other immigrant groups in the US and African Americans. In comparison, pan-African identity exemplifies how locality can be altogether transcended in an attempt to facilitate a community that mobilises the histories of slavery and colonialism to define specifically black experiences of dispersal and the diaspora. This range of dimensions to African diasporic identity allows ‘Igboness,’ ‘Nigerianness,’ ‘Africaness’ and ‘blackness’ to be viewed side-by-side.

Yet the way in which the ASA defines ‘blackness’ and ‘Africaness’ debunks any simplistic understanding of race. As Mwombeki’s suggestion illustrates, there is strong awareness among African immigrants of the historical circumstances that create the many forms of being black and African in the US. A distinction is made not only between African Americans and Africans, but also between these identities and American Africans. Introducing another member of the association, Kofi, Mwombeki says:

You will start to admire Africans who have perfect American accent, like our brother here, Kofi. Kofi’s parents came from Ghana when he was two
years old, but do not be fooled by the way he sounds. If you go to their house, they eat kenkey every day. His father slapped him when he got a C in a class. There’s not American nonsense in that house. He goes to Ghana every year. We call people like Kofi American African, not African American, which is what we call our brothers and sisters whose ancestors were slaves. (Adichie, *Americanah* 140)

The pluralisation of black and African identities in the US emphasises the experience of migrating and living in the diaspora, or routes, rather than once again representing the diaspora as a movement away from roots, or ethnic origins in Africa. Such a shift in the way the African diaspora is perceived is illustrated by Mwombeki’s remark that Africans “might make friends more easily with other internationals, Koreans, Indians, Brazilians, whatever, than with Americans both black and white” because “the internationals understand the trauma of trying to get an American visa” (Adichie, *Americanah* 140-141). The implicit suggestion in this remark is that routes should be disentangled from roots altogether. The interpretation of African diasporic identities as primarily socioeconomic entirely debunks the notion of race as the main organising social category.

If the identity dynamics in the ASA provides an initial insight into the (trans)local and multi-scalar character of African diasporic identity and how such a conception of African diasporic identity unsettles simplistic understandings of ‘blackness,’ ‘Africanness’ and ‘Igboness,’ the interaction between Ifemelu and the hair braiders at Mariama’s hair salon illustrates exactly how these different dimensions of African diasporic identity are mobilised to produce sameness and difference in the African diaspora. Situated in the peripheral area of Trenton, with “graffiti, dank buildings and no white people” and where “conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke” (Adichie, *Americanah* 9), the hair salon is the embodiment of a cultural borderland, or a place where the “dialectical relationship between sameness and difference is acted out” (Reif-Hülser x). When English can be heard, that English is “broken, curious, as though they [the hair braiders] had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism”: “Once a Guinean braider told Ifemelu, ‘Amma like, Oh gad, Az someh.’ It took many repetitions for Ifemelu to understand that the woman was saying, ‘I’m like, Oh God, I was so mad’” (Adichie, *Americanah* 9). Switching between languages is illustrative, more generally, of the multiple dimensions of diasporic identity, while the new cultural forms that emerge in such a context “disrupt attempts to fix the boundaries of identities and traditions as stable, closed and discrete” (Mullaney 121).

Ifemelu’s conversation with the hair braiders illustrates how African immigrants mobilise different dimensions of identity in the process of fashioning a diasporic self. Upon arriving at the hair salon, Ifemelu is asked if she is from Nigeria, and in return she asks the hair braiders where they are from: “‘You from Nigeria?’ ‘Yes,’ Ifemelu said. ‘Where are you from?’ ‘Me and
my sister Halima are from Mali. Aisha is from Senegal,’ Mariama said” (Adichie, *Americanah* 10-11). While national identity is employed only when the women wish to locate themselves in territorially defined and politically acknowledged communities, in matters of cultural affiliation, conversations often drift toward ethnic and pan-ethnic identities. Depending on whether the women rely on a notion of ethnic identity as localised identity or pan-ethnic identification, they choose to define themselves situationally in terms of difference or sameness.

Shortly after arriving at the hair salon, Ifemelu notices the atmosphere of pan-ethnic solidarity. After the initial round of introductions foregrounding nationality, Ifemelu catches Halima’s smile that “in its warm knowingness, said welcome to a fellow African’” (Adichie, *Americanah* 11, emphasis added). Encouraged by the smile, Ifemelu makes a remark about how hot it is in the salon without fearing that “these women would . . . say to her ‘You’re hot? But you’re from Africa!’” (Adichie, *Americanah* 11). While this brief exchange of gestures and remarks defines ‘Africanness’ in the diaspora in terms of the shared experience of Africa, the idea of shared experience is problematised through the awareness of socioeconomic difference. When Aisha asks Ifemelu if she recognises the Nollywood actress that appears in the film shown in the hair salon, Ifemelu says that she does not (Adichie, *Americanah* 13). Whereas Aisha finds the new Nollywood films “very good,” Ifemelu thinks to herself how she “thought little of Nollywood films, with their exaggerated histrionics and their improbable plots” (Adichie, *Americanah* 13). The conversation between Aisha and Ifemelu indicates the difference in their socioeconomic backgrounds and reveals the limitations of shared experience of Africa in facilitating diasporic connections. Deciding, nevertheless, to nod in agreement because “to hear ‘Nigeria’ and ‘good’ in the same sentence was a luxury” in which she sees “an augury of her return home” (Adichie, *Americanah* 13), Ifemelu hints at another connection between her and Aisha: a longing for home. ‘Africanness’ thus also emerges as a structure of feeling that cuts across class.

However, the unifying notions of ‘Africanness’ as shared experience of Africa and as a structure of feeling that shifts the focus away from particular ethnic communities do not annihilate ethnic difference. There is an ever-present awareness of ethnic cultural identities beneath the constructed idea of ‘Africanness.’ When Aisha hears that Ifemelu is Igbo, she recognises in Ifemelu somebody who could mediate in the inter-ethnic dialogue between her and her two Igbo partners. After establishing in a conversation with Ifemelu that she was wrong to think that Igbo always marry Igbo (Adichie, *Americanah* 15), Aisha begs Ifemelu to convince one of the two Igbo men to marry her. In Aisha’s view, ethnic difference poses an obstacle in her relationships with the Igbo men, which is why she insists that the fact that Ifemelu is Igbo and speaks the Igbo language is crucial to solving her romantic problems: “You tell them. They listen to you because you their Igbo sis-
ter” (Adichie, *Americanah* 18). While not denying her Igbo identity, Ifemelu rejects Aisha’s definition of the Igbo community in exclusive terms: Insisting that “Igbo people marry all kinds of people” (Adichie, *Americanah* 15), Ifemelu simultaneously confirms the existence of a unique Igbo community in the diaspora and redefines the given community as inclusive and dynamic.

The immensity of change that forms of ‘being Igbo’ constantly undergo in the contemporary world is perhaps best captured through the discussions about fluid ethnic Igbo community and evolving cyberspace. The internet, which figures prominently in the narrative in Ifemelu’s blog posts and references to the characters’ online communication, exists as an additional space that contributes to the vision of the contemporary world as fragmented yet interconnected: Ifemelu regularly keeps in touch via email with Obinze and her friend Ranyinudo in England and Nigeria, while Aunty Uju’s Igbo partner Bartholomew actively participates in forum discussions about Nigerian matters on an online platform called *Nigerian Village*. The Igbo in the diaspora use cyberspace to bridge the great spatiotemporal distances between them and members of their ethnic (and national) community back home by “bringing the imagined communities of ‘home’ to their new locales at the same time that they project themselves onto the realities of the places they have left behind” (Tettey 143). Wisdom Tettey observes that “[t]he emergence of increasingly extensive diaspora communities has, therefore, been attended by strong connections, not dissociation, from their places of origin” (143). Radically changing forms of ethnic self-organisation demand that traditional notions of ethnic community be redefined: Ethnic community no longer necessarily depends on the physical proximity of its members or their gathering in some geographical locality, but it can be preserved at great distances and from different locations as long as the members have access to cyber space. Ethnic identity can thus no longer be understood solely in relation to particular physical localities but as increasingly deterritorialised.

Adichie’s depiction of the US as a collage of different and at times contesting social imaginaries allows the social dynamic that shapes and reshapes (the perception of) the African diaspora to be examined. Set against simplistic understandings of ‘blackness’ as opposed to ‘whiteness’ or an essential ‘Africanness,’ the social imaginaries shared by African immigrants foreground the complexity and diversity of the African diaspora: The multiscalar and (trans)local nature of identification results in a variety of ways of ‘being African’ in the world. These multiple dimensions of African diasporic identity facilitate the creation of different diasporic communities but do not suppress ethnic heterogeneity. When the African diaspora is presented as a space in which identities are veritable palimpsests, ethnic Igbo identity emerges as a situational and contingent category, and just one of the many perspectives in the intersection of perspectives of very different reaches. On the one hand, the multi-layered view of diasporic identity allows ethnic identity to co-exist alongside other forms of identification, such as national, pan-
ethnic and pan-African identification, thus not losing sight of the importance of localising the self in the age of global mobility. In this regard, however, the novel does not fail to address the radically changing meaning of ‘localising’ oneself in ethnic terms that is made possible by the ever-growing use of cyberspace. On the other hand, examining Igbo identity as an element in African diasporic identity demonstrates the contingent nature of ethnicity, which explains why ethnicity is sometimes foregrounded while at other times it remains relegated to the background so that other forms of identification can be made visible.

Perception of Place and (Ethnic) Cultural Identity

The delays in narrative progression accomplished by Ifemelu’s memory-elicted analepses highlight the fact that Ifemelu’s migrant experience is a spatial as well as a temporal category. Tracing Ifemelu’s movement from Nigeria to and through the US, the analepses make particularly obvious the spatial dimension of Ifemelu’s migratory experience. At the same time, the analepses significantly slow down the narrative progression from Ifemelu’s hair-braiding for the return to Nigeria to her actually returning to Nigeria, and thus emphasise the temporal dimension of Ifemelu’s migratory experience. The spatiotemporal distance from Nigeria ultimately causes Ifemelu’s relation to her country of origin to become strained after her return. Ifemelu’s strained relation to Nigeria in its turn enables Adichie to critically explore the relation between place/emplacement and identity in a way that simultaneously addresses uncritical celebrations of ambivalent and fluid (ethnic) cultural identities.

Ifemelu’s initial reactions to Nigeria after her return and the reactions of other characters to Ifemelu as someone who has returned testify to how closely emplacement is bound up with identity. Lagos “assaulted her,” with its “sun-dazed haste, the yellow buses full of squashed limbs, the sweating hawkers racing after cars, the advertisements on hulking billboards . . . and the heaps of rubbish that rose on the roadways like a taunt” (Adichie, *Americanah* 385). The city not only causes Ifemelu discomfort, but it also makes it difficult for her to develop any sense of belonging. Ifemelu feels estranged from Lagos: “She had grown up knowing all bus stops and the side streets, understanding the cryptic codes of conductors and the body language of street hawkers. Now, she struggled to grasp the unspoken” (Adichie, *Americanah* 385). Ifemelu sense that she is in the place but not of the place is confirmed by how other characters perceive her. Unlike Ifemelu, to whom Lagos appears radically altered, her closest friend Ranyinudo insists that it is not Lagos that changed, but Ifemelu, and calls Ifemelu “Americanah” and “Madam America” to emphasise her point. Ifemelu’s status as a foreigner is also stressed by her new boss, who excitedly greets her by exclaiming how her “new features editor has come from America,” and her landlord, who
decides to rent her the flat on account of her being an “expatriate renter” (Adichie, *Americanah* 391, 393). Ifemelu’s lack of connectedness to the place, coupled with her aura of foreignness, evokes Ulf Hannerz’s observation that cosmopolitans, after their return to their place of origin, “are never quite at home again, in the way real locals can be” (248).

The identity model associated with (upper-)middle class mobility between Africa and an elsewhere, cultural in-betweenness, and perpetual negotiation between emplacement and displacement is examined in *Americanah* in relation to what is defined in the novel as Nigerpolitanism, or a local version of Afropolitanism. In *Americanah*, those who have returned congregate at the Nigerpolitan Club. The Nigerpolitans eagerly engage with local culture by discussing Nollywood film production, hair salons in Lagos and Nigerian civil society. At the same time, they readily express a longing for the things they enjoyed abroad, such as vegetarian cuisine, low-fat soymilk, fast internet and good customer service (Adichie, *Americanah* 408). The ambivalent attitude of African returnees to their place of origin is reflected in the observation of one of the Nigerpolitans, Yagazie, that “[i]t is ridiculous that Africans don’t value our natural hair in Africa” (Adichie, *Americanah* 407, emphasis added): Yagazie’s use of the term ‘Africans’ reveals that she has, to some extent, adopted an outsider perspective that relies on Western racialised discourses, while her use of the first person plural in possessive form, “our,” indicates that she considers herself an insider. Such perspectival ambivalence is celebrated in Taiye Selasi’s definition of Afropolitanism as “belong[ing] to no single geography, but feel[ing] at home in many” (“Bye-Bye Babar”). While the ambivalent Nigerpolitan perspective has the potential to offer a defamiliarised and denaturalised perspective on both local and foreign cultures, it also engenders a version of Nigeria that is constantly reproduced in relation to another place, in a way that foregrounds what Nigeria is not and what it lacks.

However, Ifemelu’s perspective on the Nigerpolitans is underpinned by strong scepticism toward their relation to the immediate locality and the potential that such a relation holds for facilitating a sense of localised cultural identity. Ifemelu is concerned by the elitist and detached manner in which she and other Nigerpolitans speak about Nigeria:

*They have the kinds of things we eat.* An unease crept up on Ifemelu. She was comfortable [in the Club], and she wished she were not. She wished, too, that she was not so interested in this new restaurant, did not perk up, imagining fresh green salads and steamed still-firm vegetables . . . This was what she hoped she had not become but feared that she had: a ‘they have the kinds of things we eat’ kind of person. (Adichie, *Americanah* 409)

The problematic relation to Nigeria that Ifemelu spells out here challenges an overly enthusiastic and uncritical understanding of the condition of ‘being of Africa and of other worlds at the same time’ (Gikandi, “Foreword” 9).
What the quote illustrates instead is how cultural ambivalence may become an impediment to meaningfully reconnecting to one’s immediate locality. In one of her blog posts, Ifemelu suggests that a meaningful relation to locality entails recognition and acceptance of its uniqueness:

Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York, or anywhere else for that matter. Lagos has always been undisputably itself, but you would not know this at the meeting of the Nigerpolitan Club, a group of young returnees who gather every week to moan about the many ways that Lagos is not like New York as though Lagos had ever been close to being like New York. (Adichie, *Americanah* 421)

The novel thus reframes cultural in-betweenness as a source of anxiety caused by the migrant’s inability to, once again, find an anchor either in the local or in the foreign cultural community.

Ifemelu’s gradual emplacement in Lagos redirects the focus to the dynamics of the place she inhabits. Instead of comparing Nigeria to other places and criticising it with the Nigerpolitans, Ifemelu adopts a more proactive approach to the locale, which ultimately allows her to redefine her sense of belonging in Nigeria. Ifemelu starts working at a women’s magazine called Zoe, but then quits the job to start her own business, a blog called The Small Redemptions of Lagos. In her blog, Ifemelu tackles issues relevant to contemporary Nigerian society and claims a place in the national culture, addressing issues such as health care, returnees and relationships that cut across classes. At the same time, by regularly reading the American blog Postbourgie, Ifemelu draws inspiration from cultural trends in the US and thus partakes in global cultural flows. Ifemelu’s redefined cultural identity does not uproot her from Igbo cultural community: Seeking to explain the contemporary realities of black people, Ifemelu refers to Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, thus demonstrating her embeddedness in specifically Igbo culture. Ifemelu’s performance of localised cultural identity reveals a vision of contemporary ‘Igboness’ that involves a firm embeddedness in a locality, not understood in simplistic terms but as an entanglement of cultural imaginaries that make it possible to connect ‘being Igbo’ to ‘being Nigerian’ to ‘being of the world.’

The portrayal of Ifemelu’s return to Nigeria as a transformation from a Nigerpolitan to a localised cultural subject is significant in at least two ways. First, it reiterates the importance of place and emplacement in the production of cultural identity while refusing to ignore the global dimensions of identity. Secondly, the novel complicates simplistic views of cultural identity by portraying identity as fragmented into parts that must be negotiated to form a whole. Adichie thus makes a case for a decentred view of contemporary cultural identity that relies on several dimensions of identification: ethnic, national and transnational. Foregrounding the multi-dimensional and multi-scalar nature of contemporary cultural identity, Adichie offers a vision of ‘being of Africa and of other worlds’ that affirms the place of ethnicity but
portrays it as just one of the many systems of cultural signification. Afropolitanism in Americanah is consistent with Gikandi’s and Mbembe’s notion of Afropolitanism as a way of being in the world that is firmly rooted in specific local geographies, but also transcends them through different forms of translocal identification (Gikandi, “Foreword” 9). Afropolitan ways of being that link ethnic identities to global cultural trends represent, Mbembe claims, a new form of transnational African modernity that “seeks to let go of essential ‘Africanness’ and dissolve Africa into the world” (“Afropolitanism” 28).

In the aftermath of slavery and colonialism and in the age of heightened globalization – all of which led to large scale movements of people and global cultural flows – questions of ethnic origin and cultural identity have become intimately entwined with categories of space and place. At the same time, as Yoon S. Lee explains, “space and place are themselves extraordinarily complex . . . ; divided, layered, unmappable” (139), and as such render questions of ethnic and cultural belonging that much more urgent and difficult to untangle. By relating how the Igbo characters participate in and respond to global circulations of people, goods and cultures that continuously restructure spaces and places, Americanah offers a vision of the changing forms and meanings of Igbo identity in the contemporary world. Americanah can thus be read as an exercise in thinking contemporary Igbo identity in different spatial contexts and in relation to different conceptualisations of space in light of the ‘global turn.’

In Americanah, space is not a simple backdrop to events. It actively participates in constructing a vision of the contemporary world and the place of Africa in it. No space in the novel is ever static, but spaces are always composed of a here and an elsewhere, a condition enabled by the circulation of a whole range of elements that are material and immaterial, as well as human and non-human, in character. Space in Americanah is therefore fluid, as its structure is constantly redefined through social movement and cultural flows. Spatial landscapes in the novel are also uneven and fragmented in several respects: horizontally, in different pockets defined by ethnic, class and/or racial landscapes; vertically, in terms of the layering of their particular histories; and ideologically, in a set of imaginaries that connect immediate spaces to distant ones. Finally, the narrative defines space as a composition of the private and the public, the village and the city, ethnic, national and transnational spaces and the virtual space, all of which interconnect to offer multiple sites of belonging (Georgiou 22-23).

The representation of space as dynamic, fluid, fragmented and layered helps Adichie to foreground the many ways of ‘being Igbo’ in the national and diasporic contexts, both in relation to a particular locality and in connection to translocal forms of identification. On the one hand, the narrative works to create a locality that is distinct: By giving a detailed account of social and cultural dynamics in urban Nigeria, Americanah creates of Nige-
ria a distinct locality that engenders particular, plural forms of Igbo identity. On the other hand, Nigeria is not defined as contained or static, but as linked to other, global spaces through movement, networks and flows, in which self-identification as Igbo in cultural terms is often coupled with identification with other, translocal cultural communities. Presenting space as constituted through both local and global dynamics, the novel suggests that contemporary cultural identities are always fashioned at the intersection between localising and globalising.

The exploration of ethnic Igbo identity in the African diaspora contributes to the idea of space as constituted through flows and networks. Igbo identity is explored in connection to the production of African diasporic identity, the multiple dimensions of which illustrate its intricate relation to geographical space. Defining diasporic identity as a palimpsest of localised identities, such as ethnic and national identities, and translocal identities, such as pan-ethnic, pan-African and racial identities, the novel links ethnic identity in diasporic contexts to identification with other territorially-based and deterritorialised communities. Moreover, by formally recreating and thematically referring to cyberspace, the novel shines a spotlight on the emerging alternative, non-geographical space that facilitates novel ways of (re)producing ethnicity. By thematising the dispersal of the Igbo across the globe and the radically changing (re)production of ethnicity in the era of information technologies, *Americanah* illustrates the phenomenon that Appadurai defined as the ‘globalisation of primordia’ (*Modernity at Large* 41).

Preoccupied with the place of Africa(ns) in the global movement of people, cultural exchange and the flow of capital, *Americanah* embodies a shift away from exploring differences between Africa and the West to exploring specifically African forms of life shaped by fundamental connections between Africa and an elsewhere. Rewriting Africa in those terms necessarily extends to rethinking the representation of the Igbo. In *Americanah*, the Igbo actively participate in contemporary social and cultural trends, both at the national and global levels. *Americanah* demonstrates how the Igbo living in Nigeria understand themselves as part of the world and, simultaneously, how living in the diaspora involves a negotiation of identity in relation to multiple sites of belonging. In this way, the novel uncouples contemporary Igbo identity from any essentialist, static or conservative notions of ethnicity and places ‘Igboness’ in relation to intricate and changing national and global contexts.
6.2 Chris Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames* (2007): Remembering Igbo Identity

*The Virgin of Flames* opens with an epigraph which speaks of “singular people who appear like metaphors [and shed light on] what is veritable and inevitable and possible and what it is to become whatever we may be” (Abani). These lines announce the novel’s preoccupation with identity construction, becoming, and possible lives and selves, often presented in a metaphorical or symbolical manner. The protagonist of the novel, Black, roams the streets of Los Angeles, trying to make sense of who he was and what he wishes to become. During his metaphorical journey, Black is “going through several identities, taking on different ethnic and national affiliations as though they were seasonal changes in wardrobe, and discarding them just as easily” (Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* 37). In the context which presents identity as an unstable variable and a possibility, the question of ‘who one is’ becomes exceptionally problematic.

The ideas of identity construction, becoming, and possible lives and selves are entertained in the very opening of the novel, where Black is captured in the act of dressing up as the Virgin of Guadalupe: “Black sat before the mirror applying paste to his face . . . While he waited for the contents of cup two to dry, he turned to look at the wedding dress hanging from a hook on the door like a ghost . . . Having acquired the dress, he had bought a blonde wig for his hair” (Abani, *VoF* 4-5). Black dresses up as the Virgin of Guadalupe so that he could act as his own model for the mural of the Virgin that he intends to paint. Yet Black’s revelling in the process of transformation is interrupted by his remembering Charles Dickens’s character Miss Havisham: “The thought of Miss Havisham depressed him, made him think of being caught forever in the moment of desire” (Abani, *VoF* 4-5). The evocation of Miss Havisham reframes Black’s process of transformation in terms of a subject locked in the moment of becoming and aching desire. Depicted in this way, Black becomes a metaphor for identity as possibility.

The fact that Black wears his friend Iggy’s wedding dress also when he is not working on his art project requires thinking about the wedding dress not only in terms of its practical role but in terms of its symbolic meaning in the narrative, too. The unnamed narrator reports: “[Black] knew why he did this; dressed up in Iggy’s old wedding dress . . . Black did it to feel safe . . . He did it to revive the magic of the white dress that had protected him from evil until he turned seven” (Abani, *VoF* 77). This seems to suggest that Black

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51 My use of the notion of ‘possible lives/selves’ relies on narrative psychologist Brockmeier’s observation that “[r]eal or imagined, narrated or enacted, discovered in one’s past or projected into one’s future, our possible lives are a constitutive part of our selves” (462, emphasis added).
projects a sense of safety onto the dress. But what makes Black project a sense of safety onto the dress?

To address this question, it is necessary to reflect on another, much vaguer symbol in the narrative, namely the photograph that Black wears around his neck. The photograph is of Black at the age of “maybe three or four [and] in a white dress” (Abani, VoF 44). The wedding dress is, then, clearly a symbolic representation of the white dress from the photograph and, by extension, of the time of Black’s childhood that is represented in it. The way in which Black perceives the photograph is suggestive of what he finds so appealing in the idea of his past/self:52 “Faded as it was, it was hard to tell if the child [in the photo] was a boy or a girl” (Abani, VoF 45). A subtle hint at ambivalent gender identity defines the photograph and the dress as symbols of a possibility to become just anything, which Black – caught in the present state of not knowing who he is or wants to become – so desperately longs to recreate. For Black, therefore, dressing up as a girl means embodying the self from the photograph, which, in turn, means recreating the past moment of possibility.

Apart from the photograph symbolising Black’s past/self, it has an additional dimension that specifies further what kind of the past/self that is. The photograph captures Black embodying his Igbo family tradition of – as explained by Black’s father in his letter to Black – hiding sons from evil spirits by dressing them up as girls until they turn seven (Abani 100, 164). The photograph, thus, represents for Black his Igbo identity which he lost when he lost his father to the Vietnam War and his mother changed his name from Obinna to Black (Abani, VoF 45, 107). In light of such a reading of the photograph, the white dress, as suggested by Madhu Krishnan, becomes a marker of Black’s desire for an ontological stability in Igbo tradition (“Of Masquerades and Mimicry” 53). Such a reading of the added symbolic dimension of Black’s photograph defines Igbo identity as an object of desire, and Black’s attempts to recreate his past/self as attempts to recreate his lost Igbo identity.

In The Virgin of Flames, Igbo identity is depicted as part of the past, is pieced together through acts of remembering and is defined as a possibility and an object of Black’s romantic quest. Yet narrative psychologists have repeatedly stressed that people’s past is rarely simply past but rather an integral part of both their present and their future. For instance, Molly Andrews claims that “[w]ithout recollection, it is difficult to have a sense of who we are in the present, much less to configure a future for ourselves” (3). In light of Andrews’s statement, Black’s interest in his past/self is inextricably connected to his present and his future, in a sense that it holds the potential to facilitate Black’s understanding of his present self and the invention of his future self. Such an understanding of Black’s project to recreate his past/self

52 The phrase past/self is intended to capture the double nature of Black’s project – his wish to recreate his past as well as the self embodied in that past.
foregrounds the question of temporality. Black appears to be an embodiment of Andrews’s observation that

[w]e constantly move backwards and forwards in our mind’s eye, and it is this movement which is a key stimulus behind our development . . . We ponder the meaning of Robert Frost’s ‘the road not taken’ in our own lives, and think about the lives we might have lived, the selves we might have become. (3)

The way Andrews conceptualised the relationship between temporality and identity offers a productive frame for an interpretation of the presentation of Igbo identity in Abani’s novel, insofar as it allows for looking into how Black’s sense of Igbo identity emerges at the nexus between memory and imagination.

Such a portrayal of Igbo identity is enabled by a specific use of narrative techniques that facilitate the presentation of the presence of the past in the present – such as disrupted temporality – and allow the narrator to stage returns to the past – such as symbols. Yet, as will be shown below, the returns to the past are problematised in a number of ways, namely through how they are framed by the narrator, through character focalisation, through the incorporation of contesting character perspectives and through the staging of a turning point at the close of the narrative. If we start from the premise that a significant motive of Black’s attempts to recreate the past/self is recreating his lost Igbo identity, then the fact that the returns to the past are problematised bears considerable implications for how Igbo identity is understood in the novel.

Defined in temporal terms, Black’s trajectory in the narrative represents his symbolical journey into the past, which, in turn, should facilitate his movement forward, toward a new identity. In the narrative, the present is, thus, conceptualised as transitory time, or the time between what Black used to be and what he wishes to become next. The sense of in-betweeness is reflected in the temporal structure of the narrative, too, that oscillates between a movement forward and a movement backward in time. In other words, narrative progression is frequently interrupted by returns to the past, or analepses, which ultimately intensifies the impression of the present as a transition time.

Black believes that only by recreating his past/self will he be able to resolve the present identity crisis and reinvent himself. In Los Angeles, where “any idea of a solid past, as an anchor, is soon lost” (Abani, VoF 207), Black’s quest for the time of his childhood defines the past as something that exists/ed in a defined form and can be retrieved in the act of remembering:

“‘The answer for me lies here,’ [Black] said, showing [Iggy] the photo around his neck. ‘In my childhood’” (Abani, VoF 208). Black’s notion of recreating the past/self is symbolically captured in how he paints his murals:

Each colour was designed specifically for a particular part of a particular mural that he might be working on at the time, and each had a different chemical consistency and density so that he could apply the paint in lay-
He did it because this way, he could build up each mural from the skeleton, if it were a person, layering the musculature, flesh and skin and clothes on with different consistencies of paint. Or if he was paining a mural of a landscape or a collage of LA images, he began with the prehistoric, built up through the Gabrieleno and Chumash, through the rancheros and missions, the former slaves and on until he got to the layer he was working on. (Abani, VoF 87-88)

The systematic manner in which Black paints his murals is telling of how he understands identity (de)construction: one’s present self consists of clearly defined and complete narratives and/or images of previous selves that layer until they produce the present form. In line with such a rationale, past selves only seem to have disappeared under all the paint and, as such, can ultimately be retrieved.

Black’s past gradually unfolds before the reader thanks to a number of recourses into the time of his childhood, formally facilitated by the use of symbols that trigger Black’s memories. Some of those symbols have already been discussed, such as the wedding dress and the photograph; the others are the Igbo word echefulam, which translates into ‘don’t forget me,’ and the letter which Black’s father leaves him. Those symbols facilitate the acts of temporal regression that shed light on Black’s past/self. Yet, as will be demonstrated below, even when those symbols help stage a return to the past, the temporal excursions into the past are staged in a way that problematizes Black’s notion of the past/self and his access to it.

As Black is stroking the photograph around his neck, he imagines hearing the word echefulam. The word, “all music” to Black, reminds him of “[a] language he hadn’t heard since his childhood, but one he knew was Igbo” (Abani, VoF 45). The language triggers an instance of analepsis that takes Black back to his childhood and the night which he spent with his father, Frank. On that particular night, Frank introduced Black to Igbo culture by telling him about the Igbo definition of the father-son relationship and Igbo words for stars (Abani, VoF 46, 50). Black’s memory of that night is presented as a coherent narrative – a narrative with a beginning, middle and an end, and a set of causally connected events. Such a presentation of Black’s Igbo origins does not only reflect his sense of the past as marked by certainty (Abani, VoF 51), but – and more importantly – it also represents the way we are assumed to make sense of our past/self. According to Dan P. McAdams, people resort to narration, or the “creation of the internalized and evolving stories of the self,” in order to “make sense and meaning out of their lives” (99). In light of McAdams’s claim, the coherent nature of Black’s narrative of his Igbo past/self is an indicator of his urge to impose a sense and meaning onto it.

That Black’s narrative of the past/self is a mere mimetic representation of what used to be is overtly undermined by the way in which the narrator describes Black when the narrated time shifts back to the present. The narrator depicts Black “wish[ing] now, as he had then, that there were more nights
like that,” while “stroking the plastic patch around his neck and . . . turn[ing] it over and over” (Abani, *VoF* 50). Such a description of Black as he is recollecting his past subtly reframes the act of recreating the past/self as an utterly romantic endeavour whose result – the well-ordered, coherent and soothing narrative – suddenly becomes an idealised construct reflective of Black’s idea of the past/self rather than of the past reality. Inciting such a meta-reading of Black’s act of remembering his past/self, the scene brings to mind Jerome Bruner’s observation that life stories essentially impose coherence on one’s past, which does not really come into view in the form of ready-made plots, but rather emerges as such through the selective and organisational power of the narrating subject (*The Culture of Education* 144). In line with such a rationale, the Igbo identity that Black seeks to recreate is, then, not something which exists ‘out there’ and is ready to be discovered, but as something which Black creates by “put[ting] together the idea of an origin from the fragments of his past” (Aycock, “Becoming Black and Elvis” 20).

Another symbol which triggers a return to the past is the letter which Black received from his father. Black tells Iggy that “[he] found [the] letter with the photo in it” (Abani, *VoF* 163). Iggy takes the letter and starts to read it, whereby another shift into the past time is facilitated. In the letter, Frank reveals to Black the reason why Black had to wear a dress until he turned seven, and thus adds another piece of a puzzle to Black’s narrative of Igbo culture and his Igbo self. Yet, even on this occasion, the notion that the past can be reconstructed in any reliable fashion is problematised. The return to the past is framed by Black admitting to Iggy that he “knew nothing about any of it until just before [his] mother died and [he] found [that] letter” (Abani, *VoF* 163). Black’s confession is telling of how he can access his past only indirectly, through artefacts such as the photo and the letter, which figure as mediated memory objects.53 This fact both makes the letter and the photo crucial to Black’s project of recreating his Igbo past/self and calls our attention to the limitations involved in such a project, such as the mediated nature of memory that turns Black’s quest for his lost Igbo identity into a “striving towards an unknowable past” (Krishnan, “Of Masquerades and Mimicry” 56).

Questioning the possibility to present Igbo past/self as a coherent narrative and to gain a reliable insight into the past offers hints at how remembering is understood in Abani’s narrative. A definition of Black’s acts of remembering as romantic endeavours which produce rather than reflect the past/self as a coherent narrative, and as mediated and unreliable acts, re-frames remembering from an act of recovering meaning to an act of constructing meaning. Such a reading is in tune with Krishnan’s definition of *The Virgin of Flames* as a novel which denies the idea of Igbo culture as a “fixed and unmoving essence” that Black can recover through remembering.

53 Van Dijck has coined the term ‘mediated memory objects’ to designate all those material items, such as photographs, albums, films, letters, diaries, that provide people a mediated access to the past.
which, ultimately, motivates Black’s wish to define the meaning of his Igbo origin (“Of Masquerades and Mimicry” 56).

The nature of Black’s memory and his awareness of the limits of his project are made most overt through focalising the past from Black’s perspective. The narrator’s running description of how Black assumed different identities throughout his life that ends with a phrase “he’d thought,” thereby indicating that these are Black’s observations, is one such example:

And he was [a shape-shifter], going through several identities, taking on different ethnic and national affiliations as though they were seasonal changes in wardrobe, and discarding them just as easily. For a while, Black had been a Navajo . . . It was the ethnicity that best suited [Black’s] personality, their language the most like his memory of Igbo. (Abani, VoF 37, emphasis added)

The word ‘memory’ unambiguously reveals Black’s consciousness of what his project of recreating the past/self really is: He is aware not only of the fact that a reconstruction of the past depends on the process of remembering, but also of the fact that the product of that process is, at best, not the past reality itself but a memory of that reality. With such a constructivist notion of reality in mind, the Igbo identity that Black seeks to reconstruct cannot be understood as anchored in any past reality but in Black’s construction of it.

Black’s awareness of the limitations of his project and his ways of dealing with these limitations are captured even more tellingly in the depiction of Black’s recollection of the moment when his father left to Vietnam. Focalised through Black’s perspective, we find out that

[all he [Black] had now was this nameless and shapeless desire and the memory of strong hands, like his father’s, strong hands and black and a face rough with beard and soft with tears, and lips full with the knowledge, whispering: Echefulam. And his mother crying in the corner, crying and hurting in a way that held all possibility. Was it true? Or did he just invent it all? Wasn’t he too young to remember? But yes: there had been tears. Definitely: tears and strong hands and the rough of a beard. (Abani, VoF 51)

As this quote shows, Black doubts the truthfulness of the past which he recalls, formally reflected in the shift from a coherent and well defined narrative of the past, to something which resembles a list of a few details from the past – “tears and strong hands and the rough of a beard” (Abani, VoF 51). The shift to a non-narrativised representation of the past leads to a conclusion that Black can render his Igbo past/self meaningful only by weaving a fictional account of his past around the few available details that have come to symbolise it. Such a shift calls into question the notion that the Igbo past/self ever presents itself to Black as a coherent, elaborate and meaningful narrative, and redefines all recreations of Black’s past/self as coherent narratives as his creative arrangements of the knowable bits and pieces into a comprehensive and meaningful whole.
Black’s project of recreating the past/self is not only challenged through the focalised presentation of him constructing rather than reconstructing his Igbo origins but also through the incorporation of character perspectives that contest Black’s notion of the past/self. Black often engages in meta-reflective conversations about identity, origins and belonging with his friends Bomboy, a Rwandan who runs a butcher shop, and Iggy, a white tattoo artist who also runs a local bar. Bomboy and Iggy, in different ways, challenge Black’s notions of origins and the past/self as layers of previous forms and as coherent narratives.

Iggy’s perspective challenges the significance that Black attaches to origins and their coherent presentation. Unlike Black, for whom “origins [hold] the key to self-discovery” (Abani, VoF 123), Iggy does not believe in origins: “There is no core to anything, Black. It’s like an onion; if you just keep peeling away, you will disappear” (Abani, VoF 208). For Iggy, “there is only the you you’re becoming or have become” (Abani, VoF 208), whereby she not only dismisses the idea of origins, but she also redirects attention away from the past or future selves toward the present self. Finally, Iggy tells Black that in defining the past/self, he should consider “everything and then the cracks in between; especially the cracks in between” (Abani, VoF 208). The notion of cracks counters Black’s idea of his past/self as a coherent narrative by foregrounding the importance of what remains inconsistent, what does not add up and what is irretrievably lost in the process of becoming.

While Iggy advocates viewing the past/self primarily in terms of fissures and inconsistencies, Bomboy problematises the very nature of the narrative of the past/self that emerges through remembering. Bomboy explains to Black: “The story of your life, well, it’s just a story, you tell it and tell it and then you believe it. It’s not the same as your life, though. We are all the same in this, we find a story we can live with and just get on with it” (Abani, VoF 198). Bomboy’s perspective shifts the attention to the ontological gap between the past reality that Black seeks to remember and the story of that past that gets constructed through Black’s acts of remembering. Such a perspective renders Black’s obsession with the accuracy of his narrative of the past/self senseless because what it assumes matters most is how that past/self is defined in a narrative: What matters in narrating the past/self, suggests Bomboy, is not the accuracy of description, but the potential of that description to help Black move on (Abani, VoF 198).

In the close of the narrative, a turning point in Black’s trajectory is staged, when Black is depicted to finally recreate, in some form, the past moment of possibility. After Sweet Girl, a transgender stripper for whom Black develops strong infatuation, shows Black how to tuck his penis back, Black gets overwhelmed with the transformation he has undergone: “He wanted to say something. Say, Help, I can’t breathe. I am suffocating, I am claustrophobic. I can’t feel my penis. Get this tape of me. It has gone for good. Who I am? What am I?” (Abani, VoF 284) It takes Black a moment to realise that he has become a woman – that he is a step closer to recreating the past moment of
possibility – and he begins to cry (Abani, VoF 284). Sweet Girl helps Black apply make-up, and put the weddings dress and the wig on, completing thereby the act of the recreation of Black’s past/self embodied in the photograph. The impression of the exceptional nature of the moment is conveyed through the language in which Black’s thoughts are presented: “He wanted Sweet Girl to shut up. He wanted to make her shut up. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to be her bitch. He loved her. He despised her” (Abani, VoF 284). The short and contradicting sentences capture Black’s sweet confusion at the thought of his transformed self.

Yet the spell of transformation is broken when Black looks at himself in the mirror. Black realises that “[h]e look[s] like a 1940s German whore from a bad B movie” (Abani, VoF 285), whereby his recreated past/self in fact emerges as a deviated, grotesque version of the original. The idea of the female beauty gone corrupt is reminiscent of the opening scene, when Black’s act of (at that point unfinished) transformation makes him think of Miss Havisham. In the closing scene, however, when Black finally realises the act of transformation, he becomes the embodiment of Miss Havisham – the embodiment of the grotesque, of unfulfilled desire and of perpetual longing. Through a metaphorical re-evocation of Miss Havisham, the narrator depicts Black’s attempt of the recreation of his Igbo past/self as impossible, made blatantly obvious by the gap between the past reality which Black attempts to recreate and the reality which eventually gets recreated.

The above conducted analysis has shown how the returns to the past and Black’s notion of the Igbo past/self are framed only to ultimately be re-framed and how this manoeuvre reflects a particular understanding of Igbo identity in the narrative. Black’s attempts to reconstruct his Igbo past/self as a coherent narrative are revealed to be nothing but failed attempts to retroactively impose a sense and meaning onto his Igbo identity. Moreover, the presentation of Black’s attempts to reconstruct his Igbo past/self with the help of the photograph, his memory of the Igbo language and the letter problematises the idea that Black can gain a direct access to his Igbo past/self and reframes Black’s quest for his lost Igbo identity as a creative arrangement of bits and pieces of symbols and memories that these symbols have come to represent.

A sense of the problematic nature of Black’s project of recreating his lost Igbo identity is strongest at the end of the narrative, when Black accepts how futile his goal was: “And he knew that he would never find this thing, this becoming that he wanted” (Abani, VoF 285). The ending of the novel testifies to the impossibility to reconstruct lost identity and Black’s Igbo identity remains one of his impossible, unrealised selves, an object of perpetual longing and quest rather than a fact of Black’s being, and something which can be irretrievably lost in the process of identity transformation. Read in such a way, the ending is a confirmation of Bomboy’s and Iggy’s perspectives on identity. The fact that Black comes to embody a deviated, grotesque version of the past self confirms Bomboy’s notion of the inevitable gap that exists
between our past/self and the past/self that emerges in the attempt at recrea-
tion. Iggy’s notion of cracks, on the other hand, which suggests that a con-
nection to ethnic cultural origins can be irretrievably lost in the process of
becoming, is confirmed by the fact that Black proves unable to recreate his
lost self after a radical disruption in the process of cultural transfer after his
father goes missing.

In this chapter, it has been shown how, in Abani’s The Virgin of Flames
like in Adichie’s Americanah, the notion of ethnic cultural identity is decon-
structed so as to tease out its changing nature and meaning in the context of
heightened globalisation. If ethnicity “acknowledges the place of history,
language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity” (Hall,
“New Ethnicities” 446), then Abani’s novel asks what ethnic Igbo identity
means and how one (re)constructs a sense of it in the multicultural global
context. In the city constituted of a variety of histories and traditions – North
and South American, Asian, and African – and where identities are bought
and sold in the street, ethnic Igbo identity appears to Black as an anchor
which could give him a better sense of who he was and could become. Yet
the novel shows that, just like other examples of ethnic cultural identity,
ethnic Igbo identity, too, exists only as/in fragments and oscillates between
being ‘lost in cracks’ and constructed anew. Such a presentation of Igbo
identity (re)frames the category at hand as a possibility rather than some-
thing which exists or can be made to exist in any complete and definitive
form. The Virgin of Flames thus becomes a novel which does not “adopt a
single-minded and static notion of African identity, or even an African iden-
tity that is singular, constructed in isolation,” but rather adopts the notion of
an African identity which “exist[s] in fragments, function[s] through cultural
particulars, and operate[s] alongside simultaneous and equally potent sys-

Moreover, I have demonstrated how the novel underlines the increasingly
problematic nature of the Igbo community, whose members in diasporic
contexts do not necessarily have access to the collective narratives of origin,
tradition and custom that, ideally, help individuals (re)produce a sense of
ethnic cultural identity. An idea of the disrupted cultural transfer complicates
Black’s project of recreating the lost sense of Igbo identity, insofar as there
is nothing around him – no Igbo community or an already establishing and
circulating cultural narrative of ‘Igboness’ – to offer him a sense of the
meaning of that identity. Black, hence, has to construct that meaning on his
own, and the novel portrays the ways in which Black tries to do that through
acts of remembering his Igbo past/self that either make Black realise or al-
ready reflect Black’s awareness of the limits in his project. The fact that
Black’s project to reconstruct the sense of Igbo identity eventually fails calls
into question the idea of a reliable Igbo culture and identity that can be re-
trieved. Abani’s novel portrays how, as ethnic communities are becoming
ever more dispersed and heterogeneous, ethnic cultural identity is becoming,
at the same time, ever more significant as an anchor and ever more difficult to define.
6.3 Spatial and Temporal Pluralisation as an Instrument of De-centring Meaning

The Nigerian Anglophone literature that engages with the diaspora challenges the predominant imaginings of the Igbo as being apart from, rather than part of, the world. As demonstrated in relation to Adichie’s *Americanah* and Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames*, it does this partly by foregrounding the globally shared phenomena of migration, communal dispersal and cultural intermingling as forces which (re)shape the meaning of ethnicity in the present age. Nigerian Anglophone diasporic literature thus abandons the paradigm of difference, focussing instead on the connections and entanglements between Africa and an elsewhere that signal various forms of similarity and commonality.

Literary engagements with the cultural trajectories that underscore the interconnectivity of the Igbo with the rest of the world, as well as the movements of the Igbo within and outside of the continent that generate multiple places of identification and belonging, are attempts to make sense of the myriad ways of ‘being Igbo’ in the contemporary globalised age. Defined by Anthony Giddens as “the intensification of worldwide social relations linking distant localities” (64), globalisation opens up new possibilities of being, identification and self-perception that transcend the locale and extend beyond ethnic, national, cultural and racial divides. *Americanah* and *The Virgin of Flames* explore these possibilities by portraying characters who negotiate their sense of self in a world where the global flow of culture produces de-centred, multi-layered and translocal cultural identities, and where the dispersal of ethnic communities is a source of anxiety as well as of new kinds of identity- and community-making. These changing social and cultural trends give shape to a new ontology of ‘Igboness,’ a way of being rooted in particular territories and communities, while, at the same time, transcending them. To fully capture the meaning of this new ontology is almost inevitably to rethink the antithetical relation between rootedness and rootlessness, mobility and territorial boundedness, locality and globality, and ethnicity and cosmopolitanism.

As the novel assumes the task of exploring the new ontology of ‘Igboness’ at the thematic level, its form, too, adjusts to the task. More precisely, thematically engaging with global mobility, communal dispersal, cultural intermingling and dislocation requires the novel to adjust in ways that facilitate the perception of the story space as fragmented, fluid and interconnected. In *Americanah*, Adichie divides the story space between Nigeria and the US, whereas she uses analepses to further simultaneously fragment the novel and put those fragments into contact with each other. What emerges is a notion of space as diverse yet interconnected through various forms of physical and imaginary movement. In such a space, Igbo identities cannot remain tied exclusively to immediate or single locations, but extend to encompass
all the other places of identification and the communities associated with them. Consciously engaging with space, Adichie’s novel responds to current calls in African studies to

concern ourselves anew with space and within discontinuities, to revisit topological imagination when it comes to this vast geographical landmass made of a multiplicity of social forms and interlaced boundaries that, though only partially connected, are nevertheless entangled in myriad ways. (Mbembe and Nuttall 352)

Adichie’s formal reconsideration of space is intimately related to making sense of the meaning and nature of contemporary Igbo identities, in a way that confirms Ato Quayson’s observation that, in the diasporic novel, “the question of identity – who am I? – is necessarily entangled with that of place” (“Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary” 148).

Another formal strategy of engaging with Igbo identities in contemporary contexts is the manipulation of narrative time, which signals the anxiety over origin, the meaning of ethnic traditions and the possibility of fashioning stable cultural identities. Portraying the protagonist’s failed attempts to remember Igbo tradition as a means of creating a sense of ethnic cultural identity in the diaspora, The Virgin of Flames reveals the conditions under which the Igbo cannot establish a sense of belonging and cultural identification. Returns to the past in order to recreate ethnic cultural traditions are, in such contexts, emblematic of the desire to root oneself in knowable communities and thus facilitate a reliable sense of self. At the same time, the impossibility of recreating ethnic cultural traditions through memory reveals a postmodernist distrust of stable, coherent and readily-available cultures as bases for identity-formation. Therefore, in novels such as The Virgin of Flames, postcolonialism and postmodernism form a strategic alliance: Whereas postcolonialism brings to light the possibly dramatic consequences as well as heterogeneous and uneven experiences of globalisation, postmodernism undermines any notion of a reliable and integrated sanctuary.

The heterogeneity of literary representations, both at formal and textual levels, of the ways of ‘being Igbo’ in the context of global mobility and cultural flows is telling, not only of the complexity of the phenomenon at hand, but also of the challenges (and potentialities) of literary representation of the emerging or the unfolding. As expressed by Michel Foucault in “The Subject and Power,” “[m]aybe the most certain of all philosophical problems is the problem of the present time and of what we are in this very moment” (216). Grappling with the emerging ontology of ‘Igboness,’ contemporary writing is, in fact, seeking to make sense – both through form and theme – of perpetually-evolving realities that “move in multiple and unforeseen directions” (Mbembe and Nuttall 349). The capacity of our realities to “continually produce something new and singular, as yet unthought, which cannot always be accommodated within established conceptual systems and languages” makes literary interventions that much more significant (Mbembe and Nuttall 349):
Through literary emplotment of the unforeseen and the unfolding into orderly and conceivable narratives, contemporary Nigerian novels provide us with the language and frames to negotiate new situations, processes and changes (Mbembe and Nuttall 349; Sommer, “Contextualism Revisited” 74). Acting as an explanatory mediator of confounding social and cultural realities, Nigerian literature claims its integral, rather than accessory, status in contemporary culture.

The portrayal of Igbo characters as they actively partake in global social and cultural trends, such as migration and the continuous (re)examination of the meaning of ethnic traditions and identities, signals a new African modernity, a modernity that undercuts both the arguments of radical difference and of global universality. Abandoning essential ‘Igboness’ for the more fluid and unstable Igbo identities as shaped by a world of overlapping and intersecting ‘scapes,’ contemporary Nigerian literature heralds a sort of African modernity that links Africa to the rest of the world and undermines persistent imaginings of the continent and its peoples as other-worldly (Mbembe, On the Postcolony). This new African modernity diverges from the African modernity of Achebe’s generation, which relied on cultural and ethnic difference from the coloniser as a source of postcolonial notions of Africa. At the same time, exploring how Africans “encounter, negotiate, mediate, make claims on, and give shape to the world of which they are a formative part” (Skinnner 6), contemporary novels highlight the active part that Africans play in defining modern forms of life. Africans thus shape a particular type of global modernity whose distinctiveness can be located in the forms of self-reliability in economic and cultural spheres, the entanglements between local and translocal identification, and the ways of negotiating cultural legacy in national and international contexts that continue to emphasise ethnicity.
7 Conclusion

Accepting Anthony Appiah’s claim that “[t]here is no better point of entry to the issue of the African intellectuals’ articulation of an African identity than through the reflections of [African] most powerful creative writers” (In My Father’s House 74), this study was a step toward a deeper understanding of the relation between African identities and African Anglophone literary narratives. I approached this relation by considering how select novels by Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chris Abani contribute to the production of Igbo identities. My endeavour rested on the premise that literary means of expression are never apolitical and ahistorical, but, rather, deeply historically conditioned and imbued with ideological content. Honing in on the nexus between narrative form, socio-historical context and ideological content, this study teased out the potential of poetics in Nigerian Anglophone narratives to offer notions of Igbo identity that disrupt culturally prevalent ones.

In terms of methodology, closely linking narrative form to socio-historical context and ideologically laden content meant supplementing a narratologically informed close reading of the formal means of expression by a contextual reading, which takes into account the social and political dimensions of narrative presentation. My theoretical points of departure were Fredric Jameson’s notion of the “ideology of the form” (1981), which holds that narrative forms are not vessels empty of content, but themselves carriers of ideological meaning, and Ansgar Nünning’s notion of literary narration as a cultural act of meaning-making, which defines literature as a significant mode of social intervention (Neumann and Nünning, “Ways of Self-Making”; Nünning, “Narrativist Approaches”). Analysing narrative forms in Achebe’s, Adichie’s and Abani’s novels in terms of how they produce ideologically laden meanings in complex conjunction with their socio-historical contexts, this study demonstrated how writing Igbo identities has never been far removed from questions of inequality in representation, social inclusion and exclusion, and domination.

My analyses of Achebe’s novels, which were written on the cusp of decolonisation and in its immediate aftermath, exemplified how the author relied heavily on narrative form to facilitate de-colonial notions of Igbo identity. In Things Fall Apart, Achebe’s manipulation of the mechanisms of narrative mediation and organisation characteristic of ethnographic discourses, such as narrative mode, narrative time and the entextualisation of Igbo eth-
nographic material, produces a two-fold effect: It not only evokes colonial ethnographic discourses, but also turns ethnography into a literary means of expression, or a poetics, with the potential to re-emploit the narrative of the Igbo in a way which asserts their humanity. The shift in character perspective staged at the end of the novel, to that of the District Commissioner who contemplates writing an account of the Igbo of Umunia, relates Achebe’s narrative even more explicitly to colonial ethnographic discourses and places a strong emphasis on colonial ethnographic narratives. Achebe’s first novel thus implies that narrative representation holds the key to understanding Igbo identity, and that any reframing of its meaning is an intervention into a longer discursive continuum.

Achebe’s *Arrow of God* represented another example of how narrative forms intervene in the tradition of representing Igbo identities, this time by disrupting the ideas, formed under the influence of Western historicism, of the Igbo as unmodern and static. Based on my reading of the steady acceleration of narrative pace and the pluralisation of character perspectives, I argued that both narrative strategies effectively contribute to Achebe’s presentation of the muddied colonial terrain – the terrain of entanglement and contestation – as a context which radically redefines Igbo cultural identity. The abrupt and disorienting cultural change, reflected in the novel’s accelerated narrative pace, was also discussed as a condition which leads to a polarisation of opinion among the Igbo on colonial modernity, itself formally facilitated by way of multiple character perspectives. The lack of consensus among the Igbo on how to approach the culture of colonial modernity was analysed as symptomatic of the highly dynamic nature of the Igbo cultural community. I also showed how the portrayal of the Igbo is additionally complicated by the introduction of colonial perspectives, whose racialised views further relativise and destabilise the meaning of ‘Igboness’ in the narrative. With this in mind, one can conclude that, in *Arrow of God*, Igbo identity is defined through the predicament of perspective, relativity and unevenness that signals the fluidity of meaning.

My critical reading of Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* confirmed the author’s sustained interest, in his early writing, in (the negotiation of) perspective as central to Igbo identity. The narration in *No Longer at Ease* centres on multiple character perspectives, each of which reveals an idea of the modern nation and the place of ethnic Igbo identity in the emerging national community. As in *Things Fall Apart*, with its juxtaposition of Igbo and colonial perspectives, and in *Arrow of God*, with its multiple and shifting Igbo and colonial perspectives, in *No Longer at Ease* different character perspectives foreground the social processes of negotiation and contestation that define the meaning of ‘Igboness.’ The wider, sociocultural implication of Achebe’s novels, which locate the meaning of ‘Igboness’ in the social, is that literary narratives, as elements in the larger system of symbolic mean-

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ing-making, become potentially significant intercessory forces in the production and negotiation of Igbo identity.

In the chapters dealing with Abani’s *GraceLand* and Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, I claimed that the use of narrative forms in third-generation Nigerian Anglophone writing illustrates strong revisionist tendencies in relation to inherited nativist and nationalist discourses. Reading *GraceLand* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* as postmodernist explorations of those experiences of ‘being Igbo’ that remain silenced or marginalised in the discourses of Achebe’s generation, these novels emerge as significant and conscious interventions – counter-narratives – in the longer postcolonial tradition of narrating Igbo identities. The inter-discursivity in *GraceLand*, when Abani brings in ethnographic discourses on Igbo tradition in epigraphs, and intertextuality in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, when Adichie evokes Achebe’s and her grandparents’ narratives about Biafra, signal the authors’ awareness of the immense influence of the postcolonial representational legacy in defining ways of thinking ‘Igboness.’ While acknowledging the influence of these inherited discourses in defining contemporary meanings of Igbo identity, Abani’s and Adichie’s literary narratives refigure those discourses in a manner which opens up new ways to conceptualise Igbo identity. I argued that fragmented narrative discourse in *GraceLand* and multiple character focalisation in *Half of a Yellow Sun* encourage a multi-perspectival outlook on Igbo identity that renders the inherited nativist and nationalist discourses inadequate in relation to diverse experiences of ‘being Igbo.’

Finally, in my analyses of Adichie’s *Americanah* and Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames*, I demonstrated how, by manipulating narrative space and time in ways which present the story world as a set of different yet variously connected timespaces, the authors stage narrative emplotments of Igbo identity that disrupt the notion of originary, essentialised and obsolete ethnicity. While attempting to make sense of the age of globalisation, fast travel and intense migration, *Americanah* and *The Virgin of Flames* develop a new paradigm of writing Igbo identity which not only shifts the focus from collective to individual Igbo identities, but also abandons the ideas of nation and authenticity to embrace the global phenomena of diasporisation, cultural hybridity and ethnic communal dispersal as conditions which shape contemporary forms and meanings of ‘being Igbo.’ Unlike in Achebe’s early novels, where stable Igbo identity strongly correlates with the perception (and narrative presentation) of space and time as coherent, in *Americanah* and *The Virgin of Flames* Igbo identity is embedded in temporally and spatially fragmented and fluid narrative contexts, where its meaning is not defined in relation to a single timespace, but in relation to a multiplicity of times and spaces. Particularly significant, for this study, is the two-fold effect of such a narrative presentation of Igbo identity: First, it exemplifies how narrative forms are both elementary structuring devices and powerful meaning-making forces, and, secondly, it contents the commonly circulating images,
in Western media, of African ethnic identities as limited to some distant, mystic past, and some remote, exotic location.

Underlying all of these analyses is a plea to African literary studies for a mindful reading of narrative form for how it produces meaning. If we accept the assumption that narrative representations as ‘world-making tools’ (Nün-ning et al., *Cultural Ways*) help to construct individual and collective identities, it becomes imperative to address the formal mechanisms which enable those representations. Subjecting formal mechanisms to close and critical scrutiny for the meanings they produce reveals that identities in narrative are not reflections of some naturally given reality, but artificial yet powerful constructs with their origin in narrative mediation and organisation. Precisely because the meaning of identity is not ‘natural,’ but shaped by the aesthetic means of expression, engaging with narrative form is just as fruitful for understanding the sociocultural dimensions and ideological underpinnings of representations of identity as engaging with theme. Doing so leads to a due appreciation, sharpened critical reading and deeper understanding of the multiple sources of meaning-making in postcolonial fiction.

Moreover, given the strong historical sensitivity and overt socio-political agendas of African postcolonial writing, Nigerian Anglophone fiction represents a fruitful way to expand the knowledge, in narrative studies, of the nature and functions of narrative forms, in particular in relation to various forms of representational resistance. My critical discussions of the use of narrative forms within a set of specific socio-historical developments in Nigeria (and the world) teased out the highly contextualised and historically situated nature of literary form. Taking seriously the historically variable ways of politicising narrative forms in Nigerian Anglophone novels to stage resistance to culturally prevalent and oppressive notions of Igbo identity, one must conclude that socio-historical context is not a passive container for literature, but the enabling condition of that literature. In other words, the potential with which authors imbue narrative forms is determined to some extent by the embedding socio-historical context and the politico-cultural agendas relevant in that context. For that reason, I strongly argue against Gerald Prince’s notion of postcolonial narratology as a practice of *applying* independently formed narrative theory to postcolonial literature, which is reduced to a mere test case. Instead, my literary analyses encourage postcolonial narratologists to undertake a narratologically informed reading which understands narrative forms as generated in particular socio-historical contexts and by politico-cultural agendas, rather than as categories disengaged from history and ideology.

It is worth acknowledging, at this point, that the complexity of the issue at hand cannot be satisfactorily tackled in a single study. Seeking to understand how narrative form translates into ideology in complex conjuncture with the socio-historical context in Nigerian Anglophone literature and beyond inevitably requires pointing out some other areas of research at the nexus between
postcolonial literary studies and narratology that merit further critical consideration. To begin, it is worth conceding that the present study has primarily taken up the task of bridging the gap between African postcolonial literary studies and narratology. It would be equally important, however, to shift the critical focus more decidedly to narrative theory and to re-examine if and when narrative theory fails to provide adequate conceptual tools for reading postcolonial fiction. Such a critical exercise may ultimately lead to refining existing narratological concepts or devising new narratological categories. Not any less importantly, future critical contributions to postcolonial narratology might discuss the political ramifications of wedding postcolonial literary studies and narratology. Taking into account contemporary distributions of power on the global scale and the increasing unevenness of development that characterises the early 21st century in late capitalism, future studies could tackle the question of how the history of colonialism and forms of postcoloniality shape our ways of knowing, including narrative theory.

The wide range of literary representations of Igbo identity discussed in this study suggests that there is no single, final, ontological meaning of ‘Igboness,’ but only historically variable and mutually legitimising or delegitimising meanings defined in a continuous, yet arguably changeable discursive continuum. In that sense ‘unnatural’ and unstable, Igbo identity is always historically marked and carries a particular politico-cultural meaning. The ongoing struggle which the present study identified at the level of form to challenge – delegitimise, subvert or pluralise – previously defined notions of Igbo identity represents an attempt to find a moment of closure. Yet, as that moment remains permanently beyond our reach, we are reminded time and again that Igbo identity is essentially an elusive category, and that defining it is less a simple question and more a riddle which defies any simple and satisfying solution.
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Sammanfattning


Studiens övergripande syfte, som anges i introduktionen, är att tillämpa narratologibaserad analys inom det postkoloniala litteraturvetenskapliga fältet på ett sätt som belyser dynamiken mellan narrativ form, sociohistorisk kontext och ideologiskt innehåll. Att läsa litterära gestaltningar av igboidentiteter från ett postkolonialt narratologiskt perspektiv har en tvådelad potential. För det första underlättar det förståelsen av hur föreställningar om igboidentitet, å ena sidan, är en följd av sättet på vilket berättelsen formar, speglar och bryter influenser från de inbäddade sammanhangen, och hur de aktivt formar textens ideologi, å den andra. För det andra gör granskningen av relationen mellan postkolonial poetik och textens sociokulturella – enkannerligen ideologiska – dimension det möjligt att överbrygga gapet mellan narratologi och postkolonial litteraturkritik på ett sätt som visar att narrativa former de facto är varibler som med hög känslighet registrerar kulturella och historiska skillnader. Studien artikulerar en syn på postkolonial poetik som ett sammanförande av narrativa strukturer och en stark historisk sensibilitet, och försöker därigenom ta sig förbi dikotomin att läsa afrikanska romaner antingen som sociologiska rapporter utan fiktionalisering eller som rent dekorativa och icke-politiska former.

I linje med den tidigare nämnda dynamiken mellan (litterärt) berättande och identitet används i denna studie en läsmetod för den litterära skildringen av igboidentiteter som uppmärksammare både poetik och politik i postkolonialt skrivande. Denna metod består av sociohistoriskt baserade närläsningar som fokuserar på den centrala roll som estetiska uttryck spelar när det gäller att definiera hur sociala problem och ideologier inkluderas i postkoloniala texter. Mer specifikt föreslås en metod som, å ena sidan, kombinerar närläsning av formmässiga uttryckssätt och meningsproduktion i berättelser och, å den andra, en kontextuell läsning som tar hänsyn till kulturella och sociopolitiska innebörder av narrativ gestaltnings. Metodavsnittet innehåller också en översikt över särskilda medlingsstrategier i de narrativa intrigerna i postkolonial fiktion, som utmanar den dominerande skildringen av igboidentiteter. Denna del behandlar speciellt hur formella strategier både svarar på förändrade sociohistoriska sammanhang och olika dominanta diskurser om igboidentiteter, och bidrar till att definiera igboidentiteter i postkolonial fiktion: från sammanhängande och lättillgängliga kategorier till svårfångade, ofullständiga och ifrågasatta.

Mot denna bakgrund ägnas de övriga kapitlen åt kritiska analyser av Achebes, Adichies and Abanis romaner för att visa hur framskrivningen av igboidentiteter aldrig har varit långt borta från frågor om ojämlikhet, social inkludering och exkludering, dominans och motstånd. Kapitel 4 behandlar följaktligen det tidiga postkoloniala litterära gesvaret på koloniala orientaliska diskurser i form av en positiv kodad nativism, vars underliggande motiv var återuppåttandet av Afrikas illa behandlade mänsklighet och historia. I detta kapitel diskuteras Achebes Things Fall Apart (1958), Arrow of God (1964) och No Longer at Ease (1960), som exempel på hur Achebe använder narrativa former för att undergräva, skriva
om och utöka kategorin för den kulturella igboidentiteten, vars upphov kan härledas till den koloniala moderniteten, på sätt som ingjuter reaktiv och pånyttfödande kraft i den givna kategorin.


Avslutningen återkopplar till avhandlingens två huvudsyften, liksom till de litterära analyserna av de utvalda romanerna av Achebe, Adichie och Abani för att sammanfatta de viktigaste resultaten. Det avslutande kapitlet pämninns därför läsaren om att en närgångning och kritisk granskning av litterär form, och den innebörde generation genom berättelser är ett fruktbart sätt att belysa den ”onaturliga” och konstruerade igboidentitets väsen, som i viss mån definieras och omdefinieras genom narrativ förmedling och organisation. I så mått är avhandlingen en värdian till det afrikanska litteraturvetenskapliga fältet att ingående studera relationen mellan narrativ form och betydelse. Detta kan utmynna i ett vederbörligt erkännande, en skärpt kritisk läsning och en djupare förståelse av de mångfaldiga meningsskapande källor som finns i postkolonial fiktion. Samtidigt betonar avslutningskapitlet hur kritiska diskussioner om användningen av narrativa former i en specifik sociohistorisk utvecklingsfas i Nigeria (och världen) synliggör den litterära formens kontextualiserade och
Att på allvar studera historiskt skilda sätt att politisera narrativa former i nigerianska romaner skrivna på engelska visar att en sociohistoriskt kontext inte är ett neutralt kärl i vilket litteratur kan placeras, utan snarare en förutsättning för denna litteraturs tillkomst. Med andra ord stöder avhandlingen en syn på narrativa former som genererade i specifika sociohistoriska kontexter och genom kulturpolitiska agendor, snarare än som kategorier frikopplade från historia och ideologi.