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# Ideology and Subversion: Linguistic Registers in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

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Ideology and Subversion: Linguistic Registers in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

An honors thesis presented to the  
Department of English,  
University at Albany, State University Of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in English  
and  
graduation from The Honors College.

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## Abstract

Effective colonial regimes have employed language to control and incapacitate their colonial subjects. However, anti-colonialist and Africanist authors have conversely used language as a significantly powerful tool in resisting colonial and neo-colonial discourses. Despite this subversive sentiment in contemporary literature about Africa, many scholars criticize Western authors, in particular, for their works about African nations, peoples, and struggles, noting their tendencies to generalize about a diverse continent, to project Western paradigms onto African contexts, and to disregard their own associations with colonial governments. Barbara Kingsolver's 1998 novel *The Poisonwood Bible* has received much critical attention as a work that deplores Belgian and American colonial and imperialist actions in the Congo. Contrary to the aforementioned criticism, scholars have largely lauded Kingsolver's condemnation of religious and white supremacist dogmatism, her intertwining narrative voices, and her larger political allegory, among other aspects of the novel. However, they have often failed to fully call into question the novel's major shortcomings. By performing a rhetorical analysis of varying linguistic registers—or varieties of language usage—in the novel, I argue that Kingsolver succeeds in suggesting a method for subverting Western discourses in privileging the Congolese language at play in her novel and in constructing American characters that confront their complicity. However, Kingsolver's cultural inaccuracies and attempted identifications between her American and African characters often undermine her more subversive moves. A closer examination of language in *The Poisonwood Bible* will allow writers and readers alike to more successfully problematize dominant Western discourses.

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## Introduction

Western writers who use Africa and Africans as settings or subjects in their fiction are usually subjected to rather severe criticism. . . . [The] failure to hold Kingsolver to a similar critical standard, I believe, has much to do with the appeal for these critics of the anti-colonial, anti-imperial, anti-capitalist, and anti-globalization political positions the author stakes out in the novel. And this, it seems to me, is indicative of a critical and academic double standard.

-William F. Purcell

In this statement, William F. Purcell refers to the critical conversation surrounding American author Barbara Kingsolver's 1998 novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*. *The Poisonwood Bible* follows the Price family, a Baptist missionary family from Georgia, as they travel to the Congolese village of Kilanga in 1959, one year prior to the Congo's independence from Belgian colonial rule. Kingsolver constructs her novel as an allegory for U.S. imperial involvement in the Congo during and directly following its independence movement. Told from the alternating perspectives of Orleanna Price, the mother, and her four daughters—Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May—the novel reveals the Price family's and, correspondingly, the U.S.'s terrible hypocrisy and destruction while simultaneously suggesting the ways in which the novel's various voices combat Nathan, the oppressive patriarch, and his dogmatic sense of right and wrong.

Kingsolver's subversive tone, then, informs the abundance of praise-ridden criticism to which Purcell refers. However, Purcell calls attention to a rather uncomfortable point; namely, he suggests that liberal or progressive-leaning politics, in the American sense of these terms, distract similar-minded critics from problematic or hypocritical aspects of an author's work. In Kingsolver's case, critics glorify the "anti-colonial, anti-imperial, anti-capitalist, and anti-globalization" stances that she establishes, but at the expense of a more honest, evaluative criticism to which Purcell believes they should aspire (Purcell 2). As Purcell points out in the article from which the above quotation originates, critics consistently fail to highlight one

prominent shortcoming in *The Poisonwood Bible*. Kingsolver cites Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* in her bibliography, and accordingly borrows customs that pertain to the Igbo people of Nigeria, applying them instead to her novel's Congolese people. Purcell charges that, in doing so, Kingsolver makes the typical Western error of "stereotyping," "essentializing," and representing the African continent "as an undifferentiated cultural monolith" (2). This issue, as well as others that arise in reading Kingsolver's novel, has its roots in language. To fully understand Purcell's discontent, we must first examine the cultural and critical contexts to which he alludes and the impact that Western languages and discourses have had, historically, in both Western and African settings.

The aforementioned flaws in Western writing about Africa reflect the continued influence that colonial discourses hold over Western thought and behavior. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European colonizers imported their languages to the African continent and used them to control and oppress native populations. In his book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes this role that language played in colonial domination. Though he notes the importance of "military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship" in securing colonial authority, he goes on to write:

But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. . . . To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.

For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language

of the coloniser. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised.

(16)

For Ngũgĩ, then, true colonial conquest was achieved not only through political, economic, and military usurpation, but through altering indigenous peoples' attitudes toward themselves, their cultures, and their relations to Western cultures. This mental manipulation operated via language control, as Ngũgĩ explains how one "aspect of language as culture is as an image-forming agent in the mind. . . . Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, individually and collectively, is based on those pictures and images which may or may not correctly correspond to the actual reality . . ." (*Decolonising* 15). In other words, because language—both in written and spoken forms—informs our understanding of our surroundings and therefore shapes our interpretation of these surroundings, it is heavily involved in cultural production. Thus, devaluing a people's language corresponds to devaluing their culture, making it easier for a colonizing body to claim cultural superiority over the colonized.

Though colonial regimes met their demise across the African continent, for the most part, during the latter half of the twentieth century, Western imperialistic pursuits continue to exert a relentless force. As a result, scholars such as Ngũgĩ call for the renewed use of African languages and for the deconstruction of what they term "neo-colonial" discourses (*Decolonising* 3). While many scholars refer to the contemporary moment as "post-colonial" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 4), the term "neo-colonial" acknowledges the supremacist stance that Western nations continue to assume in relation to African nations, with rhetoric and rhetoric-backed images playing a central role. This stance is exemplified in several ways. The United States and Europe scavenge for access to resources extracted by African labor, declaring their

industries the harbingers of progress and revitalization; non-profit organizations promote a skewed image of the West as savior to a supposedly damaged continent; educational institutions engender an appreciation of European languages, the languages of prior colonial governments, over that of indigenous languages. These examples demonstrate not only supremacist attitudes, but the ways in which the United States and European nations construct rhetoric, or use language to persuade and to sustain specific ideological standpoints. For instance, terms such as “progress” and “economic development,” often heard on the television or read in the newspaper, instill a sense of strength and capability in the Western nations to which they refer. On the other hand, language such as “poverty” and “developing” evokes backwardness and inexperience, thereby influencing listeners, viewers, and readers to believe that other nations require Western involvement and industry in order to survive and prosper in a “global economy,” another term that connotes prosperity without acknowledging the nations and peoples who labor to support it.

Returning to Purcell’s argument about *The Poisonwood Bible*, we can see that he follows in a wave of criticism that seeks to condemn Western scholarship for its adherence and contributions, however subtle, to neo-colonial discourses. In my project, I perform a rhetorical analysis of six linguistic registers—or varieties of language usages—that I have defined within *The Poisonwood Bible*, examining Kingsolver’s attempts to identify and disrupt dominant Western discourses such as those mentioned above while simultaneously calling attention to ways in which she falls victim to some of the very frameworks that she attempts to destabilize. The six linguistic registers include the Biblical register, the political register, the naïve register, the inversion register, the guilt register, and the Kikongo register (Kikongo referring to the Congolese language spoken in the novel). Of these registers, I have designated the Biblical, political, and naïve registers “ideological” in the sense that they lend their support to Nathan

Price's absolutist stance. These registers are discussed in the first chapter. The other three—the inversion, guilt, and Kikongo registers—I call the “subversive” registers insofar as they attempt to overturn this authority, and I discuss these registers in my second chapter. By performing a rhetorical analysis of varying linguistic registers in the novel, I argue that Kingsolver succeeds in suggesting a method for subverting Western discourses in her privileging of the Congolese language at play in her novel and in her American characters' assumptions of complicity, among other elements. However, Kingsolver's cultural inaccuracies and attempted identifications between her American and African characters often problematize her more subversive moves.

Despite their common subjection of African cultures to Western-manufactured discourses and conceptions, Western authors continue to, and always will, write about Africa. If we accept this right to authorship, the question becomes not whether Western authors *should* write about Africa, but *how* they can do so in a way that fully acknowledges the gap in information with which they work and respects the cultures they discuss. While Kingsolver's novel brings much-needed attention to her nation's involvement in the Congo and, indeed, to its despicable role in overthrowing Patrice Lumumba, the Congo's independence leader and subsequent Prime Minister, scholars and readers alike must remain cognizant and critical of her novel's flaws. In doing so, we can continue to push for Western authors to purge their writing of the ideological egotism that they attempt to criticize. Additionally, we can establish a readership that will hold such authors accountable for their portrayals.

## Chapter 1: Colonizing Linguistic Registers

When scholars discuss Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, they enter a critical conversation that has both praised Western authors for their desire to implicate the West's role in propagating colonial and imperialistic injustices and denounced their lack of attention to the African contexts about which they write. Some of the more contentious issues in this conversation include the reduction of Africa to a mere conglomeration of the thousands of cultures that compose the continent (Purcell); the imperialist imposition of Western discourses, such as feminist discourses, onto African cultures whose societal structures arguably do not accommodate such frameworks (Oyěwùmí); the inflation of negative characteristics such as poverty and lack of technological advance that glosses over positive aspects of African life (Koza); and, conversely, the idealization of certain aspects of African cultures, such as cooperative communities, that may overlook harsher realities (Fox).

Such injustices don't only impact the realm of discourse, however; Western scholarship about Africa, including literature about Africa, has very tangible consequences. In her book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, Ifi Amadiume writes about the impact of "ethnocentric assumptions universally applied in Western feminist academic writing" to subjects such as "motherhood, marriage and the family." She cites studies by Amos and Parmar (1984) and Mama (1984), stating that the "condemnation of other people's customs such as arranged marriage and polygyny as exploitative to women . . . feeds false information to the police and the racist state and, therefore, supports legislation and policies which are oppressive and discriminating against Black people in the areas of adoption, fostering, immigration, etc." (6). Amadiume shows how Western evaluation of particular African cultures, in which Western scholars often fail to show genuine concern for and communication with the

cultures they evaluate, leads to societal misconceptions and prejudices with social, political, and economic impacts. Though this particular example discusses “Western feminist academic writing,” a similar argument applies to Western literature about Africa—the broader focus of this project.

Some Western authors confront the brand of arrogant superiority to which Amadiume refers more than others, and Kingsolver is among them. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver attempts to combat imperialistic discourses by acknowledging the dangers that accompany her particular Western perspective. She does this by appropriating “ideological” language, or language that upholds Western imperialist ideology, within her own text. While the second chapter focuses more closely on Kingsolver’s own rhetoric as developed through the subversive linguistic registers, this chapter examines the novel’s ideological linguistic registers, focusing specifically on the rhetorical moves that Nathan Price, the United States, and Belgium utilize to exercise colonial and neo-colonial control.

### **Biblical Register**

The Biblical register refers to the religious language employed by Nathan Price and, to a lesser extent, his family throughout the novel. Distinct from the religious language used by other characters in the novel, the Price family’s Biblical language contains a tone of religious and moral supremacy. In this section, I examine the ways in which Kingsolver uses this Biblical language to illustrate and to criticize its rhetorical function; namely, justifying the colonial and imperialist missions. Individuals such as Nathan use Biblical language to justify imperialism in three major ways: they infantilize those they seek to colonize; they assert their assumed moral superiority and, subsequently, their supposed responsibility to lift the colonized from their

inferior moral positions; and they dismiss any agency or choice belonging to the colonized. Thus, this section ultimately seeks to explore precisely how Biblical language and rhetoric contributes to these outcomes.

Though scholarship on *The Poisonwood Bible* varies widely, many critics have similar analyses when it comes to Nathan's character. After suffering through a traumatic WWII experience, Nathan's religious convictions hardened. He now maintains a fundamentalist adherence to the Bible, believing it his duty to spread God's Word to Kilanga. He says to Anatole, his translator, ". . . I fail to see how the church can mean anything but joy, for the few here who choose Christi-an-ity over *ignorance* and *darkness*!" illustrating his narrow perspective and his rejection of any religious or spiritual practice that isn't Christian (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 128). Critics have described Nathan as a "wild-eyed religious fanatic" (Fox 406), commenting on his "colonizing religious rhetoric" (Kilpatrick 85) and his "phallocentric viewpoint" (Koza 286), among other characteristics. Despite their differing opinions with regards to other details, critics generally agree that Nathan's attitude and dogmatism parallels that of Belgium and the United States, and that he uses his religious beliefs as validation for his actions in the Congo.

In her article "The Missionary Position: Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*," Elaine R. Ognibene provides a detailed analysis of Nathan's character, arguing that missionary and imperialist endeavors, rather than operating separately, often intertwine (20). Indeed, the novel demonstrates this inseparability on many occasions. In one instance, Nathan converses with the Reverend Frank Underdown, explaining to him Christianity's value for a population that he believes incapable of forming complex political ideas:

Frank, this is not a *nation*, it is the *Tower of Babel* and it *cannot* hold an election. If these people are to be united at all, they will come together as God's lambs in their simple love for Christ. Nothing else will move them forward. Not politics, not a desire for freedom—they don't have the temperament or the intellect for such things. I know you're trying to tell us what you've heard, but believe me, Frank, I *know* what I *see*.  
(Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 168)

In this passage, Nathan combines religious rhetoric with political rhetoric, suggesting ties between the Congo and Babel, the Biblical city from which God scattered humanity, revoking peoples' ability to communicate through a common language. From a political perspective, this comparison lends itself to the argument that the Congo "is not a *nation*" and that its people "don't have the temperament or the intellect for such things," thus allowing a nation like the United States—and a missionary like Nathan Price—to rationalize its influence over Congolese independence. Nathan furthers his claim by referring to the Congolese people as "lambs" in whom he imagines igniting a "simple love for Christ." In these statements, Nathan infantilizes the Congolese people, suggesting their inability to function without the Christian faith as a shepherding force. Thus, Kingsolver demonstrates the transition from Biblical language to Biblical rhetoric that upholds the colonial and imperial missions by denying the Congolese agency.

Another example of Nathan's juxtaposed Biblical language and imperialistic mindset comes at the beginning of the novel's first section, "Genesis," which contains the following Biblical verse: "*And God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (Genesis 1:28)*" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 1). Ognibene

notes that “The Prices’ journey into the heart of the Congo begins with Nathan, like King Leopold, taking the words of ‘Genesis’ literally,” but she doesn’t fully expand upon this detail’s significance (22). Though Nathan does not speak these words himself, the verse represents the core of his religious beliefs and of his objectives in Kilanga. Words such as “replenish” and “subdue,” though contrasting in sentiment, complement one another from Nathan’s perspective. He strives to “replenish the earth” by refashioning every individual’s belief system in the image of his own. In order to accomplish such a task, he must “subdue” those he wishes to convert and hold “dominion” over them. As Stephen D. Fox notes, “He must impose his will on nature and on humankind, no matter what the consequences” (407). This attitude, completely indifferent to the people whose culture he plans to overturn, is explicit in Nathan’s language throughout the novel, and indeed demonstrates the intimate connection between missionary and imperialist frameworks.

While Nathan’s Biblical language infantilizes the Congolese people and therefore validates, in his mind, the need to subdue and control them, it also serves to construct a moral hierarchy, assigning Christians the moral high-ground and casting the villagers as sinners. As the Price family shares their first meal with the villagers of Kilanga, Nathan leads a prayer, quoting from Chapter 19 of Genesis: “*Nakedness . . . and darkness of the soul!* For we shall *destroy* this place where the *loud clamor* of the *sinners* is waxen *great* before the *face* of the Lord” (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 27). Nathan does not endeavor to understand the culture into which he has stepped before applying his unyielding religious rhetoric. Rather, he connects the word “nakedness” and the phrase “loud clamor” with the villagers’ garments and the music that they play in greeting the Price family, thereby devaluing this particular Congolese culture and, through his disgust, effectively proclaiming it inferior to the Western culture from which he

derives. Associating these attributes with “darkness of the soul,” he subsequently labels the villagers “sinners.” To Nathan, there exists a strict binary between darkness and righteousness, and the latter can be achieved only by those who practice Nathan’s brand of faith. Those who do not indulge in his belief system remain blinded by “*ignorance*” (128). A clear parallel also extends between the systematic and institutional oppression that African-Americans faced in the United States during the 1950s and Nathan’s instantaneous reaction to the Congolese. Drawing on his experience in an environment that openly devalues black skin, Nathan evaluates the Congolese as sub-human due to their similar pigmentation. “Darkness,” in this instance, refers not only to the lack of enlightened thought that Nathan projects upon the Congolese, but also to their skin color. Nathan’s disgust and contempt, which ring clearly through his charges of ignorance and sin, foster an environment that favors Christianity, whiteness, and Western culture, thereby upholding an ideological framework in which the Congolese are positioned as shameful and backwards.

Though Nathan is certainly the novel’s main source of Biblical language, he has exerted significant ideological influence over his wife and daughters—as a result, the Price women’s language and rhetoric occasionally function as components of the Biblical register. However, many scholars focus less on the women’s Biblical language and more on interpreting the Price family as a microcosm of colonial rule. For example, Koza writes that “the [Prices’] family structure replicates the power structure of colonialism”—in other words, Nathan represents the colonizer and the Price women represent the colonized (285). Nathan presents his worldview as dominant and, through physical as well as mental punishment, conditions the Price women to regard it as such. Other scholars have afforded more emphasis to the home and its role in perpetuating the imperialist drive. In her article “The Neodomestic American Novel: The

Politics of Home in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*," Kristin J. Jacobson explains "American domesticity's connections to imperialism," arguing that garnering public support for the imperial cause begins with nurturing this ideological position in the home (108). Similarly, Susan Strehle posits that "the goal of [the Prices'] American home is self-propagation: to replicate Georgia in the jungle, to convert Africans to Western worship, to transmogrify Congolese earth into Kansas fields, and to raise children prepared for and enthusiastic about the perpetuation of America's religious and secular values" (420). Not all of the Price women exhibit this same conviction and enthusiasm, but Leah and Ruth May stand out as the two daughters who do, in some way, adhere to their father's teachings. In the following examples I point to the Biblical language that Leah and Ruth May employ and the rhetorical function that it serves, despite their deviation from Nathan's harshness and unforgiving cruelty.

Of these two women, Leah more closely strives to emulate her father's religious and moral beliefs, at least at the novel's outset. When the family first arrives in Kilanga, she remarks, "Our journey was to be a great enterprise of balance. My father, of course, was bringing the Word of God—which fortunately weighs nothing at all" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 19). Suggesting that Leah speaks with an "unconscious irony" that "capture[s] Nathan's destructive behaviors," Ognibene claims, "Leah is both wrong and right about . . . 'balance' in ways that she cannot yet imagine" (24). While I agree that Kingsolver crafts Leah's language ironically to dramatize Nathan's flaws, it is important to note that Leah views Christianity in a way similar to her father: she fails to see how "bringing the Word of God" to Kilanga could have any negative impact. While she intends her comment as one of relief—"the Word of God" is one thing that the already over-burdened family doesn't have to fit into their suitcases—she misses an alternative connotation of the word "weight." That is, she fails to anticipate the villagers'

disdain for Nathan's attempts to impose Christianity. Leah, as a young white woman from the United States, believes that her family's mission can somehow incorporate "balance," though balance implies input from the villagers as well. However, the only thought that Leah has given to her Congolese surroundings resides in her idealized expectations of ". . . jungle flowers [and] wild roaring beasts. God's Kingdom in its pure, unenlightened glory" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 17). Leah's Biblical language reveals her lack of awareness of Congolese agency and choice in religious matters and otherwise, and she therefore constructs a devaluing rhetoric similar to her father's.

Leah exhibits not only an idyllic vision of balance and harmlessness, but also an arrogant and unfounded belief that her family has the power to enlighten Kilanga, both in religious and in pragmatic matters. She describes her father's garden thus: "It was to be our first African miracle: an infinite chain of benevolence rising from these small, crackling seed packets, stretching out from our garden into a circle of other gardens, flowing outward across the Congo like ripples from a rock dropped in a pond" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 36). Employing Biblical language by calling the garden an "African miracle," Leah speaks confidently that the garden will set a successful agricultural example for the rest of the Congo to emulate. She compares this effect to the image of a rippling pond, again illustrating her naivety as she fails to account for any possible failure or disturbance in her plan and instead associates her imagined impact with the beauty of a natural phenomenon. Though her father has yet to discover the intricacies of gardening in the Congo, though her family requires aid from the villagers to put together the simplest of meals, and though she observes the women hard at work producing the village's food, she remains faithful that her family has more to teach the village than the village has to teach her.

Leah is not the only Price woman to appropriate her father's Biblical language; the youngest daughter, Ruth May, exhibits a childlike tendency for incorporating others' words into her own lexicon. Early in the novel she states, "God says the Africans are the Tribes of Ham," demonstrating her absorption of the Bible's literal proclamations as delivered to her, presumably, by her father (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 20). Though we understand Ruth May to merely reiterate what she hears, her above statement and subsequent explanation of the Tribes of Ham illustrate the impact that Nathan's stringent Biblical rhetoric has had on her. Namely, Ruth May accepts her father's proclamations at face value, and therein Kingsolver reveals how rhetoric's impact is twofold. Rhetoric both influences the perceptions of those who do not challenge the rhetoric they receive, and it causes those receptive individuals to replicate that unquestioned rhetoric. In this instance, Ruth May adopts and reproduces a rhetoric that intends to establish African subordination to the white man by invoking religious doctrine.

This section has examined the ways in which various characters utilize Biblical language in the novel, paying particular attention to the language's rhetorical function and its subsequent role in upholding the imperial mission. By applying Biblical verses and concepts to their Congolese habitation, Nathan and his more susceptible family members construct a somewhat self-perpetuating rhetoric that infantilizes the Congolese and asserts moral and intellectual superiority. These elements enable the family to justify its missionary activity and, correspondingly, allow Kingsolver to demonstrate the intimate connections between missionary and imperial activity.

### **Political Register**

Much like the Biblical language used throughout the novel, the political language that Kingsolver's characters employ demonstrates the Price family's and the United States' dogmatism and arrogance. Though many characters—such as Anatole, Brother Fowles, and Tata Ndu—speak politically throughout the novel, this section specifically examines the sort of political language that functions as an agent for colonial and neo-colonial frameworks; the other characters' more subversive political language will be considered in a later section. The following examples demonstrate how political language constructs the Congo as an ailing, undeveloped nation reliant on Western aid and as a backwards nation vulnerable to Soviet influence and therefore to association with a dangerous enemy.

As in the Biblical register, Nathan Price is the character that makes the most abundant use of arrogant political language. Strehle writes, "In the distorted evolutionary logic of nineteenth-century imperialism, Nathan considers Africa as inadequately evolved, backward, primitive—a childish culture dwarfed by its grown-up Western colonizers—and thus in need of help from the advanced West" (418). Strehle's analysis neatly sums up Nathan's superiority complex, though she unfortunately chooses to attribute his "distorted evolutionary logic" to "nineteenth-century imperialism," failing to note that similar attitudes continue to influence political decision-making in the contemporary moment. If we overlook this not-so-minor flaw, however, Strehle's claim suggests that an infantilizing rhetoric similar to that in the Biblical register exists in the political register as well. Indeed, when Nathan discusses Western involvement in the Congo with a doctor in Stanleyville, he passionately proclaims, "The Belgians and American business brought civilization to the Congo! American aid will be the Congo's salvation. You'll see!" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 121). Glossing over the doctor's descriptions of exploitation and slave labor, Nathan has bought into a Western-manufactured rhetoric that establishes the Congo as a

desperate, undeveloped entity in need of the structural and economic support of Western “civilization.”

Whereas Nathan is the main perpetrator of this Western-devised political language, his daughters direct attention to its point of origin throughout the novel. In her anger over her family’s ignorance, Adah criticizes the American government’s involvement in producing this sort of rhetoric: “Bongo Bango Bingo. That is the story of Congo they are telling now in America: a tale of cannibals. . . . So, Khrushchev is said to be here dancing with the man-eating natives, teaching them to hate the Americans and the Belgians. It must be true, for how else would the poor Congolese know how to hate the Americans and the Belgians?” (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 174). Adah’s frustrated description refers to a newspaper comic, suggesting that the language of popular media familiarizes American citizens with an image of the Congo that insinuates hostility and, specifically, cannibalism. Importantly, she reveals that this threatening language roots itself in international politics; portraying the Congolese as hostile to the West allows nations such as Belgium and the United States to ally themselves and their citizens against the political threat of the Soviet Union in a period of volatile international relations known as the Cold War. Such rhetoric implies that if America takes no action, the Soviet Union will continue its influence over “the man-eating natives,” subjecting the United States and the world to the threat of cannibalistic chaos and communist tyranny. While on the one hand the language of the comic serves America’s wartime interest, it plays another role in this passage as well; it dramatizes an imitation of a Congolese language with the words “Bongo Bango Bingo.” This series of words, which sounds utterly nonsensical to an American ear, implies a lack of structure or meaning within this indigenous language, furthering the comic’s message of primitivism and backwardness.

The United States' position in the Cold War isn't the only political backdrop that contributes to its production of blatant propaganda. As mentioned in the previous section, rampant anti-Black sentiment in the United States during this time period also influences the condescension that the United States practices abroad. Ruth May, once again, lends us an understanding of this climate through her repetition and slightly misconstrued interpretation of others' language. She states the following about Black people in the United States: "The man in church said they're different from us and needs ought to keep to their own. Jimmy Crow says that, and he makes the laws" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 20). Ruth May exposes the connection between domestic racism and international racism, demonstrating how political language has compelled her belief in racial inequality in the United States and, subsequently, how this translates into her attitude towards the Kilanga villagers. Her mistaken belief that "Jimmy Crow" "makes the laws" in the United States calls into question the authority of the true law-making process and illustrates another linguistic dimension of the Jim Crow Laws: the name itself refers to a caricatured black character played by the blackface performer Thomas D. Rice in the 1800s (Woodward 7). Ruth May's confused political language demonstrates both the rhetorical impact that segregationist discourse has in the United States and elsewhere, but also Kingsolver's subtle attempt to subvert that particular discourse.

Another politicized element of language repeatedly invoked throughout the novel is that of national language. Despite the fact that the Kilanga villagers speak Kikongo, Nathan insists on making his family members learn French to assist with communication in Kilanga. Leah says, ". . . Before we came to Africa he made us all sit down and study French, for the furtherance of our mission" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 42). Leah's comment presents a subconscious double entendre—she suggests that learning French will help the family

communicate, but perhaps also that spreading a Western language will aid in the “furtherance of” a larger “mission” to replace Kikongo, the supposedly inferior language, with a European language. This idea harkens back to Ngũgĩ’s aforementioned comments on language as a controlling mechanism: “The domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised” (*Decolonising* 16). Much later in the novel, once Leah has shifted away from her father’s ideological standpoint, she reveals how the debate over national language has transformed into an even greater political tool after Patrice Lumumba’s successor, President Mobutu, takes power in the Congo. She says:

Now everyone’s pretending to set the record straight: they’ll have their hearings, while Mobutu makes a show of changing all European-sounding place names to indigenous ones, to rid us of the sound of foreign domination. And what will change? He’ll go on falling over his feet to make deals with the Americans, who still control all our cobalt and diamond mines. (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 448)

Though imposing European languages in African nations can be seen as a tool of colonial oppression, as stated above, this passage reveals that Mobutu’s decision to revoke French as a dominant language functions oppressively as well. Despite language’s immense power, Leah suggests that Mobutu’s attempt to “rid us of the sound of foreign domination” masks the *de facto* domination still occurring within the Congo as Mobutu refuses to nationalize the Congo’s resources and instead continues to funnel them into America and Europe in exchange for monetary gain. Thus, Kingsolver suggests that linguistic decolonization must be accompanied by actual, tangible changes for the Congolese people.

Set during the Cold War, the pre-Civil Rights era, and alongside the Congolese independence movement, *The Poisonwood Bible* figures ideological political language as a major element. Kingsolver introduces political rhetoric that accomplishes numerous feats: it casts the Congo as an economically and politically impotent nation; it vilifies the Soviet Union and, correspondingly, the Congo; it fabricates racial difference backed by legal doctrine; and it allows President Mobutu to secure power through corruption. Though we turn to an examination of Kingsolver's own rhetoric in the following chapter, we can begin to see how Kingsolver problematizes these dominant discourses in this section.

### **Naïve Register**

The previous two linguistic registers, the Biblical and the political registers, are Kingsolver's efforts to portray the dominant rhetorical discourses that Belgian and American governments perpetuate in an effort to uphold their colonial and imperialist agendas of assuming economic and political control over other nations. The naïve register, though I include it among the colonizing linguistic registers, combines the characters' ideological mindsets with Kingsolver's subversive undertones—in contrast to the subversive linguistic registers of the next chapter that reflect both the characters' and Kingsolver's subversive voices. Ognibene succinctly describes the two characters whose language falls within this register:

The youngest and the oldest of the daughters, Ruth May and Rachel, lack the astute insight, sense of complicity for wrongs done in the past, and passionate commitment to make the world better for others that their twin sisters share. Both, however, each in her own humorous and sad way, show the evil results of their father's behavior, and both

stories illustrate the consequences of white supremacy in ways the reader least expects.

(29)

Ognibene's analysis appropriately evaluates Ruth May's and Rachel's language, suggesting that they ironically reveal their father's wrongdoings while remaining ignorantly complicit in the "white supremacy" that he metes out. In this section, I intend to show how the similarities in these girls' linguistic characteristics implement these conflicting results.

Critics often discuss Ruth May with her young age in mind. One critic notes that she "sees with the all-observing eyes and limited comprehension of a five-year-old, offer[ing] us a broad sample of all she sees, hears, smells, dreams, and feels" (Austefeld 296), while Ognibene comments on her "naïve voice" (29). While Ruth May is certainly "naïve" in her young age (indeed, I have named this linguistic register after that very quality), we should not dismiss the honesty with which she observes. Her commentary often brings us closer to conceptualizing the Kilanga villagers than do those of any other character. Towards the beginning of the novel Ruth May states, "The grown-up Congo men are all named Tata Something . . . and the women are all Mama Something, even if they don't have children" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 51). Her observation, though she may not fully realize it, offers us a key insight into an aspect of Kilanga society that differs from that of the American social structure with which we are familiar. Though we cannot fully parse out, with our own limited knowledge, the exact significance of the terms "Tata" and "Mama," Ruth May nevertheless offers information that her family members seem either not to notice or not to regard as significant.

Ruth May's young age, on the other hand, does contribute to some of her more hasty conclusions and judgments regarding Kilanga. As evidenced in earlier sections, she places significant weight on the words she hears others speak. For example, when she first introduces

herself to the reader she states, “My name is Ruth May and I hate the Devil. For the longest time I used to think my name was Sugar. Mama always says that. *Sugar, come here a minute. Sugar, now don't do that*” (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 21). In this passage, Ruth May chooses to identify herself in two ways; first, by professing her hatred of the Devil—a hatred she derives from her father and the Baptist church—and secondly, by demonstrating the significance of naming. Due to her fallacious impression that her mother named her “Sugar,” Ruth May once assumed that her identity corresponded to that name. Her confusion has political implications; as seen above in the instance of Mobutu’s re-naming campaign throughout the Congo—or Zaire, as he would have it—the names assigned to locations have political significance while simultaneously containing complex meanings of identification for the people who have internalized those names. In re-naming cities and other geographical features with African names, Mobutu garnered support for his theoretical denunciation of Belgian influence in the Congo. Ruth May inadvertently shows how the associations formed through naming operate on an individual level.

Ruth May’s older sister Rachel shares the same ignorance about the insight embedded in her language. Rather than attribute her obliviousness to youthful misunderstandings, however, critics see Rachel as a “literal-minded, materialistic teenager” (Austefeld 295), a “heavy-handed symbol of crass American consumerism and paternalistic racism” (Demory 191), and a “clueless and morally neutral” character (Ognibene 31). Within her selfish and oblivious dialogue, however, Rachel unwittingly unearths some of her father’s hypocrisies and offenses. The most significant of her revelations derive from her frequent malapropisms, which critics often note: “Because Kingsolver equips Rachel with a laughably poor mastery over language, Rachel’s malapropisms create moments of humor within the novel; however, her observation, though seen

with the eyes of an unintelligent teenager, ‘renders human relationships, material details, conversations, and emotions with great accuracy’ (Austenfeld 295)” (Kilpatrick 95). In this analysis, Nathan Kilpatrick and Anne Marie Austenfeld highlight the simultaneous humor and accuracy contained in Rachel’s words. During Nathan’s extended prayer prior to the family’s first dinner in Kilanga, Rachel describes his elevated excitement: “He was getting that look he gets, oh boy, like Here comes Moses tromping down off of Mount Syanide with ten fresh ways to wreck your life” (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 26). Ognibene sums up the impact of Rachel’s statement when she writes, “Rachel, despite her mistake, describes well the poison her father uses to destroy the people’s spirit” (31). With her erroneous combination of “Sinai” and “cyanide,” Rachel subversively points to her father’s malignant aggression. However, the subversion largely stems from Kingsolver’s own conscious figuration of this particular malapropism rather than from Rachel’s understanding of its implications.

In another instance, Rachel reveals her distrust of and condescension towards Anatole—a stance that mirrors her father’s opinions. She states, “But up by the bonfire where they were cooking, a coal-black man in a yellow shirt with the sleeves rolled up was gesturing towards us and hollowing at the top of his lungs: ‘Welcome! We welcome you!’” (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 25). Rachel has unintentionally replaced the word “howling” with “hollowing,” a mistake that suggests an emptiness to Anatole’s words. For Rachel and Nathan, at the very least, Anatole’s gestures are “hollow,” containing no substance of interest to either of the Prices. Ironically, Anatole’s words are meant to welcome the Price family to Kilanga—a gesture which they neither respectfully receive nor deserve. Rachel’s elementary language contains a number of revealing, though unconsciously spoken, insinuations.

Despite Rachel's numerous disturbingly ignorant characteristics and comments, some critics note redemptive qualities in her character. Jacobson notes that "Rachel's shifts between facile and astute understanding resist straw woman constructions. Rachel is not simply evil. Her likeable qualities and keen insights hinder the reader's too easy dismissal of her as 'unlike' me" (117). While Rachel's "likeable qualities" may exist few and far between, I think Jacobson is correct in her belief that Rachel disallows the reader's complete "dismissal" of her character. When the Price family first arrives in Kilanga, Rachel states, "Already I was heavy-hearted in my soul for the flush commodes and machine-washed clothes and other simple things in life I have took for granite" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 23). Though Rachel demonstrates her typical materialistic outlook in this statement, she lets surface a barely redemptive quality; that is, she recognizes that she has taken for "granite" a number of things in her life. In this characteristic malapropism, Rachel suggests her awareness of a particularly rock-solid certainty that she has begun to question upon her arrival in Kilanga.

The naïve register combines the colonizing, oppressive rhetoric that Nathan has passed down to his daughters with Ruth May's and Rachel's youthful and uninformed tones. This unique blend ultimately depicts the negative impacts that Nathan's rhetoric has on those who blindly follow his lead, as well as the irony implicit in these influences.

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This chapter has focused on the three colonizing linguistic registers that Kingsolver's novel incorporates—the Biblical register, the political register, and the naïve register. Each of these registers encompasses rhetoric that establishes and upholds colonial and neo-colonial Western discourses, thus comprising Kingsolver's attempt to identify and problematize such rhetoric. Significantly, these three registers complement one another. Incorporating examples of

Nathan's Biblical and political language, I have shown how he construes Biblical language to infantilize the Congolese and to characterize himself as morally and culturally superior. He politicizes these constructions using language that further infantilizes the Congolese, suggesting that their nation is degenerate and unable to maintain a proper structure of governance without the West's interference and example. In addition, Nathan employs a political rhetoric of vilification, aligning the Congo with the Soviet Union's supposed communist threat. Finally, Nathan invokes the United States' prolific racial prejudice as he constructs a cross-cultural racial hierarchy that privileges the white man. Through these various rhetorics, Nathan bolsters a centuries-old imperialistic attitude that situates the Western world as the foremost example of civilization and prosperity, thereby justifying Western dominance over other nations. The naïve register, the final register elucidated in this chapter, juxtaposes Nathan's pre-existing arrogant rhetoric with his youngest and eldest daughters' ill-informed language. This register ultimately provides the bridge between colonizing language and subversive language, serving both as an example of the dangers posed by the propagation of neo-colonial rhetoric and as an opening for Kingsolver to critique this rhetoric with her own ironic insertions.

## Chapter 2: Subversive Linguistic Registers

Though colonial regimes commonly rooted political and social control in their manipulation of language, many anti-colonial activists and dissidents have used language as an equally powerful method for subverting colonial and neo-colonial discourses. For example, in his 1982 novel *Devil on the Cross*, Ngũgĩ's protagonist follows a mysterious invitation that proclaims "The Devil's Feast! Come and See for Yourself—A Devil-Sponsored Competition To Choose Seven Experts in Theft and Robbery" (*Devil* 28). The novel's characters come to realize that the Devil's Feast is a meeting of merciless capitalist business men, and thus Ngũgĩ shifts the rhetoric surrounding European and American economic involvement in Kenya and all of Africa, suggesting, instead, that Western economic interference is malicious and even criminal. While the previous chapter explores Kingsolver's intentionally colonizing linguistic registers, this chapter turns to an examination of the ways in which she employs subversive language to overturn these registers and establish her own rhetorical position.

I have highlighted three main linguistic registers that encompass the subversion of colonial and neo-colonial discourses and authority found in *The Poisonwood Bible*; these include the inversion register, the guilt register, and the Kikongo register. The first register, the inversion register, refers to language that performs an explicit reversal or sardonic appropriation of Nathan's own dogmatic language and, by extension, Europe's and the United States' ideological language. The guilt register describes a mode of language usage very different from the inversion register. This register—most often occupied by Orleana, Leah, and Adah—expresses these women's feelings of complicity in both their father's aggressive mission and their nation's attempts at imposing neo-colonial control over the Congo. Finally, the Kikongo register refers to the mode in which the novel's characters use this Congolese language to engage

in any number of subversive moves; for example, the Price women often point to the way in which Kikongo words and phrases change their meanings with subtle shifts in emphasis and tone, embedding in their observations critiques of the stark objectivity with which Nathan employs language. Though this chapter examines subversion, it also looks closely at Kingsolver's shortcomings in her attempts to criticize dominant discourses. While Kingsolver illustrates her capacity to rebel against authoritative Western linguistic registers with her own subversive twists, her gestures don't always steer entirely clear of the dangers within those registers. This chapter accordingly examines the areas that Kingsolver and others can target to strengthen and purify their subversion.

### **Inversion Register**

The inversion register exists in *The Poisonwood Bible* as a manifestation of various characters' dissenting responses to Nathan Price and his brand of religious supremacy, as well as to Belgium's and the United States' denigrating and destructive missions in the Congo. In this section we first examine language used by Tata Ndu, Anatole, and Brother Fowles, looking at the ways in which they deconstruct Western colonial and neo-colonial discourses by reversing infantilizing and paternalistic rhetoric, by challenging the beliefs of those Price family members who are open to debate, and by engaging a cross-cultural interpretation of Christianity and acknowledging indigenous belief systems. We then turn to an analysis of language used by Adah, Leah, and Orleanna. These three women contribute to the inversion register through palindromes, rhymes, and other wordplay that highlights the flaws in Nathan's own language, through frequent and deliberate sarcasm, and through their realizations of an emptiness that inhabits the Biblical and political rhetoric to which they are accustomed. The aforementioned

characters form the inversion register by putting alternately playful, confrontational, and somber spins on colonizing language throughout the novel.

Though many characters in the novel invert dominant language and discourses, many critics focus primarily on the Price women when they discuss subversive language. Few engage in extended discussion of Kingsolver's more developed Congolese characters. Some scholars note the relative lack of depth in Kingsolver's Congolese characters that perhaps explains this lack of scholarly attention. For example, Koza writes, "By making the Price women the narrators, Kingsolver has limited the novel's perspective to an American point of view; none of the African characters is given a voice . . . suggesting that Kingsolver's purpose is to tell an American story" (285). She goes on to suggest that "Kingsolver's sympathies are clearly on the side of the Congo; but because her Congolese characters never speak for themselves, she seems to deny them agency in their own history" (288). I certainly agree with Koza's evaluation that Kingsolver develops her American characters to a much greater extent than her Congolese characters. Her Congolese characters speak rarely and without the agency bestowed upon the narrating Price women; in the following examples I point to several instances in which they do speak, examining how Kingsolver intends to use their language to subvert Western authority and critiquing the limits that she places on their characterization.

Out of all the Congolese characters in the novel, the Kilanga village chief, Tata Ndu, possesses one of the most significant voices. Though he generally tolerates Nathan's presence and influence in the village, on multiple occasions he powerfully confronts Nathan. In one such instance Tata Ndu responds to Nathan's anger over the village's decision to vote for or against Jesus Christ as the village's "personal God" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 330). He proclaims:

Á, Tata Price. . . . You believe we are *mwana*, your children, who knew nothing until you came here. Tata Price, I am an old man who learned from other old men. I could tell you the name of the great chief who instructed my father, and all the ones before him, but you would have to know how to sit down and listen. . . . Since the time of our *mankulu* we have made our laws without help from white men. (333)

Despite his usual tendency to accommodate Nathan, Tata Ndu finally addresses Nathan's extraordinary presumptions in this moment. He first attends to Nathan's arrogant religious bigotry and racial prejudice, criticizing his paternalistic perception of the Congolese as his "children . . . who knew nothing" until he arrived to deliver the Word of God. In doing so, Tata Ndu begins to unravel the infantilizing rhetoric of the previous chapter. Tata Ndu's condemnation reaches beyond a denunciation of Nathan's individual attitudes, however, and indicts the entire Western imperialist involvement in constructing this paternalistic façade; as Ognibene notes, he "hoists Nathan upon his own white imperialist petard" (25). Tata Ndu claims that the village has always "made [its] laws without help from white men," invoking the pattern of guidance that extends from the village elders to the younger villagers—a method of teaching and learning entirely disregarded by Belgium and the United States. In calling attention to Nathan's demeaning attitude and his lack of knowledge about the village's traditional practices, Tata Ndu exposes and inverts Nathan's neo-colonial rhetoric.

Similarly to Tata Ndu, the village's young teacher and translator, Anatole, rarely speaks out strongly in opposition to Nathan and his family. He believes that the Kilanga villagers should form their own ideas about Christianity and the Price family, thus delivering little in the way of strongly opinionated commentary. Despite his moderate attitude, Anatole often seeks to challenge the Price family members; in particular, his close relationship with Leah prompts him

to challenge the adamancy with which she approves of her father's beliefs and actions. In multiple instances, Anatole's debates with Leah arise out of his disgust at her offensive statements. While they discuss the disputed Katanga province, Leah asks, "And what are Americans doing down there anyhow? I thought the Congo belonged to Belgium. I mean before." Anatole frowns and responds, "The Congo is the Congo's and ever has been. . . . Open your eyes, Béene. Look at your neighbors. Did they ever belong to Belgium?" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 230). Anatole's questioning challenges Leah's resolute conception of territorial possession, exposing the insignificance of Belgium's political language in the lives of the Kilanga villagers. Though Belgium might have claimed political control over the Congo, Anatole directs attention toward the emptiness of this rhetoric when he suggests that Belgium has never maintained ownership over the individual Congolese citizens.

Tata Ndu and Anatole both speak on behalf of the Kilanga villagers by inverting Nathan's and the other Prices' perspectives, but as previously noted, the occasions when they do so are few and far between. Additionally, Anatole's dialogue throughout the novel serves more to mentor Leah and to symbolically represent the entirety of the Congolese independence movement than to profess his own convictions and individuality. While I agree with Koza's argument that Kingsolver "den[ies the Congolese] agency in their own history" by limiting their voices, I think that this appeasing and passive quality presents a larger issue. It is understandable that Kingsolver's American characters narrate the story, as she intends to indict American politics and mechanisms more so than she intends to portray the Congolese political landscape and independence movement. However, Kingsolver certainly diminishes the importance of this Congolese setting insofar as her Congolese characters fail to assume more assertive statures.

In addition to Tata Ndu and Anatole, Brother Fowles—the previous missionary in Kilanga—also employs language that inverts Nathan’s dogma and points to aspects of Kilanga culture that Nathan’s absolutism has ignored. During a fiery debate with Nathan that transforms into a Biblical recitation contest, Brother Fowles professes, “I think the Congolese have a world of God’s grace in their lives. . . . I happen to think they already knew how to make a joyful noise unto the Lord a long time ago” (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 247). Brother Fowles reverses Nathan’s conviction that the villagers lack any form of “acceptable” spirituality. He recognizes that, though their religious and spiritual practices differ significantly from his own, their beliefs coalesce with Christianity’s true messages—messages that transcend Nathan’s strict and systematic interpretations. Rather than reciprocate Nathan’s exclusionary conception of Biblical language, Brother Fowles uses language to demonstrate his belief in a cross-cultural interpretation of Biblical ideas. In other words, he holds that certain Biblical elements apply differently depending on geographical location, climate, and culture, among other elements. Despite pragmatic differences in various cultures’ interpretations of Christianity, all cultures can express the religion’s core messages. Throughout his debate with Nathan, Brother Fowles also expresses a distrust of literal Biblical translations due to the “errors of translation” that often occur in printing Biblical texts, in the act of verbal translation, and in the act of interpretation. For this reason he tells Nathan, “. . . forgive me if I’m skeptical, Brother Price” (251). Here, Brother Fowles points to language’s role in altering meanings, suggesting the necessity of skepticism and historical and cultural contexts in averting absolutist interpretations of Biblical texts.

We turn now to an examination of the Price women—specifically Orleanna, Leah, and Adah—and the ways in which they continuously develop their own strains of inverting language

throughout the novel. In the closing of her article, Strehle sums up her argument that *The Poisonwood Bible* is a novel that rejects the “exceptionalist” ideology and language exemplified by Nathan. She argues that the novel replaces his narrow views with a more open, free-form, and relativistic perspective:

With the collapse of their father’s American exceptionalist mission in the wilderness, the daughters turn away from the Word to embrace words—plural, secular, nuanced, spoken, interpreted, exchanged, and affirmed. . . . In the process of finding words to tell their stories, they move away from simple binary opposites and into the mazed world of complex alternatives. (426)

Strehle’s analysis suggests that the Price women “turn away from the Word to embrace words,” accurately depicting their exploration and experimentation with new language forms and usage as well as their increasing rejection of Nathan’s indoctrinating language.

Between all of the Price women, Adah is the character whose language most often resembles that of the inversion register. Her dark sarcasm nearly always indicts and inverts her father’s language, constantly highlighting alternative ways of thinking and understanding. As Ognibene states, “Her slanted truth carries a skeptical tone, especially about ‘Our Father . . .’” Adah’s humorous and revealing nickname for Nathan (27). Adah has a special affinity for *literally* inverting language—she has mastered the art of constructing palindromes and of reading backwards as a result of her hemiplegia, a condition that incapacitated her left side from birth. For example, Adah comments on her father’s weekly sermons, stating, “When the Spirit passed through him he groaned, throwing body and soul into this weekly purge. The ‘Amen enema,’ as I call it. My palindrome for the Reverend” (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 69). Adah pokes fun at

Nathan's intensity and seriousness by creatively rearranging words, here associating his emotive bodily gestures with the "purg[ing]" effects of an unpleasant medical procedure.

Adah's other interest is rhyming, and, similarly to her palindromes, her rhymes often play upon her father's language. For example, Adah slyly comments on Nathan's dismissal of Orleanna's and Ruth May's illness and discomfort when a case of malaria confines them to bed. She states, ". . . Our Father irritably countered that the Lord operates in mysterious ways. . . . Serious delirious imperious weary us deleterious ways" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 218). Though most of the words that Adah rhymes with "mysterious" describe the crippling impacts of malaria, her insertion of "imperious" suggests that these words also describe the wearying authority that Nathan and his religious dogma hold over the Price women. Whereas Nathan remains convinced, despite all available evidence to the contrary, that God's intentions shape every element of his life, Adah's language highlights the exhaustive, dangerous, and illusory nature of these convictions.

While Adah's linguistic oddities inform many of her tendencies to invert her father's ideological standpoints, her general philosophical beliefs also undermine Nathan's rigidity. For example, she declares, "Misunderstanding is my cornerstone. It's everyone's, come to think of it. Illusions mistaken for truth are the pavement under our feet. They are what we call civilization" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 532). Adah's radical definition of "civilization" as something akin to structured illusion evokes a sentiment expressed by political theorist Kenneth Reinhard:

. . . Just as in the Bible God's inaugural declaration "let there be light" was an extraordinary and fully arbitrary intervention of creation *ex nihilo* into the "darkness" of primal chaos, a cut that divided the world into stable oppositions of "light" and

“darkness,” so at the moment of emergency the sovereign transgresses the limits of the law for the sake of the reemergence of the fundamental opposition between friend and enemy that establishes the foundation of the political world. (Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard 15)

In describing what he calls “the fundamental opposition between friend and enemy,” Reinhard suggests that fabricating national borders creates the illusory nationalist sentiment that allows individual nations to coalesce around similar goals, aided by rejections of the “Other” beyond their borders. Though Reinhard moves this discussion in a different direction, this particular way of viewing “the political world” informs Adah’s own realization that her mental framework is influenced by false definitions and boundaries. Significantly, Nathan is not so cognizant of this constructedness.

Unlike her sister Adah, Leah Price spends a good deal of her time in the Congo following and learning from her father, ultimately envisioning the positive impact that she imagines her Christian teachings might one day have on all of Africa. Gradually disillusioned, Leah finally directs her intelligence and curiosity towards new pursuits after Ruth May’s death. In the wake of this tragedy, Leah assumes a mocking tone when she references the naïve religiosity that shaped her younger years:

Out of habit we knelt on the ground and prayed the dumb prayers of our childhood: “Our Father which art in heaven,” and “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” I could not remotely believe any Shepherd was leading me through this dreadful valley, but the familiar words stuffed my mouth like cotton, and it was some relief to know, at least, that one sentence would follow upon another. It was my only way of knowing what to do. (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 372)

The transition that Leah's language has undergone strips her previous Biblical language of its power. She describes the way that the prayers "[stuff her] mouth like cotton," suggesting the dry emptiness that they now assume. Her acknowledgement of the prayers as "my only way of knowing what to do" reveals the hollow comfort that this form of language affords her, and we realize the difficulty of attempting to cast aside that which one has grown up knowing and believing in exchange for something new. Despite this difficulty, Leah manages, in this passage, to invert her prior Biblical language by taking it with a grain of salt.

In addition to transforming her own language, Leah uses language to invert the powerful misinformation churned out by the United States in its quest to justify imperial involvement in the Congo to an enchanted American public. Leah speaks of an interaction that she has had with her sister Rachel:

Rachel informs me I've had my brains washed by a Communist plot. She's exactly right. I've been won to the side of schoolteachers and nurses, and lost all allegiance to plastic explosives. No homeland I can claim as mine would blow up a struggling, distant country's hydroelectric dams and water pipes, inventing darkness and dysentery in the service of its ideals, and bury mines in every Angolan road that connected food with a hungry child. (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 503)

Leah ironically states "She's exactly right" in response to Rachel's charge that her "brains" have been "washed by a Communist plot." In doing so, Leah exposes and inverts one of the core façades erected by the United States during the Cold War period and beyond: the construction and criminalization of something akin to a "Communist plot." She goes on to describe the many forms of ambush and terror that the United States has perpetuated in Angola, rejecting the United States as her "homeland" due to the hypocrisy that it continually exhibits in other nations. This

rejection asserts Leah's powerful linguistic realization—she has dissected the United States' political language and emerged with a new understanding of the reality beneath it.

Orleanna, the final Price woman that I discuss, brings an entirely different perspective to the inversion register. As a mother, she gradually forms a bond of identification with the village women that informs her understanding of language and influences the development of her inverting capacity. She discovers that “*independence* is a complex word in a foreign tongue. To resist occupation, whether you're a nation or merely a woman, you must understand the language of your enemy. *Conquest* and *liberation* and *democracy* and *divorce* are words that mean squat, basically, when you have hungry children and clothes to get out on the line and it looks like rain” (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 383). Orleanna finds truth in the pragmatic, day-to-day tasks and concerns that busy the village women, and through these observations and experiences she comes to view politicized words such as “independence,” “conquest,” “liberation,” “democracy,” and “divorce” with skepticism and distrust.

Similarly to Adah, Orleanna recognizes nearly from the moment that she sets foot in Kilanga that her husband's views do not coalesce with the very different environment in which they have landed. She refers, sarcastically, to Nathan's enormous expectations: “We aimed for no more than to have dominion over every creature that moved upon the earth. And so it came to pass that we stepped down there on a place we believed unformed, where only darkness moved on the face of the waters” (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 10). Orleanna exaggerates the ridiculousness of Nathan's conflation of the Bible with reality when she couples the concept of having “dominion over every creature that moved upon the earth” with the phrase “no more than.” Thus, she points to the enormity of Nathan's expectations and to the fallacious and ignorant assumptions underlying them.

Employing sarcasm and reversals, the inversion register discredits and overturns the novel's colonizing language, as well as those who produce such language. While Kingsolver's African characters aren't equipped with the same voice granted her American characters, they nevertheless contribute to a destabilization of faulty Western rhetoric insofar as they question and criticize various Price family members. Adah, Leah, and Orleanna join these characters in their criticisms, pinpointing aspects of Nathan's language and putting their own simultaneously playful and serious spins on his generally oppressive messages.

### **Guilt Register**

In relative opposition to the sarcastic assertiveness of the inversion register, the guilt register includes language that expresses complicity and shame. This section discusses the ways in which three main characters—Orleanna, Leah, and Adah—express and cope with the guilt that accompanies their white, American identities and their greater understandings of the wrongs that their family and their nation have committed. Indeed, Kingsolver herself has stated, “I don't want to oversimplify, but this novel is about presumptions, arrogance, and the terrible things one country will do to another. How, in the aftermath, do we make our peace with that?” (Kingsolver, “FAQs”). Without straying too far into a discussion of authorial intent, I reflect on Kingsolver's desire to write a novel that implicitly addresses her own feelings of guilt and complicity.

Many critics see Kingsolver's characters' extensive inner turmoil as one of the novel's greatest strengths. For example, Koza writes, “Kingsolver's novel gains its power through her exploration of the Price women's struggles to judge their own complicity in both their family's fate and that of the Congo” (288). However, she also states that “. . . to the extent that

Kingsolver foregrounds America's role in the destruction of Congolese independence, her novel remains preoccupied with America's burden of guilt; thus Africa seems to function as a backdrop for working out essentially American concerns" (292-3). As Koza claims, the novel certainly benefits from its characters' self-reflexivity. I think she is correct in pointing out the downfalls to this reflexivity as well, though. Not only does the intensity of the American guilt complex push the Congolese setting and situation into the shadows, as Koza argues, but the language that Kingsolver uses seems overly focused on "erasing" whiteness at some points. This section discusses both the positive and negative impacts of Kingsolver's attention to American complicity.

Though her daughters each move forward from their experiences in the Congo by forging new and more empowered lives, Orleanna absorbs her feelings of guilt and complicity to a debilitating extent. Pamela H. Demory writes, "Orleanna tells her parts of the story retrospectively, narrating from her Georgia home, 'now,' looking back at her experience in the Congo, assessing, reflecting, explaining, trying to come to terms with what happened there" (187). Indeed, Orleanna assumes a much more reflective persona than her daughters, often moving repeatedly through past events in her mind, puzzling through that for which she cannot find an explanation. Not only does she reflect on events that unfolded during her own time in the Congo, but she also takes a broader look at history in general as it unfolded on the African continent. Near the opening of the novel she ponders:

Imagine those first Portuguese adventurers approaching the shore, spying on the jungle's edge through their fitted brass lenses. Imagine that by some miracle of dread or reverence they lowered their spyglasses, turned, set their riggings, sailed on. Imagine all who came after doing the same. What would that Africa be now? All I can think of is

the other okapi, the one they used to believe in. A unicorn that could look you in the eye.  
(Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 7-8)

Orleanna yearns for an image of Africa untouched by Europeans and Americans. She refers to the okapi, an elusive mammal rarely seen but eventually captured, exhibited, and thereby demystified by Europeans. In comparing this surrealistic animal to the mythical unicorn, she suggests that the okapi approaches myth in its evasiveness; taking the comparison a step further, she equates her vision of an untouched Africa with a tangible version of this “mythical” creature. In doing so, Orleanna encases her image with an aura of mysticism and exoticism that somewhat overshadows her more subversive potential because it fails to restore any humanity or call any attention to the plight of the Africans who have been so violated by European arrival on the Continent.

Orleanna experiences guilt not only on this expansive scale, but also as a result of the obedience with which she has always appeased Nathan. She describes a day when she walks through the market with her daughters and Leah steps over a woman’s pile of oranges. Orleanna receives a glare from the woman whose oranges Leah has so carelessly neglected, and she reflects:

Until that moment I’d thought I could have it both ways: to be one of them, and also my husband’s wife. What conceit! I was his instrument, his animal. Nothing more. How we wives and mothers do perish at the hands of our own righteousness. I was just one more of those women who clamp their mouths shut and wave the flag as their nation rolls off to conquer another in war. (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 89)

As Ognibene writes, “Orleanna’s story illustrates the complicity that comes with silence . . .” and in this passage we see Orleanna coming to the realization that she has, in fact, remained silent

and thereby aided her husband and her country in their joint mission (22). It has taken a subtle aggression such as that perpetrated unknowingly by Leah for Orleanna to recognize the enormous contradiction behind her attempted double identification with both the Kilanga women and her husband. This realization leads her to declare, “I was his instrument, his animal. Nothing more.” In this pronouncement, Orleanna transitions from understanding her identity as a human to understanding her identity as an object controlled by Nathan. She reveals the irony embedded in her simultaneous claims to “righteousness” and the complicity to which that “righteousness” gives way, suggesting that she has begun to question the value she assigned her previous moral code.

Leah’s reactions to the extraordinary guilt that she feels extend in a dramatically different direction than those of the other Price women. Taking her lessons from Anatole, Leah learns more about the Congo’s colonial history and current political situation. Intensely interested in aiding in the struggle for liberation, Leah marries Anatole and makes the Congo her home. While Leah exhibits honest attempts at fighting against the massive injustices that she sees perpetuated by Western nations, various critics have noted problematic elements of Leah’s character. Koza writes, “Anatole’s love heals Leah by allowing her to work out a new relationship to Africa as a place where she can belong and, ultimately, can overcome the burden of her father’s guilt, embodied in her own white skin” (287). Embedded in a larger argument about Anatole’s role as caretaker to Leah despite his negligible character development, Koza’s claim addresses the novel’s attempt to explicate a method of “overcoming” guilt and whiteness. Indeed, Leah says of her future plan, “And mine, I think, is to leave my house one day unmarked by whiteness and walk on a compassionate earth with Ruth May beside me, bearing me no grudge” (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 504). Seen from another perspective, Jacobson writes,

A less generous reading might suggest Leah engages in what Minnie Bruce Pratt calls ‘cultural impersonation’; she borrows, in other words, ‘the identity of the Other in order to avoid not only guilt but pain and self-hatred.’ Leah’s self-conscious awareness of her position as a white American, however, disproves or at least softens this argument. (118)

While I agree that Leah’s self-reflexivity perhaps “softens” Pratt’s argument, her strongly worded longings for existing “unmarked by whiteness” certainly do not “disprove” it. Leah often speaks of erasing her white identity, and her words lack the degree of acknowledgement and acceptance that would allow her to more fully exercise her subversive capacity as a character. For in her rejections of whiteness, Leah focuses more on abandoning her role in the neo-colonial mission than on confronting and altering this role. In addition, her own self-loathing draws attention to herself over the lives and fates of those Congolese citizens impacted by colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Adah’s own guilt-ridden language most resembles that of Orleanna, though her unique outlook produces, at times, a seemingly greater sense of balance. She describes her mother’s attempts at “Owning, disowning, recanting, recharting a hateful course of events to make sense of her complicity,” and concludes, “We all are, I suppose. Trying to invent our version of the story. All human odes are essentially one. ‘My life: what I stole from history, and how I live with it’” (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 492). While Adah acknowledges that she engages in the same process of reliving past events in her mind, noting the contradictory emotions and tendencies that accompany this process, she focuses more on how her own experiences fit into a larger pattern of human experience. However, Adah’s conception of guilt and her method of coping with its effects are far from resigned. In a passage near the end of the novel, Adah and Orleanna discuss the way in which nearly everyone around them engages in an act of

forgetting—forgetting Nathan and his insanity, forgetting Ruth May’s death, and forgetting the journey undertaken by the Price family. Adah reflects on a similar act of forgetting that continues to take place in the Congo:

Even the Congo has tried to slip out of her old flesh, to pretend it isn’t scarred. *Congo* was a woman in shadows, dark-hearted, moving to a drumbeat. Zaire is a tall young man tossing salt over his shoulder. All the old injuries have been renamed: *Kinshasa*, *Kisangani*. There was never a King Léopold, no brash Stanley, bury them, forget. You have nothing to lose but your chains.

But I don’t happen to agree. If chained is where you have been, your arms will always bear marks of the shackles. What you have to lose is your story, your own slant. You’ll look at the scars on your arms and see mere ugliness, or you’ll take great care to look away from them and see nothing. Either way, you have no words for the story of where you came from. (495)

In this passage, Adah artfully suggests that the Congolese attempt to forget the painful violations perpetrated by Belgium’s colonial rule only contributes to an erasure of the voices and histories of those who endured those violations. She recognizes the intense desire that people have to leave their bondage and their misfortune in the past, but believes strongly in the need to preserve such memories and stories in order to do justice to that which occurred.

Adah subsequently tells Orleanna about her desire to kill Nathan during their time in the Congo. She says of her father, “I imagined getting the kerosene and burning him up in his bed.” This statement is followed by an imaginary exchange between Orleanna and Adah. Orleanna’s voice asks, “*Then why didn’t you? Both of us together. You might as well have,*” to which Adah’s voice responds, “*Because then you would be free too. And I didn’t want that. I wanted*

*you to remember what he did to us.* Tall and straight I may appear, but I will always be Ada inside. A crooked little person trying to tell the truth. The power is in the balance: we are our injuries, as much as we are our successes” (496). Though the verbal conversation between the two women ends after Adah’s grim confession, Adah extends the dialogue in her mind. Her imaginary conversation reveals the full extent of her belief in the power of remembering; though she knows that death would have brought Orleanna peace, Adah wants her to “*remember what he did to us,*” to assume the burden of memory and maintain the words of a story that others will try to forget. The conviction with which Adah speaks and the resolve behind her commitment to preserving memories mark her as the strongest subversive voice within the guilt register and, indeed, within the novel as a whole. Not only does she denounce colonial and neo-colonial activity by expressing complicity, but she takes this expression to a more constructive level than her family members by confronting and accepting her once colonizing position within the historical narrative and striving to preserve a story that must be told.

Orleanna, Leah, and Adah all express guilt and complicity in ways that subvert, on some level, Nathan’s goals in the Congo. Though Kingsolver makes a number of blunders in this register—namely incorporating exotic descriptions of Africa and overemphasizing her characters’ desires to throw away their cultural identity and the burden that accompanies it—she nevertheless creates characters that differentiate themselves from their father’s mission. These women achieve subversion by creatively imagining alternative histories, by acknowledging their roles in their nation’s pursuits, by renouncing association with the colonizer and instead associating with the colonized, and by demonstrating a dedication to remembering and preserving the story of what happened in the Congo.

## Kikongo Register

The final subversive linguistic register, the Kikongo register, describes the ways in which various characters make use of this Congolese language in order to demonstrate both a respect for Kilanga's culture and a sense of subjectivity and variability to situations that Nathan has inevitably attempted to enclose within absolutist boundaries. Throughout the novel the Price family learns more and more Kikongo, and as they do so they turn to this language as a mode of expression that separates them from Nathan and allows them to develop new voices. As a result, this section again focuses primarily on Orleanna, Leah, and Adah.

One of the first things that the women notice in hearing a new language spoken around them is that each word possesses a variety of meanings depending on the emphasis given to different syllables. Orleanna and Leah both describe the unique sounds that they perceive in the Kikongo language. Orleanna refers to Kikongo as "a language that is not exactly spoken but sung. The same word slanted up or down the scale can have many different meanings" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 94). Leah states that the villagers "speak a language that burgles and rains from their mouths like water through a pipe" (105). Using words such as "sung," "burgles," and "rains," they both depict flowing sounds that contrast with the harsher tones that characterize Nathan's speech. Over time, their assessments of Kikongo change as they come to appreciate not only its beautiful sounds and its capacity for multiple meanings, but also the implications of these qualities. Most notably, their understanding of Kikongo comes in handy as they learn to pick out the flaws in Nathan's sermons. Adah says, "Our Father has a bone to pick with this world, and oh, he picks it like a sore. Picks it with the Word. His punishment is the Word, and his deficiencies are failures of words—as when he grows impatient with translation and strikes out precariously on his own, telling parables in his wildly half-baked Kikongo" (213).

Adah reveals the degree to which Nathan's livelihood and actions revolve around "the Word," and she equates his attempts at translating with an act of brashness—a "strik[ing] out"—bringing the violence of his language to the forefront.

As a result of Nathan's "wildly half-baked Kikongo," the Price women begin to use Kikongo to call attention to the irony behind Nathan's words (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 213). Orleanna and Adah both note the same irony that surfaces during church. Orleanna declares, "Yet we sang in church '*Tata Nzolo!*' which means *Father in Heaven* or *Father of Fish Bait* depending on just how you sing it, and that pretty well summed up my quandary" (96). Not only does Orleanna address the variability of the phrase that her family sings during congregations, but she relates the comical opposition in meaning to her own predicament; while she once believed in her aforementioned "righteousness," she now confronts the possibility that Nathan's religious views have acted as "bait," stringing her along on a wave of ideals that she sees bringing more harm than good in Kilanga. Adah expands on Orleanna's description:

Now I have found a language even more cynical than my own: in Kilanga the word *nzolo* is used in three different ways, at least. It means 'most dearly beloved.' Or it is a thick yellow grub highly prized for fish bait. Or it is a type of tiny potato that turns up in the market now and then, always sold in bunches that clump along the roots like knots on a string. And so we sing at the top of our lungs in church: "*Tata Nzolo!*" To whom are we calling? . . . "*Tata Nzolo!*" we sing, and I wonder what new, disgusting sins we commit each day, holding our heads high in sacred ignorance while our neighbors gasp, hand to mouth. (172)

While Adah comments on the ironic multiple meaning of "*Tata Nzolo*," she also reflects on all of the other, unknown language mistakes, or "sins," in which her family likely engages on a day-to-

day basis. Significantly, she suggests that the real “sins” are not those documented by her father, but those that disrespect and violate aspects of Kilanga culture. She extends this idea when she uses the phrase “sacred ignorance,” invoking the contradictory simultaneity at play.

The most notable instance of Nathan’s trans-lingual malapropisms is reflected in the novel’s title, *The Poisonwood Bible*. Both Leah and Adah discuss the mistake that contributes to this absurdity. Adah says:

“*Tata Jesus is bängala!*” declares the Reverend every Sunday at the end of his sermon.

More and more, mistrusting his interpreters, he tries to speak in Kikongo. He throws back his head and shouts these words to the sky, while his lambs sit scratching themselves in wonder. *Bängala* means something precious and dear. But the way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree. Praise the Lord, hallelujah, my friends! for Jesus will make you itch like nobody’s business. (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 276)

In her mocking commentary, Adah alludes to the poisonwood tree’s capacity to induce extreme rashes and itching when it comes into contact with skin—Nathan has unintentionally assigned this property to Jesus. Adah calls ironic attention to Nathan’s mistrust and hints that the villagers, who he ignorantly terms his “lambs,” have much greater reason to doubt the truth of Nathan’s own words.

Leah similarly criticizes Nathan’s “poisonwood” mishap, though she directs more attention to Kikongo’s role in liberating her mind from Nathan’s rigid grip. Kilpatrick writes, “In the recharting of her identity, Leah allows a formerly colonized language, Kikongo, to become the tongue by which she defines herself. This self-definition, done intentionally, reinscribes meaning because it occupies a formerly colonized tongue and person with a new refusal to be subjugated” (104). Over the years, during which Leah remains in the Congo to

marry and live with Anatole, Kikongo indeed becomes a second language to her, and one that allows her to establish distance from her father's overpowering voice. She says of Nathan,

But the practice of speaking a rich, tonal language to my neighbors has softened his voice in my ear. I hear the undertones now that shimmer under the surface of the words *right* and *wrong*. We used to be baffled by Kikongo words with so many different meanings: *bängala*, for *most precious* and *most insufferable* and also *poisonwood*. That one word brought down Father's sermons every time, as he ended them all with the shout "Tata Jesus is *bängala*!" (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood* 504-5).

Speaking Kikongo has instilled a sense of multiplicity and subjectivity in Leah, and this newfound sensitivity to language affords her the opportunity to reflect on the radical ignorance with which her father once spoke to the villagers in Kilanga.

Using Kikongo to subvert Western authority in *The Poisonwood Bible* is perhaps Kingsolver's greatest strength, as the incorporation of this Congolese language directs attention towards the culture to which Kingsolver seeks to do justice. This register gains its subversive tone in a number of ways; Orleanna, Leah, and Adah note the ironies that accompany Nathan's misuse of Kikongo, they point to the differences between Nathan's harsh sounds and Kikongo's pleasant, musical quality, and they discover and elucidate a subjectivity present in the Kikongo language that reflects a more general subjectivity that Nathan fails to grasp.

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In the above chapter I have focused on three subversive linguistic registers—the inversion register, the guilt register, and the Kikongo register. These three registers constitute the core of Kingsolver's efforts to problematize dominant Western discourses in her novel and to construct a new, liberating rhetoric. Whereas the first chapter discusses those registers that

contain colonizing language and rhetoric, the second chapter demonstrates the ways in which Kingsolver criticizes and undermines the hegemonic language characteristic of Nathan Price, the United States, and Belgium. The three registers in this chapter function very differently from one another. Throughout the novel, many characters employ sarcastic and oppositional language characteristic of the inversion register, deconstructing and refuting Biblical and political rhetoric. On the other hand, Orleanna, Leah, and Adah are the three primary characters whose language inhabits the guilt and the Kikongo registers. Recognizing and regretting their involvement in their nation's imperial pursuits and in Nathan's dogmatic mission, these women express their guilt and complicity and thereby revoke any allegiance that they had to the aforementioned bodies. They further their subversion and rejection of Western paradigms by rejoicing in the intricacies of the local Congolese language—Kikongo. In these three registers, Kingsolver constructs a rhetoric that criminalizes and denounces Western paradigms.

Despite the clear anti-Western sentiment communicated in *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver's novel loses strength insofar as it limits the capacities of its African characters, shrouds the African continent in exoticism, rejects the burden of white guilt, and borrows from other cultures' traditions and characteristics, among other things. By focusing on such aspects of her work and the work of other Western authors, we, as readers, can continue to locate areas of Western writing about Africa that require improvement. Language possesses the immense power to shape our understanding of the world, and we therefore must call on our scholars and on ourselves to recognize that power and to use it for good (however subjective that may be...).

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