The Gospel of Cosmopolitanism: Conflict Resolution in Barbara Kingsolver's Fiction

Catherine Altmaier
Western Kentucky University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/439

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses & Specialist Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.
THE GOSPEL OF COSMOPOLITANISM:
CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER’S FICTION

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Catherine Colvin Altmaier
May 2006
THE GOSPEL OF COSMOPOLITANISM:
CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S FICTION

April 7, 2006

Date Recommended

Kelly Reames
Director of Thesis

Ted Hart

Elizabette

Elmer Gray
Dean, Graduate Studies and Research
5/11/06
Date
If it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes a few family members, some good friends, a handful of incredibly intelligent professors, and a superb coffeehouse to write a thesis...or at least my thesis. A tremendous thanks goes to Justin and all of the fine baristas at Spencer’s Coffeehouse for providing me with highly caffeinated sustenance, as well as their much-appreciated camaraderie, in my time of need. My gratitude also extends to my small group, whose encouragement reminded me regularly of the importance of life outside of the hallowed halls of Cherry. Also, those friends, especially Corey, who patiently responded to the multitude of e-mails I sent while “working” on my thesis are blessings beyond compare. My family has continued their gentle mix of concern and support, a combination that has served me well throughout all of the challenges of my life. Without the playful haranguing of Dr. Kelly Reames, this thesis would be far shorter, much less comprehensible, and probably not even finished. If I did anything right, it was to pick an extraordinary thesis chair. And finally, I don’t know if I can find sufficient words to express how wonderful my husband has been throughout the whole process. But I’ll try. His patience in dealing with a woman who wants to do everything herself but hasn’t the time is unparalleled. His willingness to listen to my worries, frustrations, and complaints when he has plenty of his own is masterful. He is far better to me than I deserve, and the completion of this thesis is surely to his credit.
# Table of Contents

Abstract \hspace{4cm} v

**Cosmopolitanism and *The Poisonwood Bible*** \hspace{4cm} 1

Orleanna \hspace{4cm} 5

Leah \hspace{4cm} 15

Rachel \hspace{4cm} 25

Adah \hspace{4cm} 38

*_Prodigal Summer*, Cosmopolitanism, and Terence \hspace{4cm} 48

Works Cited \hspace{4cm} 58
Despite Barbara Kingsolver’s ability to create unique characters and storylines, two factors remain constant throughout each of her novels: strong female protagonists and conflict resolution. Though conflict exists in almost all fiction, the way that Kingsolver’s characters deal with their situations often speaks louder than any other aspect of her writing. Moreover, though her characters often vary wildly from story to story, their methods of conflict resolution seem to undoubtedly connect them.

Through her continuing desire to emphasize “the question of individualism and communal identity,” (Reading Group Guides) Kingsolver often promotes the ideas of cosmopolitanism, which have recently been articulated by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Appiah argues that cosmopolitanism can be represented by two main ideas: “One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship,” while the other is “that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance” (*Cosmopolitanism* xv). Though Appiah presents a compelling rationale for
cosmopolitanism in postcolonial international relations, Kingsolver applies the same theories not only to global relationships but to personal conflict as well.

While each of Kingsolver’s novels could be explored for the theories of cosmopolitanism they demonstrate, *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Prodigal Summer* provide the best foundation for an examination of their broad applications of cosmopolitanism. Within *The Poisonwood Bible*, Orleanna, Leah, Rachel, and Adah Price are forced to deal with the international issues concerning the United States and the Congo, which directly affect their lives, as well as personal conflicts that range from quarrelling sisters to death and divorce. Throughout each struggle they face, they regularly apply at least one aspect of cosmopolitanism. Moreover, their most effective moments of conflict resolution come when they more precisely adhere to the tenets of cosmopolitanism. In *Prodigal Summer*, however, Kingsolver is primarily exploring the use of cosmopolitanism in more personal matters through the story of Lusa Landowski Widener. Though Lusa is not involved with any kind of international politics, it is the ideologies behind cosmopolitanism that allows her to reclaim her life after the loss of her husband while taking responsibility for her choices and becoming more accepting of those she does not understand.

Appiah argues that, “A tenable global ethics has to temper a respect for difference with a respect for the freedom of actual human beings to make their own choices” (“Case” 30). Though Kingsolver would agree, she would further contend that such an idea should be more than a doctrine of “global ethics.” Instead, cosmopolitanism should be applied to common, every day decisions in order to make greater change in the world. In *The Poisonwood Bible and Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver demonstrates the efficacy of such an application of cosmopolitanism.
COSMOPOLITANISM AND *THE POISONWOOD BIBLE*

When Barbara Kingsolver published her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, she received mixed reviews. Though her story was compelling and entertaining, she was highly criticized for her negative representation of the Cherokee Nation. Kingsolver, who had unintentionally misrepresented them, had failed to provide a proper place in *Bean Trees* for the Cherokee people to state their case and, thereby, represented them stereotypically and, specifically, as people indifferent to the welfare of their children. Unexpectedly, Kingsolver agreed with the accusation and publicly apologized for not properly addressing the Nation. Moreover, she chose to give them a second chance to speak in a later novel, *Pigs in Heaven*. Her humility and willingness to admit her mistake, though completely uncharacteristic of the literary world, is telling of Kingsolver’s dedication to truth-telling, particularly concerning the awareness and acceptance of unfamiliar cultures.

Kingsolver fervently denies that *Pigs in Heaven* is a direct sequel to *The Bean Trees* and that she wrote it solely to appease her critics. Rather, she admits that, since writing *Bean Trees*, she has begun to emphasize, in her life and in her writing, “the question of individualism and communal identity—which is not just a thematic question, but also a very real and delicate political one” (*Reading Group Guides*). With that issue preeminent in her thinking, she chose to readdress the characters of *The Bean Trees* in *Pigs in Heaven* in order to properly and fairly discuss the position of the Cherokee Nation.

Following her experience with these novels, Kingsolver has approached every issue she writes about with respect to “the question of individualism and communal identity.” Whether telling three unrelated stories of women in Appalachian Kentucky, as
in *Prodigal Summer*, or the intertwined stories of the four daughters of a Baptist Missionary in 1960s Congo in *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver always represents the ways that individuals are influenced and affected by their communities and how just one individual can change, positively or negatively, her or his surroundings.

Even when exploring the lives of women in rural America, Kingsolver’s themes carry international weight. She notes that:

> The way [Americans] construct ideas about self and family are very much at odds with the rest of the world . . . The ideals and mythologies that hold us together as a nation are mainly about glorifying the individual, glorifying independence . . . If you look anyplace else in the world that's simply not the case. It's an aberration, but we think of it as the norm. *(Reading Group Guides)*

Consequently, the conflicts in her more recent novels, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) and *Prodigal Summer* (2001), possess both national and international implications. The ways that each of her main characters handles the complications in their lives often reflect attitudes of international association.

Although Kingsolver’s characters differ considerably in terms of their personalities and, therefore, have substantially diverse methods of coping with conflict, she portrays their growth during, through, and following various levels of conflict in their lives. Through this development and maturation, she is able to distinguish the advantages of a cosmopolitan method of resolution, whether the characters are dealing with international politics or sibling rivalry.

Though dating back “at least to the Cynics of fourth century BC” (Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* xiv), the principles of cosmopolitanism have recently been articulated by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* and his *New York Times* article “The Case for Contamination.” Appiah
vehemently argues that cosmopolitanism is the most effective stance for contemporary global relations. He provides two main tenets to cosmopolitanism: “One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship,” while the other is “that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance” (*Cosmopolitanism* xv). Both of these tenets come to be championed by various Kingsolver characters, particularly in *The Poisonwood Bible*.

In the opening pages of *The Poisonwood Bible*, Orleanna Price propositions her readers:

> Consider, even, an Africa unconquered altogether. 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? (7-8)

Orleanna has this idyllic vision of an untouched Africa because she has seen what the ravenous hearts and hands of Africa’s intruders, including her own family, have done and continue to do to the people of what the trespassers termed the “Dark Continent.” She, too, has been victimized by the unwillingness of outsiders to leave Africa alone.

Orleanna is one of five narrators of *The Poisonwood Bible*, the other four being her daughters, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May. She is the only one, however, blessed with hindsight in her authorship, as her daughters’ tales are generally written in present tense as their stories proceed. Thus, as she reflects on her family’s experience in Africa, which begins with her husband Nathan’s need to shed the light of Christianity onto the
“dark” lives of the Congolese¹, she reveals a painful sense of longing for what could never be and immediately lets the reader know that, not only was her experience in Africa agonizing, but Africa has been twisted and prodded so much that the continent itself seems to mourn continually.

As for the Price women themselves, their accounts may form a comprehensive whole, but each narrative tells an entirely different tale. Thrown into the same situation, their varying styles of coping with their circumstances ensure that each comes out of the experience with distinctly separate bruises, beliefs, and ambitions. Originally bound together by their uniqueness in the Congo, they emerge as pointedly altered individuals, shaped by their particular methods of conflict resolution. Though not a blatant political commentary, Kingsolver’s attempt in The Poisonwood Bible to explore individual and communal identity and how the two can work together makes a bold statement that advocates the principles of cosmopolitanism and demonstrates how they can be applied to everyday conflict as well as international political relations.

¹ Though the Congo’s name does change to Zaire within the course of the novel, for ease of comprehension it will be referred to as the Congo throughout the whole of this essay.
Orleanna Price was never enthusiastic about journeying to the Congo. For her, Africa was a place too far away from everything her family knew, it was too unknown, and it was too unstable. Though she strived to prepare herself and her children by packing everything she thought they could not live without, her mind could not possibly have anticipated what was awaiting her family in the Congo.

Orleanna’s narration is used only to open each section of *The Poisonwood Bible* and, thus, her reminiscent chapters are few. Her story portrays a woman pleading for mercy and forgiveness; she is a woman whose heart remains with the daughter she buried in the Congo, though her own body never wants to go back. She introduces the story by imploring the reader to “Imagine a ruin so strange it must never have happened” (5). Because she goes on to describe the landscape of Africa, it is easy to assume that the ruin she dwells on is the hurt and angry continent of Africa. Her experience, however, is too personal simply to be a country that she can’t escape. Rather, Orleanna’s grief and mourning for her lost child, husband, and life is permanently bound to the suffering of Africa, so her grief for the country reflects her deeper personal anguish.

Though Orleanna’s sections are by far the fewest, their progression reflects her and her daughters’ attempts to reconcile their personal experience with that of the Congolese. As her narrative begins, she focuses on Africa as a whole and her family’s communal responsibility for the country’s suffering. Slowly, however, her focus turns to her personal grief for Ruth May, her youngest and favorite who died in Africa. By the end of her sections, however, she seems to have bound together her grief for Ruth May and her guilt regarding Africa’s suffering so much so that she cannot effectively deal with
either. Thus, she spends the rest of her life mourning but can never move on because her inability to focus on either Africa or Ruth May prevents her from fully reconciling her guilt.

Initially Orleanna’s thoughts center on Africa and her family’s culpability in the continent’s undoing. Imitating biblical language, she remarks that her family “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 uninformed, where only darkness moved on the face of the waters” (10). She primarily recognizes her family’s ignorance as pride. She acknowledges that they thought “Only that it began and ended with us,” and though she does not directly admit that their thinking was in error, her tone leaves little doubt that she regrets her family’s devastating arrogance (10). Moreover, she accepts at least part of the blame for the turmoil in Africa, feeling that her family did nothing but add to the unrest.

When Orleanna next speaks in the narrative, however, she is unable to mask her personal pain. She seems perpetually reflective as she says, “Once every few years, even now, I catch the scent of Africa. It makes me want to keen, sing, clap up thunder, lie down at the foot of a tree and let the worms take whatever of me they can still use. I find it impossible to bear” (87). At this point, though we know that Orleanna is living in Georgia as she writes, her inability to escape thoughts of Africa becomes glaringly obvious.

As Orleanna ages and her time in Africa feels farther and farther away from her, she begins to dwell on the effects Africa has had on her. Not only does she realize that she has been unable to mentally remove herself from the continent itself, but she cannot
seem to find the strength or the will to conquer her grief from the loss of Ruth May. Late in her tale she comments, “You’ve played some trick on the dividing of my cells so my body can never be free of the small parts of Africa it consumed. Africa, where one of my children remains in the dank red earth. It’s the scent of accusation” (87). The “you” that Orleanna talks directly to follows her throughout her narrative, though there is no clear indication who it is she writes for. At times it seems that she addresses her story to Ruth May, but other times she appears to be addressing Africa itself. In the aforementioned quote, for instance, she mentions both Africa and her deceased child, which makes it seem like neither of them is her audience. And yet, she seems to actually address both of them. In her last section of the book, while defending herself to her audience, she says:

If you are the eyes in the trees, watching us as we walk away from Kilanga, how will you make your judgment? Lord knows after thirty years I still crave your forgiveness, but who are you? A small burial mound in the middle of Nathan’s garden . . . Is that what you are? Are you still my own flesh and blood, my last-born, or are you now the flesh of Africa? How can I tell the difference when the two rivers have run together so? (385)

Orleanna, it seems, cannot separate the grief of losing her youngest child from the guilt of invading Africa and then walking away without helping the struggling country. Moreover, she acknowledges the possibility of Ruth May’s and Africa’s becoming one, at least in her mind. Her not being able to tell the difference between Ruth May as her daughter and Ruth May as “the flesh of Africa” demonstrates the complexity surrounding her grief. Because she has so joined the two experiences, Africa’s suffering and Ruth May’s death, she cannot fully deal with either of them.

Her constant connection to Africa becomes continually apparent as she makes more obvious the guilt she feels over her role in Africa’s pain. She accuses herself by
saying, “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” (89). Moreover, she condemns herself: “How can I ever walk free in the world, after the clap of those hands in the marketplace that were plainly trying to send me away? I had warnings. How can I bear the scent of what catches up to me?” (89). In between these two statements, however, she begs forgiveness of Ruth May as she says, “Oh, little beast, little favorite. Can’t you see I died as well?” (89). Orleanna blames herself equally for Ruth May’s death and Africa’s struggles. This joint guilt forces her to live in a sort of limbo, a place where she cannot reconcile her guilt and, thus, cannot forget or even ignore the past.

One of the main reasons that Orleanna finds it impossible to progress is because she cannot mourn publicly, either for her daughter or for hurting Africa. She does not even attempt to discuss the loss she’s suffered with her children, though they have had to deal with the same grief in their own ways. In fact, Adah admits that she decides to speak because, upon returning to America, Orleanna persistently declines to talk. After returning to Georgia and finding herself regarded as a lunatic for having been “tainted by darkest Africa and probably heathen” (407), Orleanna decides to keep her grief and pain to herself, presuming (probably correctly) that no one who had not shared the experience would understand. Moreover, Orleanna tells Adah that “Not one woman in Bethlehem ever asked me how Ruth May died” (495). Her loss remains her owns because no one else is willing to share it with her. Adah says that her mother is “determined to grow tragedy out of herself like a bad haircut” (408), but she does so by maintaining momentum, not by acknowledging her grief or dealing with it.
Judith Butler, in her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, discusses the negative implications of contemporary ideas of mourning, particularly that grief should remain personal, kept within the confines of family and extremely close friends. Butler, however, believes that it is imperative for people to deprivatize mourning, not only so that grief can become more manageable but also so that people, particularly in Western cultures, will begin to recognize the universality of human life through the comparable pain that people experience while mourning.

More than simply making it more difficult to manage grief, Butler argues that the privatization of mourning has devastating political ramifications. By choosing to confine mourning only to the lives of those affected by death, it has become considerably easier to disregard the fact that death is a universal experience, whether it be the death of an American, an Iranian, or a Kilangan. She therefore proposes to “consider a dimension of political life that has to do with . . . our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions” (19).

Butler further notes that in a world astonishingly full of violence, it has become too easy to ignore the loss and grief of unknown lives because mourning is something that is not expressed publicly. Therefore, condemnation has become far too effortless for people, whether through negligence, disregard, or hostility, the lives of others without regarding the loss that will surround them. “If violence is done against those who are unreal,” she notes, “then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated” (33). Thus, “Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as ‘grievable’” (32). To avoid
such dismissal of loss and grief across the world, Butler contends that it is necessary to acknowledge grief publicly.

Looking at both the personal and public implications of privatized mourning, Butler believes that such privatization not only exacerbates grief but also dehumanizes others who are mourning. She questions, “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What makes for a grievable life?” (20). In Orleanna’s experience, for instance, her grief does not even seem to count to the people of Bethlehem, Georgia because her loss happened in a country other than their own. They do not recognize the severe grief associated with the loss of Ruth May; her death does not register because it happened too far out of their peripheral. Mourning, in Butler’s estimation, has become so exclusive that American society cannot or will not recognize the need to mourn deaths that happen outside of their line of sight.

However, Butler seems to feel that there is a real possibility of overcoming the separateness that too many feel from people they do not come into direct contact with. She expresses the idea that, “Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a ‘we,’ for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody” (20). Though Orleanna’s return to Bethlehem creates a feeling of “otherness” and alienation, her experience in Kilanga represents an entirely different reaction. When Ruth May dies, Orleanna and her daughters become overwhelmingly aware of the universal sense of grief that Butler refers to. As the women of Kilanga crawl on their knees to the edge of the Price’s lawn to mourn for Ruth May, Leah recognizes the commonness of death: “All of them had lost children before, it dawned on me through my shock. Our suffering now was no greater than theirs had been, no more
real or tragic. No different” (371-70 emphasis mine). Though the Prices had entered the Congo believing that they had little to nothing in common with their African neighbors, Ruth May’s death makes it impossible for them to ignore the connections they share, grief being the most alarmingly obvious. For Butler, this is natural:

When we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are, as we already are, as we have always been, as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself. Instead, in this asking, in the petition, we have already become something new . . . (44)

Orleanna’s choice to observe Ruth May’s death in the Kilangan tradition, by laying her on a table in their front yard, under a shroud of mosquito netting and a funeral arch made of palm fronds, rather than hiding her in a casket to be observed only by close friends and family as she would have done in America, both recognizes her neighbors and asks them to recognize her and her family. It is an invitation for commonality.

Moreover, though the Price women leave Kilanga directly after Ruth May’s death and impromptu funeral, they no longer feel entirely separate from the villagers. Butler argues that mourning “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (22). Pointedly, Ruth May’s death seems to have the same effect on many members of the Kilanga village as well. Leah notes that many of the children remained in their yard staring at Ruth May for an extended period of time and supposes, “they were as astonished as we were that a member of our family was capable of death” (372). Realizing that the Price family is susceptible to death allows the villagers, particularly the children, to become more sympathetic towards their would-be colonizers. Each group, then, the Price women and
the children of Kilanga, begins to see the other as less of an “other” because they realize an undeniable connection: death. Because of this connection, Orleanna begins to attach her grief over losing Ruth May to her guilt for her role in Africa’s suffering.

For Orleanna, however, her awareness of communal grief is a double-edged sword. One consequence of her understanding is that her grief is prolonged. Butler contends that “When grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order” (29-30). Because Orleanna recognizes the universality of grief, she doesn’t force herself to move on. Whether this is positive or negative effect is debatable, but it certainly affects the remainder of her life.

Orleanna’s awareness is inarguably positive in that, obviously, it makes her mindful of the opportunities she has to make a difference in Africa and in her own country. She claims, “My life was a business of growing where planted and making good on the debts life gathered onto me” (384). Part of those debts includes her lack of action in Africa. For this, she temporarily becomes a crusader. Adah says that as a civil rights marcher, her mother was “very good at it, and impervious to danger... I think bullets would pass right through her” (442). Though Orleanna may not recognize her own strength or the impact she has on others, seen or unseen, Adah, who was always the daughter most critical of her mother, admires how hard Orleanna fights. In light of the causes Orleanna takes on, Adah claims that righting wrongs has become her mother’s religion. Orleanna refuses to live a life of quiet desperation. Instead, she raises money for Leah, her relentless daughter in Africa, and continually works for equality worldwide.
Working to heal Africa is her penance, and her desire to do so derives directly from her
grief, which remains permanently tied to her state of mourning for the loss of Ruth May.

Butler asks, "Can this situation of mourning—one that is so dramatic for those in
social movements who have undergone innumerable losses—supply a perspective by
which to begin to apprehend the contemporary global situation?" (28). In relation to
Orleanna’s experiences, the answer certainly seems to be yes. More than urging her to
work as a civil rights activist, Orleanna’s entire frame of mind is changed. Whereas she
was once content to be dragged into a foreign continent against her will and turn her head
from not only the tragedies that were already present, but also those that her family
(particularly her husband) caused, following Ruth May’s death she seems relentless in
her desire to advance Africa. Had the people of Bethlehem embraced Orleanna’s need to
mourn and welcomed the opportunity to listen to her experiences, her fervent desire to
save Africa may have been adopted by some of the listeners. At the very least, they
would become more aware of the situation in Africa. In fact, Butler argues that public
mourning “might (or could) effect a transformation in our sense of international ties that
would crucially rearticulate the possibility of democratic political culture here and
elsewhere” (40). The effect of public mourning would, of course, vary. However,
because Orleanna’s mourning remains private, she never gives the people around her the
opportunity to learn about the problems in Africa as only Orleanna could tell them.

Orleanna has no desire to move back to Africa. Though she does revisit the
continent towards the end of her life, she never considers herself African. What she does
desire is a tolerance and an acceptance of and from the continent that changed her entire
world. Orleanna would surely agree with Appiah’s urging that:
we should learn about people in other places, take an interest in their civilizations, their arguments, their errors, their achievements, not because that will bring us to agreement but because it will help us get used to one another—something we have a powerful need to do in this globalized era.

. . . Understanding one another may be hard; it can certainly be interesting. ("Case" 30)

Africa took from Orleanna, but it took only a fraction of what she feels she, her family, and her country took from it. The grief that remains with her after Africa forces her into a state of permanent mourning that directs the path of her life. However, because she chooses to deal with her grief in such a private manner, she does not allow herself to believe that others might learn from her pain. Butler confronts her reader when she asks, "What are the cultural barriers against which we struggle when we try to find out about the losses that we are asked not to mourn, when we attempt to name, and so to bring under the rubric of the 'human'" those unmentioned victims of political violence (46)? By not asking others to mourn for either Ruth May or Africa, by allowing her mourning to remain private, Orleanna allows her friends and acquaintances to continue to live in ignorance. Her grief remains private because she feels that it is her burden to bear alone, but by doing so, she allows others to continue to turn away from Africa and their communal guilt in the country’s suffering. For Orleanna, “The sins of the father [and mother] are not discussed. That’s how it is” (495). And because that’s “how it is,” she remains haunted by the guilt of what could have and should have been.
LEAH

Throughout *The Poisonwood Bible*, Leah Price unarguably undergoes the greatest ideological changes. Initially her father’s most devoted follower, Leah enters the Congo with a religious zeal to assist Nathan in all of his pastoral endeavors. Though irrevocably linked to her faith in God, her faith in her father begins to wane during her family’s stay in Africa. She slowly begins to recognize gaps in her father’s truths and replaces his thinking with her own unwavering convictions. Both the most changed and the least changed, Leah cannot escape her father’s inability to embrace more than one belief at a time and, therefore, is never able to accept her role in adulthood as an “American-African.” For Leah, one can only be one or the other.

Upon her family’s arrival in Africa, Leah immediately sets herself apart by being the one who isn’t afraid to go outside. While her mother and sisters seclude themselves in their small (though luxurious, by standards of the Congo) home, Leah ventures outside into the world of the unknown because she “preferred to help [her] father work on his garden,” which was to be their “first African miracle” (35-36). Leah, as her father’s most devout, though unnoticed, disciple, swallows every word that her father speaks as though it’s the life-sustaining oxygen she breathes. His beliefs are her sustenance, and she never considers an alternative. The Leah that enters Africa does everything for two main reasons: “because I crave heaven and to be my father’s favorite” (66).

Ironically, however, she shows signs of a deeper understanding of her father’s true nature far before she consciously chooses against him. She remarks, “I believe in God with all my might, but have been thinking lately that most of the details seem pretty much beneath His dignity” (37), just as her father sets himself apart from the details of
his family. After detailing how she, her sisters, and her mother carried all kinds of household goods attached to their bodies so that they could bring more to Africa than the airline’s weight restrictions allowed, she quickly remarks that “My father, of course, was bringing the Word of God—which fortunately weighs nothing at all” (19). Though she cannot yet consider the possibility of her father’s fallibility, Leah does notice his limitations.

The main difference between Leah and her father is her persistent devotion. Nathan is “always the first to spot flaws and transgressions” (41) with everyone but his God. Leah, on the other hand, has a tendency to choose teams and be utterly devoted to those on her side and absolutely condemnatory of her opponents, a trait that will be heightened as her first alliances fall apart. Though their fierce devotion is seemingly indistinguishable, Nathan never forms allegiances to anyone but God. He is a one-man show backed by his faith. Though often just as critical as her father, Leah at least allows herself to form strong, emotional relationships with some of the people around her. She never knows her father to do that.

Leah’s ideological bulwark finally begins to crumble as her eyes are opened to the differences between an American child and an African child, more specifically the fact that, particularly in Africa, “the whole idea and business of Childhood was nothing guaranteed” (114). As she recognizes that what little childhood there is in Africa centers on survival, just as African adulthood does, she begins to acknowledge that life is not as simple as her missionary father envisions. Right and wrong are not always clear-cut choices, and Leah notices that, “For the first time ever I felt a stirring of anger against my
father for making me a white preacher’s child from Georgia. This wasn’t my fault” (115). And yet, she can’t help looking for blame elsewhere.

Leah cannot find a face to attach her blame to, however, until she begins to transfer her allegiances. When Anatole Ngemba enters the Prices’ lives, Leah begins to associate herself more with the Congolese surrounding her. After all, how could she, a greedy, capitalist American, place blame on the hurting Africans? Blame, she begins to believe, lies with her own countrymen, and in an attempt to disassociate herself from the guilt, she begins to align herself with the Congolese. Anatole makes her association more personal. Before she knows it, she finds herself daydreaming of “a father with shiny black arms pulling fish from the river and a mother with dark, heavy breasts pounding manioc in a wooden trough” (225). The mother, though dark complexioned, is obviously the role Leah sees herself in, as she immediately forces herself to recite the Repentance Psalm for having what her father would have deemed an impure thought. However, Leah questions exactly which sin she had committed to make her ask for Repentance, even wondering if it was “something more vague about being true to your own race and kind” (225), the problem for Leah being that she is becoming unsure which kind she is.

Leah’s attempted progression from American to (pseudo-) African moves forward as her relationship with Anatole progresses. At one point she remarks, “I can scarcely remember how he first looked to us, when we were shocked by the scars on his face. Now I could only see Anatole the man, square-shouldered and narrow-hipped in his white shirt and black trousers, Anatole with his ready smile and lively walk” (226). Whereas she could once see only his scars, she now notices “many other interesting features besides the scars, such as almond-shaped eyes and a finely pointed chin” (226-27).
Though Leah has begun to look past the category and see the man, she retains her penchant for classifying in concrete binaries. Leah simply cannot break through her father’s tendency to ignore the possibility of grey areas; her world exists in realms of right or wrong and good or bad. Thus, as she begins to see Anatole as a good and just man, her father and his opinions that she had once held dear become discriminatory and wrong. While speaking with Anatole, she notices her tendency to fain intelligence and realizes that by observing her father she has “seen how you can’t learn anything when you’re trying to look like the smartest person in the room” (229). Moreover, she begins to understand the problems that occur when one is too closed-minded to recognize differing points of view. She may disagree with the Kilangan tradition of having multiple wives, for instance, but through Anatole’s example, she understands that she will have no chance of convincing them to live monogamously if she ostracizes them for their beliefs. Leah may learn to adopt the convictions of a more reader-friendly character, but her personal opinions remain hardened nonetheless, at least for the time being.

Despite her growing animosity towards her birth country, Leah seems to become a more gentle character as her heart melts for her adopted countrymen. She laments:

I wish the people back home reading magazine stories about dancing cannibals could see something as ordinary as Anatole’s clean white shirt and kind eyes, or Mama Mwanza and her children. If the word ‘Congo’ makes people think of that big-lipped cannibal man in the cartoon, why, they’re just wrong about everything here from top to bottom. (235)

Leah begins to be particularly set apart from her father at this point because of her ability to love. When she first came to the Congo, she looked at its inhabitants as projects to be cultivated like her father’s Kentucky Wonder beans. However, as Anatole becomes more rooted in her life, she acquires the ability to see her Congolese neighbors and friends as
actual people, to be pitied, loved, mourned for, just like anyone else. Moreover, she admits that “she envied” (234) the Congolese for their family ties and endurance. Looking at Mama Mwanza, who had lost both of her legs, interacting with her daughters and son, Leah yearns for the connection they feel for each other: “Their family had seen so much of hardship, yet it still seemed easy for them to laugh with each other” (234). Despite her initial feeling that she, like her father, would be the teacher, Leah begins to discover that she can learn just as much, if not more, from the Kilangans. Though her opinions remain as resolute as her father’s, if nothing else, she learns how to be a more merciful version of him.

However, Leah’s transfer of affection, devotion, and discipleship from her father to Anatole is not a simple alteration but rather a gradual process involving multiple revelations. At one point she ponders, “If his [Nathan’s] decision to keep us here in the Congo wasn’t right, then what else might he be wrong about? It has opened up in my heart a sickening world of doubts and possibilities, where before I had only faith in my father and love for the Lord.” Moreover, she recognizes that “Without the rock of certainty underfoot, the Congo is a fearsome place to have to sink or swim” (244). Leah begins to realize that the world is not as evenly divided into neat binaries as her father would have her believe; she starts to realize that there is more than right and wrong, good and evil, or black and white. For the first time, she sees the multitudinous shades of grey that her father misses, or ignores.

As her frustration with her father grows, flaws in his thinking become apparent: “My father thinks the Congo is just lagging behind and he can help bring it up to snuff. Which is crazy. It’s like he’s trying to put rubber tires on a horse” (284). By pitting
herself again her father, a self-appointed beacon of the West, she aligns herself firmly with Africa. She gradually begins to set herself apart from the Western views of her family, and particularly those of her father.

Even before she marries Anatole and gives birth to African children, Leah, for all intents and purposes, stops being purely an American. Her final divorce from the country of her birth occurs when Ruth May dies. Though she places the blame for Ruth May's death squarely on her father's shoulders, grasping for the first time the grief and mourning that the Congolese live with daily prevents her from seeing herself solely as American. Such a clear understanding of Congolese life ingratiates her into the society and the culture. Suddenly, she sees no differences (internally anyway) between herself and the Congolese: “All of [the Kilangan women] had lost children before, it dawned on me through my shock. Our suffering now was no greater than theirs had been, no more real or tragic. No different” (370-31). While watching the women wail at the edge of the table Ruth May's body lies on, Leah suddenly feels part of their communal anguish, rather than only her own private sorrow. As they mourn for her sister, she says, “I knew I should join them, but I felt unaccountably afraid to get close to the table. I stayed at the back of the group” (371). Leah, subconsciously perhaps, knows that she is not African, nor will she ever be. However, she no longer feels American, either. Her suffering is joined with theirs. So even though she stays at the back of their group, she is part of their group for the first time.

After choosing to align herself with the Congolese, Leah becomes increasingly aggrieved and indignant towards the position that the Congo has been put in. Leah initially, like her sisters, had appreciated being able to tell the Kilangans apart by the
Western clothing they wore day in and day out. Rachel points out that the “Children dressed up in the ragbags of Baptist charity or nothing at all” (43). Leah, however, eventually sees their Western clothing as an encumbrance “imposed on them by foreigners” (375). Like cultural preservationists, Appiah would argue, Leah believes that the Kilangans “have no real choice” (30) but to succumb to the pressures of Western culture that are being imposed upon them. More personally, her own father is directly responsible, at least in part, for the Kilangans wearing clothing constantly, “which . . . was only for our benefit, I knew, after Father’s blowup over the little dress code problem” (47). Nathan could not handle the children’s nakedness and, thus, forces them to adhere to the Western custom of covering themselves in public. Leah sees that he is guilty of attempting to force the Kilangans to conform to Western ideology and feels guilty by association.

Moreover, Leah worries about the effect that Western culture will still have on the Kilangans. In a discussion on cultural “purists,” Appiah notes that their “fear is that the values and images of Western mass culture, like some invasive weed, are threatening to choke out the world’s native flora” (“Case” 30). Anatole, however, sees the influences of Western culture as a choice for Kilanga. “People need to know what they are choosing,” he asserts. “I’ve watched many white men come into our house, always bringing things we never saw before . . . Some of these things seem very handy, and some turn out to be not so handy. It is important to distinguish” (286). Anatole recognizes that, like any other culture (including the West), Kilanga is a growing, changing community. He realizes, like Appiah, that “Cultures are made of continuities and changes, and the idea of a society can survive through these changes. Societies without change aren’t authentic;
they’re just dead” (“Case” 30). Though Anatole does not want Western culture to be *forced* onto the Congo, he does recognize the advantage of many of the advancements that are imported to Kilanga.

From following her exodus from Kilanga, Leah becomes a fierce advocate for the preservation of the Congolese ways of life. According to Appiah, her passionate devotion to the customs of the Congo is to be expected. He argues that, “It’s no accident that the West’s fiercest adversaries among other societies tend to come from among the most Westernized of the group” (“Case” 30). After all, Appiah points out as he continues that the “independence movements of the postwar world that led to the end of Europe’s African and Asian empires were driven by the rhetoric that had guided the Allies’ own struggle against Germany and Japan: *democracy, freedom, equality*” (“Case” 30 emphasis mine). Leah is perhaps more frustrated by the atrocities occurring in Africa than the many Africans themselves because *she* can see the difference. She knows the extravagance that the people taking advantage of Africa are accustomed to, and it enrages her that her native countrymen are willing to leave her adopted country so impoverished and wounded. She has been taught that all people are equal and are deserving of success, wealth, and happiness. Therefore, when she sees the most prosperous nation in the world taking advantage of one of the poorest, it goes against every Western ideology she possesses.

Later, while hiding in the convent during Anatole’s imprisonment, Leah argues that the war the Congo is fighting in is not actually the will of the people. Rather, she asserts that “It’s no more their war than it is God’s will be done. It’s the doing of the damned Belgians and Americans” (421). Pointedly, Leah does not identify the blame she
places on the Americans with herself at all. By this time, she seems to be trying to
disassociate herself from America’s role in the oppression of the Congo.

However, Leah is never able to completely distance herself from the sins of her
fathers, biological or national. Every January, the month of Ruth May and Patrice
Lumumba’s deaths, she becomes difficult and relies on Anatole for support; “I need him
to insist that I’m useful and good, that he wasn’t out of his mind to marry me, that my
white skin is not the standard of offense. That I wasn’t part of every mistake that’s led us
to right now, January 17, with all it’s sins and griefs to bear” (437). Though she removes
herself as completely as possible from the misconducts of America after Ruth May’s
death, she cannot find a way to forgive herself for the things that happened before she
became aware of America’s infringement.

In the end, however, Leah seems to accept the blame for the offenses against
Africa. She remarks, “we’ve all ended up giving up body and soul to Africa, one way or
another. . . . Each of us got our heart buried in six feet of African dirt; we are all co-
conspirators here. I mean, all of us, not just my family” (474). But she also appreciates
Africa’s impact on her life and her thinking, for without her family’s intrusion into the
Congo, it is probable that she would have continued being Nathan’s disciple and
harboring America’s ignorance. Reflecting on the changes Africa has had on her, she
asks, “So what do you do now?” and answers that “You get to find your own way to dig
out a heart and shake it off and hold it up to the light again” (474). Leah can never
completely reconcile herself to her binationalism, but chooses instead to live in such a
way as to be deserving of Africa’s forgiveness. After all, she admits that she is “the un-
missionary, as Adah would say, beginning each day on my knees, asking to be converted.
Forgive me, Africa, according to the multitude of thy mercies" (525). The young, impressionable girl who followed her pretentious, self-righteous father’s footsteps into Africa, muttering constant prayers to his God, adopts her new country and spends the remainder of her life begging for its forgiveness and trying to prevent further atrocities against it.
RACHEL

Rachel is the easiest of the Price women to brush aside; it’s tempting to look past her to her more likeable sisters. After all, her family tends to disregard her, so why shouldn’t everyone? She’s materialistic, conceited, selfish, and self-absorbed, but she should not be overlooked. Though her choices seem ignorant and sometimes even cruel, they are some of the most pragmatic choices made throughout the whole of The Poisonwood Bible.

One of Rachel’s strongest attributes is that she is realistic; she is rarely deceived. While her family is either shaking in fear or captivated by their surroundings when they first arrive in Kilanga, Rachel recognizes the reality of their situation: “it doesn’t look to me like we’re in charge of a thing, not even our own selves” (22). It turns out that she is right. Despite her insight, it’s hard to like Rachel. She concludes her first evening in Kilanga by crying “for the sins of all who had brought my family to this dread dark shore” (29). Her tears are certainly understandable, but her insistence on blaming others, a trait that permeates her presence in the story, is frustrating. She blames the sinners of Africa for her family’s predicament and resents their need.

As time goes by, she does begin to recognize the possibility of her ignorance. After hearing Anatole discuss his time working in the diamond mines of Africa, she immediately recalls seeing Marilyn Monroe in Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend. After considering the movie for some time she wonders, “Gee, does Marilyn Monroe even know where [diamonds] come from? Just picturing her in her satin gown and a Congolese diamond digger in the same universe gave me the weebie jeebies. So I didn’t think about it anymore” (127). Though intelligent enough to recognize discrepancies
between what she thought was true and what actually is, Rachel’s youth, at least for the moment, enables her to disassociate the pains of truth from herself, until the truth gets too close to ignore.

When the former missionaries, the Underdowns, break the news to the Prices that the Belgians will be withdrawing from the Congo much sooner than expected, Rachel sees all of the adults around her panicking; “Every grown-up in the room . . . you could have mistaken for a mental psychiatry patient right then. Except for Father, and of course he is the one who is really mental” (166). Amidst the chaos of the adults’ dread, it is Rachel who recognizes that her father’s composure should actually be the cause for alarm.

Rachel is almost surprising in her ability to see past the obvious and discern truth, though she never chooses to act on that knowledge. After the village hunt, which Leah participates in despite her father’s wishes, it is Rachel who recognizes the irony in her father’s admonishment of Leah’s efforts: “Even though someone could have pointed out to Father that at least somebody finally brought home some bacon at our house. Someone could have remarked that it is Leah who wears the pants in out family, which is true” (356), though only Rachel is bold enough to admit it, even if only to herself.

Rachel’s most important and most admirable talent, however, is her inexhaustible ability to survive. She simply gets things done. When her father refuses to let the family leave the Congo with the Underdowns, Rachel takes action in her own unique way: “I screamed and kicked the furniture until one whole leg came off the table and threw a hissy fit they could probably hear all the way to Egypt” (177). Though she certainly seems to be, and probably is the petulant child, she is the only one of her sisters to speak
up, even if not articulately, to voice her frustrations at their father’s stubbornness and their family’s forced desolation.

Again showing strength of character, when Orleanna becomes ill and no longer has the strength or the desire to care for her family, Rachel steps up and decides that something has to be done. She reminds her sisters that water should be boiled for half an hour to kill parasites, and she gives each girl a job to do to keep enough food in the house. And even while Leah mocks her sister’s ability to even sift flour, Rachel insists that she can and will do it. But because Adah describes the discussion of assigning household duties, there is a sarcastic, mocking undertone to descriptions of Rachel’s leadership. Adah notes that “Having Rachel in charge was very much as if Mrs. Donna Reed from television suddenly showed up to be your mother. It had to be an act. Soon she would take off her apron and turn into someone who didn’t give a hoot about your general welfare” (221-22). Precedence, of course, does demonstrate that Rachel’s primary concern is her own welfare, but her sisters neglect to notice that their older sister has been forced to grow up in the strange foreign world of the Congo, and though she may always remain narcissistic Rachel, she knows what has to be done. Indeed, Adah turns out to be wrong. Rachel plays her part as interim mother for as long as she has to, and even after her mother gets well, she continues her role as needed. When Brother Fowles arrives and everyone else runs to meet him, Rachel remains in the kitchen muttering her uniquely snide remarks, referring to herself as “the new Chef Boy-ar-dee of the Price family” (245) and commenting that it is “back to the kitchen for Rachel the slave” (246). But the point is, she does the work because she knows it has to be done.
Rachel reiterates her tenacity when her family forces her to fake an engagement to Eeben Axelroot in order to avoid a real engagement to the village chief, Tata Ndu. Though Axelroot is entirely untrustworthy, Rachel, with minimal kicking and screaming, accepts that she has no choice. She admittedly hates Axelroot, but she realizes there is no better option and makes do: “what am I supposed to do? I talk to him. As long as you’re sitting out there pretending to be engaged to somebody, you might as well pass the time. And his company does keep the children away” (269). Despite Rachel’s ardent concern with public opinion, she sees that this is the best way to avoid a far worse situation, accepts her position, and, moreover, makes the best of it.

As things for her family go from bad to worse, Rachel begins to see the potential of Eeben Axelroot as her savior. Allowing herself to kiss him, she acknowledges (though only to the reader) that “I would get him to fly us out of here by hook or by crook” (292). Though his hygiene and attitude remain appalling, Rachel realizes that his access to the world outside of Kilanga could be her saving grace.

Rachel’s truest moment, however, comes when her family and the entire Kilanga village is attacked by ravenous ants. Not understanding what is happening, Rachel runs desperately from her home. In the midst of the madness, she recalls having read a book called How to Survive 101 Calamities that gave suggestions on how to escape a crowded theater that catches fire. Applying the book’s advice, Rachel flees the village:

I stuck my elbows very hard into the ribs of people who were crushing in around me, and kind of wedged myself in. Then I just more or less picked up my feet and it worked like a charm. Instead of getting trampled I simply floated like a stick in a river, carried along on everyone else’s power. (302)
There is no part of *The Poisonwood Bible* that more clearly defines Rachel than this one. Though often apt to present herself as a fragile, fair skinned damsel in need of rescuing, she does not hesitate to forcefully and cunningly save herself in her time of need. Not only is her persistent and pragmatic nature clearly represented but also her egotism as she does not once consider the fate of the rest of her neighbors, let alone the Kilanga villagers. When she sees Mama Mwanza, who has no legs, being carried to a boat, she is appalled that her husband (with Mama Mwanza on his back) walks right past her without offering to help: “She did deserve help, poor thing, but I personally have a delicate constitution [her fair skin]” (302). Rachel’s survival instincts are so intense that she sees her need as greater than that of a woman with no legs. She is truly materialistic, conceited, selfish, and self-absorbed, but she certainly takes care of herself.

Following the ant attack, Rachel begins to take control of her life. Her attempts to obey her parents cease, and she declares, “I alone will decide the fate of my life” (351). She even begins making plans to escape Africa (not considering the needs of the rest of her family to leave of course): “At seventeen I have my rights . . . As soon as Eeben Axelroot came back I was determined to use my feminine wilds [sic] to my own advantage. No matter what it took, I would get him to take me away from here in his airplane” (355). And though she does not escape the African continent, she does, in fact, get Axelroot to fly her out of the Congo in his plane to escape the horrors of Kilanga and her family.

Before breaking free from Kilanga, however, Rachel experiences a rare instance of commonality with her family; Rachel’s life changes with the death of Ruth May. In a moment of surprising insight, Rachel realizes that “All the other people in the whole wide
world might go on about their business, but for us it would never be normal again” (366).
It is a mark of Rachel’s naïveté that it takes Ruth May’s death to convince her that life has ceased being normal, but it is also a sign of her often-unseen goodness. She can recover from carnivorous ants, from near starvation, and from a fake engagement with a sleazy man, but she cannot wholly recover from her sister’s death. “The tragedies that happened to Africans were not mine,” she tells herself. “We were different, not just because we were white and had our vaccinations, but be because we were simply a much, much luckier kind of person” (367). With Ruth May’s death, however, the luck of the Price family runs out, and Rachel recognizes that the rest of the lucky people in the world will never look at them the same way.

Most intriguing about Rachel’s reaction to Ruth May’s death, though, is how entirely different it is from Leah’s response. Though both sisters mourn, Rachel sees the loss of her sister as a factor that will forever distinguish her family from the rest of the world, particularly the rest of America. Leah, on the other hand, sees Ruth May’s death as the tie that binds her family to the villagers of Kilanga: “Our suffering now was no greater than theirs had been, no more real or tragic. No different (370-71). She even notices that the people of Kilanga suddenly accept her family: “I suppose they were as astonished as we were that a member of our family was capable of death” (372). Unlike Rachel, Leah sees death as the great equalizer and begins to side with Africa, whose people have suffered more than anyone else Leah knows.

Despite the fact that Leah views Ruth May’s death as the one act that makes the Price family more like the Africans they lived with and Rachel sees it setting herself apart from the Americans she remembers, both realize that it is an event that they will never be
able to escape. “Until that moment,” Rachel says, “I’d always believed I could still go home and pretend the Congo never happened . . . Never had I imagined I would be a girl they’d duck their eyes from and whisper about as tragic, for having suffered such a loss” (367). Ruth May’s death both changes and unites the lives of the Price daughters forever, but it also is the catalyst for the physical, emotional, and ideological dissension that will force them into separate worlds for the majority of their adult lives.

Rachel’s world becomes one of simultaneously surviving, escaping, and climbing. Though her life is never close to being as awful as it was in Kilanga, she continually strives to better her circumstances. Her self-preservation gains momentum with her choice to leave Kilanga as Axelroot’s fiancé. Though she knows that Axelroot is a despicable person, she says, “I would have signed a deal with the Devil himself. I swear I would have” (404). With Axelroot’s help, she escapes and survives.

Her decision to leave with Axelroot, admittedly, involves sacrifice on her part. Rachel, after all, is the most feminine of her sisters and her dreams are much more aligned with traditional gender roles. Allowing herself to partner (as they never officially marry) with Axelroot certainly falls short of her youthful hopes for a husband. She says that she “put up with him out of gratitude, mainly. I guess trading away your prime of life is a fair price for somebody flying you out of that hellhole” (403). And yet, she doesn’t seem completely sure that it was worth that sacrifice. She admits that she “didn’t think about it at the time, of course” (403) and refers to herself as “an impressionable young girl” (403) at the mercy of her liberator. While she accepts his help as a last resort, Axelroot obviously does not live up to the expectations she had for herself. Rachel, after all, is the only one of her sisters who is ever interested in the hope chest projects their
mother brings to Africa for them. Though Adah and Leah have no real interest in the project, Leah remarks that “It was the only time [Rachel] ever stopped rolling her eyes or flicking her hair, to settle down to a piece of honest work” (150). Moreover, while Leah never finds the momentum to produce much for her hope chest, “Rachel hoped too much and ran out of material” (152). Though at the time Rachel has no prospects for marriage, the idea of filling a hope chest for her wedding provides her sole source for happiness, or at least entertainment. Amidst the chaos and poverty of Kilanga, her conventional female goals remain paramount in her mind.

Rachel’s fierce devotion to 1950s traditional femininity is, in fact, the main reason that her attitude is so vastly different from that of her sisters’. Having been almost sixteen when her family arrived in Kilanga, Rachel is the only sister to have experienced being a young woman directly under America’s cultural influence. She is, therefore, the only one of her sisters who adheres to customary gender roles. During her feigned marriage to Eeben Axelroot, for instance, Rachel focuses on the demands of a typical homemaker above any other need: “It is my girlfriends here in Joburg that have taught me how to give parties, keep a close eye on the help, and just overall make the graceful transition to wifehood” (405). With Kilanaga barely behind her, Rachel promptly attempts to become a respectable homemaker; for her, nothing is more important. Her priorities are set by the normative gender roles she observes.

Her dedication to femininity, however, does more than simply set her apart from her sisters and allow her to endure a less than ideal marriage; it prompts her to look past the needs of others and ignore the call to action that troubles her mother and sisters throughout their lives. While Leah and Adah are almost overzealous in their willingness
to be a part of any activity, whether playing with the Kilangan children or participating in political movements to support Africa, Rachel, though eager to watch, is rarely inclined to participate. Almost any action Rachel chooses to undertake has either been forced upon her, is purely for survival, or is actually more of an internal monologue that an external endeavor. After the tantrum she throws when her father will not let her leave the Congo with the Underdowns, for instance, Rachel defends her childish actions by saying, “Listen, what else can a girl do but try?” (177). Leah and Adah would be quick to argue that a girl can do lots of things other than just try; namely, they can act. Rachel, however, in line with conventional femininity, views a woman’s role as an inactive one and, thus, puts forth effort only when her own survival necessitates it. While her sisters and mother live their entire post-Kilanga lives trying to reconcile their guilt by attempting to make a difference in Africa’s suffering, Rachel’s fervent adherence to accustomed gender roles allows her to live a life of inaction, concentrating solely on her own needs.

But after Kilanga, simple survival is never enough for Rachel. Rather, she expects optimal circumstances for every situation in her life: “I was determined right off the bat to make the best of my situation here in my new home of Johannesburg, South Africa,” she says (405). Though she’s unhappy (after all, she’s not legally married and her “husband” has numerous partners), she is determined to move forward with her life. But, as hard as she tries to forget Kilanga, she can’t; “When I get out of bed every morning, at least I’m still alive and not dead like Ruth May . . . Sometimes you just have to save your neck and work out the details later” (405). Rachel’s life moves forward one day at a time; as long as she is moving away from the past and towards the possibility of something better and brighter, she is satisfied.
Rachel’s escape, however, never takes her back to America. Though she breaks free from the darkness of Kilanga, she goes only as far as South Africa, which has plenty of problems of its own. She adapts to her prosperity among the impoverished by closing her eyes to unpleasantries: “Of course you have to look the other way when the train goes by the townships, because those people don’t have any perspective of what good scenery is . . . But you just have to try and understand, they don’t have the same ethics [sic] as us” (424). After all, she points out, “That is one part of living here. Being understanding of the differences” (424). As Rachel adapts to life in South Africa, she learns to “understand the differences” by ignoring them. Above all else, Rachel knows who she is: “I am a very adaptable person” (425), which is easily the truest remark she ever makes. She harbors no pretensions of humility, selflessness, giving, or understanding, but time and time again she shows that she excels at adaptability.

Though Rachel knows herself inside and out, her family is never able to understand her. While cataloging the religions of her family, Adah posits that “Rachel doesn’t [have a religion], and she is plainly the happiest of us all” (442). Although it is true that Rachel is never as devoted to any one thing as her sisters are (Leah to Africa and Adah to medicine and her mother), she has certainly not achieved the pinnacle of happiness. To escape her faux marriage with Axelroot, she steals her best friend’s husband, only to stay married to him for a short period of time before marrying an older man who was wonderful enough to die and leave her a hotel. While running the hotel, she certainly enjoys aspects of her life and puts on a good show. But at the same time, she is terribly alone and continually hiding from the past. Though she feels unfairly disrespected by her sisters, she relentlessly complains that they don’t come to visit her.
She tells herself that they don’t come because “they’re afraid they would have to start respecting me finally” (464), but that still doesn’t diminish her desire to have them at her home. Even when Leah is on her way to see her husband, newly released from prison, Rachel cannot understand why they couldn’t take a half day’s trip to her hotel: “She couldn’t even bother herself to come up and see the Equatorial—even though we were only a half a day’s drive away . . . I can’t forgive that in my own sister” (477). Though she pretends to be unaffected by her family’s distance from her, complaints about it saturate her narrative. Rachel’s life may be more outwardly carefree than her sisters’, but it is only a superficial ruse.

Moreover, Rachel somehow has a better grasp of her family’s situation than either of her sisters, despite the fact that she is the farthest separated from them. She admits, “our true family fell apart after Ruth May’s tragic death. You could spend your whole life feeling bad about it,” which, she admits, is what the rest of her family seems to be doing, but “that’s their decision. What happened to us in the Congo was simply the bad luck of two opposite worlds crashing into each other, causing tragedy. After something like that, you can only go your own way according to what’s in your heart.” Poignantly she adds, “in my family, all our hearts seem to have whole different things inside” (465). Though Rachel is probably oversimplifying her family’s history by characterizing their experiences as “simply . . . bad luck,” she certainly seems to grasp the truth. She understands that she has chosen to survive by constantly moving forward. On the other hand, from Rachel’s perspective, “Leah’s decided to pay for [Ruth May’s death] by becoming the Bride of Africa” and Adah has thrown “her prime of life down the tube of a disease organism” in her attempt to cure the ills that her family brought to Africa by
curing the maladies that infest the country. Even though Rachel has spent her adult life trying not to look behind her, she cannot help but see clearly what her family has done to itself in the name of salvation.

Rachel, however, refuses to live her life in an unending search for salvation. She merely opts out of her sisters’ search for deliverance: “I’d made my mind up all along just to rise above it all. Keep my hair presentable and pretend I was elsewhere” (465). She admits that maybe, somehow, she could have saved Ruth May: “There was just a minute there where maybe I could have grabbed her” (465). But, realistically, the snake was far quicker than any of her family’s reflexes, dulled from months of malnutrition. “So,” she declares, “I refuse to feel the slightest responsibility” (465). Her inherent ability to survive at all costs makes it seem more likely that her choice is not to dwell on the past and, instead, to continually move forward. “I’m the type of person where you just never look back,” (514) she asserts. However, her constant reminders to not look back force her to be continually preoccupied with the past. Though she chooses not to examine the past, and thus does not try to understand, it consistently hovers at the forefront of her mind.

Likewise, Rachel tries to act as though she does not recognize why her sisters feel responsible for more than just Ruth May’s death, but for the pains of all of Africa as well. She is simply of the opinion that she holds no culpability in the continent’s problems. “These horrible things had nothing to do with us; it was all absolutely hundreds of years ago” (489), she tells herself as Leah berates her for not being more aware of the evils of the world. But, Rachel ends her narrative by admitting that she does, in fact, understand where her family went wrong: “You can’t just sashay into the jungle aiming to change it
all over to the Christian style without expecting the jungle to change you right back”

(515). Moreover, just as it was she who understood her father’s hubris from the

beginning, she acknowledges that “Father’s mistake, see, was to try to convert the whole

entire shebang over into just his exact way of thinking” (516). And she assures us that

her choices are based not out of ignorance, but on her worldview:

The way I see Africa, you don’t have to like it but you sure have to admit

it’s out there. You have your way of thinking and it has its, and never the

train [sic] ye shall meet! You just don’t let it influence your mind. If

there’s ugly things going on out there, well, you put a good stout lock on

your door and check it twice before you go to sleep. You focus on getting

your own one little place set up perfect, as I have done, and you’ll see.

Other people’s worries do not necessarily have to drag you down. (516)

Rachel knows that there is ugliness in the world; she once lived in the middle of it. But,

rather than carry the world’s sins on her shoulders as Leah does or live in semi-seclusion

like Adah, Rachel simply lives. She doesn’t try to absolve the past. Rather, she makes

up for it by surviving.
ADAH

The handicapped twin who is always “left... behind,” Adah is the only Price that questions the rightness of her family’s presence in the Congo from the very beginning. Shortly after their arrival in Kilanga, Adah relays the judgments, good or bad, that all of the women of her family pass on Africa. “And so the Price family passes its judgments,” she says. “All but Adah. Adah unpasses her judgments. I am the one who does not speak” (32). And though it’s true that Adah is primarily accepting of her Congolese neighbors, she continuously critiques and criticizes her family. Whereas she describes the Kilangan women’s attire with indifference by saying, “whether you find them beautiful or appalling, they do make the women seem more festive” (32), she scrutinizes every decision her family makes.

Adah is especially sensitive to criticism of the easily belittled because, in her Georgian youth, she was the one constantly denigrated. She was regularly berated for being too slow, while her twin sister, Leah, was praised for her marvelous intellect, though Adah was equally gifted. She has never been treated as normal, whether due to her dragging left leg or her chosen muteness. Thus, she has a keen ability to recognize injustice towards the defenseless and abused. Even as a young child, she sees the cruelty in her Sunday School lessons: “According to my Baptist Sunday-school teachers, a child is denied entrance to heaven merely for being born in the Congo rather than, say, north Georgia, where she could attend church regularly” (171). Even at only five years old, Adah recognizes the injustice behind such a philosophy and speaks out about it, only to be sent to the corner for her insightfulness. Because of this, it seems, Adah begins to connect the bias she deals with in her own life to the atrocious discrimination against
those less fortunate than even her. She does not pass judgment on those typically judged; rather, she condemns the judges themselves.

Therefore, as the Price family enters the Congo, Adah is acutely aware of how grossly her family stands out in their layers upon layers of clothing and overstuffed luggage bags. Among some of the world’s most severe poverty, the Prices represent waste, excess, and luxury, and Adah immediately sees that. Moreover, she recognizes that, though they may adapt to their surroundings over time, they will never be able to be African; they have simply known too much excess or, for that matter, have known excess period. As she hears the subtle differences in the language of Kilanga, she realizes that, “Our Baptist ears from Georgia will never understand the difference” (175). And, of course, she’s right. They do not even recognize the danger they are in or realize who is and is not on their side. The Price family is too fortunate to truly understand the language of the deprived.

Privilege, however, is only part of why the Prices cannot begin to grasp the position of the Kilangans. Their greatest limitations stem from the imperialist attitude they bring to the Congo. With the exception of Ruth May who is too young and Adah who “unpasses her judgments,” the Prices follow Nathan’s lead into the Congo with what Appiah would refer to as a neofundamentalist mindset by believing their own culture and way of life is superior to that of the poor inhabitants of Kilanga. Appiah defines neofundamentalists, which he also refers to as counter-cosmopolitans, as those who “do think that there is one right way for all human beings to live” and who will appeal to other cultures by saying, “Join us . . . and we will all be sisters and brothers” (“Case” 30). But behind their tempting entreaty is the fact that “each of them plans to trample on our
differences—to trample us to death, if necessary—if we will not join them” (Appiah “Case” 30). Though the Prices’ efforts do not, and probably would not, incorporate violence, their ethnocentric attitudes make it impossible for them to fully appreciate the Kilangans’ situation. Adah, as the member of the Price family who chooses to live outside of Western norms, is better qualified to reach out to the Kilangans. However, her limp and muteness cause her to seem peculiar to Kilangan society just as it had in America and, thus, she, too, is incapable of fully entering the culture of Kilanga.

Of course, it would be easy for any of the Price women to blame their position as infiltrators on Nathan. He, after all, is the one who forces them to come to the Congo when not even the other Baptist missionaries thought they should be there. He instigates their intrusion. But Adah knows that their blame is shared: “We his daughters and wife are not innocent either. The players in his theater. We Prices are altogether thought to be peculiarly well-intentioned, and inane” (213). They may have come to Africa wishing nothing but the best for the people they see, but their ignorance prevents them from really being ingratiated into the society of Kilanga. Adah alone recognizes that they are intruders, not the saviors that Nathan believes his family to be.

More than intruders, however, Adah watches her family corrupt a village, or at least parts of the village. After first arriving in Kilanga, Leah and Adah had delighted in teaching Pascal, their one friend, American colloquialisms like “Man-oh-man” and “Crazy!” (218). However, when Orleanna and Ruth May fall ill, leaving Rachel, Leah, and Adah to become the women of the house overnight, Pascal uses the phrases to taunt them to play. “It used to make us laugh,” Adah admits, “but now we cringed for having trained him in insolence” (218). While the rest of their neighbors are “occupied with
their own [reduced circumstances]” (218), Pascal is content to play and shout out nonsensical English phrases. Before the Price girls knew what is was to live in hardship, they delighted in contributing to Pascal’s indolence. However, because their mother is sick and incapacitated, Adah realizes that their “childhood had passed over into history overnight” (218). With their newfound maturity, they are able to see how their own carefree attitudes had contributed to Pascal’s insouciance.

Seeing the results of their ignorance, Adah begins to recollect the prejudices her Sunday school in Georgia held against Africans. She realizes how far their ignorance extends and how wrong their assumptions were. “I should like to stand up in Sunday school now and ask,” she says, “May Africa talk back? Might those pagan babies send us to hell for living too far from a jungle?” (298). And, when she realizes that the American government is conspiring to assassinate Patrice Lumumba, she asks, “Might the tall, thin man rise up and declare: We don’t like Ike. So sorry, but Ike should perhaps be killed now with a poisoned arrow” (298). Judgment goes both ways, Adah learns as she hears of the devious acts that were being committed by her home country and recognizes the unrest her family has brought to the peaceful naïveté of Kilanga. Judgment cannot, or at least should not, be one sided, Adah recognizes, an awareness that leads her to judge less and consider more.

Adah’s penchant for judgment seems to lessen while she and her sisters learn more about what it’s like to be from Kilanga as they suffer malnutrition with the rest of the village: “Those who have known this kind of hunger cannot entirely love, ever again, those who have not” (345). Primarily it seems that she is beginning to understand that she will never feel fully American again; she has simply been too far removed from the
excess and privilege of her home country. Moreover, she sees herself too universally. As
the entire village of Kilanga, including (most of) the Price family, joins together to find
food, Adah becomes aware of the universality of the human condition: “On the day of the
hunt I came to know in the slick center of my bones this one thing: all animals kill to
survive, and we are animals” (347). She may never murder another human in cold blood,
but she and her family “still boil our water to kill the invisible creatures that would like to
kill us first” (347). By equating disinfecting their water with killing animals for
nourishment, she is somehow better able to understand a person’s desperate need for
survival, even if it is simply the survival of their idea of normalcy. “The death of
something living is the price of our own survival,” she decides, “and we pay it again and
again. We have no choice. It is the one solemn promise every life on earth is born and
bound to keep” (347). Right or wrong, Adah sees that she is living a prime example of
survival of the fittest ideology, and, as one who is rarely seen as the fittest, how can she
pass judgment on those who are?

After leaving Africa, Adah seems to be the one who best adapts to her
surroundings. Though Rachel is financially successful, she remains an American
surrounded by Africans. She never allows where she lives to affect how she thinks. On
the other hand, Adah takes Africa wherever she goes but does not allow her experiences
to impede her potential. “Given my own circumstances,” she remarks, “I find that
anything can turn out to belong nearly anywhere” (409). And, in fact, she does seem to
belong anywhere. After all, she ends up living in the American South, the place that
made her feel like such an outsider in her childhood. Her youthful suspicion that she
would never be entirely American holds true, but she also does not allow herself to be alienated. She is fully Adah, and that never changes.

However, she continues to struggle with the idea of judgment. While a medical student at Emory, she encounters patients faced with difficult decisions every day and watches them have to consider their personal wants and desires when making choices. Remembering what Nelson had once told her that women in Kilanga did if they gave birth to twins, she ponders, “Who is to say [the mother] should not have run to the forest with her hair and umbilical cords flying, and knelt to deposit each of these three [triplets] at the base of its own pine tree? Who will argue that my drips and incubators are the wiser plan?” (443). Adah will not make that argument. She chooses the path of medicine because she can do that; she can help somehow with her “drips and incubators.” However, the world of her hospital is too far away from the reality of Africa for her to impose her wisdom on it.

Moreover, Adah refuses to judge. “Africa has slipped the floor out from under my righteous house, my Adah moral code,” she confesses. “What I carried out of Congo on my crooked little back,” she decides, “is a ferocious uncertainty about the worth of a life” (443). After watching Ruth May die, Adah begins to question her own worth. As Leah points out, “if there is any single thing that everyone hopes for most dearly, it must be this: that the youngest outlive the oldest” (371). And yet, for the Prices, “the last was first” (371). Not only the last, but also their mother’s favorite, the one she chose to carry out of the village during the ant attack instead of Adah. Orleanna’s choice to save Ruth May rather than Adah during the ant’s attack on Kilanga had caused Adah to judge her mother more than anyone else. But, after Ruth May, Adah is the youngest. So, at the
start of their exodus from Kilanga, Orleanna chooses to leave Ruth May’s body and save Adah. “She took hold of me and pulled me through,” Adah says. “Mother was going to drag me out of Africa if it was her last living act” (410). With that, Adah begins to see the uncertainty of life. Whereas before Ruth May’s death “There was room in Adah for naught but pure love and pure hate,” (413) her mother’s choice to rescue her opens Adah’s eyes to the ambiguity involved in any decision. “Since then,” Adah admits, “life has become more difficult” (413). Her mother’s choice fills her with unanswerable questions: “Would she rather have had Ruth May? Was I the booby prize? Does she look at me and despise her loss? Am I alive only because Ruth May is dead?” But, because she sees that truth is not always black and white, she understands that judgment should not be passed lightly. The obscurity of everything in Africa has made it impossible for her to impose on anyone’s moral code any longer.

Adah survives Africa by being stoically opinionated. Dwelling on her judgments gives her the ferocity to allude a lion, survive an ant’s feeding frenzy, and to endure a seemingly endless walk out of Kilanga after watching her sister die. But with Ruth May, Adah’s judgments die, too. The world stops being right and wrong after Ruth May dies and Orleanna chooses to save Adah. Thus, she spends the rest of her life making up for her judgments. Certainly she has her own opinions, but, though she speaks in her adult life, her judgments go unspoken:

The loss of a life: unwelcome. Immoral? I don’t know. Depends perhaps on where you are, and what sort of death. Hereabouts, where we sit among such piles of leftover protein we press it into cakes for pets, who usefully guard our empty chairs; here where we pay soothsayers and acrobats to help lose our weight, then yes, for a child to die from hunger is immoral. But this is just one place. I’m afraid I have seen a world. (527, emphasis mine)
Africa never leaves Adah’s thoughts. Though she has adjusted to the excess of America, she refuses to join the ethnocentric bandwagon and will not force her lifestyle onto anyone else, let alone an entire country.

Out of all of her family, Adah seems to have left Africa with the most awareness and, thus, most successfully merges her two worlds. She continues to be mindful of Africa and, in fact, much of her life is lived based on the ways Africa affected her. Though she understands why Albert Schweitzer wanted to convince Africans to have fewer children, she is too familiar with Africa to not see why it wouldn’t work: “when families have spent a million years making nine [babies] in the hope of saving one, they cannot stop making nine. Culture is a slingshot moved by the force of its past” (528). Though her ideas seem cynical in their complete lack of hope for change, she doesn’t doubt the possibility of any change. Rather, after having lived under the rule of one who tried to force changes to suit his will and his beliefs, she understands that change, particularly cultural change, happens at its own time. She can work to better it, but neither she nor anyone else can force it.

Moreover, Adah pities Africa’s position. “No other continent has endured such an unspeakably bizarre combination of foreign thievery and foreign goodwill,” (528) she notes. She has been a part of the harm done to Africa, so she chooses to work to help it in her adulthood. “Out of sympathy for the Devil and Africa, I left the healing profession. I became a witch doctor. My church is the Great Rift Valley that lies along the eastern boundary of Congo. I do not go there. I merely study the congregation” (528). Adah finds comfort in her idea that all humans came from the Great Rift Valley in Africa and “made voodoo, the earth’s oldest religion” and, through voodoo, they
“Worshipped everything living and everything dead, for voodoo . . . honors the balance between loss and salvation” (528). From voodoo, though she only studies, not practices, it, she derives that “God is everything, then. God is a virus” (528). This idea appeals to her because she feels that if “you could for a moment rise up out of your own beloved skin and appraise ant, human, and virus as equally resourceful beings, you might admire the accord they have all struck in Africa” (529). So, though she lives in the comfort of America, her respect for Africa’s ability to persevere motivates her to dwell on the tribulations of Africa.

Her thoughts of Africa, however, are not like those of her sister Leah. While Leah screams and flails at the injustices done to Africa, Adah quietly searches for meaning and understanding. Studying the diseases that afflict the bodies of Africa, she finds a sense of equality and rightness; “We and our vermin all blossomed together out of the same humid soil in the Great Rift Valley, and so far no one is really winning.” (529). But to Adah, Africa has become less about winning and more about the fight. Though she does appreciate the harmony between human, ant, and virus in Africa, Adah acknowledges that most people will “shriek for a cure” (529) rather than appreciate the cooperation between the three entities. Though she recognizes that it is human nature, or at least American nature, to try to pull a cure out of thin air, she strives to focus on understanding and insight rather than the guilt and betrayal she felt in her childhood. Her past, like cultures and viruses, cannot immediately be fixed; they can only be known.

“So I am the one who quietly takes stock,” she admits. “Believing in all things equally. Believing fundamentally in the right of a plant or a virus to rule the earth” (531). She has experienced what it is like to try to rule people and places and knows that it
doesn’t work. And though she tries to simply understand, she is aware of her shortcomings: “Misunderstanding is my cornerstone. It’s everyone’s, come to think of it. Illusions mistaken for the truth are the pavement under our feet. They are what we call civilization” (532). More personally, however, she notes, “We constructed our lives around a misunderstanding, and if ever I tried to pull it out and fix it now I would fall down flat” (532). Unlike Leah, Adah recognizes that the sins of her past cannot be undone. She cannot go back and be more understanding, more accepting of her family and her life in Kilanga. She cannot change the horrors committed against Africa. So she survives on her acceptance, a quality she did not possess in Kilanga. After years of feeling either betrayed, guilty, or both, Adah comes to accept that “We are the balance of our damage and our transgressions . . . Believe this: the mistakes are part of our story” (533). Adah may not have a religion as her sisters do; she may not have Rachel’s money or Leah’s family, but she has acceptance, which Leah feels too guilty to find and Rachel is too busy moving forward to look for. Though she walked into the jungle of Kilanga left...behind, she finds in her adulthood the ability to move forward.
Perhaps more than the postcolonial conflict, personal conflict represents the foundation of each of Kingsolver’s novels. From *The Bean Trees* to *Prodigal Summer*, her fiction revolves around variably strong female characters who are forced to manage, whether publicly or privately, their conflict-ridden lives. While *The Poisonwood Bible* describes various methods of handling conflict, Kingsolver’s overall philosophy of conflict resolution seems summed up in one of the stories in *Prodigal Summer*, that of the delicately painted Lusa Landowski Widener.

Lusa is an entomologist from Lexington, Kentucky who, after falling in love with and marrying a farmer from the Appalachian Hills of Eastern Kentucky, moves to his rural hometown in Zebulon County only to see him die in a car accident within a year of their marriage. Surrounded by his sisters and, as Lusa sees it, their small-minded community, she must make a choice. One possibility is to return to her stagnant life in the city where she had been marginally happy with her quiet family and old friends but would undoubtedly find acceptance and intellectual fulfillment. Or she could choose to remain in the homestead of a family she no longer has a living connection to and continue to feel the glare of suspicion from her sisters-in-law, most of whom simply don’t understand her way of life.

Lusa, after all, has never really felt welcome on the Widener farm. Even before her husband Cole dies, Lusa feels that each day is a struggle to be overcome by finding small things on the farm that she can relate to or call her own: “Survival here could be possible if only she could fill the air with scent and dispatch the stern female ghosts in that kitchen with the sweetness of an unabashed, blooming weed” (31). From the first
day that she tries to call the Widener farm her home, she feels like an unwanted intruder stirring up and angering even the ghosts of Wideners past.

The biggest impediment Lusa faces in her adjustment to living on the Widener farm is her own parochialism and assumptions. Even before Cole’s death, she complains endlessly of loneliness and isolation: “I’m so alone here. You have no idea” (35). She begs him for understanding, but at the same time, she continually puts down his home: “I’m sorry my education didn’t prepare me to live here where the two classes of animals are food and target practice” (35). While Cole looks past her prejudices by joking that bait is the third category, she cannot make the effort to drop her assumptions. When Cole suggests that she befriend the people in Zebulon County to cure her loneliness, she cannot allow herself to make the effort because “she could picture only the doe-eyed, aggressively coiffed women she saw in Kroger’s” (36). She simply assumes that there is nothing more behind their doe-eyes and looks at them as a lost cause.

Moreover, Lusa simply does not understand the motives behind the citizens of Zebulon County. She automatically assumes that the coldness she feels from them is judgment and ridicule. A major form of frustration comes from the fact that “Lusa kept her own name when they married, but it hadn’t mattered: everyone called her Mrs. Widener, as if there were no Lusa at all” (40). Lusa believes that their references to her as Mrs. Widener are malicious, as if they are purposely not calling her Lusa Landowski in an effort to snub her heritage and individuality. More likely, however, is that they just don’t think about it. When Cole introduces her as “my wife, Lusa,” their assumption is that her last name is his last name, Widener. They don’t know women who choose to retain their maiden name, so it doesn’t occur to them that she might not have taken
Widener as her own. While they may not put enough effort into getting to know Lusa, they don’t maliciously refuse to use her last name. Rather, their offensiveness is solely a fault of the assumptions they make.

Though Lusa does feel disconnected from the people of Zebulon County, particularly Cole’s family, she recognizes a shared connection with the land from her first visit there. Despite her condescending smirks at Cole’s talk of breathing mountains, she does admit to having “some respect for the poetry of country people’s language” (31). Moreover, in response to Cole’s frequent frustrations at her city pride, she defends herself by saying, “A city person if only part of who I am” (35). Her connection with the earth is what forces her slow acceptance of the people that live around her. First, “she learned to tell time with her skin” (31), as her husband and neighbors could do. Then, incredibly slowly, she begins to notice her own prejudices. “Ay-rab mama, Polack daddy—[Cole] held this against her too, apparently, along with the rest of his family,” or so she believes. Then again, “hadn’t she ridiculed his accent, his background?” (45).

At the same time, her surprisingly sudden realization that she can leave Zebulon County impedes her progress towards understanding and accepting of the people around her. She realizes “She’d been granted more than hiding from sisters-in-law who disapproved of reading and probably the whole idea of being in bed . . . she could leave this place, be anybody she wanted, anywhere at all” (71). The problem with Lusa’s revelation is that she wants to be in Zebulon County, but she can’t convince herself that it wants her. Moreover, she knows that if she leaves Widener farm, she leaves Cole, too. A stranger at Cole’s funeral, in an effort to espouse her wisdom concerning grieving, tells Lusa that “You learn to love the place somebody leaves behind for you,” which perhaps
explains why it is so hard for her to think of leaving Zebulon County (73). “What she’d loved was here,” she admits, meaning Cole, “and still might be, if she could find her way to it . . . if she chose it” (80).

Still, Lusa knows that she will never be from Zebulon County and will, therefore, never have the instincts that born-and-raised farmers do and will always in some way be an outsider. So, she must find her own way. At first she forces herself to do everything on her own. When her brothers-in-law come to ask about her farm, even though they are expert farmers who want only to help, she takes offense at their assumptions of her ignorance and their imposition into her life. Though she knows she could probably use their advice, she really wants them to “Just leave her to muddle through in her own way, however mistaken” (107). Though in a way this attitude is pure obstinacy, it is also her acknowledgment that, to survive in Zebulon County, she will have to find a way to make the person she is fit into the way the county works. She cannot simply conform to traditional Zebulon ways. Rather she must merge what she knows and how she lives with the expectations of Zebulon County and find a happy medium that allows her to remain Lusa while utilizing the best qualities of the knowledgeable farmers around her.

First, Lusa begins “to comprehend this frank pragmatism [of farming people] and to suspect that if she could acquire it—if she could want to—she could belong here” (163). But though she is willing to let a small bit of Zebulon County into her life, she continues to have difficulty letting go of any parts of herself, even the stubborn, annoying parts. It seems that she recognizes this problem, but does not know how to fix it. “That’s me,” she admits. “I can’t seem to go in a straight line. . . . it’s embarrassing. People are watching me. I’m figuring out how to farm by doing all the wrong things” (163). Only
by listening to the advice of her nephew, Little Rickie, does she begin to understand that the farming people surrounding her that have the answers to her problems. Even if she doesn’t do things exactly their way, she can take from them what they have to give and use it to her benefit.

As she begins to open herself up to the lives and opinions of her relatives and neighbors, she begins to let go of her own stubborn attitudes and, in a sense, assimilate to life in Zebulon County. As her brothers-in-law lightheartedly tease her, she realizes that they are not being cruel, as she once thought her sisters-in-law were, but that “this was how they spoke to each other, too—in a complicated mix of rue, ridicule, and respect that she was just beginning to grasp” (227). With this understanding comes the realization that, as part of their family, she is subject to any amount of unwanted advice and judgment that they can throw at her, but their criticism is also a sign of acceptance. Because she is in their family, they will treat her with a familiarity that she may not yet feel. Still, Lusa finds it difficult to picture herself as a permanent resident of Zebulon County: “For the hundredth time Lusa tried and failed to imagine how she was going to stay here, or why” (239). Her common sense provides no reasons for her to stay, but she can almost feel “the odors of honeysuckle and freshly turned earth, and ancient songs played out on the roof by the rain. Moths tracing spiral in the moonlight” (239). Her head can offer no rationale for her desire to stay on the Widener farm, but every instinct in her body gives her little choice.

Then, finally, she realizes why she has felt such a desire to stay in Zebulon County. Walking into a storeroom in the barn for the first time since Cole’s death, a sense of ownership washes over her. “Before this moment,” she realizes, “it had never all
belonged to her” (291). Not only does she own each rusted antique stored in the barn, but she is the inheritor of Cole’s life and land, including his family and the status of sister and aunt in that family. Simply by saying “I do” to Cole Widener, she assumes a place in a world essentially foreign to her. She realizes that the farm and all of its complications and rewards are purely hers and begins to claim the inheritance left to her and make it her own.

Suddenly, by her own assertion, Lusa becomes a part of Zebulon County. Rather than city life being only one piece of her, as she had once argued to Cole, it becomes a recessive part of who she is. She tells her niece Crystal that people from big cities do not care about the problems farmers have: “I used to live in a city, and I’ll tell you, city people do not think this is their problem” (293, emphasis mine). As if her life in Lexington were a million years ago, she becomes completely disconnected from “city people” as she fully assumes her role as a farm person.

Moreover, she assumes her role in the Widener clan, for better and for worse. She admits that “Big families are a blessing,” despite the pains they relentlessly cause her (304). But with the help of her niece/soon-to-be-adopted-daughter, she finds “ways of living with the judgment of the righteous,” mostly by learning that she, too, has her moments of righteousness (350).

Lusa even goes so far as to adopt the Widener name as her own, a feat she could not bring herself to do during her husband’s life. Though she cherishes her Landowski heritage, she recognizes that the mark she makes will be as a Widener, on Cole’s farm. She understands that “As long as I live on this place, I’m going to be Miz Widener, so why fight it?” (383). Though by succumbing to the expectations of a traditional
patriarchal family she relinquishes a belief central to her identity as a feminist woman, she decides that changing her name is a compromise that she is willing to make. For the sake of the daughter she is about to adopt and the in-laws that she wants to pleasantly associate with, Lusa can let go of her name. After all, in return she gets to peacefully inhabit a farm she has fallen in love with and enjoy the reminders of the husband she is still learning to love that permeate every inch of the land.

It seems, too, that when she lets go of her frustrations and anger about being the Widener widow and welcomes all of the family and responsibilities that comes with the title, farming becomes her. When her muscles ache from her hard work and exhaustion overcomes her, she finds that “she almost enjoyed the tingling, achy release of lactic acid in her muscles” (410). More than simply adopting the aches and pains of farming as her war wounds, Lusa begins to believe that this is where she is supposed to be. When Little Rickie tells her she is meant for farming, she concedes: “I guess that’s true. It’s weird, though, I was born into such a different life, with these scholarly parents, and I did the best I could with it. I raised caterpillars in shoeboxes and I studied bugs and agriculture in school for as many years as they’ll let you” (411). And though she had found ways to work around the structure of city life, she did not really change until she met Cole and he “walked into my little house and blew the roof off” (412). More importantly, she realizes that “he was just this doorway to me” (412).

When Lusa originally lingers in Zebulon County after Cole’s death, she does so primarily out of respect and due to a final posthumous effort to get to know her husband. She searches the land and his family for snippets of who he was and finds only frustration, disappointment, and resentment. Only when Lusa is able to let go of just
enough of herself to let in Zebulon County and Cole’s family does she begin to see her place in the life Cole left her. Only through a complicated game of give and take is she able to etch her name on the land she inherits. “It seems to Lusa that all these scattered accounts [of Cole] were really parts of one long story, the history of a family that had stayed on its land. And that story was hers now as well” (437). She remains Lusa but with a bit of Widener in her, too.

Kingsolver closes Prodigal Summer with a chapter told through the eyes of the coyote who travels among all three of the novel’s storylines. Though the coyote could not and does not attempt to speak for any individual character, the chapter attempts to place some perspective on the choices made throughout the novel, Lusa’s included. The last line states: “Every choice is a world made new for the chosen” (444). Lusa’s acceptance of her place on Widener farm is not the result of some monumental happening. Rather, she chooses to fit into Zebulon County and is thereby given the opportunity to affect and be affected by all of the people around her.

A similar chapter closes The Poisonwood Bible. Narrated by Ruth May, who has become “the forest’s conscience” and takes the form of a snake, the short section describes the surviving Prices’ last trip to Africa (537). As Ruth May speaks to her family from the trees, out of their earshot, she reiterates the idea of cosmopolitanism as demonstrated through the lives of her mother and sisters. Initially, she confirms their culpability: “Yes, you are all accomplices to the fall” (537). Each of the women’s actions, those done unknowingly, maliciously, or altruistically, have affected the world around them: “Every life is different because you passed this way and touched history” (538). A spider may be dead because of their carelessness, but an okapi may also have
lived longer in the shelter of the forest for having run away from the girls’ noise. They do not know the affects of each of their actions. However, Ruth May also attempts to reassure her mother by demonstrating the universality of guilt. “The sins of the fathers belong to you,” she admits, but they also belong “to the forest and even to the ones in iron bracelets” (543). Orleanna alone is not responsible for the sins of the world. Though she is part of them, they are not all hers to absolve. Just as the coyote’s chapter of *Prodigal Summer* reiterates the affects of the characters’ choices, Ruth May’s final chapter urges her family to understand that they are part of a larger plan and, though their decisions matter, they cannot hold themselves solely responsible for all of the world’s ills.

Appiah proposes that “the golden rule of cosmopolitanism” is a quote from *The Self-Tormentor*, a play written by Publius Terentius Afer (Terence), a Carthaginian slave from the second century AD. It says: “‘I am human: nothing is alien to me’” (qtd. in *Cosmopolitanism* 111). The credo, Appiah believes, is befitting because an effective cosmopolitanism must be based on pluralism, the idea “that there are many values worth living by and that you cannot live by all of them,” and fallibilism, “the sense that our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence” (‘Case” 30). Neither of these ideals can be effectively established without first respecting the diversity of humanity. It is this call for respect that so aptly aligns *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Prodigal Summer* to Appiah’s interpretation of cosmopolitanism.

While none of Kingsolver’s characters hold all of the characteristics of cosmopolitanism, most do maintain some aspect of the overall philosophy. Adah, perhaps, comes closest to being a model for cosmopolitanism in that, as an adult, she both
feels an obligation to society and respects people’s differences. In fact, by accepting and applying some or all of the philosophy of cosmopolitanism, the women of *The Poisonwood Bible* learn to more successfully resolve the conflicts in their lives. However, it is in Lusa that Kingsolver’s application of cosmopolitanism is most unique. Through the life of one women learning to live in Zebulon County, Kingsolver is able to demonstrate that cosmopolitanism can be more than a philosophy of global ethics. Lusa is not involved with or interested in any kind of international politics, but the ideology behind cosmopolitanism allows her to take responsibility for her choices and be more accepting of her neighbors, though they think differently than she does. By adhering to the cosmopolitan beliefs in pluralism and fallibilism, Lusa is able to embrace her life in Zebulon County.

Appiah argues that, “A tenable global ethics has to temper a respect for difference with a respect for the freedom of actual human beings to make their own choices” (“Case” 30). Though Kingsolver would agree, she would further contend that such an idea should be more than a doctrine of “global ethics.” Instead, cosmopolitanism should be applied to common, every day decisions in order to make greater change in the world. After all, the people of Zebulon County do not yet know that they should be concerned with the lives of Africans. But by learning to foster respect for all people, they may realize that the global thinking advocated by Appiah is their responsibility, too.
Works Cited


