YORUBA INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA: KNOWLEDGE, POWER AND THE POLITICS OF INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY

by

Elizabeth Temitope Adefarakan

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Graduate Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This study investigates how Yoruba migrants make meaning of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges in the African Diaspora, specifically within the geopolitical space of dominant Canadian culture. This research is informed by the lived experiences of 16 Africans of Yoruba descent now living in Toronto, Canada, and explores how these first and second generation migrants construct the spiritual and linguistic dimensions of Yoruba Indigenous identities in their everyday lives. While Canada is often imagined as a sanctuary for progressive politics, it nonetheless is also a hegemonic space where inequities continue to shape the social engagements of everyday life. Hence, this dissertation situates the historical and contemporary realities of colonialism and imperialism, by beginning with the premise that people in diasporic Yoruba communities are continuously affected by the complicated interplay of various forms of oppression such as racism, and inequities based on language, gender and religion. This study is situated within a socio–historical and cosmological context to effectively examine colonialism’s impact on Yoruba Indigenous knowledges. Yet, inversely, this study also involves discussion of how these knowledges are utilized as decolonizing tools of navigation, subversion and resistance. The central focus of this research is the articulation of colonial oppression and how it has reconfigured Yoruba Indigenous identities even within a purportedly ‘multicultural’ space. First, the historical dis/continuities of the Yoruba language in Yorubaland are investigated. This strand of the research considers British colonization, and more specifically, the Church Missionary
Society’s (CMS) efforts at translating the Bible into Yoruba as pivotal in the colonial project. What kinds of categories does missionary education create that differ from pre-colonial categories of Yoruba Indigenous identity? How are these new identities shaped along lines of race and gender? In other words, what happens when Yoruba cosmology encounters colonialism? The second strand of this research investigates how these historical colonialisms have set the framework for enduring contemporary colonialisms that continue to fracture Yoruba Indigenous knowledges.

This dissertation offers insights relevant to diversity and equitable pedagogy through careful consideration of the complicated strategies used by participants in their negotiations of Yoruba identities within a context of social inequity and colonialism.
Acknowledgments

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To my family: My mother who gave me life and recently saved it – literally and figuratively, I have come full circle and am a better woman, mother and person for it. Thank you
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They say it takes a village to raise a child; it also takes a village to write a doctoral dissertation. Thank you to the village —seen and unseen— who congregated in the culmination of this thesis. It was a communal labour of love.

AṢẸ
Dedication

For Babatunde

May you rise to your Destiny and always love your Whole Self.

AȘE
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Chapter One:  
Introduction

Background and Statement of the Problem

For Africa and Africans¹, the questions of spirituality and language are deeply bound up within a history of centuries of colonialism, and are therefore entwined in questions of power, knowledge, historical displacement and cultural genocide. However, upon closer examination of this history, spirituality and language are also bound up with/in a complicated matrix of social agency, and individual and group negotiation with, and resistance to colonial domination. For Africans living in Canada, such complexities are heightened by racist and dominant Eurocentric constructions of African identities, particularly as an ‘inferior’ monolith. Of particular relevance is the pathologization and denigration of African Indigenous knowledges (Dei, 2000; James, 1993; Morrison, 1984). Contrary to colonialist and marginalizing constructions of these knowledges, Indigenous knowledge systems are –and have been- crucial sites of empowerment and resistance particularly for those who reside in dominant Eurocentric contexts (Dei, 2000).

My doctoral dissertation explores this inequitable contention between colonizing/Eurocentric knowledge and Indigenous knowledges as they are lived and negotiated by Africans, specifically Yoruba² people in the Canadian context.

¹ For the purposes of this thesis, I include in the term ‘Africans’ both persons whose countries of birth were African and those whose ethnic origin is from the African continent.

² The Yoruba are one of the most populous ethnic and linguistic groups in West Africa. Most Yoruba-speaking peoples reside in the South-Western region of what is now known as Nigeria. The Yoruba number approximately 30 million in this region, also bordering Togo and Benin. There are substantial diasporic Yoruba-speaking migrant communities worldwide, but particularly in Europe and North America. There are also the large enslaved descended communities that are predominantly in Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Southern United States and Sierra Leone.
The Yoruba Community

Popularly known for their ancient art, urban centers and highly complex divinatory and religious systems (Warner-Lewis, 1997) the Yoruba are one of the most populous ethnic and linguistic groups in West Africa. Most Yoruba-speaking peoples reside in the South-Western region of what is now known as Nigeria: a region that is also popularly known as Yorubaland. To date, the Yoruba number approximately 30 million, also bordering Togo and Benin. Their residence in Yorubaland dates as far back as A.D. 800-1000, according to archeological excavations carried out in the Yoruba cities of Ile Ife and Oyo (Drewal, Pemberton, & Abiodun, 1989, p. 13). There are also substantial diasporic Yoruba-speaking migrant communities worldwide, with the largest residing predominantly in Europe and North America. Due principally to the horrific era of European enslavement of African peoples, there are also the large enslave descended communities whose social, religious and cultural practices are distinctly Yoruba, and these identifiable communities exist largely in (but are not limited to) Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, Brazil, Puerto Rico, the Southern United States and Sierra Leone.

While it has been argued by scholars such as Biobaku (1973), Peel (2000), and Law (1991) that no collective Yoruba identity existed until the 19th century (where, it is claimed, that European missionaries were the first to apply the term to a wider portion of the Yoruba linguistic group) other scholars such as Abimbola (1997), Oyewumi (1997) and Akinjogbin (1967) contest this position and argue that there did, in fact, exist a pre-colonial collective Yoruba identity that was based largely on shared language, as well as common socio-religious beliefs and customs. However, these commonalities (as important as they are) are not to be understood as indicating that Yoruba peoples and/or identities are singular or one homogenous entity. In

3 See Biobaku for more on this Sources of Yoruba History p.1
addition to the many sub-ethnicities such as the Oyo, Ijebu, Ekiti, Ife, Ijesha and Egba (to name a few), as mentioned earlier, there also exist the many Yoruba communities that have primarily crossed the Atlantic to form the diasporic Yoruba communities in Europe, the Caribbean and Americas. With such diverse yet salient commonalities, it is impossible to argue Yoruba identity and peoples are singular or universal (Warner-Lewis, 1997; Oyewumi, 1997; Olajubu, 2003; Falola 2004). Nevertheless, what is a point of consensus amongst scholars who focus on and research this ethnic group is the recognition of Yoruba history, art, religion, politics and medicine as key sources of knowledge for the important contributions Africans have made to world civilization (Drewal, Pemberton and Abiodun, 1989). However, scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) reminds us that critical analysis or engagement specifically with the Indigenous knowledges of Yoruba peoples has been remiss (Oyewumi, 1997). Importantly Indigenous ways of knowing are relevant to the Yoruba as well as many other colonized Indigenous peoples. For, while a wide breadth of largely anthropological literature on the Yoruba (alongside disciplines such as history and religious studies) exists, this scholarship has largely been divorced from critical discussions of unequal social relations particularly in the context of colonialism and imperialism. This uncritical stance on colonial hegemony has resulted in the production of grossly unbalanced and Eurocentric views of Yoruba peoples as “inferior” or “subhuman” “objects” to be studied.

Counter to this, my research project is anchored in an anti-colonial framework that holds Indigenous knowledges to be essential decolonizing tools for liberation (Dei, 2001). More specifically however, this study focuses on Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and how they are lived, understood and experienced by Yoruba parents and their children in Canada. That is to

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4 For a more detailed discussion of the anti-colonial theoretical framework and how it applies to this study, see Chapter 3.
say, this study explores how first and second generation Yoruba migrants discuss, communicate and make meaning of the spiritual and linguistic dimensions of their Yoruba Indigenous identities in their everyday lives both inter-generationally, as well as from within the geopolitical space of dominant Canadian culture. I am also interested in how these knowledges are utilized as tools of navigation and subversion. I situate this study within a Yoruba socio-historical and cosmological context to effectively examine colonialism’s impact on identity and knowledge making in Indigenous Yoruba culture. In my exploration of diasporic Yoruba Indigenous identities, my focus is on the problem of Indigenous dis/continuities, which I argue, are two-pronged. First, I investigate the historical dis/continuities of the Yoruba language in Yorubaland which occurred partly as a result of British colonization, and more specifically, the Church Missionary Society’s (CMS) efforts at translating the Bible into Yoruba. I focus on exploring how colonialism –specifically formal missionary derived Western education- figures into the construction of Yoruba Indigenous identities by teasing out the complexities of how it shaped social relations of power and privilege. What kinds of categories do colonialism –specifically missionary education– create that differ from Indigenous and pre-colonial categories, and how, if at all, were they shaped along the lines of gender and class? In other words, what happens when Yoruba cosmology encounters colonialism: how does power get displaced, shifted and reconfigured? Because missionaries came with the Eurocentric and racist agenda of religious conversion, their access to Indigenous languages and spiritualities were seminal to their imperial project of conversion. The missionaries needed to learn, as well as have access to Indigenous speakers of the Yoruba language in order to translate the Christian Bible into Yoruba, which could then inaugurate a process of proselytization. The spaces in which the attendant configurations through which Indigenous Yoruba spirituality was replaced with Christianity are
crucial sites to explore, as this is where the complicated connections between language and spirituality are revealed.

Next, I examine how colonialism set up the framework for enduring contemporary dis/continuities and resistances to these colonial legacies amongst the more recent Yoruba migrations to the West, and their first generation children in the Yoruba diaspora, specifically in Toronto, Canada. The first portion and focus of my argument informs the second, in that it gives a historical backdrop and essential contextualization to how Yoruba Indigenous knowledges are contemporarily understood, constructed and practiced, given the reality of European colonization and imperialism. In situating both the historical realities and contemporary legacies of colonialism, this research also investigates how racism, economic exploitation, discrimination and inequities based on language, gender, sexuality, age, religion, employment, class, education and other socio-political factors such as immigration continue to affect people in diasporic Yoruba communities to this day. If Yoruba identities and the experiences of people in Yoruba diasporic communities (especially, but not limited to Toronto) are to be effectively explored and understood, we must consider those experiences and identities specifically (a) Within the historical and socio-political climate of contemporary ‘Canada’ and (b) with the understanding that the various strategies and forms of resistance against oppression employed by Yoruba parents and their children must also be acknowledged and explored. My exploration of dis/continuities within this particular Yoruba community is also an exploration of the effects colonialism has and continues to have on both the construction of Yoruba Indigenous identities and how they are lived, practiced and understood.

While this is not the focus of the work, I do realize that prior to the so called ‘voluntary’ Yoruba migrations to the West, thousands and maybe even 2 of Yoruba women, men and children were ripped away from their homelands specifically during the horrific forced migrations of transatlantic slavery.
Aim and Objectives of the Study

The central aim of this research project is to investigate the various ways in which Yoruba Indigenous identities are constructed in the Diaspora and specifically how the spiritual and linguistic dimensions of Yoruba culture figure in such constructions within the larger context of dominant ‘Canadian’ culture and colonialism. I explore the extent to which Eurocentric colonialism has marginalized and constrained research participants’ abilities to secure and sustain self-affirming constructions of Yoruba Indigenous identities, as well as the implications and decolonizing possibilities of such realities. Hence, my research project has three learning objectives:

1. To develop and contribute to critical social theory about Yoruba (African) Indigenous knowledges.

2. To engage in in-depth learning and discussion of Yoruba lived experiences and understandings of Yoruba cosmology from within the larger contexts of Euro-dominant culture.

3. To open up a space that engages critical dialogue about Yoruba Indigenous identities and knowledges that are more affirming and accessible, particularly in public spaces where such knowledge has been rendered invisible, silent, and bound up in racist colonial constructions.

Research Questions

This project is informed by three central questions:

1. How do Yoruba Indigenous knowledges inform the diasporic lived experiences of Africans of Yoruba descent in Canada, and vice versa?
2. What are the challenges of learning and honouring these Indigenous knowledges (particularly the spiritual and linguistic dimensions) within a context that pathologizes Yoruba (African) Indigenous spirituality?

3. What are the subversive and emancipatory possibilities of utilizing Yoruba Indigenous knowledges? For example, how can we begin to develop an empowering lived pedagogy of Indigenous African identities from within the lived context of dominant Euro-Canadian culture?

My hope is to gain a more nuanced sense of the ways in which Yoruba people draw on their Indigenous knowledges and to explore how they use these knowledges to guide them to resist, re-define and re-invent themselves – i.e. their Africanness – outside the domain of the hegemonic, while living in diasporic colonial contexts. My investigation into the ways in which Yoruba Indigenous identities are constructed in the diaspora focuses on the experiences and understandings of 16 participants (or 5 families) from the Yoruba community in Toronto, Canada. This research project investigates the role of Yoruba (African) Indigenous knowledges in these 16 participants’ lives and identities.

**Personal Location in the Study**

This research project was informed by my particular life and educational experiences and how I feel the legacy of colonialism has shaped my relationship to Yoruba cosmology. i.e., how my access to Yoruba cosmology has been amputated, fragmented and blocked. I came to this work by virtue of my own life experiences of oppression, violence and amnesia that were persistently interwoven with a strong sense of displacement and loss around not knowing my Yoruba culture and identity, as well as feeling cut off from important parts of me that seemed so inaccessible. However I was also deeply anchored by an equally strong sense of my Blackness
which was shaped largely by diasporic Africans who had a similar yet different history of struggle, trauma and resistance in the ‘New World.’ As I continued to make connections with Africans who also had a passion for African spirituality, and yearned for, but did not have the language to access it, my specific location and history as a Yoruba (African) woman who could point to and claim a particular people, language and culture on the continent of Africa became evident. I became curious about developing a deeper historical understanding of the varied ways Africans have resisted, challenged and negotiated our shared histories of colonialism. Sharing and exchanging these differences alongside our similarities helped me to realize that I wanted to know more. This led me to seeking both an opportunity and space in which to grapple with, explore and re-member my Yoruba identity. Through many conversations with elders in the Yoruba community, and through attending many of this community’s functions in Toronto, I realized that the particular forms of ‘Yorubaness’ expressed were more often than not anchored in Christianity and, to a lesser degree, in Islam. Similar to my own upbringing in Canada, while many first generation Yoruba-Canadian migrants would speak Yoruba to each other (their peers), I found it interesting that they spoke English to their children and that even if they did speak Yoruba to their children, their children almost always replied in English. I realized there was a pattern to this and wanted to understand why this was the case. Why was it that ‘normal’ Yoruba identities were overwhelmingly seen as the colonially derived ones – the most obvious examples to me being religion and/or spirituality, and language? I wondered what had happened to Indigenous Yoruba spirituality? Why was it that in conversation with many community elders, our Indigenous spirituality was repeatedly not seen as normative, and why was it largely spoken about with deep disdain, shame, or almost always dismissed as ‘something to not talk about’? Also, why were so many parents not speaking the Yoruba language to their children, or,
conversely, why were so many children of Yoruba migrants not able to speak, much less read or write Yoruba? Over and over again, at community outings, family and friends’ functions, church. I noticed that this pattern emerged. While these were my own personal, anecdotal observations, I wanted to know, were people in the Yoruba community really for the most part not—or at least not openly—embracing and practicing Yoruba spirituality? And why did so many first generation ‘Canadian’ children, such as myself not speak much, if any Yoruba at all? I noted that my observations were highly experiential and while valuable, they could be read through a Eurocentric lens as largely unsupported assumptions in terms of whether this was coincidental, or a larger issue affecting many in the Yoruba community. However, as a young Black woman who was raised in Canada since the age of three, I also knew about racism, sexism and classism and experienced the traumatic realities of all forms of oppression on a daily basis. Coming from a very working class family, I knew what it meant to not be able to afford to buy my lunch, or have the latest brand name clothes and toys that my white peers had. Both I and my siblings began part-time jobs, working at very early ages in our adolescence and in doing so, were partially responsible for family expenses. I knew what it meant to either be ignored in a store because it was assumed that I could not afford the merchandise, or to be followed closely because it was assumed that I would steal the merchandise. I also knew what it meant to be in Canadian public schools since the age of three and never experience being taught by a Black teacher until graduate school because, ironically enough, the principals and other school officials at all three levels (elementary, middle and high school) claimed that “there weren’t any qualified Black teachers to hire.” I knew what it meant to come home from work on a school night and have a dark car following me, only for the window to be rolled down, often exposing an older white man asking me if I wanted a ride. I knew what it meant to see the young Black males in
my high school be used for basketball competitions while getting credited for classes they did not have to attend because they were going to be “basketball stars.” Yet as it turned out, they were merely being used to bring in quite a profit for the school coach from corporate sponsors. I also knew I never learned about African/Black people in school and if I did, they were either “savages,” “slaves” or famine and disease stricken charity cases in need of Western aid. Despite the national rhetoric of Canada as a ‘tolerant,’ peacekeeping and multicultural country, I knew that my experiences as a young Black woman were very contrary to this; racism and other forms of oppression were alive and well in Canada.

Hence, graduate school, and ultimately this research project, became a space where I could investigate this problem of what, to me, seemed to be deep-seated patterns of Yoruba cultural discontinuities within a larger context of deep seated anti-Black racism and the many other forms of oppression that exist in ‘Canada.’ Graduate school allowed me a space to remain cognizant of and merge these experiences with the historical realities of how ‘Canada’ came to be. In being provided a space to continue asking deeper and more critical questions, I was able to marry them with my own experiences in terms of exploring what it means to be woman, colonized, Black, decolonizing, ‘Canadian,’ and to explore how these layers figure into the shared Yoruba identity I have with the 16 participants in my study. However in highlighting our shared, but not singular, Yoruba identity, it was clear that I also needed to be cognizant of differences and how these aspects of our identities also contribute to differing standpoints and social locations (Lorde, 1984; Carty in Gottfried, 1996; Amadiume, 1997, 2000; Collins, 1990) thereby making the concept of difference critical to this project. Hence, both the shared and

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6 I use quotations to highlight the paradoxes and power imbalances, especially in terms of the paradox that ‘Canada’ is as a “real” material and geographic space, yet at the same time a space/land that remains marked and reflective of colonial hierarchies – an occupied land – I also use quotations to highlight the layers of this land to denote this geographical space’s Indigenous name: Turtle Island
different experiences that are structured around race, age, gender, class and generation (while all the participants who are first generation grew up in Yorubaland, Nigeria, their children were raised primarily in Canada) serve the function of nuancing my exploration of Yoruba Indigenous identities in diasporic contexts. Ultimately, my particular social location paradoxically as both an Indigenous ‘insider’ and a Western researcher shapes my reading of the knowledge and data in this research project, and “I” cannot stand outside that. Feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith asserts the importance of challenging notions of ‘objectivity’ in research:

The practice of objectivity in the social sciences allows that science to detach its corpus of statements from the subjectivities of those who have made them. It has very little to do with the pursuit of knowledge (Smith, 1987:33).

I would like to extend Smith’s discussion of the impossibility of ‘objective’ research to the impossibility of ‘objective’ identities, as we all have a particular perspective, social location and standpoint from which we know and understand our world, lives and experiences (Lorde, 1984; Collins, 1990). I therefore write and produce this research with a clear social and political project of decolonization and affirmation of Yoruba Indigenous identities and knowledges, particularly in colonizing and imperial contexts. However, my position as the researcher in this project poses additional challenges and tensions around power, namely academic training and exclusiveness, and the politics of knowledge production: this dilemma has often been understood as that of the insider/outsider (Carty, 1996; Collins, 1990; Smith, 1999). In Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) writes:

There are a number of ethical, cultural, political and personal issues that can present special difficulties for indigenous researchers who, in their own communities, work partially as insiders, and are often employed for this purpose, and partially as outsiders, because of their Western education or because they may work across clan, tribe, linguistic, age and gender boundaries. Simultaneously they work within their research projects or institutions as insiders within a particular paradigm or research model, and as outsiders because they are often marginalized and perceived to be representative of either a minority or a rival interest group….More often, however, I think that indigenous
research is not quite as simple as it looks, nor quite as complex as it feels! If I have one consistent message for the students I teach and the researchers I train it is that indigenous research is a humble and humbling activity...Indigenous researchers are expected, by their communities and by the institutions which employ them, to have some form of historical and critical analysis of the role of research in the indigenous world. In general, this analysis has been acquired organically and outside of the academy (5, my emphasis).

What Smith highlights are the politics of just how marginalized and devalued Indigenous knowledges are within the academy, because ultimately the knowledge that researchers who identify as Indigenous draw upon overwhelmingly exists outside these oppressive and exclusive terrains. To this end, it is these multiple and overlapping positionalities that I bring to this research project.

**Significance of the Study**

While there is a wide breadth of literature and research on the Yoruba both in Yorubaland, and the retentions of Yoruba culture in the diaspora (i.e., Haiti, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago and Cuba), my work addresses the realities and experiences of a very specific Yoruba community that shares a contemporary identification with both continental and diasporic Yoruba peoples. In other words, on the one hand, there is the huge body of largely anthropological literature which focuses primarily on the source: Yoruba people and culture in Yorubaland of what is now known as the South-Western region of Nigeria. On the other hand, there is the literature which focuses on the dispersal of Yoruba peoples in the diaspora, primarily as a result of transatlantic slavery. This literature concentrates primarily on how Yoruba culture, and particularly Yoruba spirituality was forced to go underground, to move, shift and syncretize, yet continue and take root in the form of Shango and Spiritual Baptism in Trinidad and Tobago, Vodun in Haiti, Santeria/Lucumi in Cuba and Candomble in Brazil. There is then another
community that has recently (beginning late 60s and early 70s) been ‘voluntarily’ migrating to the Atlantic diaspora from Yorubaland: the Yoruba speaking community. That is, those whose first language is Yoruba and who more often than not, raise their children in the Atlantic African diaspora. More specifically, the focus of my research is the Yoruba diaspora in Toronto, Canada. These particular Yoruba communities live highly complicated and remarkable lives where they follow global capital, in the hopes of giving their children better lives with one leg on either side of the Atlantic. This manifests often through one leg in the form of travel and sending money (largely through remittances), clothing and other necessities to support relatives and loved ones back home in Yorubaland; meanwhile, the other leg carries the responsibility of survival and establishing a livelihood for their families and children in the diaspora. However, with the exception Charles Adeyanju’s Master’s thesis titled, The Transnational Social Fields of the Yoruba in Toronto, Canada, there is virtually no research on the Yoruba diaspora in Toronto – nor in any geographic region in Canada for that matter – that details the specific lived realities of these particular Yoruba communities. The absence of such research has also meant a silence around how Yoruba Indigenous culture is affected and re-configured in the face of balancing familial and economic demands from within the onerous context of colonial oppression. My research, therefore, fills this large gap in the research on Yoruba-speaking communities in diasporic contexts.

Second, while literature on the African Atlantic diaspora is fairly developed and well-established in the United States, Britain and the Caribbean, the African diaspora in ‘Canada’ is

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7 I use quotations to highlight the paradoxes and power imbalances, especially in terms of the paradox that ‘Canada’ is as a “real” material and geographic space, yet at the same time a space/land that remains marked and reflective of colonial hierarchies – an occupied land – I also use quotations to highlight the layers of this land to denote this geographical space’s Indigenous name: Turtle Island
often overlooked and rendered invisible. My work contributes to the sparse yet growing scholarship on the specificities of the ‘Canadian’ experience in the African/Black diaspora.

Third, analysis of the various dis/continuities and preservations of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality and language amongst Yoruba migrants in Toronto, Canada and their first generation children has not been undertaken. Very little research investigates how migrants negotiate their Indigenous identities in colonized spaces that are not Indigenous to them, making this study unique for its relevance both to the participants in the study, and to those who are socially positioned in similar ways.

Fourth, this research redresses the paucity of literature on diasporic Indigeneity by employing an avenue of inquiry that has rarely been adopted; namely employing an Indigenous (Smith, 1999) feminist and anti-colonial framework of analysis (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001). In their article “The Power of Social Theory: The Anti-colonial Discursive Framework” George Dei and Alireza Asgarzadeh discuss how an anti-colonial discursive framework is inextricably bound with feminist and other anti-oppressive frameworks of analysis:

While tackling pyramids of power and hegemony, the anti-colonial framework calls into question all relations of domination emanating from racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ablism and all dominant forms of social relations.

Of additional importance is that analysis from this conceptual perspective provides a more critical and comprehensive understanding of the linkages between diaspora and Indigenous identities in spaces that are hegemonic and colonizing.

The fifth reason this research project is of significance is that it challenges the dominance of largely anthropological research methods and theories that have dehumanized and positioned Africans and other Indigenous peoples as objects to be studied, or merely as “sources of data” (Dei et al, 2000). Instead, this study is anchored in and part of a larger decolonizing project that
seeks to give voice to those who have been marginalized, silenced and/or erased (Lorde, 1984; Amadiame, 1997; Oyewumi 1997; Smith, 1999). This is often achieved by ‘writing back’ (Hutchinson, 1982), ‘talking back’ (hooks, 1989) or ‘researching back’ (Smith, 1999), where “a recovery of ourselves, an analysis of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination” (Smith, 1999) are simultaneously sustained and remain central.

Finally, this research project is of importance because, in challenging the silencing of Yoruba Indigenous identities, this study opens up a space for critical dialogue around the politics of how African Indigenous identities have been, and continue to be constructed in colonizing contexts. This project also serves as an example that illustrates the vital role that our Indigenous identities and knowledges play in decolonizing projects, and opens up a space for imagining how these knowledges and identities can be used as a central politic for resistance, progressive change and especially as a foundation for nurturing the impulse towards wholeness that colonialism chokes and disrupts.

**Challenges of the Study**

This research project focuses on 16 participants and their understandings of Yoruba Indigenous identities and the nuances of how the spiritual and linguistic dimensions are, or are not utilized by them in their everyday lives in dominant Canadian culture. Given such a focus, this study might be perceived as limited in that it emphasizes and explores the significance of these particular –spiritual and linguistic- elements rather than considering other dimensions that may also be vital in the construction of Yoruba Indigenous identities and knowledges. However, my focus on and privileging of these dimensions in this study was strategic based on my observations of spiritual and linguistic silences in diasporic Yoruba culture, and on my personal location as a second generation Yoruba-Canadian woman who has had many unsuccessful
experiences accessing these aspects of my identity. Thus, while the study is not a comprehensive assessment of all possible factors influencing Yoruba identity construction in the Diaspora, it does strive to understand the significance of these two otherwise overlooked dimensions of Yoruba Indigenous identity construction.

Second, the research is limited to 16 participants from the Yoruba-speaking community in Toronto, Canada, and therefore is not a large enough sample to make any all-encompassing, representative or conclusive arguments about all, many or most Yoruba speaking communities in the diaspora. However, despite the shortcomings by virtue of the small sample, the impetus of this research is to develop a more detailed and illustrative (Goldstein, 2001; Adefarakan, 2002) and nuanced understanding of the politics and layered complexities of how Yoruba Indigenous identities are constructed from within the dominant and oppressive terrains of Canadian colonialism. An additional motivation for this research is to demonstrate how an illustrative study of this type exemplifies how these knowledges and aspects of one’s identity can be used as subversive and decolonizing tools.

A noteworthy tension in this study is that while it contributes to the small but growing literature on African diasporic scholarship in Canada, it is limited, in terms of geographic scope, to the Atlantic portion of the African diaspora. Paul Zeleza (2005) notes that much of the conceptual knowledge and scholarship on the African diaspora remains centered around the Atlantic, meanwhile leaving the intra-African, Indian Ocean and Mediterranean dimensions of African diaspora largely absent (Zeleza, 2005). In this sense, this research project is somewhat of a paradox in terms of being spatially and geographically located among, or surrounded by the ‘giants’ of African diasporic studies –namely Britain, America and to a lesser extent, the Caribbean. Yet, Canadian scholars have only recently begun to emerge and contribute to this
literature. The tension therefore arises from the ironic positioning of emerging scholarship on African diaspora in ‘Canada’ as a type of scholarship which shares an overlooked, yet emerging similarity with the African diasporas of what Zeleza (2005) calls the intra-African, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean.

Again, based on my own personal observations and experiences, a large number of people in the Yoruba speaking community in Toronto, Canada largely identify as Christian, and unsurprisingly, all but one participant (who was raised Muslim, but is currently not practicing) in my study identified as Christian. Given such, this study is limited to investigating Eurocentric colonialism and Christianity, and does not examine the impact and influences that Arabic colonialism and Islam have had on the construction and retention of Yoruba Indigenous identities.

Finally, this research in and of itself (as one that prioritizes African Indigenous and anti-colonial perspectives) is challenging by virtue of the dominance of postmodern politics as the singular valid or acceptable approach to ‘rigorously’ theorizing identity and/or Indigeneity. Such a challenge is heightened for African peoples who are often seen as “not Indigenous enough” or “not Indigenous at all.” The tensions become even more intense when the focus is diasporic; for, many would argue that being in a diasporic context renders (especially) African Indigeneity impossible or, simply non-existent. For this, I am keenly aware that I write against the academic grain, and in the face of incredible opposition. However, in sum, the challenge (and my political position) here is not so much to engage the debates on “the politics of identity” (Indigenous or otherwise), so much as it is to engage an exploration of African, and more specifically, Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and identities on their own terms.
Chapter Two:
The Complicated Interplay of Indigenous Knowledges and Identities

The term ‘indigenous’ came into being to give a common name both to those who exist/ed outside colonial domains, as well as those who are colonized (Narogin, 1995). While Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) embraces this concept, she also cautions that Indigenous peoples are not homogenous, and this term might seem to primarily suggest. It is important to note however, that those taking issue with this term have come overwhelmingly from dominant –especially in academic spaces– or those who work with and have embraced dominant and Eurocentric frames of mind or analysis. Opposition to and debate about the appropriateness of the term ‘Indigenous’ do not come from the Indigenous peoples themselves (Dei 2000; Battiste, 2000). Discussions around identities and processes of identification have also been highly contentious, debated and variously defined and theorized, again particularly within the academy where these varied approaches have often been termed ‘identity politics.’ Given this, it is no surprise that a discussion of both terms coupled together –Indigenous identities– might likely increase or intensify the level of contestation and be even more fraught with divisions and debates both around how people identify themselves, as well as around how they are identified by others. While I recognize these tensions, it is not my aim to resolve them in this work. Instead, I embrace these terms and discuss their relevance to the learning and research objectives outlined above by reviewing five bodies of scholarship, and bringing them into conversation with one another. I begin with scholarship on Indigenous knowledges and identities which I bring into conversation with literature on the roles that spirituality and language play in Indigenous processes of identification. I then review scholarship on Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and identities with specific emphasis on the intersections of language and
spirituality. This section also includes a discussion of scholarship on the European colonization of Yoruba peoples and culture—primarily via Christian missionaries—and their role in the development of ‘formal’ education. I argue that the arrival of this form of education in Yorubaland is a crucial site at which the complicated interplay between Yoruba language and spirituality can be illuminated. Of particular importance in this section is a review of literature that discusses how gender figures and is conceptualized within the context of Indigenous Yoruba identities and ways of knowing. The last body of scholarship I review involves literature on diaspora, specifically the African diaspora, and the key debates surrounding African diasporic identities and retentions/survivals. This final section is necessary because it situates my research project within the larger social context of how and why Yoruba peoples came, and continue to come to ‘Canada.’

Aboriginal scholar Marie Battiste cautions against universal definitions of Indigenous knowledges and cites the need for definitions as a Eurocentric phenomenon:

…Indigenous knowledge is not a uniform concept across all Indigenous peoples; it is a diverse knowledge that is spread throughout different peoples in many layers. Those who are possessors of this knowledge often cannot categorize it in Eurocentric thought, partly because the processes of categorization are not part of Indigenous thought…Eurocentric thought demands universal definitions of Indigenous knowledge…[where] Eurocentric thinkers automatically assume the superiority of their worldview and attempt to impose it on others, extending their definitions to encompass the whole world. Typically, this quest for universal definitions ignores the diversity of the people of the earth and their worldview of themselves (Battiste, 2000: 35-37).

Battiste describes this devastating process as “cognitive imperialism.” Not only does she highlight the importance of recognizing multiplicity as the normative reality of Indigenous experience, but she also attunes one’s senses towards understanding that multiplicity and diversity are foundational principles in Indigenous thought and philosophy. This is a vital point because it simultaneously underscores the important contributions that Indigenous peoples and
their knowledges offer, while contesting the Eurocentric and hegemonic view that the only valid systems of knowledge are those which come from Europe.

As discussed above, and identified by Smith (1999) the term ‘indigenous’ is used in a myriad of ways by different scholars and is therefore not exempt from tensions and ambiguities. Nevertheless, Smith also informs us that it is a legitimate term which carries political relevance for colonized peoples who epitomize “the unfinished business of decolonization” (1999:7). Further, she argues that the term operates as an umbrella concept that allows diverse colonized peoples to collectively voice their diverse experiences as well as act as allies for one another in order to mobilize in both local and global struggles for decolonization and self-determination (Smith, 1999). Trevor W. Purcell’s (1998) discussion of the term supports Smith’s position. He argues that while the term ‘indigenous’ is largely an invention of colonial history, its usage by Indigenous peoples has largely been self-applied, carrying less condescension than racist, anthropologically-anchored terms such as “primitive” or “tribal” (Purcell, 1998: 259). While the term may be a colonial invention, it does not preclude the fact that Indigenous knowledges and the peoples who carry them have always existed, but have simply been using other terms (Battiste, 2002). Battiste identifies the following terms as other names that have been given to describe Indigenous knowledges: “folk knowledge,” “local knowledge or wisdom,” “non-formal knowledge,” “culture,” “indigenous technical knowledge,” and “traditional knowledge.” (7). It is also important to note that within the context of people who simply be and live their knowledges on a daily basis, there very well may not be a need to name that which they simply are. In the co-edited book, *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World*, George Dei describes Indigenous knowledge as:

…A body of knowledge associated with long-term occupancy of a certain place. This knowledge refers to traditional norms and social values, as well as to mental constructs
that guide, organize, and regulate the people’s way of living and making sense of their world. It is the sum of experience and knowledge of a given social group, and forms the basis of decision making in the face of challenges both familiar and unfamiliar. For millennia, many indigenous cultures were guided by a world view based on the following: seeing the individual as part of nature; respecting and reviving the wisdom of elders; giving consideration to the living, the dead, and future generations; sharing responsibility, wealth, and practices reflecting connections to a higher order, to the culture, and to the earth (2000: 6).

The elements identified by Dei are present in many African and more specifically, Yoruba Indigenous systems of thought. These are systems where an individual’s identity is relational (Mbiti, 1975; James, 1993; Oyewumi, 1997; Olajubu, 2003; Dillard, 2006) and conceived within a larger context of both their human community, as well as the community which extends beyond human existence in a worldsense that recognizes both the seen and unseen environments as an infusion of the physical and spiritual. This conception of identity is shaped by an understanding of Indigenous knowledges which “…are indigenous epistemologies [that] are grounded in an awareness and deep appreciation of the cosmos and how the self/selves, spiritual, known and unknown worlds are interconnected” (Dei, 2000:115). Indigenous scholars such as Linda Smith (1999), Marie Battiste (2002), Mudrooroo Narogin (1995), Haunani-Kay Trask (1999), John Mbiti (1975) Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) and Oyeronke Olajubu (2003) also place emphasis on the foundational significance of cosmology or worldview in Indigenous systems of knowledge, and cite them as the crucial larger milieu that nurture the constantly evolving knowledges that we humans produce about ourselves, as well as our relationships with the other beings and species in our environment. Of particular significance in Dei’s discussion of Indigenous knowledges is his understanding that they are also characterized by an absence of colonial and imperial imposition (2000:6). Dei argues that such knowledges are re-emerging partly in response to imperial destructiveness, as a viable way to counter this, as well as a powerful reminder to not forget how Indigenous peoples and their knowledges have been
silenced and cast to the periphery (2000:6). More specifically, Dei discusses African Indigenous knowledges as counter hegemonic systems which serve as a means of epistemological recuperation (2000: 71). For the research I undertake here, a conceptualization of Indigenous knowledges where they serve the multiple roles of operating as decolonizing tools of resistance, underscoring imbalances of power, and remaining cognizant of how colonialist and imperialist forces figure is most useful since the Yoruba are a colonized people whose realities and lives exist with/in the legacies of these forces.

Marlene Brant Castellano’s scholarship (2000) outlines traditional knowledge, empirical knowledge and revealed knowledge as three broad features of Aboriginal Indigenous knowledges. Castellano identifies traditional knowledge as intergenerational and passed down to younger generations by community elders; she describes empirical knowledge as based on accumulative careful observations of the surrounding environment (i.e. culture, nature, society) and finally, she distinguishes revealed knowledge to be information that is accessed through dreams, intuition and visions (2000: 25). These features are also present and in keeping with many African Indigenous knowledge systems. In the Yoruba context, these three kinds of knowledge often overlap, particularly given that Yoruba notions of community exist beyond temporal lines to include the metaphysical world of ancestors, those yet to be born, and the natural world. For example, an ancestor often communicates with their human descendant(s) by imparting important information through dreams, and can literally speak to their living loved ones; and can take the shape of sound. Hearing a voice, seeing light; evoking bodily senses such as vibrations; feeling pressure in the form of warmth, smelling familiar scents that trigger memories; all of these are examples of how information may be communicated through stimulation of the body in a Yoruba context. In this sense, all three features of traditional,
empirical and revealed knowledge not only occur within the material realm, but also cross over to move in between the physical and metaphysical realms, thereby illustrating the importance of interconnection and complementarity within a Yoruba world sense.

A number of scholars have noted that Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing about the self are grounded in connectedness with community and harmonious relationship with one’s environment – both physical and spiritual (Mbiti, 1975; Amadiueme, 1997; James, 1993; Dei, 1999; Semali and Kincheloe, 1999; Smith, 1999; Battiste, 2000; Dillard, 2006). Said another way, Indigenous notions of the self are not singular, but rather, are interwoven and extended in multiple layers within the context of the larger community that one exists in. As mentioned above, this larger community is anchored in the larger milieu known as worldview or cosmology, where, because it is understood that interconnectedness and relationship are central, fragmentation and fracturing are often experienced as destructive and amputative. Marie Battiste (2000) posits the principle of holism as the crucial and definitive context for Indigenous ways of knowing and heritage to be transmitted and sustained. In all, she identifies six widely shared characteristics that structure Indigenous ways of knowing:

1. knowledge of and belief in unseen powers in the ecosystem; 2. knowledge that all things in the ecosystem are dependent on each other; 3. knowledge that reality is structured according to most of the linguistic concepts by which Indigenous describe it; 4. knowledge that personal relationships reinforce the bond between persons, communities, and ecosystems; 5. knowledge that sacred traditions and persons who know these traditions are responsible for teaching “morals” and “ethics” to practitioners who are then given responsibility for this specialized knowledge and its dissemination; and 6. knowledge that an extended kinship passes on teachings and social practices from generation to generation (2000:42).

These characteristics outlined by Battiste are relevant to this research project, in the sense that they are elements which also structure Indigenous ways of knowing amongst the Yoruba (particularly where Elders, belief in the un/seen ecosystem, and interconnected relationships are
concerned). However, Battiste does not address the issue of origin, or, more specifically, land and how this is often used as the crucial element necessary to apply the term “Indigenous” to a particular people. In fact, she herself subscribes to the belief that land or territory is an essential marker concerning which groups can be considered, or qualify as “Indigenous peoples.” Furthermore, her application of this concept to African peoples is particularly problematic and rather exclusive:

….Africa poses problems of definition [as Indigenous peoples], because most Africans consider themselves Indigenous people who have achieved decolonization and self-determination. Yet many relatively small nomadic herding and hunter-gatherer societies such as the Tuareg (in Niger), Maasai (in Kenya), Mbuti (in the Congo), and San (in southern Africa’s Kalahari) have been displaced and oppressed (“internally colonized”) by ethnically unrelated African peoples who have been neighbors for a thousand years or longer (Battiste, 2000:65).

To make a statement claiming that “most” Africans consider themselves decolonized without substantiating it in anyway, is to reproduce the idea of Africa and Africans as an essentialized monolith to which the politics of decolonization do not apply because we “have achieved decolonization and self-determination.” In addition, Battiste’s claim conveniently allows for the continued denial of existing anti-Black/African racisms that are the contemporary cornerstone of colonial hegemony. Battiste’s statement is ideological in that contexts of denial serve to silence those who speak otherwise, and wish to voice the very real and material consequences of anti-Black racism. Second, in addition to reifying the notion of land as the essential marker of Indigenous identity, Battiste limits African Indigenous peoples and their identities to the geographical space of Africa; she does not consider that such identifications exist in diasporic contexts both within and beyond the continent. In this respect, Battiste leaves a void in her discussion when considering African peoples’ varied migrations, and forced removals (i.e. the European enslavement of Africans) from their Indigenous lands and ecosystems. Finally, and
rather disturbingly, Battiste seems to conceptualize the contemporary colonization of African peoples as deriving primarily from other Africans, as opposed to understanding such divisions as the long-standing effects of European colonialism that have been deeply internalized. This dangerously rings of the hegemonic trope of “tribal violence”, “factional fighting” or, what is popularly referred to in current dominant discourse as “Black on Black crime.” Such limited conceptions of Indigenous peoples ultimately end up excluding a rather large number of African peoples, particularly those who migrated and/or were forcibly moved under tremendously oppressive conditions that – much like in the case of the Indigenous peoples of North America – were not of their own making. Fortunately, in contrast to Battiste’s narrow discussion of Indigenous peoples, Trevor Purcell (1998) reminds us that although legally recognized definitions of Indigenous people are often limited to residing on ancestral land/territory, Indigenous knowledges are not (1998:260). I therefore build on Purcell’s line of reasoning, and see it as an important point of departure for my study because it allows for dialogue concerning Indigenous identities to be ones that are more open to a multiplicity of understandings and approaches in terms of how Indigeneity is conceptualized or defined. What makes my research project of critical importance is my argument for the need to move away from narrow or essentialized notions of Indigeneity – such as those that are exclusively predicated on residing on land – so that allowances can be made for inclusion of the Indigenous knowledges and identities of people who carry this information with them in their bodies – alongside their cultural histories and memories – despite the fact that they may not be residing on their Indigenous lands. Thomas Heyd’s (1995) work in particular has argued powerfully that such knowledges are “embedded in distinctive social practices and cultural frameworks” (70) such as one’s cultural memory (Dei, 2000). Hence, while the focus of my research is specifically diasporic Yoruba Indigenous
identities, this research nevertheless builds on the previous works of the handful of scholars who have written extensively to demonstrate the varied and complicated ways that African Indigenous knowledges are embedded and embodied in diasporic contexts (Herskovits, 1941; Stuckey, 1987; Heyd, 1995; Amadiume, 1987, 1997; Semali and Kincheloe, 1999; Dei, 2000; Warner-Lewis, 1997, 2003; John, 2003; Falola, 2004, 2005). Such approaches are relevant to my research here in that they open a space for Indigenous knowledges and identities to conceptually ‘meet’ or ‘merge’ in the space of cultural memory (embeddedness) as experienced by the body (embodiment). [In this sense, my project adds to the few works that engage the topic of Indigenous identities and knowledges, while simultaneously taking a different tangent through its contemporary and diasporic focus.]

**How Does Spirituality Figure? The Importance of Spirituality for Indigenous Ways of Knowing**

In academic circles, including or embracing spirituality in one’s scholarship is often encumbered with the risk of being perceived as an academic whose work is not rigorous. However, such dilemmas are non-existent when Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing are considered because spirituality is understood to be the *life-force* of Indigenous peoples: it informs, and is therefore connected to all existence. In *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora*, Dona Richards states that spirituality in African contexts:

…does not mean distant or ‘non-human,’ and it certainly does not mean ‘saintly’ or ‘pristine.’ Spirituality refers to spiritual being, to that which gives life, form, and

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8 I say this with specific reference to spaces that are more conducive to Indigenous peoples and not the academy. I am also aware that some academics who are Indigenous are faced with the challenge of the tension between knowledge that the academy privileges, and the epistemologies of Indigenous peoples. This thereby creates a hierarchy where, the knowledge that has currency is often not that of Indigenous peoples. What I want to highlight here is that tensions around the credibility of spirituality and spiritual knowledges are not present amongst Indigenous peoples because they form a core aspect of Indigenous worldsense and worldview.
meaning to physical realities. It is the breath of life...[and] the apprehension of cosmic interrelationship (Richards, 1994:36).

While no singular definition of spirituality –African or otherwise– can encompass a full range of the various ways spirituality is expressed and structured, Richards’ description is echoed in the work of numerous African Indigenous scholars who emphasize spirituality, or matters of the spirit, as the essential anchor in cultural worldview (Mbiti, 1975; Amadiume, 1987; Olupona, 1991, 2000; Falola, 1999, 2005; Dillard, 2006). I would add that both individual and shared expressions of one’s spirituality are symbiotically manifested in varied life contexts; for example, in daily relationships (Smith, 1999), experiences and practice; as well as in one’s shared/communal cultural practices as evidenced in naming ceremonies, burials and rituals such as prayer (Oyewumi, 1997; Olajubu, 2003). Ultimately, the core of spirituality is the infused ethereal and physical expression of connection with, and reliance on a higher force that is larger than one’s human self (Idowu, 1962; Mbiti, 1975; James, 1993). As noted above by Marie Battiste (2000), the holistic philosophy central to Indigenous ways of knowing necessitates an awareness of how the spiritual as well as material inform our world and daily realities. Being conscientious of the spiritual dimension of our physical existence requires particular attention in a Euro-dominant world that increasingly equates progress and knowledge with secularization (particularly secularized science as the norm) or amputation of spiritual consciousness and intelligence. However, both understanding and having a relationship with spirit are essential for Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Writing in *African Religions and Philosophy*, John Mbiti shows us that while on the one hand, “the spiritual world of African peoples is very densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits and the living dead,” this world also operates *in concert* with the physical, where they “intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or separate them” (1975: 74). This
interdependent and tightly woven relationship between the material and spiritual is also discussed by Joy James (1993) within the context of community and cosmology:

Theory is done from the standpoint of the individual – in relationship to community…. The point is to stand at the crossroads, at the center within your community. There the world of your horizon – family, friends, community, and people (nation) and the vertical climb and descent where spirit links you through time to those preceding you (ancestors) and those to follow you (the not-yet-born) intersect. Stand at the center, within community, and you will see the four corners of the world. From the vantage point or viewpoint, in African cosmology, we theorize to live freely as human beings (James, 1993: 34).

Community is of prime importance in James’ discussion. She links the interwoven relationship between the individual and community, with that of the material and spiritual. In this sense then, that which is spiritual is inseparable from that which is tangible, and Indigenous notions of spirituality both operate and manifest at the level of a type of sacred or spiritual tangibility. Said another way, Indigenous notions of spirituality are located in all seen and unseen relationships amongst the various beings and species on earth, primarily because these relationships exist, and are interrelated in the larger context of cosmology or worldview. Historian Sterling Stuckey contends that such worldviews are circular. Writing in, Slave Culture: Nationalist theory and the Foundations of Black America, Stuckey shows us that despite the conversionist zeal of Christianity, enslaved Africans in the Southern region of the United States very much remained immersed in African rituals and traditions, which were overwhelmingly anchored in the structure and symbol of the circle. Stuckey is important to quote at length:

The majority of Africans brought to North America to be enslaved were from the central and western areas of Africa—from Congo-Angola, Nigeria, Dahomey, Togo, the Gold Coast, and Sierra Leone. In these areas, an integral part of religion and culture was movement in a ring during ceremonies honoring the ancestors. There is, in fact, substantial evidence for the importance of the ancestral function of the circle in West Africa, but the circle ritual imported by Africans from the Congo region was so powerful in its elaboration of a religious vision that it contributed disproportionately to the centrality of the circle in slavery. The use of the circle for religious purposes in slavery was so consistent and profound that one could argue that is was what gave form and
meaning to black religion and art. It is understandable that the circle became the chief symbol of heathenism for missionaries, black and white, leading them to seek either to alter it or to eradicate it altogether. That they failed to do so owes a great deal to Bakongo influence in particular, but values similar to those in Congo-Angola are found among Africans a thousand or more miles away, in lands in which the circle is also of great importance. .. Coded as a cross, a quartered circle or diamond, a seashell’s spiral, or a special cross with solar emblems at each ending – the sign of the four moments of the sun is the Kongo emblem of spiritual continuity and renaissance... The circle is linked to the most important of all African ceremonies, the burial ceremony... circular movement is used to represent themes of togetherness and containment... Wherever in Africa the counterclockwise dance ceremony was performed – it is called the ring shout in North America – the dancing and singing were directed to the ancestors and gods, the tempo and revolution of the circle quickening during the course of movement... Sierra Leoneans reveal much about the circle in relation to the life process; indeed, the circle may well be the principal African metaphor for it... the connection of the circle to the ancestors and to the young is so various. Nevertheless, other African institutions and African priests were brought to America in large numbers and, unrecognized by whites, found their places in the circle and elsewhere (Stuckey, 1987:10-15).

This passage is of significance for a number of reasons. First, Stuckey’s discussion of the circle highlights the holistic nature of African Indigenous culture(s) where spirituality and/or religion are inextricably infused with the culture; each element continually operates in concert with the other, literally, in a circular fashion. Second, the themes of holism and continuity are incomplete without all members of the community. This is where ancestors, the unborn, and multiple gods manifest, take hold of, or ‘meet’ the physical. They do this especially during ritual dance and song, by using the fleshy and tangible bodies of the enslaved participants as the primary vehicles for expression and communication with their worshippers. These rituals of expression and communication between pure spirit and fleshy human counterparts are reciprocal ones; in that enslaved Africans are also demonstrating and expressing their connection to, and relationship with spirit as both part of, as well as an extension of themselves. Again the structure of the circle is fundamental to this process, both in terms of movement during dance (Stuckey; 1987), as well as the participants’ identities as that of multiple overlapping selves that are in a state of circular
flux. Amongst the Yoruba—and in many other Indigenous African societies—the cosmological worldsense\(^9\) is circular, emphasizing and symbolizing the important philosophy of balance/reciprocity, continuity, community and unity between ancestors, the living and unborn (John, 2003:12) and how each entity cannot exist without the others. All are important threads that come together to make the circle whole where, in essence, there is no beginning or end, but rather a powerful continuity of life through transmutation. The importance of the circular cosmos is expressed by Bolaji Idowu in *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*:

The Yoruba worshipper makes a circle of ashes or white chalk; within the circle, which is a symbol of eternity, he pours a libation of cold water, and in the centre he places his kola-nut on cotton wool…(Idowu, 1962:142).

The circle reflects how the individual exists within the context of the larger community, and how the living self is intertwined with the worlds of the ancestors and the unborn. The circle, then, is both literally and figuratively a symbol of eternity in its continuity because the self is conceived of as a layering of many synthesized selves which cross over, move in, out and between the spiritual and material energy fields. In other words, the self is an existence that is extended throughout the cosmos, as opposed to simply being restricted to the world of human beings. For this research project, I am interested in engaging a deeper exploration of what happens to the self/selves when the Yoruba cosmos encounters colonialism: how has balance, community and continuity been affected and how, if at all, has colonialism re-drawn the Yoruba cosmological map?

Third, Stuckey’s discussion is worthy of attention because it reminds us of the dangers of adopting Cartesian modes of thought that privilege the mind over spirit, emotion and the body. Cartesian ideologies only serve to amputate, or at the very least, obfuscate the significance of spirituality as the critical element that both structures and breathes life into Indigenous

\(^9\) See page 57 for the political significance and detailed explanation of this term.
cosmology or worldview. This, in turn, highlights how Indigenous ways of knowing that are anchored in their attendant spiritualities, are primary sites for contesting and resisting hegemonic Christianity as the *only* valid spiritual or religious system. Fourth, the circle then, functions as both a figurative (in the sense that it is an emblem of the circularity of life where the unborn become the born, living in flesh, who then, through death, become ancestors, and are reborn again) as well as a literal (as in both clockwise and counterclockwise dance; the coded cross; and as manifested in nature as the sun, for example) symbol of African Indigenous spirituality that has no beginning and no end.

Catherine John’s discussion of the circle as “a particular kind of metaphysical logic” that operates at both the conscious and unconscious level for African peoples on the continent and its diaspora (2003:13) builds on Stuckey’s observation of the circle as a principle metaphor for African life, where the world is ultimately *sensed* on multiple levels and in layers. One of the ways Africans have been able to retain aspects of their Indigenous knowledges in imperializing and diasporic contexts has been through creativity, as described in Stuckey’s discussion of the circle innovatively being coded in diverse reconfigurations i.e. as a cross, diamond or spiral. In an African context, the element of creativity is crucial to one’s ability to adapt, survive and evolve in colonizing corporeal time and space. African-American scholars Carlyle Stewart (1999) and Gloria Hull (2001) both emphasize creativity as a vital dimension of African-American spirituality which then informs the struggle for freedom in the face of social and racial oppression. However, while both Hull, and Stewart discuss African Indigenous spiritualities as part of African-American spiritual traditions, they do not address how power figures, and particularly how the *internalized* Western hierarchical ordering of these spiritualities within these African-American religious traditions often position African Indigenous spiritualities as
‘inferior,’ ‘inherently evil’ or harm ridden. My research builds on both Hull and Stewart’s understanding of African-American spirituality, but also includes a critical dialogue about African Indigenous spiritualities in Euro-dominant contexts.

Scholarship that infuses the spiritual with the political, and also acknowledges social relations of power to articulate how colonialism, slavery and oppression have (re)(con)figured Indigenous spiritualities, are of particular significance in this research precisely because they highlight the material realities and struggles embedded in Indigenous peoples’ lives both historically and contemporarily. However, Linda Smith cautions against the temptations of adopting “misty-eyed” models of Indigenous spirituality that are not grounded in the everyday material experiences of Indigenous people: namely the oppressive hegemony—both spiritual and material—of colonialism and imperialism (1999:12). Similarly, in 2006 at the University of Toronto’s Diasporic Hegemonies Conference on Feminist Transnationalism, Andrea Smith commented that New Age approaches to spirituality tend to appropriate Native religious traditions while reframing them in romanticized neo-liberal contexts. An example would be the Aboriginal Sweat lodge ceremony as a vital form of healing for various Indigenous peoples across North America, and the continued appropriative exportation of this ritual out of an Indigenous communal context, into a depoliticized neo-liberal one that privileges white individualism. Both Rayna Green (1988) and Andrea Smith (2005) have written extensively against this trend and other New Age romanticized appropriations of Native culture, citing such acts as exploitative and genocidal (as cited in Smith, 2005:123). Interestingly, unlike Native Indigenous spiritualities, African Indigenous spiritualities tend to be overtly framed as “demonic” and inherently evil in dominant or mainstream discourses (Mbiti, 1975; Morrison, 1984; Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997; Olupona, 1991; Wa Thiong’o, 1994; Elabor-Idemudia,
ultimately, the current depoliticized and imperialist climate in which indigenous spiritualities currently exist is the product of centuries of violent colonization with the aim of achieving euro-christian conversion. the persistence of indigenous spiritualities within such a seemingly depoliticized imperialist climate underscores their significance as both political and powerful tools of resistance.

the links among language, orality and spirituality for indigenous knowledges and identities: the foundations of indigenous spiritual literacy

language is a universal phenomenon which all human beings use to interact with one another. it is central to our relationships with one another because language is one of the most basic tools that we use to communicate. how we express and share our thoughts, needs, actions, ideas, dreams, wishes etc., are all carried in the language(s) we speak. yet, language is also more than simply words, and a means of communication (wa thiong’o, 1986) “it is part and parcel of the identity and culture of the people speaking it” (the supreme court of canada in mahe et al. v. the queen in right of alberta, as cited in battiste, 2000: 79). there are multiple understandings of the importance of language and the role it plays in a people’s culture and identity. while language itself is a universal human phenomenon, how it figures into a people’s lives and cultural worldsense is not homogenous and differs depending on time, place and of course, the people. aboriginal scholar marie battiste offers a definition of indigenous knowledges, with particular emphasis on orality and the role of language:

indigenous knowledge comprises the complex set of technologies developed and sustained by indigenous civilizations. often oral and symbolic, it is transmitted through the structure of indigenous languages and passed on to the next generation through modeling, practice, and animation, rather than through the written word (battiste, 2002:2)
Battiste highlights the essential role orality and language play in Indigenous knowledge production, particularly with respect to their function as technologies of transmitting this knowledge to younger generations. Importantly, Battiste also contests the Eurocentric privileging of the written word over oral traditions as valid, legitimate and authoritative. George Dei (2000), Marlene Brant Castellano (2000), Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1986) and Patience Elabor-Idemudia (2000) call attention to the significance of language and orality as seminal to Indigenous identities and knowledges, and how they are passed on to future generations. Dei and Castellano’s work is quite similar in that they both point out the importance of relationships in the context of one’s environment within an Indigenous spiritual context. With respect to orality, both Dei and Castellano focus on the relationships between community elders as keepers and teachers of the knowledge, and the younger generation to whom the knowledge is imparted. Dei (2000) and Castellano (2000) note that this transmission occurs in stages over a period of time, and ultimately stress that orality, or the spoken word is fundamental to the sustenance of relationships between elders and future generations in an Indigenous context.

One of the most influential scholars on orality, language and African identity is Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. In his critically acclaimed book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), Wa Thiong’o re-inserts the once neglected debate on language to examine why African Indigenous languages have been deemed less valuable in relation to colonial European languages. Wa Thiong’o argues that language has been the most significant means through which colonial power was realized. He asserts that language itself has been used as a means of “spiritual subjugation” (9) against African Indigenous peoples and their cultural values and traditions:
The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation the entire universe (Wa Thiong’o, 1986: 4).

According to Wa Thiong’o, any discussion of Indigenous identity is remiss without placing it in the context of colonialism and imperialism, and particularly tracing it back to the Berlin conference of 1884 where he argues that African Indigenous cultures, languages and peoples were dismantled and carved up to be identified through hegemonic colonial constructs and European languages. To illustrate both the connections between his Gikuyu language and identity, and how this Indigenous identity was fragmented by colonialism, Wa Thiong’o shares his personal experiences of Indigenous education and oral knowledges as passed on to him and his peers in the traditional/communal setting. He also demonstrates how the meanings, magic and nuances of Gikuyu cultural ties and worldview – that are embedded in the oral culture and language – were broken when he began “formal” education in an English colonial school. This was a school where he and his fellow students were rewarded for speaking, learning, reading and writing in English, and punished for carrying out their daily activities in their Indigenous African languages.

In her chapter, “The Retention of Folkways as a Basis for Resistance” in *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Meanings of Our World*, Patience Elabor-Idemudia narrates a similar experience to Wa Thiong’o with respect to the contrasts between her Indigenous and “formal” education as a child growing up in Nigeria. She recounts her formal education as a context in which she and her peers were trained to internalize characteristics of individualism, uncritical obedience and complacency, while being forced to “give up their mother tongue” and local traditional religions (107-8). She also addresses the centrality of Indigenous languages to the formation of African people’s identities, noting that the retention of
what she calls ‘African folkways’ have been central tools of resistance against Western oppression and hegemony for colonized African peoples:

…knowledge of African folkways, when inculcated in children through socialization, becomes a basis for resistance in later life. For ages, exposure to such knowledge of folkways has given most Africans strength, courage and a sense of identity…[that] has always been central to their survival throughout hardships such as those imposed by slavery [and] colonialism….In most traditional societies the spoken word is the basis of cultural identity and a means of transmitting indigenous knowledge from one generation to the next (Idemudia, 2000:102).

Idemudia also argues that oral knowledges transmitted through songs, proverbs, folktales, ritualistic chants and riddles help to articulate distinctive cultural identities, as well as give voice to the diverse social, political and linguistic systems that have for centuries been muted by cultural imperialism and colonialism (102). Idemudia importantly reminds us that our identities are inextricably connected to oral knowledges and Indigenous languages.

While Wa Thiong’o and Idemudia use the term ‘identities’ to illustrate the interconnected relationship between orality and Indigenous knowledges, Aboriginal scholar Marie Battiste prefers to describe this relationship using the term, ‘heritage,’ contending that orality and language are vital components of Indigenous heritage because this is where Indigenous thought, consciousness and worldview are embedded:

Heritage is broadly defined as everything that belongs to the distinct identity of a people which is theirs to share, if they wish, with other peoples. This broad definition includes all those things that international law regards as the creative production of human thought and craftsmanship, such as songs, stories, scientific knowledge, and artworks. However, the definition also includes inheritances from the past and from nature, such as human remains, natural features of the landscape, and naturally occurring species of plants and animals with which a people has long been connected (Battiste, 2000:69).

Dr. Erica-Irene Daes, special rapporteur for the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous peoples, also uses the term ‘heritage’ instead of identities; maintaining, like Idemudia and Battiste, that oral knowledges such as stories, songs, proverbs and oral medicinal knowledge are
significant facets of Indigenous peoples’ heritage. Dr. Daes notes that “for Indigenous peoples, heritage is a bundle of relationships rather than a bundle of economic rights” (as cited in Battiste, 2000: 150) where reciprocity and responsibility to the context/environment in which the songs, stories and medicinal knowledge were developed and sustained is imperative, and therefore given priority.

The terms ‘heritage’ and ‘identity’ are critical for this discussion and my research here, however rather than conflating these two terms to have the same meaning, I build on George Dei’s understanding of the terms as related but distinct (1996). According to Dei, the terms are related in the sense that significant parts of our African identities emerge from our cultural, linguistic and spiritual heritages, however the popular discourse around heritage tends to induce a depoliticized discussion of history (Dei, 1996; 2006; personal communication). Identities are political because they are relational and therefore acquire their meaning from what they are not (Martin, 1995) and from the ‘Other’ (Hall as cited in Dei 1996). Hence, to claim an ‘Indigenous’ identity is to make a political claim about oneself and community; one’s being; how one relates to other beings (human and otherwise; physical and metaphysical) within the larger context of worldview or cosmology. From within the political context of colonialism and imperialism, the claim of an Indigenous identity inevitably involves and evokes a politics of power, difference and the complicated negotiations that take place concerning how dominant forces hegemonically construct Indigenous identities. Ultimately, one’s ‘identity’ evokes a politics that ‘heritage’ does not because identity also often says something about one’s place in the world; notions of belonging; and coming to a political consciousness about who one is (Dei, 2006: personal communication), in addition to an awareness of the implications or consequences of that knowledge. Hence, while I embrace both terms, for the purposes of this study, I build on Dei’s
usage of ‘identity’ as a political statement to highlight African Indigenous identities as important sites of empowerment and resistance to oppression.

At this point, I want to limit my discussion of language to Wa Thiong’o and Battiste’s conceptualizations of language because both offer deeper understandings of the connections between language and Indigenous spiritualities and identities. My approach here is one where I distinguish key elements of each scholar’s discussion to draw clear links between spirituality (which is cosmollogically anchored) and language. It is my belief that articulating such linkages generate and inform a type of spiritual literacy\textsuperscript{10} that is critical for Indigenous knowledges, identities and peoples.

\textit{Language as Communication.}

The first element/dimension involves language as a means of communication (Wa Thiong’o, 1986:13). Wa Thiong’o outlines three aspects to this powerful dimension: a.) language of real life b.) speech as verbal signposts c.) written word imitating the spoken. The ‘language of real life’ is universal and quite simple; it refers to the relations and links people establish between and amongst themselves in the division of labour i.e. the production of wealth, food, housing, clothing etc. (13). These ways of relating with one another in one’s community are universal for human beings –regardless of time, place and space- not only because they attend to everyday basic human needs, but because the meeting of these needs is essential to a people’s survival. The second aspect of language as communication is speech, and again, speech is seen as a universal for human interaction:

The verbal signposts both reflect and aid communication or the relations established between human beings in the production of their means of life. Language as a system of verbal signposts makes that production possible. The spoken word is to relations between

\textsuperscript{10} See Chapter Six for a more comprehensive discussion and elaboration of spiritual literacy for Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing.
human beings what the hand is to the relations between human beings and nature. The hand through tools mediates between human beings and nature and forms the language of real life: spoken words mediate between human beings and form the language of speech (Wa Thiong’o, 1986: 14).

As a largely oral culture and society, the importance of the Yoruba language as spoken word to Yoruba identity cannot be overstated. This is because orality is primary in its mediation between us Yoruba and nature –our surrounding environment that is understood as sacred in the Yoruba worldsense. In Yoruba culture, the sacred is inextricably bound up with/in the spoken word/orality. The most salient infusion of Yoruba language and spirituality is evidenced in the sacred texts of Ifa and Eerinlogun which are the ancient knowledge systems from Orun (the Otherworld) which direct and guide Aïye (the physical world of the living). These oral literary texts hold thousands and thousands of oral stories that carry, guide and detail the Yoruba worldsense and cultural knowledge. Ifa and Eerinlogun are the sacred oral tools that are consulted first in order to determine which physical tools will be used -by the hand- to mediate the relationship(s) between the physically living Yoruba, Ile (earth/nature), and Orun. Through Ifa and Eerinlogun, Yoruba signs, symbols and language are the threads that weave communication between the three worlds together, making it much more than simply communication, but about relationality and way of life.

Wa Thiongo’s third aspect of language as communication involves language as written signs (14). He states:

Where the first two aspects of language as communication through the hand and spoken word historically evolved more or less simultaneously, the written aspect is a much later historical development. Writing is representation of sounds with visual symbols, from the simplest knot among shepherds to tell the number in a herd or the hieroglyphics among the Agikuyu gicaandi singers and poets of Kenya, to the most complicated and different letter and picture writing systems of the world today (14).

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11 See page 10 for a more detailed discussion of the Earth and nature as sacred in the Yoruba worldsense.
This third aspect is of particular significance because it raises a number of questions and issues that are relevant to my work. The first is the question of what counts as language; the difference between understanding how language can be represented in multiple ways and how colonialism or colonial projects have limited language to written documents and the creation/use of the alphabet as a measure of civilization and progress. The second question is how the language question is bound up with power, particularly in the context of colonialism because, in such a context, power imbalances are central to the who, and how of how language is shaped, lived and practiced. In other words, how has colonialism displaced Indigenous language systems —oral and visual signs, symbols and pictographs\(^{13}\)- as legitimate ways of communication and relationship?\(^{14}\) And particularly within the Yoruba context, what kind of effect has colonialism had on the interwoven relationships between Orun, Aiye and Ile as expressed and carried in the Yoruba language?

\(^{13}\) The visual signs and symbols of many indigenous language systems are what many of us today would call art. Yet art in the African context tends to very much differ from Western conceptions because African artistic forms are very functional. Rather than often literally remaining fixed i.e. in a museum, on paper, on a wall, or in a particular corner of a room on display — serving only as spectacle to be observed— Yoruba ‘art’ moves with the function it serves for the people and culture. Yoruba scholar, Rowland Abiodun elaborates:

> My approach is best expressed by a Yoruba proverb: “What follows six is more than seven” (Ohun ti o wa leyin Offa, o ju Oje lo). The proverb suggests that we must look beyond what is easily observed if we are to understand something. Relating it to the study of African art, we must try to understand an art work in its cultural depth, as expression of the local thought or belief systems, lest we unwittingly remove the “African” in African art.

> Let me illustrate what I mean by examining how audiences in Africa are affected by indigenous verbal and visual arts. For example, ritual objects gracing a shrine or masquerades danced in a festival must be seen in terms of the choice and arrangement of objects; sounds, spoken phrases, incantations, and movements, persons, groups. Most of these elements are unfamiliar to Western aesthetic sensibilities and create enormously complex religio-aesthetic problems for the researcher. The complex interplay of visual and verbal artistry does not lend itself to easy description, translation, and analysis, especially if we rely on the terminologies and theoretical constructs of Western academic disciplines such as art history, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology (Abiodun, 1994:69-70).

I included this discussion of language and art because it is important to acknowledge that they are connected and often one and the same in the indigenous context. However, I want to limit my focus on language to the written word for now. The significance of the spoken word and how it interweaves with visual arts in Yoruba culture will be discussed in further detail below in the section on colonialism and missionary impact on Yoruba language and culture. The importance of pictographs and art as functional i.e. the functions that shrines and altars serve in ritual, ceremony as communication and connection with the otherworld is significant also of significance.

\(^{14}\) I explore this question in more detail in the next section of my literature review where language and spirituality are fused together again as evidenced by missionary activity in Yorubaland and their usage of the Yoruba language as the key tool—they translate the Bible into Yoruba- to impose the ideological and cultural agenda of civilization and progress, as disguised under the cloak of European/white supremacy.
Language as Culture.

The second definitional dimension of how I conceptualize language is borrowed from Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s argument of positing language as culture (1986:13-16). He outlines another three aspects of this argument: a.) culture is a product of history, b.) culture is an image-forming agent in the child’s mind c.) culture transmits those images through the spoken and written language (Wa Thiong’o: 1986:15). The first concept of - culture as a product of the history which it in turn reflects- can also be understood as culture being a product and reflection of human communication over time, and this is done through the formation of images or pictures of the world (15). Language is central to this image and picture forming; I like to understand language as the artist or sculptor that shapes and colours the images and pictures of a people’s culture through the tones, rhythms, sounds that come with uttering the words, and the specific shapes and forms the mouth must make in these utterances. While this is universal, the pictures and images that a language sculpts will differ and be specific to each culture because the tones and sounds of each language differ.

The second aspect of language as culture entails thinking about culture as an image-forming agent in the mind of a child:

Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, individually and collectively is based on those pictures and images…our capacity to confront the world creatively is dependent on how those images correspond or not to that reality, how they distort or clarify the reality of our struggles. Language as culture is thus mediating between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between me and nature. Language is thus mediating in my very being (Wa Thiong’o, 1986: 15).

An example of this second aspect from Yoruba culture would be the 401plus Orisa. Some were once human beings and became deified, while other Orisa are figuratively and symbolically associated with natural phenomena like mountains, hills, earth, rivers, lakes, the ocean, trees and the wind. Understood as powerful spiritual forces, our Orisa are one of the many cultural
pictures and images that help us Yoruba understand and confront our natural world particularly through the philosophy of balance and respect for nature through *Orisa* reverence. Because often one of these 401 plus *Orisa* also act as guides for our *ori-inu* (inner-soul and destiny) they are both individual and collective pictures and images; and as guides for fulfillment of our destiny, they mediate between our identities as individuals and as members of the larger cultural community; they also mediate between our physical selves in the world of the living and those of *Orun*; and finally they mediate between humans and nature. How to live in harmony with nature and keep in balance with one’s guiding head/Orisa is determined by the sacred texts of Ifa and Eerindinlogun, once again illustrating the inextricable connections between language and spirituality as the core of the Yoruba worldsense.

The third aspect of language as culture as discussed by Wa Thiong’o (15):

Culture transmits or imparts those images of the world and reality through the spoken and the written language that is through a specific language. In other words, the capacity to speak, the capacity to order sounds in a manner that makes for mutual comprehension between human beings is universal…But the particularity of the sounds, the words, the word order into phrases and sentences, and the specific manner, or laws, of their ordering is what distinguishes one language from another. Thus a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history.

Bringing the point home, and literally to the source, Yoruba culture, spirituality and cosmology are transmitted through the Yoruba language, as this is the means through which all three are communicated and reflected.

*Language as Sacred.*

For the third element of this language model, I borrow from Mi’kmaw scholar Marie Battiste, who makes a powerful connection between language and spirituality:

Where Indigenous knowledge survives, it is transmitted primarily through symbolic and oral traditions. Indigenous languages are the means for communicating the full range of human experience and are critical to the survival of any Indigenous people. These
languages provide direct and powerful ways of understanding Indigenous knowledge. They are the critical links between sacred knowledge and the skills required for survival. Since languages house the lessons and knowledge that constitute the cognitive-spiritual powers of groups of people in specific places, Indigenous peoples view their languages as forms of spiritual identity. Indigenous languages are thus sacred to Indigenous peoples. They provide the deep cognitive bonds that affect all aspects of Indigenous life. Through their shared language, Indigenous people create a shared belief in how the world works and what constitutes proper action…Any attempt to change Indigenous language is an attempt to modify or destroy Indigenous knowledge and the people to whom this knowledge belongs (Battiste, 2000: 48-50 my emphasis).

Indigenous language is the heartbeat or drum of a people and their culture. It connects and carries. It is the centre through which the cosmological sphere is lived, passed down and taught to the following generations because it holds the cultural knowledge. This is no different in the Yoruba context where the language connects Aiye, Orun and Ile which is most evident in sacred Yoruba rituals and ceremonies such as isomoloruko (baby naming ceremonies). Before a child is named, the forces of Orun are consulted by elders and a Babalawo (diviner) to determine a suitable name for the child. We Yoruba have a saying, “Ile la man wo ka to s’omoloruko.”

Translation: We look at the family history and events surrounding the child’s birth before we name a child. In this sense, context, history and especially communication with the forces of the Otherworld are all interwoven and central to a Yoruba child’s identity and formal introduction to the larger community. Yoruba children are not official members until they have been named and introduced. What is important is that the child be given a name that reflects their Ori-inu (inner-head, soul and destiny) and guiding force (Orisa) so that every time their name is called, uttered, spoken or thought about, his/her destiny is re-confirmed and continuously charged with Ase. The spirituality embedded in sacred Indigenous ceremonies such as isomoloruko demonstrate the deeply spiritual understanding that the Yoruba language is infused with Ase (dynamic spiritual energy and life-force) that vibrates and moves with the very breath and ends it out into the universe when these words are spoken.
Isomoloruko (naming) then, is an important sacred practice that both carries and connects Yoruba spirituality and language as they manifest themselves in a Yoruba person’s identity and destiny, from birth until death. Words have power, and from a Yoruba worldsense, they are infused with Ase (life-force). Yoruba scholar, Wande Abimbola elaborates:

According to Yoruba mythology, creation of human beings was a joint effort between Ogun who molded the skeleton, Obatala (Oosaala) who molded clay on the skeleton, Olodumare who supplied the vital breath force know as Emi, and Ajala who supplied Ori –iniu (the inner head). The universe was, however not created with Olodumare’s breath. It was created with ase which is usually believed to be contained in his divine words. Olodumare gave a copy of this ase to some Orisa such as Esu and Obatala from whom we humans can access it. (1997:70).

In the Yoruba cosmos, skeleton, breath, and Ori-inu cannot exist without Olodumare’s divine words which manifest primarily in the Ifa and Eerindinlogun (16 cowries or sacred bodies of literature). These two Indigenous knowledge systems manifest themselves as ancient oral narratives that are taught, learned and passed down from Baba or Iyalawo, to their chosen apprentices. And this is done through the oral tradition. While Abimbola does not discuss language explicitly, its importance is clear when one understands that the divine words he speaks of are the sacred oral texts of Ifa and Eerindinlogun. These texts both guide and exist within the context of the Yoruba cosmos and everyday life which is practiced, lived and expressed through the Yoruba language. Yoruba language is part and parcel of the divine and the divine is part and parcel of the cosmos. The inextricable connections among the Yoruba cosmos, spirituality and language, and how they come together to play themselves out in Aiye (the world of the living) are a vitally important type of spiritual literacy that is central to Indigenous knowledges and identities.

The Cosmological Underpinnings of Yoruba Indigenous Knowledges and Identities

-Aiye l’oja, orun n’ile-
(This world is a marketplace, the Otherworld is home)
I recall my mother using this proverb particularly to console those who had lost a loved one who had passed away. When I asked my Mother about other contexts in which this proverb might be used, she said that it was also used to console people when they were stressed out, or depressed, and possibly at a point where they were questioning the meaning of life. It is used, my mother said:

…to console them: you remind them that we are all just passing through and you say it to tell them that we must hold on and make the best….that when you are here, whatever it is you need to do needs to be done well while we are here, before we go back to our everlasting home (Adefarakan, personal communication).

This conversation with my mother helped crystallize my understanding of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges as one that is anchored in cosmology. It is a cosmology which, as demonstrated in the above proverb, encapsulates Yoruba understandings of materiality and the metaphysical. It is an understanding of the cosmos where human life is understood as a part of the eternal existence of spirit which resides in our everlasting home, Orun (the Otherworld). Said another way: for the Yoruba –and many other Indigenous traditions– human life is understood to be a journey to the ‘marketplace’ we call Earth, where both matter and spirit are infused, thereby creating the various forms of life that exist here on Earth. Yoruba conceptions of the cosmos are consistent with George Dei’s discussion of Indigenous knowledges as “epistemologies [that] are grounded in an awareness and deep appreciation of the cosmos and how the self/selves, spiritual, known and unknown worlds are interconnected (Dei, 1999:115). Scholars such as Samuel Johnson (1966), John Mbiti (1969, 1975), Toni Morrison (1984, 1987), Ifi Amadiume (1987, 1997, 2000), Joy James (1993), Mudrooroo Narogin (1995), Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997), Linda Smith (1999), Haunani-Kay Trask (1999), Marie Battiste (2000, 2002), and Oyeronke Olajubu (2003)
have also emphasized cosmology, or worldview as the necessary anchor and larger context within which Indigenous knowledges and identities need to be considered and understood.

However, writing in *The Invention of Women: Making and African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) reminds us that language is political, and argues that the term ‘worldview’ is Eurocentric because it does not adequately describe Yoruba cosmology and culture:

> The term “worldview,” which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West’s privileging of the visual. It is Eurocentric to use it to describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term, “world-sense” is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups…[and] will be used when describing the Yoruba or other cultures that may privilege senses other than the visual or even a combination of the senses (1997:3).

Oyewumi draws our attention to how power imbalances between languages and the terms we use can often be hegemonic and normalized, particularly where discussions of Indigenous knowledges and cultures are concerned. While some may dismiss Oyewumi’s discussion as mere semantics, she reminds us of the interconnected relationship between Indigenous cosmologies and language. Not only do these linkages reveal the inadequacies of dominant languages in describing Indigenous cultures, but they also prompt us to remember that colonial hegemony can often be subtle in its layers of inequities, even, and especially in ‘highly intellectual’ spaces such as the academy where critical knowledge production is assumed to be of exclusive preserve.

Ultimately, critical discussions such as Oyewumi’s prompt us to anchor our conversation within the larger context of Indigenous cosmology, or, as Oyewumi terms it, world-sense.

**Christian Missions, Education and the History of Colonialism in Yorubaland**

One of the classic texts which focus on Christian missionary presence in Yorubaland, and Nigeria on a whole is J.F.A. Ajayi’s *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891: The Making of A New Elite*. In this work Ajayi gives a historical account of missionary activity in Nigeria and the
impact that it had on both the people and cultures of the country. Ajayi specifically chronicles how missionary education was vital to the creation of a new class of African elites; namely Western-educated Africans who were trained in missionary founded schools. Importantly, Ajayi notes that “it was not enough for missionaries to be Europeans to be believed. They had to use education and the technology of Europe to argue and to convince people” (Ajayi, 1965: xviii). According to Ajayi, the period of 1841-1891 is of significance because it was the era in which Western education was established and positioned as formal and authoritative, highlighting the importance of this form of education in devaluing Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and teachings.

E.A. Ayandele’s *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914* (1966) builds on Ajayi’s work, featuring the connections and relationships between missionaries as well as the colonial administration and traders. Ayandele also gives an account of how Nigerians negotiated and engaged with missionary presence, arguing that they “saw missionary enterprise simply as a suitable instrument for the achievement of their political and social aspirations” (xviii).

Ayandele’s research includes accounts of various African chiefs who endorsed missionaries for their own reasons and agendas. Both Ajayi and Ayandele’s research is of significance for their historical accounts of missionary activity. Ajayi’s contribution is a record of how central missionary derived education was to the Euro-Christian colonial project, while Ayandele’s work reminds us that missionary-Indigenous relations are complicated. Ayandele’s work contributes to our understanding of this period where the agency and forms of resistance employed by Nigerian peoples and accounts of how many (especially the wealthy) chiefs utilized missionary resources for their own purposes. Both works also detail missionary presence and activity in Yorubaland as one of violent intrusion and imposition. However, they are *historical* texts and, as such, are limited to offering detailed *histories* of the role that missionary occupation played in the colonial
project. Hence, while I both rely and build upon these texts to give historical background and context to the contemporary reality of Christian identification amongst the Yoruba, I recognize that these accounts are historical, and can therefore only lend a partial explanation of Yoruba spiritual and religious life to-date. Ultimately, literature that theorizes and explores the contemporary, and particularly the diasporic politics of Yoruba social life remains is rare.

Building upon Ajayi and Ayandele’s works is J.D.Y. Peel’s *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (2000), in which Peel continues to investigate the significance of conversion in the colonial project by highlighting the subjectivity of missionaries in utilizing their diaries and journals as his main sources of data and inquiry. Peel argues that with respect to the Yoruba, conversion was rather atypical in that a large number of missionaries were, in fact, Yoruba – the first-generation, who were the products of a Western missionary education. Peel also observes that from the 1860s to the 1900s, the percentage of diaries and journals authored by Yoruba missionaries rose from 55 to over 80 percent (11). Ultimately, Peel contends that Christian conversion was inevitably more complicated than we may have understood it to be previously because, as the Yoruba increasingly became Christian, conversely, Christianity also became more Yoruba (2000: 8-9).

Peel’s argument in this work makes an important contribution in drawing our attention to conversion as a dialectical process that does not erase African agency. However, what is of concern here is Peel’s failure to consider the hierarchical ordering of knowledge; specifically his non-recognition of Christianity as the normative hegemonizing framework that shapes Yoruba identity. What are the implications, or what is at stake for Yoruba peoples when their Indigenous heritage gets reconfigured and subsumed under the larger rubric of Christian religious
identification? Such questions are neither engaged nor explored by Peel, however, they will be addressed in my work, as it is the central focus of my research here.

Agboola Ologunde’s article, “The Yoruba Language in Education” also discusses missionary presence in Nigeria, focusing specifically on language as central in Western education. Ologunde outlines the history of the Yoruba language in Nigerian education, arguing that its role had undergone three significant stages: a.) the period of missionary control; b.) government participation in missionary control; c) and government control (1964-present) (Ologunde, 1982: 279). While Ologunde goes on to discuss an array of issues surrounding the Yoruba language and the need for its re-insertion into Nigerian education, for the purposes of my interest in tracing the history of Yoruba colonization, I focus on the first two stages that Ologunde identifies.

Ologunde outlines stage one as missionary control (1842-1882) where the Yoruba mother tongue was to play a pivotal role in colonization because the missionaries’ central goal was to ‘civilize,’ ‘enlighten’ and spread the word of Christ through the bible. Missionaries therefore needed people who were literate in their Yoruba mother tongue was to play to become the teachers and catechists through which ‘the gospel’ could be spread. A written orthography was produced, and the Bible was translated into Yoruba. Newspapers began to be published in Yoruba and missionary schools began to increase, as did the number of teachers, and the literacy rate. Yoruba was the medium of instruction and sermons, as well as “the main subject at school” (Ologunde, 1982: 283). Ologunde describes this stage as ‘the golden age of Yoruba.’ However, it seems to me that there is nothing golden about the agenda behind why missionaries

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15 By literacy I am indexing a type that is normalized and conventional in the Western sense of the word, where value is exclusively attached to reading and writing according to the European derived orthography/alphabet, and in this context that would mean both the English and Yoruba alphabets. This is not to deny Indigenous understandings of literacy that are grounded in orality and Indigenous worldsense/cosmology. Said another way, Indigenous Yoruba notions of literacy are not grounded in the Eurocentric sense of an alphabetized orthography, but rather are anchored in a type of literacy that when orality and Yoruba Indigenous cosmological ways of knowing are central.
privileged Yoruba, because the language was ultimately used as a tool or means to conversion. The consequence of this was the intentional and simultaneous positioning of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and peoples as ‘inferior’ and ‘uncivilized’ unless they were Christian. In this first stage of Yoruba colonization identified by Ologunde, it is clear how literacy becomes inextricably bound up with Christianity, where, to be educated meant being Christian. Hence, as written Yoruba becomes associated with education and Christianity, it is consequently bound up with class and power. While the spoken/oral Yoruba language remained intact, the spiritual beliefs and practices of the people were condemned and risked erasure, as this was/is the goal of Christian evangelists. Therefore, the rather contradictory situation here is that technically the Yoruba language was being developed in the sense that it was translated into an orthography in the form of an alphabet, however this was done solely for the purposes of domination, as coded in the colonial discourse of ‘civilizing,’ ‘progress’ and ‘enlightenment.’

The second stage of Western education in Nigeria identified by Ologunde entails both missionary and colonial government collaboration (1883-1964) (Ologunde, 1982: 284). Ologunde contends that during this stage the Yoruba language played almost no role in the education system. He explains that changes in financial contributions and objectives were central to this shift. As the colonial government began to pay for Yoruba schooling, the educational bill, the objective behind formal Western education shifted from creating/training teachers and catechists of Christianity, to the government’s need for civil servants (clerks, officers etc.) (Ologunde, 1982). Civil servants would have to be trained in the language of colonial administration: English. Consequently, the government created and awarded grants to ‘successful students’ only for subjects where the medium of instruction was English (Section 5 of the ordinance on government grants). This had the effect of making English the privileged language
of the system and effectively discrediting Yoruba. This was a pivotal moment in the colonization of Yoruba language, people and identities where we see a shift in the importance of the Yoruba mother tongue from *suiting the missionary agenda*, to *suiting that of the colonial administration*. While power monopolies did move and transfer hands, ultimately, the Indigenous language was manipulated and utilized for colonial means and purposes.

Jacob Olupona’s anthology *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* is a key text that brings the dialogue around African traditional religions to a contemporary context. Olupona’s work offers a more multifaceted and nuanced perspective on the challenges of learning and utilizing African Indigenous knowledges in colonizing contexts to pathologize Indigenous ways of knowing. The chapters most relevant to my study are those contributed by Joseph Awolalu and Wande Abimbola.

In his chapter, “The Place of African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa: The Yoruba Example,” Abimbola reminds us of the dangers of dividing Indigenous and Western knowledges into two separate binaries (Purcell, 1998; Dei, 2000) by arguing that despite the conversion of most Yoruba to Christianity and Islam, traditional Yoruba spiritual beliefs are nevertheless retained and practiced by many Yoruba people (Abimbola, 1997:51).

On the other hand, in his chapter, “The Encounter between African Traditional Religion and Other Religions in Nigeria” Joseph Awolalu is of differing opinion, and argues that despite the periods of political independence in 1960 and Nigeria’s hosting of the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1997, where Indigenous religions were officially recognized and embraced, the contemporary reality is that both the Muslim and Christian religions in Yorubaland have become completely intolerant of the traditional Indigenous religions (9). Awolalu contends that the increasing religious fundamentalism of both Christian and militant
Muslim groups has “demanded stricter adherence to normative interpretations of both religions” and consequently exacerbated previous colonial antagonsisms to Nigeria’s Indigenous religions as ‘uncivilized’, ‘paganish’ and ‘Satanic’ (111-112).

While it is true that Abimbola and Awolalu present rather divergent views concerning the contemporary relationships and views that Yoruba peoples have towards their Indigenous spirituality, however, I am of the opinion that both are valuable to this research project, in that they offer a more complicated picture of the multifaceted ways in which Indigenous knowledges and identifications can be interpreted, as opposed to conveniently offering simple and dichotomized notions of our realities as colonized peoples. However, while valuable in its offering of more nuanced readings of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and identities, *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* does not address itself to a diasporic context, and how African, but more specifically, Yoruba Indigenous knowledges inform the lived experiences of Yoruba peoples in the African diaspora. Therefore, while adding to and building on Olupona’s key scholarly contribution to this dialogue on African Indigenous religions in contemporary times, my research takes a different tangent in its diasporic focus, and consequently contributes to our understanding of how African Indigenous knowledges are lived in diasporic contexts, specifically in Canada.

**Yoruba Indigenous Identities and the Question of Gender**

Toyin Falola’s anthology *Yoruba Gurus: Indigenous Production of Knowledge in Africa* (1999) is an important contribution to the scholarship about the production of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and the intellectuals who felt compelled to record this heritage in both Yoruba and English. While the anthology offers an important chronicle of key Yoruba intellectuals, Falola’s socio-political slant is regrettably problematic in his uncritical embrace of colonialism, and
hegemonic notions of education, literacy and gender. For example, in the introduction, Falola deems it necessary to thank missionaries for ‘creating’ standard Yoruba language in the written form (1999:2). While on the one hand, Falola argues that the works of those who wrote in Yoruba should be equally valued and honoured as those who wrote in English, on the other hand, he is silent about the pro-Christian, elitist and class-based positions many of the intellectuals he has discussed take in their work, including himself. This, in turn, reifies the marginalization of Yoruba Indigenous intellectuals who may not be ‘literate’ in the Eurocentric sense of an alphabetized orthography, yet, they are literate and versed in Yoruba Indigenous knowledges. Also, Falola’s decision around who counts as an intellectual is worthy of attention. For, with the exception of one woman, –whom he argues is the only Yoruba woman worthy of note and distinction as an intellectual (1999:133) – all of the ‘Yoruba intelligentsia’ he discusses are men. It seems that Falola’s definition of an intellectual must include not only Eurocentric notions of literacy, but also Eurocentric notions of gender that have historically been foundational prerequisites for being an intellectual; namely having a penis. This raises pertinent questions around the differential valuing of bodies and how this often determines what or who counts as ‘literate’ and educated enough to be deemed an intellectual. Similarly, the reproduction of Yoruba intellectuals as overwhelmingly middle class, male, Christian and literate (predominantly in English) is a salient, yet hegemonically identified theme in Falola’s anthology. This raises more questions around how Yoruba identities are constructed and how notions of being educated seem to be inextricably tied to Christianity, literacy and gender. Critical interrogation of the colonial production of the ‘Yoruba intelligentsia’ and the implications for Yoruba women, gender, spirituality and language needs to be explored in more detail.
Consequently, the literature reviewed in this section features the question of gender and how it is conceptualized within the context of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and identities. There exists a proliferation of feminist literature that explores the question, meaning and significance of gender as a primary social category. However, for this research project I am interested in feminist literature that prioritizes and engages gender from Indigenous perspectives. Because imperialism and conquest are the realities of many Indigenous peoples, much Indigenous feminist scholarship has theorized and engaged the devastating impact colonialism has had on Indigenous peoples; namely how it has shifted, displaced and overwhelmingly hegemonized Indigenous conceptions of gender and identity. One of the most significant debates around gender and specifically Yoruba identity has been between feminist scholars Oyeronke Oyewumi and Bibi Bakare-Yusuf. In *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Oyewumi critically interrogates the epistemological underpinnings of Western notions of sex and gender in Yoruba discourses, and argues for the exposition of the taken for granted universality of Western cultural concepts and theories in Yoruba (and to a larger extent, African) studies. She discusses how her work came out of the realization that Western knowledge production processes dominated African studies. Of particular shock to Oyewumi was her realization that her initial research on studying gender in contemporary Yoruba society had become totally defunct because gender, and more specifically the category, “woman” did not operate in Yorubaland in the same way it did in Western gender discourses (x, xi, 1997). Consequently, she changed her research into a study that investigated and explored how and why gender came to be constructed and understood as a fundamental category in Yoruba society, especially as a category of analysis in academic scholarship about Yoruba peoples. Also of relevance is the centrality of language in Oyewumi’s research where she argues
that the tendency for Yoruba scholars to not take language seriously has led to gross misconceptions about Yoruba scholarship that stem from incessant uncritical acceptance of Western paradigms of thought as universal. Oyewumi calls for immediate attention to how gender is reinscribed into a social hierarchy when gender-free Yoruba is translated into gender-specific English. She cites this as an example of how Western concepts and theories are being imported and constructed around knowledge about Yoruba society.

By and large, Oyewumi’s study challenges the masking of Western social categories – particularly the category of “woman”– as timeless and universal, when more often than not, they are grounded in essentialist notions and fixed categories. Her overall position is that gender operates differently in the Yoruba context because, seniority, not gender is the primary social relation in Yoruba society (13). However, Yoruba scholar Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, contests Oyewumi’s claim that gender is not one of the primary organizing principles in traditional Yoruba society. In response to Oyewumi’s position, Bakare-Yusuf states:

First, I will argue that by relying on language and discourse to articulate a cultural essence, she [Oyewumi] fails to understand the nature of power and the ways in which language is inscribed within social practices. This failure is crucial; without allowing for a distinction between meaning and its socio-existential context, Oyewumi’s analysis reduces language to semiotics and representation. A related absence in her text that reinforces this reductive account of language is any focus on the lived effect of embodied subjectivity on men and women. What is therefore principally missing from her account is an unwillingness to take biology and embodiment seriously. This means that she cannot address how the experience of being a sexuated body affects how agents live through and are positioned within the field of power, language, discourse and social practice (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003:120).

Bakare-Yusuf’s attention to power and embodiment is key in that she recognizes them not only as crucial tools of analysis in critical social theory, but also as integral to discussions around sex, gender and anatomy. Because these features are missing from Oyewumi’s study, she is not able to address how the gendered and age-identified body *interlock with power*.
Bakare-Yusuf argues that Oyewumi’s failure to seriously consider the social relations of power also means that she will not be able to address the complex nuances of how power figures with respect to seniority and gender. Such a critique reminds us of the principal importance of intersectionality (Collins, 1990) as a fundamental tool of critical inquiry to tease out and better understand how power and privilege shape our experiences and identities. This is of necessity because age and seniority are not categories that exist outside of other social relations such as gender and class, for example. Bakare-Yusuf notes how these social relations are continually shaped by differences in power, and the often violent consequences of such inequities:

…[Oyewumi] cannot discuss the fact that the ideology of seniority is very often used as a way of masking other forms of power relationship. It is in this sense that her theorisation of seniority may be seen as politically dangerous. The vocabulary of seniority often becomes the very form in which sexual abuse and familial (especially for the aya/wife in a lineage) and symbolic violence are couched…where victims are reluctant to challenge the abuser in the name of ‘disrespecting their senior’ (132).

Bakare-Yusuf also contends that Oyewumi does not include the concrete experiences of ‘anamale’ and ‘anafemale’ Yoruba people prior to European contact, and that utilizing the experiences of privileged Yoruba women such as princesses is misrepresentative because most women in Yoruba society do not hold such privileged social status (129). That Oyewumi fails to explore or address these issues with an integrated analysis of how power, gender, class and embodiment figure, ultimately intensifies the necessity for teasing out the various ‘sites of disempowerment’ that may also be present in African Indigenous knowledge systems (Dei, 2000:8) particularly, but not excluding those which existed prior to European contact.

Undoubtedly, Bakare-Yusuf’s critique of Oyewumi is an important reminder of the necessity of being cognizant of different lived experiences. However, ironically enough, Bakare-Yusuf herself falls prey to Oyewumi’s critique of African scholars depending solely on
Eurocentric or Western derived conceptual frameworks as adequate tools to theorize African life. Bakari-Yusuf’s theoretical and epistemological preferences are clear when she states:

Instead of concentrating totally on language and what is said, we can then examine what is done, what remains unspoken, using statistics, typical examples and a whole variety of other methods that anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists, and philosophers have spent decades perfecting. This is not to privilege action over speech, or social reality over discourse and law, it is rather to place discourse in the context [sic] of practice and unmask how they are negotiated and manipulated…..Beneath the surface of language, gender distinctions (as with other allegedly second-order modes of power structure) have always been at work in Yoruba society; the only thing Western discourse has done is to help to articulate it and invite the work of raising it to a critical discursive plane (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003:135, 137 my emphasis).

Bakari-Yusuf’s discussion of language, gender and discourse is noteworthy for two reasons. First, as stated above, it illustrates her preference for Western theories and frames of analysis as the authoritative or primary sources of knowledge produced about Yoruba society. Second, to suggest that the existence of language and gender distinctions are ‘articulate’ and ‘raised’ to ‘higher’ planes of critical thinking with Western discourse is to suggest that these distinctions were not articulate without or prior to Western ways of knowing. This dangerously privileges Western knowledge a powerful universal, authoritative and normative re/source of critical knowledge about Yoruba society. This is not to say that anthropology, sociology, ethnography etc. should be jettisoned, however, I would argue that paradoxically, Bakare-Yusuf’s inclination towards Western theories to the exclusion of African Indigenous knowledges is as equally politically dangerous to the project of thinking about Yoruba identities as her critique of Oyewumi (citing Oyewumi’s failure to address the embodied realities of how power, gender and seniority figure in Yoruba society). Bakare-Yusuf’s failure to integrate and include Yoruba Indigenous ways of knowing as valid, central and primary sources of knowledge about ourselves only serves to reify the hegemonic ordering of Indigenous knowledges as non-knowledge, or as ‘inferior’ to Western discourse. Such thinking ultimately designates Indigenous knowledges as
intellectually defunct methods and/or theories of critical inquiry that cannot adequately produce knowledge about Indigenous life.

While complicated, the debate on gender between Oyewumi and Bakare-Yusuf is an important one because it reminds us that the uncritical acceptance of Western discourse as normative in discussing Yoruba identity can reinscribe the very colonial legacies that is seeks to disrupt. While Oyewumi convincingly cautions against the dangers of Western universalisms, Bakare-Yusuf reminds us that continued focus on differences of privilege and power imbalances through intersectional analysis are imperative in understanding the embodied and material realities of Yoruba women, and society on a whole. Inevitably, the debate on gender and how it figures in Yoruba society has not been resolved; and it is not my intention to settle these tensions in this research project. Rather, this dissertation builds on and reflects the works of these scholars by expanding on the convergent and divergent discussions around gender as a significant social category in Yoruba society. This project simultaneously gives serious attention to the material, embodied realities of how gender intersects with other social categories such as race, class, seniority and age, all within the larger context of colonialism.

* African Diasporas and how the Yoruba Figure *

African diasporas have been discussed, debated and theorized from various geographic regions and starting points. However, such points of departure have overwhelmingly been Atlantic focused, where literature on African diasporic experience has largely been triangulated between Africa, Britain, America, and the Caribbean. Some of the most influential scholars on the African or Black diaspora have been Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. In his chapter, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” within the anthology *Theorizing Diaspora*, undoubtedly, Stuart Hall’s argument around cultural identity as both a state of becoming and a state of being are very
useful. He discusses the crucial importance of refusing Blackness as a monolithic or singular identity, and argues that cultural identity is incumbent upon the many points of similarity as well as the “critical points of deep and significant difference (sic) which constitute ‘what we have become’” (Hall, 2003:236). According to Hall, difference persists both “in and alongside continuity” (238), however, his understanding of diaspora is rather limited and contradictory in that he seems to be selective with respect to whose or which cultural identities are diasporic and simultaneously different yet similar. The diversity of African peoples is clear when Hall states:

…In the history of the modern world, there are few more traumatic ruptures to match the enforced separations from Africa – already figured, in the European imaginary, as “the Dark Continent.” But the slaves were also from different countries, tribal communities, villages, languages and gods. African religion, which has been so profoundly formative in Caribbean spiritual life, is precisely different from Christian monotheism in believing that God is so powerful that he can only be known through a proliferation of spiritual manifestations, present everywhere in the natural and social world (2003:238).

Quite surprisingly, however, Hall limits his conception of ‘diaspora’ to the “New World” (thereby excising the African continent) when he writes:

The “New World” presence- America, Terra Incognita – is therefore itself the beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference, what makes Afri-Caribbean people already a people of diaspora…Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (2003:244).

To suggest that diaspora begins in the “New World” is to limit difference to this geographic region, thereby excluding the constant changes, transformations and becomings that are also occurring amongst African peoples and cultures within the African continent. Such an argument puts forth a rather limited notion of diaspora which suggests that African diasporas do not exist on the African continent itself, or that Africa does not exist outside the geography of the continent. Such discussions carry residual imperialist tropes of Africa as static, unevolved and unchanging. Scholars such as George Dei have pointed out the importance of theorizing Africa
beyond its geo-spatial boundaries (Dei, 2006) because Africa is lived, imagined and continued in a variety of manners and contexts by the people who carry it in the form of their cultural memories and knowledges. Hall goes on to elaborate his own rather flawed approach to conceptualizing diaspora:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformations and difference. One can think here of what is uniquely – “essentially” – Caribbean: precisely the mix of color, pigmentation, physiognomic type; the “blends” of tastes that is Caribbean cuisine; the aesthetics of the “cross-overs,” of “cut-and-mix,” to borrow Dick Hebdige’s telling phrase, which is the heart and soul of black music. Young black cultural practitioners and critics in Britain are increasingly coming to acknowledge and explore in their work this “diasporic aesthetic” and its formation in the postcolonial experience (Hall, 2003: 244-245).

Whilst I do agree with Hall in that diversity and multiplicity are necessary to how we approach or understand diasporic experience, Hall nevertheless seems to be evoking a certain type of essentialism here: where his position locks in hybridity as an essential element to what he refers to as “diasporic aesthetic.” Meanwhile other types of essentialisms are denied, policed and dismissed by Hall, particularly those which empower and are evoked by Indigenous peoples (Lattas, 1993; Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001). Hall’s subtext here is that hybridity is a newer, more progressive, or ‘better’ type of identity than the “older,” and “unevolved” ones which, again are often assumed to be analogous to Indigenous constructions of identity. This type of essentialism is what I conceive of as a “hybrid essentialism” which is based on the ideological notion that the “new,” mixed breed, or mixed culture is, in essence, the better and more evolved form of identification. The constant favouring of hybrid or mixed identities seldom translates into ‘newer’ or more progressive understandings of Africans and Blackness. What seems to remain constant are inequitable power imbalances that persistently position Africa and Blackness as
‘inferior’ and occupying the lower rungs of oppressively hierarchical social relations. This is not to jettison Halls’ key argument about the diversity of diasporic identities, but rather to highlight that Indigeneity is part of the diverse range of identities. In other words, there exist a myriad of ways to ‘be’ and ‘exist’, and to categorize Indigenous identities as non-existent, or as ringing of some type of essentialism, while engaging in a particular type of one’s own is to participate in an exclusionary politics which (intentionally or not) continues to deny Indigenous peoples their right to self-identify.

Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, is also a highly influential text in African diaspora studies. In this book, Gilroy makes the important argument of asserting and *re-inserting* Black experience as crucial to Western modernity, particularly and especially through centering the traumatic experience(s) and horrors of slavery. A key argument Gilroy makes is that African/Black diasporic intellectual culture is more transnational than it is limited to nation-state and/or essentialist based paradigms of Blackness. Focusing primarily on Black movements and intellectuals from America, the Caribbean and Europe, Gilroy employs the image of the ship as a key metaphor or “chronotype” for his discussion:

> I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons that I hope will become clearer below. Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs (1993:4).

In her critique of Gilroy’s decision to use the ship as a metaphor, Julia Sudbury (2004) raises the important question of African/Black life and existence *prior to* the sailing ship in the Atlantic basin, through the image of what has been paradoxically termed the “slave castle.” These “castles” were where African men and women were imprisoned for extensive periods of time
before being forced across the Atlantic in ships. This brings to our attention African land, and the conditions and unbalanced social relationships (i.e. around gender, class, citizenship and criminality) that existed both within and beyond these ‘castles’ that put people on these ships in the first place. Yet, much like Gilroy and Hall, Sudbury’s discussion of African diasporic experience focuses on the traumas of slavery and the descendants of those who were forced to experience such horrors, and rightly so. However, what remains unaddressed by these scholars is the latest and most recent layer of the African Atlantic diaspora; the recent and increasing global migration and movements of continental Africans across, and beyond the Atlantic.

That the most influential texts on African diasporic studies remain overwhelmingly centered around enslavement is understandable given the long history of dispersal and forced removal of enslaved Africans, alongside the well-documented fact that such legacies remain with us. It is also understandable given the contributions and indelible mark enslaved Africans and their descendants have made and left, and continue to leave on Western society and beyond culturally, socially and politically. However, a consequence of this has been that academic knowledge and theorizing around these communities has been less established. This latest and most recent layer of the African diaspora is yet to be seriously considered, or seen as integral in addition to its proceeding layers and dimensions of movement. My research therefore, contributes to this scant yet growing scholarship that seeks to produce critical knowledge about the realities and experiences of continental Africans in diasporic contexts.

Paul Zeleza (2005) has made similar observations, arguing that much of the conceptual knowledge and scholarship on African diaspora remains centered around the Atlantic, meanwhile leaving the intra-African, Indian Ocean and Mediterranean dimensions of African diaspora largely absent. In this sense, my research project is somewhat of a paradox in terms of being
spatially and geographically located in, or surrounded by the ‘giants’ of African Atlantic
diasporic studies – namely Britain, America and the Caribbean – yet, the African-Canadian
diaspora has largely been rendered invisible. Paradoxically then, the emerging scholarship on
African diaspora that speaks to the particularities of ‘Canada,’ shares an overlooked, yet
emerging similarity with the African diasporas of what Zeleza (2005) calls the intra-African,
Mediterranean and Indian Ocean.

An example of the few works that have made an effort to include and theorize the
migratory experiences of recent immigrants from the African continent is the anthology, *The
African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*. While limiting themselves to “the
Americas,” editors Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce-Davies and Ali Mazrui do not render the
Canadian element of African diaspora completely invisible. In this anthology, African-Canadian
feminist Patience Elabor-Idemudia contributes a chapter that focuses on the experiences of
African immigrant women in the Canadian labour force. Of particular importance is Elabor-
Idemudia’s recognition of this most recent layer by appropriately terming it the “new African
diaspora.” Idemudia’s article is also beneficial in its identification of racism, sexism and
discriminatory practices based on class and language as key factors in barriers to employment for
African immigrant women in Canada. However, with the exception of a brief acknowledgement
that African women’s Indigenous cultures are pathologized, and therefore not oriented to
developing a positive self-identity, or “full participation in Canadian social life” (2000:235),
Idemudia’s discussion overlooks the Indigenous knowledges dimension. In doing so, she
neglects to consider the role(s) Indigenous knowledges might play in African immigrant
women’s lives, especially as empowering tools that subvert dominant Canadian culture. Nor
does Idemudia address the complex meanings, ideas and engagements that African immigrant
women *themselves* attach to their Indigenous knowledges and cultures. With a specific focus on the Yoruba community, my research fills such gaps in existing the literature, by offering a focused, and more nuanced understanding of how African Indigenous knowledges are understood, lived and practiced in the “New African diaspora,” and more specifically, in Canada.

Wisdom Tettey and Korbla Puplamu’s make a substantial contribution to filling this gap in their co-edited book, *The African Diaspora in Canada: Negotiating Identity and Belonging*. They offer one of the most relevant and engaging positions in their focus on the diasporic lived experiences of continental Africans. They acknowledge the challenges embedded in a study which focuses on the particular experiences of continental Africans who, as a specific group, have been overlooked and overwhelmingly homogenized under the meta-identity of ‘Black.’ They note that this is complicated by the equally homogenizing meta-identity of ‘African,’ for, as they state, “not all Africans are Black, nor do all Black people consider themselves African” (Tettey as cited in Tettey and Puplampu, 2005: 5, 11), thereby making it imperative to be cognizant of how race and culture figure in connection to constructions of *continental* African/Black identities in Canada. Tettey and Puplampu’s research is cognizant of the “relational character of identity as both avowed and ascribed,” and the reality that “continental Africans and their children are likely to be [hegemonically] characterized as Black/African,” (12) thereby underscoring Dei’s assertion of the importance of understanding and theorizing “the salience of race” (Dei, 1996). Also, while their focus remains on the highly neglected geographical region of Canada, Tettey and Puplampu recognize that because continental Africans have immediate familial and “traceable genealogical links to the [African] continent” (12), this adds another dimension to producing comprehensive scholarship which theorizes the experiences of continental Africans, thereby making both the experiences and the study
transnational, in addition to its local and national scope. Of prime significance and direct relevance to my research project is the fact that Tettey and Puplampu’s anthology does not limit its focus to only first generation continental Africans. Instead, their work explores their children’s experiences, arguing that:

...as they [the children of first generation continental Africans] try to negotiate a sense of self vis-à-vis their parents and the larger Canadian society….this latter focus is worth examining because it is germane to understanding the daily lives of the parents. The lifestyles, struggles, and aspirations of the children constitute an intrinsic part of the parents’ reality (Tettey and Puplampu, 2005:12).

The intergenerational focus is highly pertinent to my work in that I write this dissertation from the standpoint of a second generation continental African-Canadian, who, much like the scholars who contribute articles to this anthology, I am cognizant of how the experiences of diasporic continental Africans must be theorized through the lens of the complicated interplay of various forms of oppression such as racism, economic exploitations, discrimination and inequities based on gender, language, age, religion, employment, class, sexuality, education and other socio-political factors that affect such experiences and realities. However, my point of departure differs from Tettey and Puplampu’s both in terms of my research focus and its scope. First, in contrast to despite their extensive focus on identity and how it is distinctly negotiated along generational lines, my concern regarding identities is more focused on the Indigenous knowledges dimension of African diasporic identities and how they figure –i.e. as devalued yet subversive– in Eurocentric dominant contexts. Second, I explore these issues with a specific focus on the Yoruba ethnic group.

Whilst Toyin Falola’s anthology, *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (2004) also breaks new ground in that it is the first of its kind to focus specifically on the Yoruba diaspora, its salience is limited with respect to the research undertaken here. First, the anthology is
historical, and whilst it may give significant historical context to Yoruba diaspora, it cannot lend itself to theorizing the more contemporary realities and experiences of Yoruba peoples in its diaspora. Second, this anthology focuses overwhelmingly on the enslavement of Yoruba peoples across the Atlantic from the 17th to 20th centuries, thereby excluding the more recent and ‘voluntary’ movements of Yoruba peoples from Yorubaland. Third, the anthology is limited to the Atlantic portion of the Yoruba diaspora, and, while it includes chapters that theorize and discuss Yoruba presence in a variety of places such as Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, the United States, the English speaking Caribbean, Costa Rica, Sierra Leone and other parts of West Africa, the Canadian element of Yoruba (African) diaspora is once again neglected. This is clear in the absence of chapters addressing the geo-spatial region of Canada, historically or otherwise. Once again, we arrive at the paradox of Canada’s spatial location within and amongst other African/Black Atlantic giants yet its invisibility in academic research –a gap which this research will try to address.

With the exception Charles Adeyanju’s Master’s thesis titled, The Transnational Social Fields of the Yoruba in Toronto, Canada (2000), there is virtually no research on the more recent Yoruba diaspora in Toronto –or in any geographic region in Canada for that matter– that speaks to the specificities of their realities and experiences. Adeyanju’s thesis sets the groundwork for discussion and dialogue on Yoruba presence in Canada, and more specifically, Toronto. Adeyanju’s work gives a detailed discussion of the political-economic factors that contributed to Yoruba migrations by placing them in historical context; beginning with colonialism and continuing with an examination of the pervasive inequalities that globalization has produced. He builds on Walter Rodney’s (1972) argument of development where ‘globalization’ and Western accumulation of global capital are understood as merely new forms of colonialism that continue
the unequal distribution of resources by corruptively extracting from and under-developing Africa, while developing Europe and the West. This is done primarily through Western lending bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) which continue to have a monopoly on global capital, by keeping Southern countries such as Nigeria, in chokehold loans and inequitable economic policies that keep them indebted to such Western bodies. This, coupled with the emerging dominance of transnational corporations, the collusion of dishonest Nigerian political elites and a ruthless military dictatorship of the 1980s, resulted in a rather unstable Nigerian economy (much like many other ‘developing’ countries in the South). This made Nigeria a difficult place for the majority of Nigerians to make a daily, sustainable living wage, thereby making migration more desirable for those who were able to do so. However, although relevant, Adeyanju’s political-economic focus does not lend itself to my more socially focused analysis, which foregrounds how Indigenous Yoruba culture and knowledges are understood and utilized in diasporic and hegemonizing contexts. The absence of such social research has also entailed a silence around how Yoruba Indigenous culture is affected and re-configured in the face of balancing familial and economic demands from within the onerous context of colonial oppression and dominant Canadian culture. Therefore, my research project fills the gap in the research on contemporary African Indigenous cultures, and more specifically, Yoruba speaking communities in diasporic contexts, while simultaneously contributing new research to the overall dearth of scholarship on the African-Canadian diaspora.
Chapter Three:
Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two theoretical frameworks: anti-colonial theory and Black/African feminisms. I draw from and build on these theoretical models of analysis to critically contextualize the experiences of Yoruba peoples in diasporic and Euro-dominant contexts. Whereas a more general understanding of ‘migrant’ experience in the ‘host’ country is often proclaimed uncritically as one where immigrants have access to “better jobs,” “more opportunities for their children” and overall dreams of success provided that they are willing to work hard, anti-colonial and Black/African feminist theories provide more critical alternatives for exploring and theorizing migrant experience. Both theoretical approaches analyze social relations of power, and how they figure in hegemonic discourses and contexts. Said another way, both anti-colonial and African/Black feminist frameworks allow for a more critical and nuanced reading of how issues of race, class, spirituality, gender, language, religion, and especially notions of Indigeneity interlock in the lives and experiences of Yoruba peoples in the diaspora. Rather than examining these issues from hegemonizing positions that deny, demarcate or eclipse one issue over the other, I draw from and build on anti-colonial and Black/African feminist theories to articulate how various concepts that are imperative to this research project. Although anti-colonial and Black/African critical perspectives often overlap with many similarities, the specific relevance of each framework will be discussed separately in more detail in the following sections.

I begin with the anti-colonial discursive framework and a discussion of key concepts that are critical to this theory. There is a particular focus on the term “Indigenous” as a vitally significant concept in anti-colonial thought. I also argue that this concept needs to be
reconsidered and critically interrogated where diasporic Africans are concerned. I maintain that Indigeneity (or Indigenous identities) need to be imagined differently so that the unique positionings of especially diasporic Africans can be accorded a space to theorize the particularities of their experiences. Said another way, I argue that there is a need for a shift in how notions of Indigeneity are taken up so that they are not imagined exclusive. I also argue for different and more flexible engagements with Indigeneity because this concept is often taken up to exclude diasporic African identities. Instead, I argue that this intellectual shift in how notions of Indigeneity are engaged needs to include a variety of Indigenous people’s experiences. I then move the reader to African/Black feminist theories and explicate the divergences and convergences between the two frameworks, but explicitly focus on their commonalities in terms of centering Black diasporic female experience. The key arguments I want to get across are that gender in Indigenous, and especially the Yoruba context differs from Western constructions of gendered identities (Oyewumi, 1997). There is therefore the need to eschew Eurocentric and universal notions of gender in thinking about Indigenous peoples and identities. Finally, I discuss spirituality as significant for both anti-colonial and African/Black theoretical frameworks, arguing that it is integral to Indigenous notions of self, community and cosmology.

**Anti-Colonial Theory**

Some of the most pertinent concepts in anti-colonial theory are ‘imperialism,’ ‘colonialism,’ ‘decolonization’ and ‘indigenous.’ Linda Smith (1999), George Dei (2000) and George Dei and Alireza Asgharzadeh (2001) are scholars whose work specifically addresses how these concepts can be understood from anti-colonial perspectives.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Smith discusses European imperialism as a multilayered concept diversely understood as 1) economic
exploitation and expansion in facilitation with the establishment of European colonies on Indigenous land; 2) imperialism as the subjugation of ‘others’ [particularly indigenous peoples]; 3) as located within the enlightenment era which transformed economic, political and cultural life in Europe and 4) being complex in the ways in which colonized peoples were pulled into the system, and in the effects of this in order to know how to decolonize (21).

To elaborate on the first layer, Smith conceptualizes colonialism as “one expression of imperialism” (21) that acted as both “the fort and port of imperial outreach.” She also maintains that colonialism was not limited to this function and served as, “a particular realization of the imperial imagination…and of the future nation it would become” (23). According to Smith, folded into this imaginary is the image of the [Indigenous] Other, ‘inferior’ in stark and subtle degrees, making the stories of colonialism key elements of both a grand narrative, and local experience.

Meanwhile, in “The Power of Social Theory: The Anti-colonial Discursive Framework,” George Dei and Alireza Asgharzadeh (2001) understand ‘imperial’ “as political institutional structures that sustain the relations of domination” (301), and ‘colonial’ is understood by them “as a set of relations…that is not simply foreign or alien, but also as imposed and dominating (300). I do not see Smith, and Dei and Asgharzadeh’s conceptions of these terms as mutually exclusive; for both emphasize their fundamental relevance to anti-colonial theorizing. I therefore build on their conception of these terms and understand them to be complementary. Whereas Smith highlights the multilayered historical and ideological elements of imperialism (as they are crucial for understanding the present), Dei and Asgharzadeh take an explicit power-centred position and focus on these concepts as inequitable relationships that are informed by structures
of political and institutional domination which are often linked to militarism, and the colonial is referred to in terms of how colonies are often re-organized in complicated ways.

While I recognize that ‘imperial’ and ‘colonial’ are not the same, they nevertheless are interrelated (Smith, 1999) and overlap. Given this, I use the terms interchangeably and offer my conception of them as both the explicit and subtle inequitable relationships between colonizers and the colonized. I would note that they that are also built on historical, ideological, social, cultural, economic and spiritual inequities as structured by European systems of domination and subjugation. Such a conceptualization allows for a more complicated and multifaceted exploration of both the historical and contemporary inequities embedded in colonial relations to be teased out and scrutinized. A more nuanced understanding of diasporic Yoruba identities is warranted, alongside the socially constructed contexts that inform their experiences, particularly in Euro-dominant spaces such as Canada.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* Frantz Fanon asserts that decolonization is an historical process which entails “the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature…which results from and is nourished by the situation of the colonies (36). According to Fanon, this encounter is inherently violent as it is one in which the native is exploited by the settler, thereby constituting an inequitable relationship based on domination and subordination of the former by the latter. Fanon accurately maintains that decolonization must also involve a complete questioning of the colonial situation. However, because decolonization is a process (Fanon 1963; Smith 1999), Smith reminds us that decolonization must also include an analysis of pre-colonial times. As such, a comprehensive conception of decolonization entails an examination of both the unequal encounter between colonizer and colonized, *as well as* the time
before this, when Indigenous peoples’ self-determination was unbroken. This approach to
decolonization is what Linda Smith calls the ‘Indigenous language of critique.’ She writes:

A constant reworking of our understandings of the impact of imperialism and colonialism
is an important aspect of indigenous cultural politics and forms the basis of the
indigenous language of critique. Within this critique there have been two major strands.
One draws upon a notion of authenticity, of a time before colonization in which we were
intact as indigenous peoples. We had absolute authority over our lives; we were born into
and lived in a universe which was entirely of our making. We did not ask, need or want
to be ‘discovered’ by Europe. The second strand of the indigenous language of critique
demands that we have an analysis of how we were colonized, of what that has meant in
terms of our immediate past and what it means for our present and future. The two
strands intersect but what is particularly significant in indigenous discourses is that
solutions are posed from a combination of the time before, colonized time, and the time
before that, pre-colonized time. Decolonization encapsulates both sets of ideas (Smith,

Smith’s approach to conceptualizing decolonization is significant in that her discussion of
‘authenticity’ is one in which she links it to self-determination, and ultimately, power. Rather
than evoking an essentialist notion of authenticity, Smith understands it to be connected to
power, and to having the ability to determine how one’s life is lived, understood and
experienced. This is what imperialism and colonialism have, and continue to disrupt and
devastate in the peoples they colonize. Additionally, her approach to critiquing imperialism and
colonialism is one that is anchored in the necessity to “have an analysis of how we were [and
continue to be] colonized.” Smith’s discussion of decolonization provides a model for my work,
as it is one in which I utilize both strands of her Indigenous language of critique’ to underscore
the importance of how Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and identities (both diasporic and
otherwise) are dynamic, in constant flux and therefore shaped by both eras. Research that limits
investigation to binarized models of analysis may pose the risk of eclipsing the myriad
possibilities of decolonization because one era is implicitly deemed to be more important than
the other. Dei and Asgharzadeh argue that, reading Southern peoples histories in the demarcated
stages of ‘pre-colonial,’ ‘colonial’ and ‘post-colonial’ is not as useful as understanding them as “imposed relations and power inequities engendered by history, tradition, culture, and contact” because colonial relations are constantly being re-organized (301). Demarcating histories in this way may also overlook crucial aspects of Indigenous peoples’ existence, and also may neglect to consider how Indigenous peoples themselves understand the world we live in, and most importantly, how we can go about developing innovative and effective ways to decolonize. So, while we may speak of Yoruba cosmology or worldsense\(^{16}\) as ‘pre-colonial,’ however, it also spans all three stages of pre-colonial, colonial, and ‘postcolonial’ and therefore it informs how Yoruba peoples understand, live, interpret and experience the environment/world around them and how their identities are formed in the present and the future. In this sense, cosmology or worldsense is not static, but rather changes and evolves over time; \textit{including} the time of ‘formal’ imperialisms and colonization that occurred in the 15\textsuperscript{th}-20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, \textit{as well as} the more elusive contemporary (re)configurations which continue into the present 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

Similar to Smith, Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001) emphasize the saliency of concepts such as colonialism, imperialism and decolonization in anti-colonial frameworks, and argue that the value of a theory should be measured in terms of its ability to “propel social and political action” (298), rather than being considered valuable based solely on philosophical theorizing and academic pontification. Appreciation for the pragmatic or ‘on-the-ground’ theory makes anti-colonialism essential to research projects such as mine, which identify decolonization and the critical affirmation of Indigenous knowledges as empowering tools for decolonization. Dei and Asgharzadeh offer a number of principles that are key to their rearticulation of anti-colonial theory. The most relevant of these to my story is the first principle where they write:

\(^{16}\) See page 57 for a more in-depth discussion on this concept, ‘Worldsense.’
The anti-colonial discursive framework allows for the effective theorizing of issues emerging from colonial and colonized relations by way of using indigenous knowledge as an important standpoint...[It is] an epistemology of the colonized, anchored in the indigenous sense of collective and common colonial consciousness (300).

It is their position in that Indigenous knowledges offer indispensable ways of knowing and decolonizing that must be seriously engaged as an anti-colonial strategy. Employing Indigeneity as a focal point in anti-colonial theory makes this framework indispensable to my research project because this study hinges on Indigenous identity as a pivotal social location for change. However, such a social location has proven to be rather challenging, especially for Indigenous and/or racialized scholars in academic spaces, because the academy values dominant paradigms of knowledge production as the superior norm. Despite the postmodern and postcolonial critiques which currently dominate in the academy, many anti-colonial scholars maintain their commitment to Indigeneity as a crucial entry point and dimension of anti-colonial theory. In particular, Dei and Asgharzadeh write:

The anti-colonial stance fosters the idea that intellectuals should be aware of the historical and institutional structures and contexts which sustain intellectualism. For instance, whereas postcolonial theorists’ mainly depend on Western models of analysis, conceptualization, and theorization, the anti-colonial theorists seek to work with alternative, oppositional paradigms based on the use of indigenous concepts and analytical systems and cultural frames of reference...Such a consciousness emerges from an awareness of the intellectual agency of local subjects as well as from their capacity to articulate their condition in terms of their own geography, history, culture, language and spirituality (301-302).

As a theoretical framework that privileges Indigenous ways of knowing, anti-colonial theory simultaneously affords a space for spirituality as integral to this framework. As discussed previously, Yoruba spirituality is highly interwoven within Indigenous cosmology, and is approached as the core life-force of all forms of existence (Mbiti, 1975; Richards, 1990; James, 1993; Smith, 1999; Dei, 2000; Battiste, 2000). It also entails belief in and ultimate reliance on a
force that is larger than one’s human self and other earthly forms of existence (Idowu, 1962; Mbiti, 1969; James, 1993).

Marie Battiste (2000) notes that holistic philosophy is central to Indigenous ways of knowing, and necessitates an awareness of how the spiritual and material inform our world, and daily realities. Honouring the spiritual dimension of our physical existence requires particular attention in an oppressive Euro-dominant world that increasingly equates progress and knowledge with secularization (particularly within secularized science) or amputation of spiritual consciousness and intelligence. For this reason, both understanding and having a relationship with spirit are essential to Indigenous ways of knowing and being because this affects resistance to colonial hegemony, particularly as Indigenous notions of self and community endure. In this sense, spirituality is critical to anti-colonial theorizing because of its decolonizing and healing qualities for Indigenous peoples.

The final concept critical to anti-colonial theorizing is the concept of ‘Indigenous’ itself. At this point, I engage a deeper dialogue of this term to clarify how I conceptualize it in my research project. Because the reality of human movement, migration and exchange across time and space makes it difficult to say exactly who the very first peoples of any geographic region/land are, this concept has been highly contested, and can be read as problematic if not taken up critically. That is, without considering why the idea that the questions of “firsts” is important in colonizing and imperial contexts, claims made by colonizers that they discovered the lands they settled because no other peoples existed prior to European arrival cannot be understood critically. In short, the only important presence would be European presence, and any non-European (read Indigenous) presence would still read these lands as empty. The most popular case in point would be Christopher Columbus and the colonial myth that he “discovered”
the Americas. The question of ‘firsts’ is important for a project like mine which centres Indigienity in colonial and imperial contexts, thereby also making this a question of power. Additionally, much like any other identity-linked category employed in the academy, and especially everyday life –i.e. working class, gay, Muslim, woman, Black, disabled– ‘Indigenous’ is a socially constructed category that holds significant political and social relevance for those who embrace the term. Such identities are not imagined, but have real meaning in terms of the daily inequitable material consequences (Dei, 2000) of being marginalized and oppressed as a member of that group. Said another way, although categories of identity such as ‘Indigenous,’ ‘Black,’ ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘woman’ are marginalized, the categories themselves are nevertheless embraced by members of these groups these terms draw attention to, and politicize a particular reality that is bound up with inequity, imperialism and the position of having been colonized. This is the same reality for Indigenous peoples and their knowledges.

(Re)Conceptualizing Indigenous: Living and Imagining Indigeneity Differently

As discussed in Chapter Two, ‘indigenous’ is a relatively recent term that emerged in the 1970s out of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the Canadian Indian Brotherhood (CIB) (Smith, 1999). It came into being to give a common name to both those who exist outside the colonial domain, as well as those who were colonized (Narogin, 1995). Trevor Purcell (1998) provides further background regarding usage of the term as one that is largely self-applied because it carries less condescension than words such as ‘primitive’ or ‘tribal’ (259). However, this concept is not unproblematic and has been seriously challenged primarily by those who work from postmodern theoretical frameworks because it may appear to homogenize unique and distinct peoples that have different experiences under imperialism (Smith, 1999). Such opposition has not come from Indigenous peoples themselves (Battiste, 2000; Dei, 2000) but
rather, has originated with scholars whose work relies on Eurocentric frames of mind and
analysis as the sole loci of legitimate knowledges. For Indigenous peoples, usage of the term
Indigenous is a *collectivizing* political and social strategy that emerged out of anti-colonial social
movements such as AIM, CIB and Red Power, all of which were strongly influenced by the
American Black Power and Civil Rights movements of the 1960s. Furthermore, ‘Indigenous’ is
employed as an umbrella term, or way of including common experiences of colonialism across
various communities, language groups and nations. Using the term ‘Indigenous’ need not deny
that each group’s distinctiveness and unique experiences with imperialism will also be given
serious attention and acknowledgment (Smith, 1999). Ultimately, ‘Indigenous’ is a multilayered
term that is informed by a multiplicity of experiences where both sameness and difference exist
simultaneously; it is not a singular category, experience or identity. Hence, my particular
understanding of Indigeneity may not speak to, or include the experiences of all of those who
speak from an Indigenous positionality and identity. For some, they are better suited, or more
comfortable focusing on the variety of issues that surround Indigeneity rather than placing
emphasis on what often can be limiting definitions. I elaborate on this further in the following
section and find it important to note that while I do recognize that a multitude of claims and
oppositions to ‘Indigenous’ as an identity concept exist, it is not my intention nor goal to resolve
the conflicts and debates around this term. Instead, I offer my own multilayered working
definition of how this term is used and conceptualized in my work, and how it specifically
applies to Yoruba (African) peoples.

The first layer of my thinking comes from Mudrooroo Narogin’s (1995) conception of
‘Indigenous’ to “simply mean originating in or from a country [or land]” (7). For Yoruba
peoples, this land is in the South-Western region of what is now known as Nigeria, as well as the
neighbouring borders of Togo and Benin. While according to archeologically documented knowledge, Yoruba presence in this region dates as far back as A.D. 800, Indigenous Yoruba oral designate this region as the site of the birth of humankind. However, the culture, language, spirituality and worldview of the Yoruba are not bound to this one geographic space, but have traveled with Yoruba peoples in the myriad directions they have moved and migrated outside this region. For example, forced removals such as the European slave trade, which resulted in a large number of Yoruba peoples being dispersed to areas that include (but are not limited to) other parts of Africa, as well as other geographic regions such as the Americas, the Caribbean and the continent of Europe, have inflected Yoruba identities with other lived experiences as other geographic spaces.

The second layer of my use of the term ‘Indigenous’ concerns conceiving of cosmology or ‘worldview’ as foundational, and borrows from George Dei’s (2000) conception of Indigenous knowledges as dynamic, experientially based, holistic and relational in the sense that the interwoven nature of the physical and metaphysical realms of Yoruba life are common knowledge and cosmologically anchored. In Dei’s words, “Indigenous epistemologies are grounded in an awareness and deep appreciation of the cosmos and how the self/selves, spiritual, known and unknown worlds are interconnected (Dei, 2000:115). This is in keeping with the Yoruba Indigenous philosophy of maintaining links to ensure that connection between these worlds remain active and unbroken. For Yoruba peoples, communication occurs through a myriad of rituals and practices that utilize and evoke all bodily senses. Yoruba feminist Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) explains the inadequacy of the term “worldview” as a synonym for cosmology in Yoruba contexts:

The term “worldview,” which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West’s privileging of the visual. It is Eurocentric to use it to
describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term, “worldsense” is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups and will be used when describing the Yoruba or other cultures that may privilege senses other than the visual or even a combination of senses (3).

Overemphasis on the visual is also problematic for Yoruba Indigenous discourses because the Yoruba conceive of spirituality and/or spiritual forces as largely inaccessible to the human eye. Hence, the term ‘worldview’ does not fully reflect the complexity of Indigenous Yoruba culture and how life is understood from this multi-sensed position. Cosmology or worldsense is a foundational locus of Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems. This is so because a people’s worldsense maps out how they experience and understand their world. In the Yoruba context, cosmology is complementary (Soyinka, 1976; Oyewumi, 1997; Olajubu, 2003), and interconnectedness is central, where Orun (the otherworld), Aiye (the physical world of living human and other beings) and Ile (the earthworld) are all interdependent and cannot exist on their own. Orun is inhabited by the Supreme Being, Olodumare, who is also known as Eleda (the Creator) and Olorun (literally meaning owner of the skyworld); the 401 plus Orisa –many of which once walked the earth as human beings with mystical powers, who were then deified through death. The lives of the Orisa are continued through the supernatural powers and prowess of various forces of nature such as water, wind, land/earth, fire, thunder/lightning and the forest/trees. The Otherworld is also inhabited by a number of spirits such as Egungun (Ancestors), egbe (mirror or spiritual half/halves on the otherside), Eboraiwin (a small supernatural being with magical powers)\(^\text{17}\), and Ara Orun (beings of the otherworld, including the unborn). The forces of Orun are always influencing and in communion with those who inhabit Aiye. The people of the physical world (aiye) will one day die and simultaneously become one with ile (the female earth/soil) because it is our last resting place, as one moves onto

\(^{17}\text{Fama’s Ede Awo: Orisa Yoruba Dictionary, p.97.}\)
the spirit world. The earth, and its connection to the dead are so sacred to Yoruba peoples that relatives of recently buried loved ones take small portions of soil from their grave and use it to swear oaths (Abimbola, 1997:68), again, illustrating the interconnection between the living and the dead through the power of nature and earth. As is common in many Indigenous cultures, the Yoruba also hold nature and one’s environment to be sacred. This is reflected in our belief in deified ancestors, the *Orisa*, and spirits that are associated with natural phenomena such as mountains, hills, earth, rivers, lakes, the ocean, trees and wind (Awolalu, 1979: 45). An example of ile as sacred in Yoruba life and cosmology is explained by historian J. Omosade Awolalu:

> The earth is venerated in Yorubaland because it is believed to be inhabited by a spirit. The Yoruba attach great importance to the earth. In creation, the myth says, earth was spread on the face of the deep, and land appeared. Furthermore, Obatala used clay to mould man before Olodumare gave him breath. When a new born comes into the world, the first landing place is the earth; when a man grows old and dies, he is buried in the earth. The earth supplies food for human consumption, and so it keeps life going. From the Yoruba point of view, an element which has such manifold and useful functions must have a spirit dwelling there…Since most of the Yoruba depend on agriculture for their sustenance, and crops are grown in the soil, *Ile* (the earth) receives special sacrifice at the time of planting and harvesting, almost in the same way as Orisa-oko does. And since the corpses of the ancestors are buried in the earth and there are powerful spirits dwelling therein, the Yoruba have the habit of pouring the first drop of any drinks on the ground and of throwing some portion of food to the earth before they drink or eat in order that the spirits may drink and eat first (1979:45).

The third layer of how I conceptualize Indigeneity concerns the matter of land and how it is understood as the definitive marker of who can officially be identified or ‘count’ as Indigenous. Dr. Erica-Irene Daes, the chair of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations places particular emphasis on land, or ecology as “the central and indispensable classroom” for the teaching and generational transmission of Indigenous knowledge systems (Daes as cited in Battiste, 2000: 41). Many Indigenous scholars and intellectuals such as Ward Churchill, Linda Smith, Andrea Smith, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ifi Amadiume, Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, Wande Abimbola and others have stressed the significance of
land for the self-determined development and sustenance of Indigenous peoples and their systems of knowledge. On this matter, Aboriginal scholar Marie Battiste (2002) writes:

Indigenous knowledge is also inherently tied to land, not to land in general but to particular landscapes, landforms, and biomes where ceremonies are properly held, stories properly recited, medicines properly gathered, and transfers of knowledge properly authenticated. Ensuring the complete and accurate transmission of knowledge and authority from generation to generation depends not only on maintaining ceremonies, which Canadian law treats as art rather than science, but also on maintaining the integrity of the land itself (13).

I do not dispute that land, or rather particular lands are central to many, if not all Indigenous peoples and the knowledge systems they maintain. Rather, it is the manner in which land is spoken of that is problematic for me here, especially where many diasporic African peoples are concerned. It is often implied, or assumed that Indigenous peoples are current residents of their countries of origin, however, just as often, they may have been displaced and pushed off their distinct territory through colonization. While imperial or colonialist settlers often forcibly remove Indigenous peoples from their territories, very often they remain residents of that same larger physical/geographic space or land mass – as is the case with Aboriginal peoples in the Americas, Australia, the Pacific region, as well as many South African Indigenous peoples. As scholar Trevor Purcell (1998) reminds us, to be considered Indigenous, one must be residing on, and/or in relatively close proximity to one’s ancestral territory. However, what has not been given due attention – particularly in academic, as well as Indigenous grassroots activist circles in the Americas – are the Indigenous populations that have been completely displaced off that particular land mass; as is the case with the hundreds of millions of Africans who were enslaved by Europeans; or the current movements of continental Africans who follow global capital as a result of ‘globalization’ (which in itself is simply a new form of imperialism). In this sense, it is one’s relationship to land that is critical, and this does not necessarily manifest as a physical
marker. Yes, one’s Indigeneity is undoubtedly tied to a distinct ancestral land or territory, yet, popular conceptions of Indigeneity (in the academy and otherwise) have constructed slavery and African peoples conquest based removal from their Indigenous lands as disqualifiers for being counted as Indigenous peoples, despite the fact that this occurred through imperialist and colonizing forces. And this disqualification occurs primarily because African Indigenous experiences under colonialism are generally not understood to be the definitive experience of Indigeneity. By contrast, I argue that while undoubtedly tied to a distinct ancestral land or territory, Indigeneity also indicates displaced communities’ *relationship* with their homeland and must include an analysis of how imperial histories and social relations of power figure(d) in the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories. This analysis must consider both their geographic proximity to, as well as their relationship with these lands. By no means should my argument be taken as an attempt to deny the saliency and necessity of land with respect to providing self-determined sustenance for Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing. Indeed, land theft and occupation are central to the implementation, execution and perpetuation of colonialism and imperialist projects. Rather, what I propose here is a rearticulation of Indigeneity that permits the diverse histories and realities of distinct Indigenous groups to be seriously considered, so that the particular realities of diasporic Africans are included in this concept instead of being denied or subsumed under grand narratives or more popular notions of Indigeneity. In this regard, we move away from exclusive or hegemonizing essentialist notions of ‘Indigenous peoples’ that are narrowly predicated on obligatory residence on one’s ancestral land, to a more complicated and inclusive approach that is reflective of the varied experiences of Indigenous peoples under colonialism and imperialism.
Being attuned to how imperialism and colonialism affects various Indigenous peoples differently, also allows for a multifaceted conception of Indigenous identities that anchors, but does not lock them into their ancestral land or territories. I do not conceive of being ‘locked’ and ‘anchored’ as synonymous. In my opinion, being anchored means being grounded with the promise of flexible movement, and this is not limited to solely a physical state of being; interwoven in this concept throughout are psychic, emotional and spiritual qualities of existence as well. Inversely, I conceive of the notion, or sensation of being ‘locked in’ as a position that precludes movement, much in the same way certain definitions of Indigeneity have precluded the experiences of those who are Indigenous, but have different, non-residential, or more transnational relationships and experiences with their ancestral lands precisely because their experiences with/in colonialism and imperialism have been different.

For the many diasporic Africans who have been physically and forcibly scattered, moved and displaced out of their ancestral lands, numerous emotional, spiritual and psychic connections to various peoples and cultures of the African continent have nonetheless been retained through reassemblages of key elements of African culture such as language, clothing, food, music, dance, spirituality etc. Given the reality of globalization as a hegemonic process imbued with political, economic, social and religious inequalities that induce the continued movement of peoples across multiple spaces, and national borders, it becomes futile to evoke hegemonically fixed or static notions of any form of identity or people. My research challenges us to think about the relationship between Indigeneity and land differently. Understanding that such relationships are highly complicated and differ for African peoples across time and space opens up the possibilities for developing more nuanced analyses of the multiple, yet distinct ways that Indigenous peoples are positioned in relationship to their ancestral lands, and how colonialism
and imperialism have figure(d) in changing these relationships. As a project that prioritizes African Indigenous and anti-colonial perspectives, imagining Indigeneity becomes quite difficult when applied to African peoples who are often seen as “not Indigenous enough” or “not Indigenous at all.” These tensions become heightened when the focus is diasporic because many would argue that being in a diasporic context renders (especially) African Indigeneity impossible or, simply non-existent. In this respect, I am keenly aware that I write against the academic grain, and in the face of incredible opposition. However my aim here is not so much to engage the debate on “the politics of identity” (Indigenous or otherwise), so much as it is to engage an exploration of African, and more specifically, Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and identities on their own terms.

That said, folded into this third layer of my conceptualization of Indigeneity is the necessity for a conceptualization of diaspora that is also inclusive, and cognizant of difference. Rather than conceiving diaspora as the exclusive preserve of specific geo-spatial regions—a position that Stuart Hall (1997) takes— I prefer Earl Lewis’ suggestion that we live in “a world of overlapping diasporas” which are “interconnected and demarcated by race, class, color, and other factors” (1995:779).

Michel Laguerre (1998) and Aihwa Ong (1999) present a similar line of argument in their suggestion for “more flexible or diasporic notions of citizenship [in order] to probe the multiple belongings created in diaspora” (as cited in Braziel and Mannur, 2003:6). Lewis’ call helps me to think of the Yoruba communities here in Canada as a layer of diaspora that overlaps with others. What other layers precede and/or interact with that of the Yoruba in Canada?18 The first of these are the African diasporic layers; shared and related, but different in that I am distinctly thinking

18 I am aware that this particular layer I speak of is not the first Yoruba diaspora in ‘Canada.’ I acknowledge that many other Yoruba peoples who were enslaved preceded this, however for the purposes of this research project I focus on the most recent Yoruba speaking communities who ‘voluntarily’ migrated from the African continent in the late 60s to the early 70s and on.
about Africans who are the *direct* descendants of enslaved Africans. So there are those layers, and how that particular form of movement was traumatically enforced with no element of choice or autonomy for those who had been kidnapped away. My mind then veered towards the Indigenous peoples of ‘Canada’ as another set of layers. As the First peoples of this land, I then wondered if they could be confined to layers? I was not sure, and frankly somewhat bemused as to how to conceptualize or approach this. However, what I did understand is that without question, the location and social positioning of Canada’s Indigenous peoples needed to be engaged in my work. I recognize that my social location as a Yoruba woman who was raised in ‘Canada’ since the age of three, on land that was not Indigenous to me could not to be overlooked. I wondered, what are the implications of simultaneously being Indigenous and Western, on land that you are not Indigenous to? What does it mean to be a resident and citizen of a land where the Indigenous peoples of that land were still being oppressed and marginalized? I had no answers to these rather complicated and admittedly harrowing questions, but I did know that they needed to be given serious consideration and attention in my work. On the whole, my reconceptualization of land and diaspora as they relate to Indigenous peoples was to underscore the central themes of difference and multiplicity. George Dei and Alireza Asgharzadeh also insist on difference as a key principle and concept in anti-colonial theorizing:

> Oppression should be looked at as a site encompassing varieties of differences, categories, and identities that differentiate individuals and communities from one another and at the same time connects them together through the experience of being oppressed, marginalized and colonized (2001: 316).

Hence, approaches to defining ‘Indigenous’ must involve a recognition of difference, where serious attention is given to the multiple and diverse experiences that Indigenous peoples have under imperialism and colonialism. In the same way that it is necessary to acknowledge that Indigenous identity is not singular, it is necessary to recognize that Indigenous people’s
relationship(s) to their ancestral land or territory is also not singular. This is a call for a conceptual shift, where, instead of Indigeneity being presumptively predicated on compulsory physical residence on one’s ancestral territory, this is replaced by the appreciation that notions of belonging and connection to one’s Indigenous land(s) takes multiple forms, and should therefore not be limited to simply one experience of how belonging is manifested. This conceptualization of Indigeneity allows for the varied histories and realities of distinct Indigenous groups to be seriously considered, so that a more multifaceted and inclusive approach is utilized to reflect the nuances and varied experiences of different Indigenous peoples under colonialism and imperialism.

The fourth definitional layer of how I conceptualize ‘Indigenous’ directly builds on the third to underscore the crucial theme of resistance and empowerment that Indigeneity holds. For this layer, I work with the idea that colonized Indigenous peoples can claim or evoke an Indigenous identity even when they are not on their ancestral land because such ways of knowing are flexibly embedded and embodied. However, before proceeding with further discussion of this layer, it is important that it not be confused with the appropriation of Indigenous identities in the way that individuals who come from dominant communities do. Linda Smith elaborates:

[Indigenous] has been co-opted politically by the descendants of settlers who lay claim to an ‘indigenous’ identity through their occupation and settlement of land over several generations or simply through being born in that place – though they tend not to show up at indigenous peoples’ meetings nor form alliances that support the self-determination of the people whose forebears once occupied the land that they have ‘tamed’ and upon which they have settled. Nor do they actively struggle as a society for the survival of indigenous languages, knowledges and cultures. Their linguistic and cultural homeland is somewhere else, their cultural loyalty is to some other place. Their power, their privilege, their history are all vested in their legacy as colonizers (1999:7).
While everyone is Indigenous to some place, sometime, somewhere (Ward Churchill, 2003: public lecture titled ‘Indigenous Strategies of Resistance’ at York University), a distinction must be made between constructions of Indigeneity that are interlaced with historical and contemporary legacies of conquest, colonial occupation and white supremacy, and those that are grounded in struggle, resistance and decolonization. The ‘Indigeneity’ of the former is conveniently evoked by the dominant in certain contexts, and very much shaped by power imbalances in the sense that such evocations do not disrupt their ‘innocence’ as settlers (Razack & Fellows, 1998). Settler identities such as this are heavily anchored in romantic amnesic constructions of themselves as benevolent ‘founders.’ The Indigeneity of which I speak of is one that is anchored in having been colonized on ancestral territory, or, a land mass different from the one one currently resides on. Especially for African diasporic peoples, this particular (re)configuration of Indigeneity works with the salient principle that Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding the universe are dynamic, and therefore flexibly embodied and embedded.

However, an Indigenous identity where one can claim citizenship on land that one is not Indigenous to raises important questions about power. As a Canadian citizen, my Indigeneity is precariously built on the amnesic denial of ‘Canada’ as stolen land. This is to acknowledge the paradox and complexity of being both Indigenous (Yoruba) and ‘Canadian’ (Western) as a rather unsteady social location that does not conveniently fit popular notions of what it means to be Indigenous. Yet, I maintain that these realities do not make African peoples any less Indigenous, rather, it is a different form of Indigeneity that inevitably highlights the third definitional layer which emphasizes difference. I conceptualize this particular type of difference through something I term as a type of ‘migrant Indigeneity’; where one retains their Indigeneity through
cultural embeddedness and embodiment. I’m remembering that constructions of Indigeneity vary, and are not singular, but diverse and dynamic. Therefore including the Indigenous identities and knowledges of people who carry this information with them in their physical bodies is legitimate and considering how this operates in concert with their cultural histories and memories is worthy of study. And this transpires despite the fact that they may not be residing on their Indigenous lands.

Thomas Heyd (1995) has argued that Indigenous knowledges are “embedded in distinctive social practices and cultural frameworks” (70) such as one’s cultural memory (Dei, 2000). Some of the most profound examples of the retentions and reconfigurations of African Indigenous knowledges are found in the older African diasporic communities that were forcibly removed from the African continent during the Maafa, more popularly known as the European transatlantic slave trade. Nevertheless, despite the flexible dynamism of Indigenous knowledges as “living knowledge systems that are continually responding [and adapting] to new phenomena and fresh insights” (Battiste, 2002: 12), the evocation of an Indigenous identity remains highly contested with continual charges of essentialism equating the term with colonialism and imperialism – particularly in academic spaces. I echo the contrasting standpoint of scholars Isidore Okpewho, Ali Mazrui and Carol Boyce-Davies who insist that memory of Africa and a sense of roots are, in fact “political statements” and “psychological necessities” that serve/d exiled Africans well, particularly when the conditions of oppression and colonization seemed intolerable (Okpewho et al, 1999: xv). Similarly, George Dei and Alireza Asdharzadeh

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maintain that many aspects of Indigeneity act as “profound sites of empowerment, struggle and resistance against imposed hegemonies” (2001: 318). However, in “Essentialism, Memory and Resistance: Aboriginality and the Politics of Authenticity” Andrew Lattas (1993) presents one of the most thought-provoking positions on this issue. In agreement with Okpewho et al and Dei and Asdharzadeh, Lattas also posits that “cultural and political significance is always constituted through a past” where “a sense of continuity with the past might be a way of resisting assimilation” (246). Of principal significance is Lattas’ response to charges of essentialism, which he establishes through a rearticulation of Indigenous identity from an Indigenous 

worldsense standpoint:

An enormous amount of intellectual energy is currently directed at establishing Aboriginality as something that is invented through European involvement. What is often ignored is the sense of autonomy from the control of the ‘Other’ conferred by images of the past and indeed the necessity to have an image of the past if one is to have a sense of ownership of oneself. Yet when Aborigines seek to give a mythological content to, or to reclaim, a primordial past for themselves then they are accused of essentialism and of participating in their own domination. Aboriginal culture here is set up to be de-mythologised and rationalized by the white intellectuals working in Aboriginal studies. It is to be stripped of its essentialising mythology and folklore and introduced to modern theoretical ideas which emphasize the contextual and relative nature of any identity. This is identity without content and without a primordial past; it is identity stripped to the bare logic of being simply a relation. The demand that Aborigines produce their popular consciousness along the lines of a social theory of identity is a request that they become conscious of themselves as purely relational identities; they are to be resisters without producing an essence for themselves. They are to situate themselves in opposition to Whites without fetishising themselves. They are to become a pure system of difference, an oppositional form that does not stabilize itself except through being a subversion of the other. There is no positivity and content in this form of Aboriginality, it is a relationship of opposition responding to the terms and agenda set yet again by white society. In effect, a white moral gaze refuses Aborigines an identity politics that is grounded in them taking up their bodies as an imaginary space (247-248).

Lattas’ brilliant discussion highlights the empowering possibilities of Indigenous knowledges as central decolonizing tools of resistance against domination and colonization. In placing Indigenous ways of knowing at the centre, Lattas refuses the conventional Eurocentric yardsticks
of academic identity construction, and instead, carves out a space to reconstruct an Indigenous identity on its own terms; that is, from an Indigenous perspective that affirms the past through descent, the body and generational transmission of one’s memories and ancestors. Lattas helps me to think about engaging Indigeneity as a decolonizing terrain of intellectual engagement. He also demonstrates that essentialisms that are grounded in Indigenous constructions of the self cannot be solely and simply measured in relationship to whites, but rather, Indigeneity also exists autonomously to serve important ‘cultural and political functions’ (246) that are empowering – for example, being conscious of one’s connection to one’s past, one’s land and one’s body as strategic ways of resisting colonialism and assimilation (245). This is not to say that relational readings and constructions of identity should be jettisoned or dismissed, rather, what is being advocated here is the necessity to take seriously Indigenous constructions of identity on their own terms, and to be aware of the dangerous re-colonizing implications if these ways of knowing continue to be denied and delegitimized. In this sense then, essentialisms that are “strategic” (Spivak, 1990) and cannot be sloppily grouped with and subsumed under the oppressive and dangerously subjugating essentialisms of the dominant/colonizers. In effect, certain essentialisms are evoked differently because these formulations serve the function of strategic resistance, particularly in the necessary and eventual decolonizing shift towards healing from oppression. Such essentialisms are also therapeutic in that they provide physical, psychic, spiritual and emotional ways of knowing and understanding oneself through a sense of community, groundedness, connection and stability. In other words, certain essentialisms are empowering Indigenous constructions of identity that must be taken on those terms, and according to those ways of knowing the world; ways which are deeply anchored in their own unique Indigenous worldsense. Finally, Lattas’ discussion reminded me that taking a staunch and absolutely anti-
essentialist position where people are continually reduced to “pure systems of difference” (Lattas: 248) is a form of essentialism in and of itself because one remains fixed in that system. Indigeneity here is conceptualized both as an empowering resistant identity, and as part of a diverse range of identities. The fact remains that there are a myriad of ways to understand our existence and identities in this world, and to exclude Indigenous identities, or slap them with charges which ring of some type of subtextual ‘primitive’ essentialism, while engaging in a particular type of one’s own essentialism is to participate in exclusionary hierarchical politics which (intentionally or not) continue to deny Indigenous peoples’ their right to self-identify. In the end, such accusations are misguided and, in addition to reifying dominant Western knowledges, they fail to recognize the empowering and decolonizing possibilities of Indigenous knowledges and identities.

The fifth conceptual layer of my understanding of Indigeneity involves the premise that binaristic thinking around Indigenous and Western knowledges as clearly demarcated needs to be avoided20 (Purcell, 1998; Dei, 2000). However, it is also important to recognize the current position of Indigenous knowledges and identities as ‘discredited’ (Morrison, 1984) and subjugated, particularly in relation to dominant Western discourses about ‘truth’ (Foucault as cited in Purcell, 1998: 260). To bring it back to the African context, the two monotheistic religions of Christianity and Islam have historically constructed African Indigenous religion – this includes that of the Yoruba– as ‘inferior,’ ‘uncivilized’ and ‘backward.’ Where Islam relegated African Indigenous religions to al-Jahilliyya, the time of Barbarism, Christianity viewed it “as pure paganism” (Olupona, 1991:1). Needless to say, these hegemonic constructions persist to-date, as evidenced in the often ostracizing and antagonistically hostile attitude towards

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20 This is important primarily because Indigenous knowledges are often co-opted, appropriated and subsumed under ‘Western’ knowledges, without being acknowledged in their own right.
proponents of African Indigenous spirituality. The fact that most Africans have internalized, converted to, and consequently live out Christian or Muslim identities in allegiance to these colonizing religious traditions poses some interesting questions around how African Indigenous religions figure in liberation and decolonizing projects. Accordingly, an anti-colonial theoretical framework becomes imperative to my study because it engages a critique of the denigration and disparagement of Indigeneity, particularly since such pathologizing is carried out in the name of ‘modernity’ (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001:301). In short, the anti-colonial discursive framework appreciates, and therefore takes the position that Indigenous knowledges and identities carry crucial elements of empowerment, resistance and the basic human right to simply be who one is. In this sense, justice and social change are attendant imperatives when working with/in this framework. Scholars Ladislaus M. Semali and Joe L. Kincheloe (1999) elaborate:

A central tenet [is] our belief in the transformative power of indigenous knowledge, the ways that such knowledge can be used to foster empowerment and justice in a variety of cultural contexts. A key aspect of this transformative power involves the exploration of human consciousness, the nature of its production, and the process of its engagement with cultural difference (15).

The sixth layer of my conceptualization of Indigeneity involves a synthesis of the salient Black feminist principle where the various forms of oppression in our world, such as patriarchy, white supremacy/racism, classism, ablism and heterosexism are conceptualized as interlocking and mutually sustaining forces of dominance (hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984; Collins, 1990). Against the traditionally masculinist grain of anti-colonial theory, George Dei and Alireza Asgharzadeh echo Black feminist sentiments in their rearticulation of anti-colonial discourse to assert the necessity that all forms of oppression be approached as interlocking, and therefore of equal importance in anti-colonial theorizing. However, given such rearticulations, it should not be assumed that research which may focus more extensively on one or more sites of oppression is
immediately doing so at the expense of others and therefore reproducing these same forms of oppression. Instead, attention must be paid to the manner in which this is done and ways in which certain forms of oppression and domination are salient in certain contexts, or, the need for focus and emphasis on certain sites because they remain under-researched and scantily theorized. Dei and Asgharzadeh provide a lucid articulation of how this can be done in a strategic and anti-hegemonic manner:

The anti-colonial thought forwards a notion of critical gaze which could be maintained on any single category such as race, class, or gender, at the same time can refrain from subduing or subordinating other categories and sites of oppression. Such a gaze is not concrete and fixed. It is fluid and transparent. It constantly sees and observes colonial relations of power and domination, shifts from one site onto the other, resists all of them, but maintains a relatively heavier presence on any chosen category in a strategic gesture to be more effective (2001: 312-313).

As discussed in earlier chapters, scholarship that premises contemporary Indigeneity from an African diasporic perspective remains quite scant and under-researched. My present research gives the concept of contemporary African diasporic Indigeneity the same consideration that other social identities and forms of domination are given when thinking through the interlocking nature of oppressions. Said another way, what I am suggesting here is that, as a social location and identity that one both celebrates, yet is systematically oppressed under through colonialism, African diasporic Indigeneity needs to be included as a category of analysis. Doing so could only enrich and nuance one’s scholarship, but more importantly, doing so indicates a counter-hegemonic political act in academic spaces. It is to say that one is aware of, and contesting the (destructive) dominance of Western knowledges as normative. Finally, to do so (whether one identifies as Indigenous or not) would be taking a powerful alliance-based standpoint that signals to others the importance of speaking out against the continued oppression of Indigenous peoples, their knowledges and lands.
The seventh and final conceptual layer of my understanding of Indigeneity is two-fold and builds on the sixth. The first portion entails an awareness that any critical analysis which seeks to understand the interlocking social relations of power in diasporic Yoruba identities requires us to put aside the seductive lull of romanticizing our Indigeneity. We must recognize that some Indigenous knowledges systems carry sites of disempowerment, which are often evoked against women and other cultural or ethnic minorities (Dei, 2000:8). These evocations also tend to be erected in the name of ‘tradition’ or under that banner of ‘culture,’ as justifications for inequitable social relations. With a conscientious awareness of how colonialism figures, these sites of oppression also need to be critically engaged and examined, not disregarded. African/Black feminist theories are important conceptual tools which can be utilized to critically analyze these spaces of inequity and disempowerment in some Indigenous knowledge systems.

The second portion of this final layer emphasizes the importance of working with a philosophy of humility, acknowledging the incompleteness of knowledge. This means embracing the power of not knowing (Dei, 2000). In my opinion, this is one of the most important lessons that scholars in the academy and Western world can learn from African and other Indigenous knowledge systems. In a space where one’s worth and status is judged on the primacy of intellect and ‘knowing it all,’ opening oneself up to the humbling position of viewing oneself as a

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21 For example, whilst not the focus of my study, I ask, how does homophobia, or the silence and denial of same gender relationships in African Indigenous knowledge systems limit itself as a source of empowerment and decolonization? As I make this assumption around the denial of homosexuality in African traditional societies, I feel the urge to unsay it because, yes, although Africans do share many cultural and spiritual values, epistemologies and histories, it is also vastly important to not homogenize African peoples, or see the continent as an undifferentiated monolith. The differences and specificities of distinct African societies needs to be seriously considered. For example, Malidoma Some has discussed the key role spiritual gatekeepers -who are often gay men- play among the Dagara people of Burkina Faso. He is also currently writing a book on gays and lesbians as spiritual gatekeepers in traditional Dagara society. See his website, www.malidoma.com for more information. Also see, Boris de Rachewiltz. *Black eros: sexual customs of Africa from prehistory to the present day.* Despite the heavily anthropological construction of African societies, the pictures and images in this text give some insight into the diverse ways different African societies value, manage, respond to and deal with sexuality and, the dangers in assuming that the markers of sexuality in the West can easily be transferred to African societies. According to this text, homosexuality is accepted in some societies and severely punished or seen as unnatural in others. Additionally, the often metaphorical, indirect, and proverbial salience of African languages and oral traditions must be seriously engaged where analysis and discussion of sexuality in African contexts is raised.
perpetual learner rather than an eternal expert can be a transformative tool for many in the academy and beyond. As a core element for Indigenous knowledge systems, humility challenges us to think *and feel* outside our individual selves by engaging circle-centred epistemologies that focus on our interconnectedness with each other. The hope is that this will assist us in developing a critical reflexivity and sustaining deeper critical understandings of how these connections among one another reinscribe our position(s) in this world.

Ultimately, anti-colonial theory is central to my research project because it privileges Indigeneity as an empowering and crucially significant standpoint from which to understand the world. Further, this theoretical framework produces scholarship that addresses colonialism, imperialism and other inequitable social relations of power to allow for a more historicized, contextualized and nuanced understanding of how specifically Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and identities are constructed, and how they might be reinscribed as empowering decolonizing tools.

*African / Black Feminist Theories*

This project is also anchored in African and Black feminist theoretical frameworks, both of which complement and contribute to anti-colonial theory. These frameworks explicate and further nuance the complexity of African life and experience on the African continent and its diaspora through their commitment to dismantling forms of oppression such as patriarchy, white supremacy, classism, and heterosexism. These discourses emerged largely from the unique positions Black women hold, where, on the one hand we face the racism and white supremacy of white feminists, while, on the other we face the (often internalized) sexism and patriarchy of African/Black men, all within the larger contexts of capitalism and Eurocentric societies.
(Combahee River Collective, 1974; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Amadiume, 1997; Collins, 1990; Mama, 1997).

African and Black feminisms do have distinct histories in terms of their academic development, however it is important to point out that they also heavily overlap and dialectically inform each other. Examples of this overlap can be seen in the works of leading feminists such as Ifi Amadiume (whose work has primarily focused on continental Black women) and Carole Boyce-Davies (who has theorized African women’s writing on the African continent, the Caribbean and North and South America). Understanding the deep historical, cultural and spiritual connections between the African continent and her scattered children, these scholars have theorized the impact of slavery through centering African women’s experiences of, and forms of resistance against their enslavement and colonization.

On the ancestral shoulders of the long history of Black enfranchisement and Black abolitionism, the academic concept of Black feminism emerged largely from the historically activist-based and grassroots experiences of Black women in the United States. See Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God; Folklore, Memoirs and other writings; Gloria T. Hull et al, All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies; bell hooks, Ain’t I a Woman?: Black Women and feminism; Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider; Angela Davis, Women, Race and Class; Patricia Hill-Collins, Black Feminist Thought for in-depth discussion and theorizing of Black feminism, as an important site for critical analysis of Black female experience within oppressive social relations of power. This is not to deny the long-standing grassroots activism and resistance of Black women on the continent, the Caribbean, Europe and North and South America—which, occurred simultaneously and alongside their African-American sisters— rather, it is simply to say that the emergence of academic and textually based Black feminist discourses were initially conceived in primarily U.S. contexts.

Similarly, see Ifi Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands; Reinventing African: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture; Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism; Amina Mama, Beyond the Masks; Race, Gender and Subjectivity; Patricia McFadden, Gender in southern Africa: A Gendered Perspective for academic texts which explicate and theorize African feminism. To contribute to the dearth of written literature placing Black women as subjects at the centre, these texts emerged largely from the historical and contemporary experiences of continental African women. Also, in light of the significance of narrative as central to African Indigenous culture and ways of knowing, many other African feminist intellectuals have theorized and voiced African women’s experiences through narrative or storytelling. See works by Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangarembwa, Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapo, Yvonne Vera and Bessie Head (to name a few).

African-Canadian feminist Njoki Wane (2002, 2007) has also theorized Black women’s experiences, with a Canadian focus. Wane’s work draws on the lives and experiences of African/Black women in the Caribbean, Europe, and the African continent because African-Canadian women have histories and roots in all of these geographic areas.

Despite contentious debates over the distinct specificities of the terms ‘Black’ and ‘African,’ they do overlap, are highly interconnected, and therefore cannot be clearly demarcated as separate. Hence, I use these terms interchangeably as a political signifier in specific reference to the various and multiple Indigenous peoples of the African continent—to indicate both those who were stolen away through the horrific European transatlantic slave trade, and those who remained on the African continent, and were forced to undergo the atrocious traumas of colonialism and imperialism. In the spirit of unity and community, I also use these terms interchangeably as a counter-hegemonic and political identity to critically underscore the unique positionings and social locations of Indigenous Africans in Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, North and South America and Asia. This is not to mobilize a conflated conception of ‘Africans’ and ‘Blacks,’ where we are homogenized as one large monolith that exists absent of difference, rather, my aim is to discuss and theorize the complex nuances of Indigenous African life—wherever that may be—through usage of these terms as the larger politically unifying milieu under which Black/African people can be named and identified.
Nevertheless, not all African/Black women whose scholarly work engages gender at the intersection of other forms of oppression identify as “Black feminist”, and in fact, prefer variations of the term “Womanist” (Walker, 1983). Examples include Splawn’s “Cross-Atlantic Womanism” (1992), Dove’s “African Womanism” (1998), and Hudson-Weems’ “Africana Womanism.” 24 African/Black women scholars who have resisted identifying themselves as “Black feminists” cite a number of valid arguments for doing so such as gender not being the primary social relation in the struggle for African liberation (Walker, 1983; Dove, 1998; Hudson-Weems, 1998; Houston, 2002); a commitment to the empowerment, liberation and survival of African/Black women and men (Walker, 1983; Dove, 1998); a focus on centering an African framework rather than a gendercentric/Western one (Hudson-Weems, 1998); and Filomina Chioma Steady’s (1987) call for a more inclusive and humanist approach to feminism where women are viewed “primarily as human beings” and where the totality of human experience is emphasized. I acknowledge the issues and arguments of these Black women scholars, and the tensions between Black feminisms and Womanisms. However, in my research project, I do include them in my discussion of African/Black feminist theorists. This is not to deny the agency of Black women scholars who prefer identifiers other than “Black feminist”, rather, I do this in a collectivizing manner, to build on and engage the key issues, ideas and arguments raised in the works of these scholars that are relevant to my discussion(s) of gender in African diasporic, African Indigenous, and more specifically, Yoruba diasporic contexts. Respectfully understanding the divergences, distinctions and tensions between Black/African feminisms and Womanisms, as a Black woman scholar, I nevertheless prefer to identify under the term Black feminist. I do this because it is my belief that the fundamental contributions

24 For a more in-depth discussion of the distinctions and tensions between Black/African feminism and Womanism, see Cynthia B. Dillard and Chinwe Okpalaoka, “The Sacred and Spiritual Nature of Endarkened Transnational Feminist Praxis in Qualitative Research.”
which African/Black women have and continue to make to feminist theory and practice be recognized as such. My preference for the term “Black feminist” is also a political one in the sense that it is an insistence to our white counterparts that we as Black/African women have a right to come to the table, to stand and be counted and heard. In other words, it is a demand to be acknowledged as equals and have it be recognized that the specificity of the diversity of our experiences as Black women be given due respect and equal serious engagement as the feminist issues deemed pertinent to our white peers, alongside the right to determine how the resolutions and various forms of resistance against the oppression we speak against and theorize are to be structured and carried out. Additionally, identifying as a Black feminist allows one to have conversations with others who identify as feminist both within and across the lines of race, gender, class, ability, geography, nationality, sexuality etc. (Dillard, 2010: personal communication). It is rather difficult to engage in critical dialogue with women (and/or men) across and within these boundaries when the only ones identifying as womanist are Black/African women. In this sense, identifying as Black feminist is also strategic (Dillard, 2010: personal communication).

Given this, as Black feminist contributions to transnational feminist theory continue to gain a foothold in academic circles, the emphasis on critically examining, as well as crossing national, economic, political and cultural borders has grown and consequently induced a shift towards focusing on how the local affects the global and vice versa. This shift has, in turn, increasingly lent itself to shining a spotlight on the impact of inequitable social relations in African women’s lives everywhere. Consequently, my research project focuses on the crucial role that African/Black feminist discourses play in tracing how our lives and experiences figure in the continually globally oppressive forces of colonialism and imperialism.
Black/African feminisms are indispensable to my research project because they provide frames of analysis that allow me to critically interrogate and expose the entanglements of masculinist, patriarchal and white supremacist knowledge systems that deny and oppress the voices, contributions and experiences of African women. These feminisms are powerful because they place Black women at the centre of analysis (hooks, 1981; Amadiume, 1987; Collins, 1990) while simultaneously employing the concept of intersectionality; where categories of identity, oppression and analysis such as race, gender, class, sexuality and ability are conceptualized as inextricably interdependent, mutually sustaining and of equal importance (Combahee River Collective, 1974; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984; Collins, 1990). The term ‘Intersectionality’ enables me to think through the complex experiences of Yoruba migrants without hierarchically prioritizing either gender or race specific oppressions (Collins, 1990; Boyce-Davies, 1994; Amadiume, 1997), while eclipsing others. In contradistinction to white feminist or Black male-centred articulations of oppression which inevitably wind up positioning African women’s experiences and knowledges at the lower ends of such hierarchies, thereby obscuring Black female presence and voice, African/Black feminisms, and their concept of intersectionality project become crucially imperative for this research project because they offer frameworks through which to situate the diverse realities, experiences and knowledges of Black/African women as central, both historically and contemporarily.

The politically progressive inclination of scholarly writing against the traditionally masculinist grain of anti-colonial theory, is due, in large part, to Black (and other world majority) feminist critiques of this androcentric discourse and its establishment of male experience as the norm. Black feminist critiques have heightened such dominance by calling into question the establishment of white female experience as the norm, and insisting that differences between and
amongst women be taken into serious consideration as well. Such keen focus on the multiple social relations of power and oppression – in the stead of singular analyses – make African/Black feminisms highly complementary to anti-colonial theory, particularly given the African-centred focus of my research here. A melding of African feminist theory and anti-colonial scholarship is also of necessity for my work given that this research considers Indigenous knowledges as crucial entry points and sites of resistance and empowerment against Euro-colonial oppression. African/Black feminist theory complements, overlaps and builds on anti-colonial frameworks because it allows for more nuanced attention to be paid to the entanglements of gender and power, and how they figure(d) in colonizing and imperialist systems of oppression. However, while there is a proliferation of African and Black feminist literature that explores the question, meaning and significance of gender as a primary social category, for this research project, my entry point is African/Black feminist scholarship that draws on and engages the category of gender from Indigenous perspectives. African/Black feminisms are a powerful and necessary conceptual tool for my research here because they critically interrogate spaces of inequity within Indigenous knowledge systems, while simultaneously recognizing that these spaces of disempowerment are challenged and critically interrogated in the promise of transformation and hope for more equitable change. African feminist frameworks that embrace Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing appreciate that these spaces of disempowerment do not then become ‘backwards’ or ‘primitive’ all-encompassing representations of the whole network of Indigenous knowledge systems – as they are often framed in colonialist discourses. Ultimately, Black feminisms which utilize, and are anchored in Indigenous-centred philosophies understand that Indigenous ways of knowing are not singular, monolithic epistemologies, and that the impact of colonialism and imperialism on these knowledges must be taken into account and
given critical attention, especially given the reality that these hegemonic systems continue to oppressively impact our choices, voices and overall lives. This is not to deny our own agency and forms of resistance, but rather, to highlight the insidious nature of the legacy of colonialism, how it often obscures our access to knowledges –particularly Indigenous ones– and the assorted fields of empowerment that such knowledges offer.

**Convergences and Divergences between Anti-colonial and Black Feminist Theories**

There are a number of convergences and divergences between these anti-colonial and Black feminist theoretical frameworks that require mentioning. The first convergence is that both anti-colonial and Black/African feminist frameworks theorize from the ground up, and have their roots in social movements that challenge the status quo and seek redress. For example, anti-colonial theory has roots in a multitude of anti-colonial wars of independence; one of the most popular being the Algerian War of Independence (in the 50s and early 60s) during which pre-eminent psychologist and theorist Franz Fanon practiced and wrote some of the foremost anti-colonial theory. Meanwhile, Black/African feminist theory has its roots in the 20th century anti-slavery and women’s suffragette movements, as well as the American civil rights, Black power and women’s movements of the 1960s. That is, both anti-colonialism and Black feminisms are politically-based theories that emphasize social change and advocate the merging of both theory and action (hooks, 1981; Amadiume, 1997; Collins, 1990, 1998, Fanon, 1963, 1967; Smith, 1999; Battiste, 2000, Dei, 2000). Further, both theoretical frameworks also place great emphasis on centering the experiences of the oppressed/marginalized as a key aspect of their intellectual agency, and the basis from which knowledge is constructed and theorized. Another important point of convergence between anti-colonial and Black/African feminist theoretical frameworks is their focus on a legacy of struggle against oppression, as well as resistance to oppression and
how this informs one’s individual and collective sense of self and identity in the struggle for self-
determination (Fanon, 1967; Dei, 2000, 2001; hooks, 1981; Davis, 1981; Collins, 1990). Both
theoretical frameworks place great emphasis on the injustice of inequitable social relations of
power, such as race, class, gender, language, sexuality etc. while theorizing and advocating for
more equitable relations in their stead.

However, Black feminist and anti-colonial frameworks also diverge in certain areas. For
example, where, in anti-colonial theory concepts such as ‘colonialism’, ‘imperialism’, and
‘decolonization’ are most salient and highly engaged by anti-colonial scholars, African/Black
feminist theories tend to concentrate on concepts such as, ‘patriarchy’, ‘gender’, and
‘intersectionality.’

Black feminist and anti-colonial theoretical frameworks also have differing points of
departure. Where anti-colonial theory centres Indigenous knowledges or the concept of
Indigeniety as the salient point of departure (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001), Black/African
feminist theories place Black women at the centre of analysis (hooks, 1981, Amadiume, 1997,
Collins, 1990). The anti-colonial focus on Indigeneity only serves to strengthen much of
Black/African feminist theories because spirituality is a central component of Indigeneity, and
thereby provides a space for spirituality to be validated and critically engaged. Inversely, the
Black/African feminist imperative of placing Black women at the centre of analysis also
strengthens anti-colonial theory by interrogating the gendered spaces of inequity or
disempowerment that can exist in Indigenous knowledge systems. The divergent foci between
these two theoretical frameworks is not mutually exclusive, and one can find scholars who work
with concepts and arguments from both theoretical perspectives. George Dei (2000, 2006), Ama

**Conceptualizing Gender in Indigenous Yoruba Contexts**

In this research, I draw on African/Black feminist literature that prioritizes and engages gender from Indigenous perspectives. Since imperialism and conquest (and their legacies) are the realities that many Indigenous peoples live with, much Indigenous feminist scholarship has focused on the devastating impact of colonialism; namely how it has displaced and warped Indigenous constructions of gender. Such arguments then conveniently explain patriarchal dominance and violence against women in Indigenous communities. Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997), Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003) and Oyeronke Olajubu (2003) are all African/Black feminist scholars whose work addresses the meaning and significance of gender in Indigenous Yoruba contexts. Oyewumi’s work addresses the naturalization of Western knowledge production processes in African studies. Specifically, she focuses on the epistemological underpinnings of Western notions of sex and gender, where gender-specific English is written into gender-free Yoruba, as foundational evidence that gender, and particularly the category, “women” does not operate in Yorubaland in the same way it does in Western discourses (x, xi, 1997). In Oyewumi’s estimation, seniority, not gender, is the primary power relation in Yorubaland. Oyewumi’s groundbreaking exposition of concealed Western social categories – particularly the category of “woman” – as universal, is a staunch reminder of the need to remain cognizant of how the naturalization of culturally specific (Western) categories prevail even in analyzing Indigenous cultures. In this sense, Oyewumi’s work acts as a decolonizing model for my
research around gender, as well as other social categories. Oyewumi’s deconstructive resistance against Western universalisms reinstalls the need to use Yoruba Indigenous knowledges as central sites from which to theorize and produce knowledge about Yoruba peoples.

However, Yoruba feminist Bibi Bakare-Yusuf contests Oyewumi’s position that gender is not one of the primary organizing principles in Indigenous Yoruba societies. Bakare-Yusuf argues that Oyewumi reduces Yoruba cultural life and experience to discourse, semiotics and representation, without taking into account the lived effect of language on embodied subjects as sexuated bodies. For Bakare-Yusuf, Oyewumi fails to address “how agents live through and are positioned within the field of power, language, discourse and social practice” (120). Bakare-Yusuf’s attention to power, embodiment and social experience is key for my work, in that, not only are they of prime relevance when discussions around sex, gender and anatomy are raised, they are also important analytical tools necessary for gaining a deeper understanding of what Yoruba Indigenous identities and lived experiences in diasporic contexts entail. Because these features are missing from Oyewumi’s study, she is not able to address how the gendered and age-identified body *interlock* with the everyday experiences of the social relations of power.

Bakari-Yusuf argues that Oyewumi’s failure to seriously consider the social relations of power also means that she will not be able to address the complex nuances of how power figures with respect to seniority and gender. Oyewumi and Bakare-Yusuf’s positions are not mutually exclusive however, and their approaches remind us of the principal importance of intersectionality as a fundamental tool of critical inquiry, to tease out and better understand how power and privilege shape our experiences and identities. The concept of intersectionality is critical for this research because age and seniority are not categories that exist devoid of their entanglements with other social categories, such as gender and class for example. Of particular
significance to my work is Bakari-Yusuf’s position that these social relations are continually shaped by differences in power, and the often violent consequences of such inequities:

…[Oyewumi] cannot discuss the fact that the ideology of seniority is very often used as a way of masking other forms of power relationship. It is in this sense that her theorisation of seniority may be seen as politically dangerous. The vocabulary of seniority often becomes the very form in which sexual abuse and familial (especially for the aya/wife in a lineage) and symbolic violence are couched…where victims are reluctant to challenge the abuser in the name of ‘disrespecting their senior’ (132).

Bakare-Yusuf notes that the Indigenous Yoruba category of seniority can become a concealatory site of patriarchal oppression and disempowerment for the ‘sexuated’ (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003) or ‘ana-female’ (Oyewumi, 1997) body otherwise known as ‘woman.’ According to Oyewumi, there is no Yoruba category of woman that is equivalent to the Western sense of the word/social identity. However, as Bakare-Yusuf points out, what does exist are notions of seniority that, in practice, can leave women vulnerable and prone to abuse and violence under the guise of seniority. In other words, while abuse and oppression are not epistemically visible in Yoruba Indigenous philosophy, the marginalization of women is practiced. Here, Oyewumi’s argument is both right and wrong: right in that gender does not operate in Yorubaland in the same way it does in Western society and discourse; wrong in her denial of gender as a primary social relation in Yoruba society. In the end, Bakare-Yusuf’s discussion echoes Dei’s (2000) sentiment that ‘sites of disempowerment’ in Indigenous knowledge systems cannot be left unexamined and must be critiqued, albeit with keen cognizance of the larger colonial context.

Perhaps the most useful and flexible discussion of gender in Yoruba contexts is that of Yoruba feminist scholar Oyeronke Olajubu (2003), who understands gender as a dynamic process that is mutably constructed and therefore interdependent on other social systems (7). She states:
...gender as construed by the Yoruba is essentially culture bound and should be
differentiated from notions of gender in some other cultures. It is a gender classification
that is not equivalent to or a consequence of anatomy at all times. Yoruba gender
construction is fluid and is modulated by other factors such as seniority (age) and
personal achievements (wealth and knowledge acquisition). Its boundaries are constantly
shifting, and reconfigurations attend its expressions constantly (2003:8).

Olajubu’s emphasis on the flexibility of Yoruba gender construction is the particularly relevant
for my research here because such flexibility allows for discussions about gender to be taken out
of narrow binarized conceptions that either deny, or decontextually overemphasize gender as a
primary social category in Yoruba culture and society. In this sense, Olajubu’s articulation of
gender as mutable, and process-oriented provides an effective conceptual model for how to
utilize and approach gender in my research. However, I note that Olajubu’s argument of Yoruba
gender construction as culture-bound is somewhat contradictory to her position that it is flexible,
since culture itself is not static, but flexible. What Olajubu neglects to mention is how, through
the violence of colonialism and imperialism, Eurocentric notions of gender have also influenced
how the Yoruba construe gender. So the question becomes, to which culture(s) are Yoruba
gender constructions bound, when the fact of dominating processes such as colonialism and
imperialism are taken into account? Further, while Olajubu recognizes that Yoruba gender
construction is modulated by other social factors such as age, wealth, etc., nowhere in her
statement does she address colonialism or imperialism. In neglecting to do so, she fails to
account for the fact that the fundamental impetus behind colonialism and imperialism was to
conquer, destroy and annihilate. In this context Indigenous Yoruba gender constructions must
have been somehow impacted and modulated; that is, in some way, they were shifted and
displaced according to patriarchal Eurocentric constructions of gender. Regrettably, Olajubu
does not engage what I would think is a crucially fundamental aspect of the varied flexible
manifestations (be they Eurocentric, hegemonic, Indigenous, or the complicated entanglements
of these) of Yoruba gender construction processes. Unlike Olajubu, I conceptualize the various social relations that modulate Yoruba gender construction to be one that includes, and is therefore cognizant of oppressive systems such as colonialism and imperialism; systems which, in all likelihood, have almost certainly warped Indigenous Yoruba constructions of gender.

Ultimately, this complicated debate about gender in Yoruba contexts is of significance because it underscores the fact that such a discussion is not solely about gender, but rather, is also bound up with spirituality and issues of imperialism, colonialism, embodiment, power, culture and the uncritical acceptance of Western discourse as normative. While Oyewumi convincingly cautions against the dangers of Western universalisms, Bakari-Yusuf reminds us that continued focus on differences of privilege and power imbalance are imperative in understanding the embodied and material realities of Yoruba women, and society on a whole. Meanwhile, Olajubu’s argument that Yoruba gender constructions are flexible, fluid and process-oriented, serves as a significant reminder that Indigenous knowledges are complex and dynamic and cannot be reduced to narrow binaries. The debate on gender and how it figures in Yoruba society has not been resolved; and it is not my intention to settle these tensions in this research project. Rather, this dissertation builds on and reflects the works of these scholars by expanding on the convergent and divergent discussions around gender as a significant social category in Yoruba society. This project simultaneously gives serious attention to the spiritual, material and embodied realities of how gender intersects with other social categories, such as race, class, seniority and age, all within the larger contexts of colonialism and imperialism.

**Conceptualizing Spirituality**

Spirituality has been variously defined and discussed by both anti-colonial and African/Black feminist scholars (Mbiti, 1975; Morrison, 1984; Stuckey, 1987; Richards, 1990;
While some scholars deem spirituality to be interchangeably synonymous with (dominant) religion, this is not the case for the many African/Black feminist scholars (Hurston, 1939; Morrison, 1984; Boyce-Davies, 1994; Amadu, 1987, 1997, 2000; Oyewumi, 1997; Richards, 1990; James, 1993; Hull, 2001; Olajubu, 2003, Dillard, 2006) who embrace Indigenous African notions of spirituality. Spirituality is an integral philosophy of African/Black feminist theorizing. Black feminism understands religion as involving adherence to a set of formal, humanly-constructed and, overwhelmingly masculinist regulations and beliefs that both unify and separate peoples under religiously demarcated identities such as ‘Christian,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘Jewish,’ ‘Buddhist,’ etc.

However, Black feminist and Indigenous conceptions of spirituality are anchored in heightened spiritual consciousness, where it is understood that one’s core or highest identity is interconnected with all beings and forms of existence. This is characterized by deferential connection with and reliance on a higher force that is larger than one’s human self and community. From an Indigenous worldsense, spirituality is also understood as the fundamental metaphysics of life –of which humanity is but one aspect– where the inextricable entanglements of spirit and matter manifest in countless energy fields, while simultaneously understanding that spirit informs matter. African, and other types of Indigenous spiritualities recognize the existence and contributions of the nonmaterial, invisible world, where numerous participants –humans, spirits, plants and animals– are engaged in continuous conversation (Akyeampong and Obeng, 2005:24 -in African Gender Studies) about life and being. Dona Richards notes that African Indigenous spiritualities make no distinction between the sacred and the secular because “[spirit] gives life, form, and meaning to physical realities. [In African contexts, spirituality] is the breath of life...[and] the apprehension of cosmic interrelationship (Richards, 1990:36).
For Indigenous peoples, spirituality is both structured and shaped by an Indigenous worldsense (worldview) that is circular. Sterling Stuckey’s research cites the circle as “the principal metaphor for life,” and, in this sense, an indispensable symbol in African Indigenous contexts, both literally and figuratively. This can be recognized in African conceptions of community, where human beings, ancestors and the unborn are all approached as equal members. These three states of being are mutably interrelated and in constant flux; where the unborn are born, living in flesh, who, through death, become ancestors, and in that realm, are at some time, reborn as living human beings again. Here, the circle functions as a unifying tool where the living self is intertwined with both ancestral and pre-human entities; what I otherwise understand to be a type of ‘circle-centred spirituality.’ For the Yoruba, the African person is conceived of as a layering of multiple, synthesized selves which cross over, move in, out and between the spiritual and material realms. For the purposes of my research here, Accordingly, I conceive of the ‘self’ as a mutable form of being which extends throughout the cosmos, as opposed to being secularly restricted to the material world of human beings. This is evident in the data chapters: five and six, as well as my concluding chapter (chapter seven), where I argue that the Indigenous Yoruba self is covert, hidden and closeted, yet present and entangled in a complicated reality of complicity to, as well as protest against colonial and Christian discourses.

However, it is also important to note that the type of spirituality I conceptualize here is not one that engages romantic or depoliticized constructions that are divorced from discussions of power and inequity. Deconstructing Euro-dominant climates such as ours call for critical attention to be paid to how oppression affects spirit, and, in particular, African Indigenous spiritualities, which are almost always confined to the lower rungs of the ladder of colonial stratification. What I advocate here is something I call, “critical spirituality,” which is similar to
Dei’s (2006) discussion of spirituality. However, my focus remains on the hierarchical ordering of spiritual and/or religious knowledges, and the need for this to be engaged. On first glance, this term might seem to be somewhat paradoxical in that spirit informs all existence. However, the reality is that the physical/tangible matters of this world are deeply imbued with (historical and contemporary) inequitable social relations that must be addressed, and I argue that the effects on spirituality are central to understanding how to reclaim Yoruba agency. In other words, there is not enough recognition of how our relationships with one another are oppressively stratified along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality etc., (Dei, 2006) and one of the least discussed, yet most salient dimensions of our existence, spirit. While there exists a proliferation of scholarship that has written against Euro-dominant hegemony, this has overwhelmingly occurred in absence of discussions which critically engage spirituality and how peoples’ beings, both physical and metaphysical are individually and collectively impacted by domination and inequity. It is in this spirit that I engage, explore and ask, how do we talk about spirituality in a holistic, diverse, yet critical manner that allows us to think about power, and the multiple forms (oppressive, healing, decolonizing) it can take? Hence, this research engages a deeper exploration of what happens to the self/selves when the Yoruba cosmos encounters colonialism: how has balance, community and continuity been affected and how, if at all, has colonialism re-drawn the Yoruba cosmological map?
Chapter Four:  
Research Methodology

In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that Western research paradigms are anchored in, and therefore complicit with European imperial/colonial projects that have situated Indigenous peoples as ‘uncivilized’, ‘subhuman’ and ultimately inferior (1999:1). Her argument illustrates the danger of relying solely on research that is anchored in this oppressive history, and underscores the fact that such methodologies cannot adequately, nor respectfully research Indigenous communities and their knowledges. Since methodology shapes analysis and frames the questions a researcher asks, and since methodology also determines the set of instruments and methods employed in one’s research (Smith, 1999) it is very important that one’s research methodology is clear, concise and transparent. This is particularly crucial where Indigenous peoples and our knowledges are concerned, given the oppressive contexts of imperialism and colonialism.

Importantly, Smith also builds on Sandra Harding’s (1987) distinction between methodology and method: where, she says, “A research methodology is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed...A research method is a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence” (1999: 143).

This research project is anchored in anti-colonial and African/Black feminist research methodologies because they allow me to effectively engage my learning objectives and the research questions outlined earlier in Chapter One. In alignment with the anti-colonial methodology, my research privileges and brings to the centre Indigenous ways of knowing, as effective decolonizing methodologies that honour the communities these knowledges come from. This project is therefore anchored in both Dei (2001) and Smith’s (1999) anti-colonial
methodology of privileging Indigenous worldviews or cosmologies. As Smith discusses, employing decolonizing or anti-colonial frameworks often entail privileging process focused methodologies over those that emphasize outcome:

In all [Indigenous] community approaches process – that is, methodology and method – is highly important. In many projects the process is far more important than the outcome. Processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate. They are expected to lead one small step further towards self-determination (1999:127).

What Smith calls process and outcome, I see both figuratively and metaphorically as journey and destination. Life is an enclave of journeys that we process, and processes that we journey; where we continuously learn and relearn through experience. Hence, in addition to centering Yoruba Indigenous knowledges, I will also be drawing on other Western qualitative research methods as important parts of this process/journey. An example of this is qualitative triangulation, where Linda Tuhiwai Smith elaborates:

Indigenous methodologies are often a mix of existing methodological approaches and indigenous practices. The mix reflects the training of indigenous researchers which continues to be within the academy, and the parameters and commonsense understandings of research which govern how indigenous communities and researchers define their activities (1999:143).

As discussed in Chapter One, the main objective of this research/journey, is to theorize and give testimony to how Yoruba indigenous identities are lived and constructed in diasporic colonial contexts, thereby contributing new critical social theory about how Indigenous knowledges figure in the contemporary lives of diasporic Yoruba peoples. Here, qualitative methodologies such as the decolonizing methodologies developed by Linda Smith (1999) combined with qualitative anti-colonial and feminist analysis, allow for more in-depth, contextualized and intimate understandings of Indigenous identities to be teased out and explored. Specifically, these methodologies allow me to engage my first three learning objectives of this project where I contribute to producing critical social theory about Yoruba Indigenous knowledges, as well as
discuss and theorize Yoruba experiences and identities in diasporic and Euro-dominant contexts. In its focus on colonialism and imperialism as historical and contemporary dominating forces, the anti-colonial framework also validates the experiences and agency of colonized and marginalized peoples. Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001) identify the importance of using Indigenous knowledges as an entry point from which to theorize colonial and colonized relations (300). Bringing Indigenous ways of knowing to the centre of my research acts as an effective decolonizing methodology, allowing me to achieve my third research objective of opening up a space that engages more critical decolonizing and affirming constructions of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and identities. This methodology is used to honour and validate the experiences and voices of the communities from which these knowledges came from as legitimate and valuable sources of knowledge production.

Anti-colonial methodologies are ideal for my research project also because they are flexible and sensitive to the social contexts in which data is produced; they allow for the subjects’ voices to be centred and premised as priority. In both anti-colonial and Black feminist methods of inquiry, the researcher’s role is explicit, thereby problematizing and bringing to the fore the power differences and tensions that exist between the so-called ‘unbiased’ researcher and his/her ‘objects’ of study (Smith, 28). In contradistinction to academic research paradigms that objectify research participants as objects, anti-colonial and Black feminist theoretical frameworks situate participants as the subjects of research who both have, and utilize their agency (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001).

The African/Black feminist methodologies in which my research is anchored complement anti-colonial methodology and theory. Of prime relevance to my work is the fundamental Black feminist principle of utilizing one’s concrete experiences as a valid and
necessary site/standpoint from which knowledge can be produced (hooks, 1981; Collins, 1990; Mama, 1997; Amadiume, 1997). This principle is crucial to my research because of my extensive focus on examining the under-theorized experience of Yoruba Indigeneity in the diaspora. The Black feminist principle of centering experience allows me to explore the third learning objective and first research question of this project; where the goal is to engage in in-depth learning and theorizing of Yoruba lived experience in diasporic contexts and Euro-dominant culture; and to explore how Yoruba Indigenous knowledges inform the diasporic lived experiences of Yoruba people in Canada.

The Black feminist concept of intersectionality is vital to my work because I employ it as a method of analysis that allows me to deconstruct the entanglements of white supremacist, patriarchal, masculinist and imperialist knowledge systems which oppress and deny the voices, perspectives and contributions of Black/African men and women, whether they identify as Indigenous or not. ‘Intersectionality’ is employed as a method in my work because it provides the space to critically interrogate and unpack the complex entanglements of oppression and its impact on Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and identities, thereby allowing me to engage my second research question of exploring the challenges of learning and utilizing Indigenous knowledges in oppressive contexts that pathologize them.

Ultimately, qualitative triangulation methods allows me to draw on multiple theoretical approaches, methods and sources (Waldron, 2005) so that I can effectively examine Yoruba culture and Indigenous identities in Canada. As such, Catherine Reissman’s (1993) research on narrative analysis as a qualitative method of inquiry has been useful in formulating a layer of the qualitative triangulation method I employ in this study. Reissman writes:

Narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself…The methodological approach examines the informant’s story and how it is put together, the
linguistic and cultural resources it draws on, and how it persuades a listener of authenticity. Analysis in narrative studies opens up forms of telling about experience, not simply the content to which language refers. We ask, why was the story told that way? (1993:2).

Another key element in this method entailed identifying what participants point out as significant and insignificant events—high points, low points, epiphanies, people and places in their lives (Bruner as cited in Reissman: 27)—and how this is linked to their understanding of self. In this sense then, my intersectionality narrative method also involves focusing on the form of telling and sharing experience; that is, paying attention to how participants often revealed information about their lives in the form of narrative accounts, or by storytelling.

It is significant to note that storytelling is also very much in keeping with Indigenous ways of knowing, communicating and retaining culture. Hence, the type of intersectionality narrative analysis that I utilize draws on both Indigenous (Smith, 1999) and Western sociological approaches to face-to-face interviews. Critical sociological narrative analysis is very much anchored in frameworks that examine the connections between historical and contemporary social relations of power, privilege and knowledge differences. Hence, my method fuses narrative analysis with anti-colonial and Indigenous African/Black feminist frameworks.

However, in contradistinction to Reissman’s position that “narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation of the story itself,” I engage with my research subjects as subjects, not the means to a story, because anti-colonial and Indigenous feminist frameworks strongly resist the continued objectification of colonized peoples. Anti-colonial and Indigenous feminist frameworks allow me to situate and ‘see’ research participants as subjects and whole beings that exist both within and beyond the narratives they share with me; as both individuals and members of a larger collective community. I also take the participants’ telling of the story as the site of
analysis and I would add to Reissman’s discussion the question, ‘how are the telling of stories and what is said, shaped by (unequal) relations of power?’

Finally, I participate in this project not only as researcher and knowledge producer, but also as a participant. This approach is in keeping with African/Black feminist methodologies where thought and action are understood to be inseparable when theorizing (Collins, 1990). From this perspective, the strength of one’s research hinges on *not* alienating oneself from her/his communities, family and self, but rather, embracing a full immersion in one’s daily activities and relationships (Collins, 1990) in order to produce what is true to the communities from which the knowledge originates.

Participating in this project as a participant and a researcher allowed me to explore my third, fourth and fifth learning objectives of gaining a deeper understanding of Yoruba lived experience; creating more affirming and empowering understandings of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and identities; and contributing to the still-developing literature on Yoruba (African) diasporic experience, especially in Canada. As previously mentioned in Chapter two, I found that the literature about Yoruba diasporic experience was very limited, however, my research is a unique contribution to this area in that my study is grounded in anti-colonial and anti-oppressive frameworks, thereby allowing for more progressive and critical understandings of Yoruba diasporic experience. Additionally, my learning objectives are also explored in Chapters five and six, my data chapters, as well as Chapter seven, the concluding chapter.

Embracing the Black/African feminist methodology of immersing oneself fully in my community has also allowed me to explore my third research question which asks how Yoruba (African) Indigenous knowledges can be utilized to develop empowering pedagogies of African identity and resistance, particularly in the oppressive contexts of dominant Euro-Canadian
culture. To operationalize this methodology, I used the method of keeping a journal while conducting interviews in an attempt to make explore my own Indigenous identity and experience as a Yoruba woman. In this journal, I reflected on my multiple locations as Yoruba, woman, Nigerian, Western/Canadian, colonized and decolonizing to better understand how this figures into my shared Yoruba identity with the informants. In doing so, I paid attention to differences in age, gender, experience (i.e. many participants grew up in Yorubaland and I did not) and how that further refined my exploration of Yoruba Indigenous identities. For example, in one of my entries, I reflect on the stark difference between me and my participants where church attendance is concerned. All participants discussed attending church on a weekly basis as an important routinized element of community building. Whereas my experience and notion of the Yoruba community did not revolve around Christianity and/or church attendance, and is therefore in stark contrast to my participants because I did not grow up in, or attend church on a regular basis.

My journal entries and experiences were also included as data in this research for purposes of reflection. This entailed reflecting on my own engagement with the research participants to chronicle the evolution of the data analysis process, as well as to track my feelings around simultaneously shared, yet differing understandings of Indigenous Yoruba identities.

While reading my reflective journal entries, I realized that I was positioned as both insider and outsider (Lorde, 1984; Carty in Gottfried, 1996; Collins, 1990) in the eyes of my participants. I was an insider in that I am Yoruba, however, in the eyes of the parent participants, my having been raised in Canada since the age of three made me ‘more Canadian’ than Yoruba or Nigerian, and therefore an outsider despite having been born in Nigeria. I was an outsider because of my position as the ‘researcher’, however I was an insider in the sense that I shared with the participants the Yoruba culture, identity and language. It was interesting to see how my
shifting positionality – that is, the ways my position changed in different interviews played itself out in my journal entries; it was here that the inevitable contradictions of identity and entangled tensions between Indigenous and dominant knowledges became clear. Making use of the unique standpoint of insider/outsider is another Black feminist method, and it is important for my research project because it exposes the contradictions and tensions of identity, marginality, oppression and resistance. Another example of my insider/outsider status is the differing conceptions of community between my participants and I. As I mentioned earlier, all participants’ notions of community were connected to church attendance, whereas mine was not and more congruent with the shared Indigenous culture and language.

In the end, keeping a journal allowed me to remain true to the important decolonizing and Indigenous philosophies of accountability and community. The notes in my journal showed me how my particular social location was shaping my reading of the data and reminded me that “I” cannot stand outside that.

**Data Collection**

Face-to-face interviews were my primary source of data and were vital to this research. I interviewed a diverse group of Yoruba parents and at least one of their children. While 16 participants agreed to participate in this research, in the end there were five different families with a total of 14 participants that were individually interviewed. Regrettably, two participants, a single mother and her son, withdrew from the project due to personal circumstances that made them unavailable.

A small sample size of 14 was ideal for gathering in-depth, richly textured and more nuanced experiential information through face-to-face interviews. I felt that a small number of participants is more conducive for a study that engages spirituality because it is a subject that is
more likely to be richer and flourish in a personal/intimate one-on-one setting such as an interview, where privacy and confidentiality are both respected and protected.

Each interview ranged from 45-120 minutes and were carried out over a four month period, from December 2006 to March 2007. All interviews were digitally recorded and took place in person. Arrangements were made with each participant to meet for the interview in one session and, if necessary, two sessions, where further comments, clarification, or a follow-up interview could be scheduled. However, second sessions were not necessary because all the digitally recorded data was clear and concise. With the exception of one interview, which took place in my personal residence, all remaining participants graciously opened their homes to me, and the interviews were carried out in their homes. A total of 21 hours of interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Each interview began with questions that I had previously collected in the biographical profile (see Appendix C) which, upon initial communication, I had asked each participant to fill out if interested in participating in my study. I collected all participants’ biographical profiles directly prior to the commencement of the interview. The questions for the interview were loosely structured and developed with the objective of exploring how Yoruba parents learn, produce and pass on knowledge about their Indigenous identities to their children, and, inversely, how the children understood and constructed these knowledges given the generational and cultural differences of having been born and/or raised in Canada (see Appendix A for a summary of the topics and questions that were used in this project).

As a young Yoruba woman who has been volunteering in the Yoruba community for two years (i.e. at various Yoruba community associations) I had access to potential participants through these social and volunteer networks. However, these particular affiliations put me in
contact with only one family of six, of which four members volunteered to participate. Two of
the other participants in this research study were community members with whom I was familiar
(another sole support mother and her son). I did not know the remaining participants previously,
but was able to find them through recommendations and referrals from initial participants. I
found referrals of initial participants to be particularly useful for recruiting, reaching and
researching the ‘harder to reach’ or less visible members of the Yoruba community. This
approach also encouraged participants who had already volunteered to take part in the study the
opportunity to recommend their peers and other eligible Yoruba community members that
resided outside my social and voluntary networks. Potential participants who were interested
were given my contact information. I am very grateful to the participants who assisted me in this
process because it was their willingness to contribute their knowledge that put me in contact with
the remaining ten participants for my research study, eight of which were interviewed.

During the initial stages of recruitment, I explained the study to all potential participants,
and if they agreed and/or expressed interest to be interviewed, I gave them a letter of invitation,
which detailed the objectives of the study for their review and perusal (see Appendix B). I did
not request immediate response, but rather gave all prospective interviewees time to get back in
touch with me, by leaving a phone number and email address so that they could contact me if or
when they were interested in pursuing the study further. In all, eight of the 16 initial participants
contacted me and agreed to participate in the study. I followed up with a phone call or emails to
the remaining potential participants which totaled 20. This entailed speaking to both the parents
and their children (on separate occasions to ensure that one did not pressure the other to
participate) who, with the exception of one participant, still lived with their parents. If both the
parent and the child(ren) did not agree to participate, then neither was interviewed.
Of the 20 potential participants contacted with follow up communication, 10 agreed to participate. These participants were then forwarded, in mail, the letter of informed consent (see Appendix D) in duplicate, with a self-addressed envelope that I provided. The second copy of the letter of informed consent was for participants to keep for their own records. They were given the option of mailing the signed consent letter back to me, or keeping it to give to me on the day of the scheduled interview. All participants chose the latter, and gave both the consent letter and biographical profile to me on the same day they were interviewed.

**Method: Individual Interviews**

I decided that individual interviews were the most effective way to collect data, primarily because they would be oral and conversationally-based, thereby leaving room for stories, proverbs, songs, and other forms of narrative experience to be shared if participants wished to do so. Orally based interviews also allowed me to privilege participants’ voices, thereby encouraging their agency and sense of power in terms of determining how they would answer the loosely-structured questions, if at all. Keeping participants’ voices and agency central also allowed me to “centre them [participants] as sources of knowledge rather than as sources of mere data” (Rosenberg in Dei et al, 2000: xvi). In this sense, participants were approached and engaged as agents of knowledge (Collins, 1990) where I, the researcher, and they, the participants, were all *subjects* who were constructing the knowledge together.

Keeping oral interviews as my central method of collecting data allowed me to remain aligned with, and grounded in the larger epistemological, philosophical and Indigenous frameworks of this research project because orality was the primary method of communication and data collection. As discussed earlier in Chapter Two, orality is the means through which Yoruba individuals and communities maintain connections with one another. Individual
interviews were also used because they allowed for spontaneity and/or flexibility in terms of how and when to ask certain questions, as well as to modify them according to the tone and level of comfort between myself and the participant. All interviews were carried out using semi-structured and open-ended questions that were guided by a range of topics and issues that I wished to cover; such as spirituality, immigration, oppression, gender and generational knowledge/seniority (see Appendix A for a summary of the questions I asked the participants in this study).

Another significant reason that interviews were used is because of the promise of dialogue. Because “dialogue has roots in an African based oral tradition” (Collins, 1990: 212) and because, as bell hooks (1989) reminds us, dialogue is a humanizing speech between two subjects that challenges and resists domination (131), I felt that utilizing interviews as my primary method would allow for the Indigenous African tradition of oral culture to be continued, while remaining anchored in its consequent promise of resistance.

Finally, using interviews fulfilled the fourth aim and objective of my research. That is, these interviews opened up a space towards engaging in *critical*, and more affirming dialogue about Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and identities, in contrast to the ways that Yoruba peoples have historically been rendered invisible and/or bound up within racist colonial constructions. Patricia Hill-Collins elaborates on the importance of dialogue as a type of connectedness that is vital to affirming one’s knowledges:

A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge validation process. This belief in connectedness and the use of dialogue as one of its criteria for methodological adequacy has Afrocentric roots. In contrast to Western, either/or dichotomous thought, the traditional African worldview is holistic and seeks harmony (1990:212).
In using the face-to-face interview, the disconnection, silences and oppressive secrecy that African Indigenous knowledges and practices overwhelmingly exist in slowly started shattering, and Yoruba individuals and families were brought into affirming public spaces where their knowledges could be re-cast, re-written and revitalized as sacred. This was accomplished through critical, respectful and engaged dialogue.

All of the interviews were transcribed by me over a three month period, from April to June 2007. I felt it necessary to transcribe the interviews myself because it was an opportunity to familiarize myself with the data, and become intimate with it in such a way that it was “under my skin” (Goldstein: 2006; personal communication). The transcription also enabled me to recognize emerging themes and reflect on their significance for answering the research questions of this project. Additionally, notes from my journal (especially the post-interview notes), as well as taking notes of changes in participants’ tone of voice during the interview, assisted me greatly in reading, interpreting and analyzing the transcribed data. All participants were given the opportunity to read their own transcribed interviews to ensure the accuracy of their comments and their comfort with my analysis of it. None of the participants wanted to change any part of their transcribed interview, nor did they give me any feedback. Finally, a copy of the completed study will be provided to participants upon request.

Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the journeys that we undertake in life, are also processes that we journey. They are continuously learned and relearned through our experiences. Hence, similar to Smith (1999), one of the most important journeys in this research process was the realization that the most important layer of my triangulation method would involve centering

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25 See Chapters Five and Six for discussion of how African Indigenous knowledges, culture and spiritualities are contemporarily closeted.
Yoruba Indigenous practices. It was imperative that my data analysis journey be guided by the Indigenous Yoruba knowledge system known as Ifa. This system consists of 256 Odus, or sacred oral texts which are foundational to the belief and practice of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. Drawing on Smith’s (1999) position that research on Indigenous peoples must center their ways of knowing, I developed and utilized a unique Indigenous methodology: what I refer to as an “Ifa method/ology” where Yoruba worldsense (cosmology) drives and formulates the methodological design and analytic process of my project.

The 256 literary texts (Odus) of Ifa are also referred to as chapters which individually hold thousands and thousands of oral stories, verses, praise poems, proverbs and lessons that offer wisdom, guidance and advice for people in the Yoruba community. These Odus also detail the Yoruba worldsense and Indigenous cultural knowledges that are both process (journey) and outcome (destination) focused. In this research, Ifa operated as a cosmological map that framed my analytic method, allowing me to read and re/interpret my data in a way that was aligned with and grounded in a Yoruba perspective of the world. When coupled with the intersectionality narrative analysis method I mentioned earlier, I was compelled to pay particular attention to the ‘cultural and linguistic and resources’ (Reissman, 1993) that participants drew on and the events participants named as significant during the interview. A methodological challenge such as this created an opportunity to “seek new and contextually relevant alternatives based on African conceptual systems” (Hallen as cited in Abiodun, 1994: 71).

What I employed here was an anti-colonial decolonizing method where Indigenous knowledges were affirmed as empowering tools for decolonization. Being anchored in a Yoruba worldsense through these Odus allowed me to analyze research participants’ experiences, identities, and understandings of themselves, both in relation to the larger Yoruba community,
and to the dominant Eurocentric world. Ifa methodology opened up a space for me to effectively examine and explore how research participants constructed and made sense of themselves from within the complicated context of unequal interplay between Indigenous and dominant Eurocentric cosmologies. This methodology also entailed examining how this sense-making was constructed, how it was informed by a Yoruba worldsense (the 401 plus Orisa, Ancestors and other beings in Orun/the spiritworld) and whether/how various Indigenous Yoruba signs, symbols, colours, food, songs, dance, prayer, music, stories and dreams ‘showed up’ in participants’ construction of themselves and Indigenous Yoruba culture.

An example of how I applied this Ifa methodology for my analysis entailed observing which aspect of Yoruba cosmology were mentioned, how they were discussed and the significance of this. Within the Yoruba cosmos, the Orisa, Sango is the deity of thunder and lightning and his colour is red. Osun is the deity of love, fertility, sexuality and beauty who presides over lakes. Her colour is yellow and her metal is brass. Esu is the keeper of ‘ase’ (life-force) and deity of the crossroads who traverses between and within the material and physical worlds. The colours for this deity are black and red. Essentially, all of the 401+ Orisa have numbers, taboos (which often means swearing not to eat certain foods, not going out at certain times of the day or night etc.) and sacred Odus which are devoted to them. When any given Odu shows up during divination, the corresponding Orisa must be given special attention, and this begins with an analysis of the story to determine the important lessons it carries for the devotee. I applied this divinatory method to my own academic method of analysis by paying attention to which Orisa were mentioned by participants and why. Participants overwhelmingly brought up the Orisa (Yoruba deities) when asked about Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. For example, questions around participants’ thoughts and/or feelings about Indigenous Yoruba spirituality
were often met with answers where Yoruba Orisa were named and constructed as ‘evil’ and ‘not of God.’ Such terminology was exceedingly used in conjunction with the Orisa, Esu. This compelled me to further explore why this was the case (as is discussed in further detail in chapters five and six). My analysis also included how paradox, choice, contradiction, ‘evil’, ‘harm’ and the many other signs and symbols related to Esu figured in research participants’ understandings of themselves, and Indigenous Yoruba culture at large. When utilizing the intersectionality narrative analysis method, the linguistic and cultural resources that participants drew on were Christian and colonial discourses, which constructed the Yoruba Orisa as “not of God”, “heathenistic” and ultimately uncivilized.

This method empowered me with a set of spiritual tools that, in effect, allowed me to engage a richer and more contextualized reading/analysis of the information shared by the research participants, permitting me to remain cosmologically contextualized so that I arrived at deeper meanings which remained true to Yoruba Indigenous systems of knowledge. In the end, it became clear that the conventional research methods available to me would not suffice for my research project because I understood that entering African Indigenous systems also meant entering them on their own terms and participants’ subjectivities could not be adequately understood through solely Western derived methodologies (Oyewumi, 1997; Dei et al, 2000).

The data analysis process began with the first interview. I noticed that during the interview process, many participants responded quite similarly to the same questions, thereby compelling me to pay closer attention to the kinds of words, terms, ideas and stories participants chose in response to the questions, and the level of importance they placed on events described (Reissman, 1993). It was during this time that I also began to notice patterns in terms of emerging and recurring themes, which I took specific note of while transcribing the interviews.
What I found particularly significant was the striking similarity amongst participants in terms of which of my questions were met with awkward silences or pauses, after which participants were very careful with their words and spoke and thoughtfully. Overwhelmingly, this happened around discussion of the Indigenous Yoruba spirituality, racism and oppression. Inversely, I paid close attention to the times where participants were passionate about the issues and topics discussed, and were very willing to remain talking about the issue at hand. For the most part, such responses came around the questions that focused on issues of language and/or seniority, or, as many of the older participants put it, “respect for elders.” There were similar responses to questions around sexism, where most participants denied its existence in the Yoruba community. However, because the questions were loosely structured around the specific themes of spirituality, oppression, gender, language and seniority etc., it comes as no surprise that these same themes of Indigenous spirituality and Yoruba Orisa as ‘evil’ and backward emerged during the interviews. However, again, it was how these topics were engaged by participants that I was interested in, and this encouraged me to explore the undercurrents, or unspoken dimensions surrounding these themes. I felt that there was something “more” to participants’ responses, where silences, overt passion, cultural pride, denial and cultural advocacy would show up again and again. It was during the process of transcribing the interviews and listening to each one three times that I realized that my analytic process with respect to themes was only the beginning. I realized that I was engaged in developing an argument around these themes that would speak to the c/overt nuances of Yoruba Indigeneity. However, the intersectionality narrative analysis method provided a structured guide as to how to analyze this information in a manner that captured the c/overt nuances of how participants spoke of their experiences and the ways this was entangled within colonialist discourse and other forms of oppression. By now I had a better
sense of the direction my work was moving in, I did not have a clear understanding of how I was going to carry out what, for me, was such a monumental undertaking. For, the themes were there, but what exactly was I saying with respect to these themes? And how would I theorize and discuss what my intuition was telling me about the data? These questions remained, however, my intersectionality analysis and Ifa methods were tools I used, trusting that answers would come when they were supposed to.

I continued transcribing and listening to each interview, and summarized them with the following questions in mind: a) What were the main things respondents were trying to say/tell me? b) What were the patterns? c) Which aspects of the interview were most salient? I recognized that I needed to pay special attention to the nuances surrounding the data, to understand that what was not said was just as important as what participants were explicitly saying in the interviews.

The second level of data analysis entailed coding the data with NVivo; a qualitative computer software program that enabled me to collate and organize my data according to themes I had already identified. This program allowed me to engage in deeper levels of analysis of the nuanced dimensions of the themes, and provided a structured way of collapsing these themes according to their relevance to my learning objectives. I spent an additional two months coding my data with NVivo, from August to September 2007. Each month entailed a phase in the analysis where the first phase involved large, general coding according to the themes I identified which included, but were not limited to the central ones the interview questions were structured around. In the second phase I tightened the themes by collapsing them into each other and proceeded to extract segments of participants’ voices to support the themes. It was during this process that the nuances of the data were most evident, and it became clear that ‘silence’,
‘secrecy’ and the clandestine were very much part and parcel of the themes I had identified. It was at this moment that the connections between the overt and ‘covert’ data were clear because I now had concrete themes to work with that put a name to the enigmatic nuances which, until that moment I was not able to make sense of. Some examples of this were the emergent and recurring “smaller” or “invisible” themes which I had coded as, ‘silence’; ‘secrets’; ‘personal’; ‘internal’; ‘God’; ‘harm’; ‘evil’ and ‘idol worshipping.’ These sub-themes allowed me to put “flesh to the bones,” so to speak, of the themes; enabling me to begin thinking about developing and constructing arguments around the themes in order to answer my research questions. These sub-themes became a common thread woven through, and theorized in data Chapters Five and Six.

To keep Yoruba Indigenous knowledges central, this data was then triangulated with the Ifa method (as discussed earlier), and further supported with Glasser and Strauss’ (1967) important technique of grounding the theorized data in my theoretical framework. As discussed in Chapter Three, the theoretical approaches central to my research methodology include anti-colonial and Black feminist frameworks, as well as Yoruba Indigenous worldsense. Therefore, the scholarship and literature in which these theoretical approaches have been cultivated can also be understood as sources of data (Batacharya, 2010) because they include important historical information and decolonizing approaches to knowledge production that are pertinent to this project.

**Challenges, Tensions and Ethical Considerations**

Some of the most significant critiques of academic research have come from Indigenous peoples and their communities precisely because they have largely been constructed and exploited as objects of study (Semali and Kincheloe, 1999; Dei et al, 2000). This grim fact heightens the need for all academics and/or researchers (Indigenous and otherwise) to be
cognizant of carrying out research that is empowering, ethical and respectful of Indigenous communities. In other words, the study must be situated within a decolonizing and anti-colonial politic, or what Smith (1999) refers to as an Indigenous agenda, where research is connected to the “good of society” and key terms such as ‘healing’, ‘spiritual’, decolonization and ‘recovery’ are most necessary. This also includes Denzin et al’s (2008) approach to being engaged in a decolonizing politic whereby the researcher continually critically reflects on his or her ethical research practice in relation to the lives of the participants in the study. For me, this entailed implementing what Black feminist Patricia Hill-Collins (1990) refers to as an ethic of caring and personal accountability. This means anchoring one’s research in community empowerment and rejecting individual self-interest. Therefore, while a number of challenges and ethical considerations arose during the data collection and analysis stages, my first priority was to apply the ethics of care and accountability by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of participants and ensuring that this was never compromised. To do this, I used pre-arranged pseudonyms and transcribed the data under these pseudonyms to maintain the privacy of each research participant. Further, parents and children did not have access to each other’s data. All participants were also informed about the nature and objectives of the study and their needed participation. Additionally, all interviews were transcribed solely by me and stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office during the research and writing of this project. The transcripts and audiotapes were kept in a secure locked location and will be stored for a period of seven (7) years after the completion of my dissertation, at which time they will be destroyed. Participants were assured that they could freely withdraw from the project at any point and time without negative consequences, and that inclusion of their contributions was subject to their approval. Participants were also given the opportunity to read the transcripts of their individual interview to ensure
accuracy of their comments and the analysis of it. Finally, I provided a summary of the completed study to the research participants upon request, and a copy of the final thesis was made available for their examination, again, upon request. It was not in my interest, nor my intention to engage in the practice of forcing any participant to continue participating in the research if they did not want to because, again, it was very important that I remain aligned with the ethic of caring, and rooted in an empowering decolonizing politic. Acknowledging research participants’ crucial roles in qualitative research that honours an Indigenous worldsense also means understanding that participants are understood as “sources of knowledge rather than sources of data” (Rosenberg in Dei et al, 2000), thereby making the study collaborative. Here, the researcher remains grounded in a reciprocal relationship with his or her community while simultaneously laying the groundwork for continued ethical and empowering research.

It could be said that there were no anticipated risks for participants in this study greater than the risk of daily living, primarily because the issues discussed (i.e. language, spirituality, generational knowledge, oppression) are also addressed and negotiated in everyday life and mainstream institutions: such as the university curriculum, and common discourse in the media. However, the construction of these topics in dominant discourse is problematic because Indigenous perspectives have overwhelmingly been rendered invisible, silent and bound up in racist and Eurocentric ways of knowing or understanding the world. Tensions such as these are quite challenging in the context of research and the principle of remaining engaged in ethical methodological practice. This raised important questions for me of how to ethically carry out my research, while at the same time fulfill my objectives of producing critical social theory and opening up a space that engages empowering critical dialogue about Yoruba (African) Indigenous knowledges. I realized that it was a challenge to which I had to rise up to and that
one way to minimize the tension was to ensure that participants’ anonymity remained protected. In this way, participants who wished to disclose information about embracing their Indigenous spirituality would be kept anonymous and their identity and privacy would remain protected. I also anticipated that participants could get upset about the nature of the issues being discussed, and therefore conveyed to them that they were not compelled to answer any questions they were not comfortable with. I also reminded each participant that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point if they wished to do so. As it turns out, while no participants were visibly upset, a number did remain silent, or chose not to answer some of the questions, most of them being those centred around Indigenous Yoruba spirituality (see Appendix A for the semi-structured questions I asked on this subject).

While I did anticipate some ‘thorniness’ and tensions around dialogue about the subject of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality, I nevertheless found it challenging when some participants reproduced racist constructions of their Indigenous spirituality; constructions that they had deeply internalized and accepted. I had to remind myself repeatedly that the issues being discussed were complicated because participants were accessing core understandings and expressions of their identities, thereby making the arrival at simple analysis and conclusions highly problematic. People engage in complicated and contradictory negotiations when it comes to their identities, especially in inequitable and oppressive societies such as Canada, and Africans and other people of colour were no exception to this rule. In due course, I prompted myself to remember that the project provided an important forum for participants to discuss issues that they otherwise may not have the opportunity to do elsewhere. Finally, I reminded myself that the study was voluntary, and while there were potential risks to participation, interviewees had volunteered because they were interested in the research and wanted to contribute. Critical or
not, these were their contributions and it was up to me to remain cognizant of their agency and central role as sources of knowledge in order to engage in the ethical analysis and methodological practice that decolonizing anti-colonial work calls for.

In the spirit of reciprocity, and as a token of my appreciation for their taking the time out to participate in the study, all participants were offered a $50.00 honourarium. This honourarium was also given to acknowledge the important role interviewees played as key contributors to my research. However, a number of interviewees did not accept the money. While the adult children accepted the honourarium, none of the parent participants did. Essentially, all of them told me that they would not accept it because as an elder, it was their duty to provide for me, not the other way around. They also went on to explain that it was also their role as elders to pass on cultural knowledge, and it was therefore very taboo to take money from a younger person for this reason. To have accepted the money would have meant that one is an agbaya, meaning, “senior for nothing” (Oyewumi, 1997) in the Yoruba language, or, one who uses their seniority in unethical and/or abusive ways for personal gain.

Before carrying out any interviews, I had deliberated over whether I should offer the older participants monetary numeration because I knew how importantly seniority and respect for elders figured amongst the Yoruba (and many other African communities). However, I decided to preface each offer with, “As a token of my appreciation…” but needless to say, none of the parent participants accepted the money. In fact, the first three parent interviewees were offended with my offer and expected me “to know better, even if I was ‘Canadian.’” While I was hesitant offering the honourarium to the remaining five parent participants, I decided to remain consistent and offer it anyway. However, I did modify how I went about offering it by saying that while I knew offering an elder money was contrary to Yoruba cultural practice, I
would appreciate it if they accepted the honourarium as a token of my appreciation for their participation. Still, all of the remaining parent participants refused to accept the honourarium. However, I did make progress in the sense that none of them were offended and were, in fact, very happy that I was acknowledging their contribution to my project. One parent participant even said that this small act of acknowledgement was “gift enough.” In essence, this challenge confirmed the significance of seniority as a crucial social category in Yoruba life and identity (Oyewumi, 1997; Olajubu, 2003), and I learned that it also shaped how I went about asking the parent participants questions. Yoruba feminist Oyeronke Olajubu (2003: 19) discusses similar challenges and tensions around seniority while carrying out her research in the Yoruba community.

Finally, the last challenge and methodological consideration concerned my insider/outsider status (Lorde, 1984; Collins, 1990; Carty, 1996) on multiple levels. I was an insider in that I am Yoruba, however, in the eyes of the parent participants, my having been raised in Canada since the age of three made me ‘more Canadian’ than Yoruba or Nigerian. Consequently, I lacked authenticity especially in the eyes of the parent participants” (Carty, 1996). Yet on another level, I was an insider again because I was Yoruba, and therefore shared cultural norms. However, this was mediated by my researcher position, which placed me in a position of power and might have brought to the surface legacies of academic exploitation that are “inextricably linked to European colonialism and imperialism” (Smith, 1999: 1). This is where Africans have overwhelmingly been objectified and denied their voices and agency as human subjects in academic knowledge production processes. The fact that I am a researcher who is studying and belongs to this very community, and yet trying to stay grounded in a decolonizing and anti-colonial politic that privileges Indigeneity makes this only more
complicated in my participants’ eyes. Ultimately, while, at some level I was read/treated as an outsider by research participants, I benefited more from my insider status because I was privy to information that participants most likely would not have shared had I not been seen as belonging or “one of their own” (Altorki and El-Sohl as cited in Carty, 1996).

**Overview of Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of a diverse group of Yoruba parents and at least one of their children. While 16 participants agreed to participate in my research, in the end a total of 14 participants from five different families were interviewed. Regrettably, two participants—a single mother and her son—drew from the project due to personal circumstances that made them unavailable. The participants were previously asked to complete a biographical profile (see Appendix C) indicating their name (which was replaced with a pre-arranged pseudonym), age, gender, ethnicity/Yoruba dialect spoken, citizenship, years in Canada, educational background, marital status, number of children, and employment and community involvement affiliation(s). These categories were used because they helped to provide a more personal dimension to the data, particularly in terms of how it shaped my understandings and analysis of how participants understood Yoruba Indigenous identities. The biographical profile was also used to document and illustrate the diversity in age, class, education and gender in order to produce a richer perspective on how these factors influence Yoruba conceptions of Indigenous culture and identity. Of the 14 participants, 8 were parents who ranged from 45-59 years of age, while their children ranged from 18-26 years of age. Of the five families in this study, three were nuclear and the remaining two were sole support families.

Overall, I selected Yoruba parents who had raised their children in Canada for at least ten years in order to gain a deeper understanding of the difficulties they may have faced while
becoming accustomed to life in Canada. I also implemented a ten years in Canada criterion to gain a better grasp on how residence in Canada has affected participants’ views and practices of their Indigenous identities. Ultimately, this group of participants brings a new perspective and approach to the study of Yoruba diasporic culture, and simultaneously helps to fulfill a gap in the research on the construction and lived practice of Yoruba Indigenous identities in dominant Euro-Canadian contexts. The following provides a brief description of the participants, whom I discuss individually and within their larger familial structure. All participants were given pseudonyms for both their first and/or last names.

**The Oladirans.**

This family of six, with two boys and two girls, was recruited through the Yoruba Community Association. However, only four members agreed to participate in this study: Mr. and Mrs. Oladiran, along with their two daughters, Yinka and Tunmi.

As mentioned before, I met Mr. Oladiran while volunteering at the Yoruba Community Association. Mr. Oladiran, a self-described Nigerian-Canadian, is heavily involved in the Association and took immense pride in belonging to an association that could, “support the Yoruba people and our culture and community in Canada.” In his view, this was very important because the next generation needs to know their Yoruba culture and the Association provides a space in which to keep the Yoruba culture alive. Mr. Oladiran holds a diploma in business management and still holds onto the dream of securing a job in this profession, despite the reality of being a cab-driver for over 20 years.

Mrs. Oladiran also identified herself as Nigerian-Canadian, and is a member of the Yoruba Community association. She holds a high school diploma and is employed as a cleaner in a health-care facility. Like her husband, she has lived in Canada for over 25 years and is
adamant about the necessity of “giving her children a better life” through “prosperity and having the fear of God [instilled] in them.”

Yinka Oladiran is their eldest daughter at 26 years-old, with two older brothers (who did not participate in the study). She referred to herself as Canadian. Yinka holds an Honours Bachelor degree in Sociology and is employed as a court officer. She was recently married and is very excited about her new life as a wife. She looks forward to being a mother. My interview with Yinka took place at my residence.

Tunmi Oladiran was the youngest in the family at 23 years old, and describes herself as African-Canadian. She still lived with her parents at the time of the interview and felt most comfortable doing the interview there. She holds a college diploma in Social Service work, and expressed interest in obtaining a university degree in the same profession because she found her volunteer work at the Jane and Finch Centre to be “very fulfilling and rewarding in giving back to the community.”

The Awoniyis.

This family of six, with three girls and one boy, was recruited through referrals from other members of the Yoruba community. However, only three family members agreed to participate in the study: Mr. and Mrs. Awoniyi, and their youngest daughter, Bisi.

Mr. Awoniyi described himself as Nigerian and Canadian. He has lived in Canada for over 25 years, and despite having been recruited to Canada with a degree in mechanical engineering, he has been employed as a customer service worker at a home improvement retailer for the past ten years. He describes “integrity” and “being helpful to their community” as the greatest wishes he has for his children because, for him, these qualities could transcend financial difficulties and would give them a sense of self.
Mrs. Awoniyi also referred to herself as Nigerian-Canadian and has also lived in Canada for over 20 years. She holds a university degree in nursing and works at a hospital in the same profession. She is very proud that her children are fluent in Yoruba due to their decision to go back to Nigeria for six years, “during the children’s formative years.” In the end, she simply wants her children “to be happy and have respect for their elders.”

Twenty-three year old Bisi Awoniyi is the youngest in the family and identified herself as Nigerian. She is currently pursuing a degree in Communications and expressed much interest in living in Nigeria. Despite speaking Yoruba fluently, she felt that she was “missing out on a lot of the culture” and she wants her future children to know it.

**The Fayemis.**

The Fayemis are a family of seven, with five boys, who were also recruited through referrals within the Yoruba community. Three members of this family agreed to participate in this research project: Mr. And Mrs. Fayemi and Seun, the third son of the five.

Mr. Fayemi describes himself as Yoruba and Canadian. He has lived in Canada for over 32 years and was also recruited to Canada as an engineer. Despite having spent the last 20 years working as a cab-driver, Mr. Fayemi still holds out hope that he will realize his dream of being an entrepreneur and owning his own business one day. Additionally, his most heartfelt desire for his children extends to the larger Black community, where he wishes for the next generation(s) to “stay away from crime [in order to] be more successful and have high positions in business and government.”

Mrs. Fayemi referred to herself as African, Canadian, woman, and mother who has lived in Canada for 20 years. She holds a bachelor degree in business administration; however she is currently employed as a health care worker. She is also very passionate about the importance of
education and of her children having respect for their parents, as well as all elders in the community.

Eighteen year old Seun identified himself as both African and Nigerian and was attending his final year of high school at the time of our interview. He was not sure that university was right for him and did not yet know which career path he wanted to pursue, but he knew that whatever he chose, “it would be hard work.”

The Oriolas.

This family of three, with two boys, was also recruited through the Yoruba Community Association. However, only two members volunteered to participate in the study: Ms. Sade Oriola, a divorced single-mother, and her youngest son, Dele.

Like, Mr. Oladiran, I met Ms. Oriola while volunteering at the Yoruba Community Association, an institution for which she is a staunch advocate and is heavily involved in. She identifies herself as Yoruba first, Nigerian second, and then Canadian. Ms. Oriola has lived in Canada for 16 years, and during that time, has earned undergraduate degrees in sociology and social work in order to upgrade herself. She spoke of deferring her desire to go to graduate school so that her children could attend university. The interview with Ms. Oriola was quite enjoyable and lengthy because of her great skill as an avid storyteller, a dancer and an actor in the Yoruba and African-Canadian communities. She advocates education and cultural knowledge with a special emphasis on “respect for elders” as the most important forms Yoruba culture the next generation could possess.

Twenty-one year old Dele described himself as both Yoruba and Black and was in the process of completing an undergraduate degree in the arts at the time of our interview. Of particular interest is the fact that his mother was displeased with his transfer from a pre-medicine
program to one in fine arts, despite the fact that she herself is a very talented artist. He expressed particular interest in pursuing a career in music and entertainment, and was especially fascinated with Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry which is the 3\textsuperscript{rd} largest in the world, after Bollywood and Hollywood. Like his mother, Dele feels that the Yoruba culture needs to be taught to the younger generations, with a particular emphasis on having respect for one’s elders and speaking the Yoruba language.

\textit{The Olusanmis.}

This family of three, also with two boys, was recruited through community referrals discussed earlier. However, only two family members volunteered to participate in my research project: Mrs. Olusanmi (also known as Mama Niyi), a separated single-mother and her first born son, Niyi.

Mrs. Olusanmi identified herself as Yoruba, African and Black. She has lived in Canada for over 26 years and came to Canada with her now estranged husband, Mr. Olusanmi. She holds a college diploma in health-care, but was not comfortable disclosing her current occupation or type of employment. However she did share with me her dream of one day owning her own catering business. She expressed the need for the culture to be continued through “respect for elders” and dressing up in traditional Yoruba clothing as the most important cultural knowledge that she would like to see the next generation retaining.

Twenty-five year old Niyi described himself as a Canadian of Nigerian descent that was born and raised in Canada. He holds a high school diploma and was still not sure what type of career path he wanted to pursue at the time of our interview. Although single, Niyi cited settling down, getting married and starting a family as his main priority, and looked forward to moving out of his mother’s home to start living on his own.
Research Sample

Table 1 summarizes important information of the fourteen Yoruba parents and children who participated in my study.

Table 1
Participants’ Biographical and Demographical Profile

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Years in Canada</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
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Chapter Five:

Overtly Christian, Covertly Yoruba:

On Spiritual Closets and Concealed Indigenous Identities

Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us… There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions within ourselves – along with the renewed courage to try them out. And we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams imply, and so many of our old ideas disparage.

Audre Lorde

Eurocentric and colonialist constructions of Yoruba (and, to a larger extent, African) Indigenous spirituality so deeply pervade the moral, social and institutional fabric of Western society that negotiated engagements with these core aspects of our identities (i.e. ritual, ceremony) are often forced to occur on the peripheries of our social worlds, and largely, in secret. This secret existence that many Africans have been forced to live, is what I refer to as a spiritually closeted life. While this concept is conventionally built on ideas that specifically pertain to sexual orientation or queer identity, my discussion of ‘the closet,’ secrecy and concealed identities is anchored in a different ideological and epistemological space; that is, within the framework of African Indigenous spirituality and the cosmological philosophies that inform these ways of knowing and being. This is not to deny that the origins of academic scholarship produced around ‘the closet’ come from foundational queer theory. The analogy of ‘the closet’ helps me to theorize and discuss another wounded existence that is also deeply marginalized and confined to asphyxiating social spaces that injure the spirit.

I recognize the irony of using the Western notion of ‘the closet’ to denote a complex Indigenous social reality that exists both with/in and outside hegemonic Western culture. However, given the historical and contemporary insidiousness of colonialism and imperialism in
Western and non-Western colonized societies, contradiction is a messy fact, and inevitable reality of social life. In other words, I do understand that “the closet” is a Western cultural and historical construct (Sedgwick, 1990) and it may therefore seem problematic to some that I use this term to symbolize a rather different social life. However, I argue that exactly the opposite is true. My position is two-fold. First, when a people’s everyday cultural and spiritual life is so deeply disrupted, disparaged and reconstructed as inferior, at best (if not completely wiped out), aspects of this social life become relegated to the margins, while ‘new’ ways of life pervade the centre to become ‘normal.’ It is dominance, oppression and hegemony that have created this reality of marginalization, and I am of the opinion that in order to effectively theorize and discuss life on the periphery, one must name the systems that created the inequities in the first place. The West teaches us who live in this part of the world to hide what is not valued or respected in a closet. Colonialism created this fragmentation and its attendant wounds, hence building on similar peripheral social realities that are endemic to Western society become ideal sites to begin critical anti-colonial interrogation of inequity, and how it can be effectively theorized and resisted.

Echoing Audre Lorde above, the concept I introduce and discuss here is not a new idea. Rather, it is a new extrapolation of an old (Western) idea that, quite ironically, underscores the indispensable Black feminist concept of intersectionality: where the connections between ‘different’ forms of oppression – be they spiritual or sexual – are illuminated. Hence, what on first glance may seem problematic, I prefer to approach as a necessary contradiction (engaging the West to understand Indigenous life in hegemonic Western contexts) that is part and parcel of the abstract messiness of colonial oppression and liberation. Black feminist theorizing – specifically the concept of intersectionality – has taught us that anti-colonial political work is messy,
contradictory and not easy. Ultimately, the foundational tenet of all forms of systemic, institutional and spiritual dominance is the violent and injurious insistence on singular notions of normalcy as the conventional standard that all must live up to and abide by. This sets the deleterious groundwork for confining spaces such as closets to be a part of the Western cultural landscape – albeit a hidden one – and how one becomes forced into them. Unsurprisingly, such hegemonies must then dismiss multiplicity and interconnection in order to keep these fixed and oppressive notions of sexual and/or spiritual normalcy intact. That said, I do find it necessary to reiterate that whilst the connection between the spiritual and sexual – in terms of closeted peripheral identities – is undeniable, my focus in this thesis remains on theorizing the lived reality of what it means to be spiritually closeted from an African Indigenous perspective. My hope is that this thesis will act as a testimony to this complicated reality, while simultaneously providing a deeper understanding of the harmful effects of closeted Indigenous spiritualities which, I argue, manifest in both the individual and collective psyche and spirit of (too) many African peoples.

I arrived at the concept of spiritual closets through the voices and experiences of the 14 research participants I interviewed. Their articulations of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality were pivotal to my developing and conceptualizing this term. This concept of the spiritual closet is also woven through Chapter six to become the groundwork and larger frame through which related concepts are introduced and discussed in the following chapters. However, in this chapter, the concept of spiritual closets is introduced and theorized by answering the following research question: **How are Yoruba Indigenous knowledges constructed by diasporic Africans of Yoruba descent? What are its manifestations, particularly in terms of daily life and experience in Canada?** My focus is not so much on how Indigenous Yoruba spirituality is defined, but rather, how are Yoruba words, stories, ideas and meanings used and voiced by
participants in relation to their conceptions of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality? During my interviews with participants, words such as “juju”, “idol”, “idol worshipping”, “pagan”, “illiterates”, and repeated discussions of “harm” and “evil” were often interspersed with furtive or veiled silences that had, what seemed to me to be contradictory undercurrents behind them and the stories or conversations that surrounded them. Hence, in this chapter I tease out and critically interrogate how the research participants conceptualize Indigenous Yoruba spirituality, and I use this analysis to arrive at the concept of ‘spiritual closets’ as a term that provides a metaphoric image that conveys the complicated reality of concealed African Indigenous spiritual identities. Ultimately, this chapter provides a glimpse into the quality, substance and consequence(s) of living a spiritually closeted life, and into the complexity of how Africans of Yoruba descent draw on and construct Yoruba Indigenous knowledges to navigate Eurocentric terrains of life in Canada.

**Spiritual Closets: Whispers of a Concealed Spiritual Self**

Yoruba people share a collective consciousness about the interconnectedness between the seen and unseen world, particularly where matters of the spirit are concerned. As mentioned in Chapters Two and Three, this is largely the case because Yoruba understandings of the physical and metaphysical are anchored in what Oyewumi (1997) refers to as an Indigenous worldsense. The first question I asked my participants concerned sharing their understandings of spirituality and how they conceptualized it. My research participants overwhelmingly believed spirituality to be infused in daily life, both seen and unseen. While a number of participants limited their conception of spirituality to Christianity, Ms. Oriola (or Sade) was one of the few who, in seeing spirituality as part and parcel of daily life, included Indigenous Yoruba beliefs. When asked about her understanding of spirituality, Sade (Ms. Oriola) responded that spirit was
“…everywhere and in all things, which [inevitably] go back to God.” Sade also spoke of spirituality being in the Church, as well as in Ifa (Indigenous Yoruba) practice. She stated:

Everybody worships in different ways. I think it has to do with different denominations in the church. But I know it’s still the same, when they talk of Ifa [Indigenous Yoruba spirituality] it still has to do with God…It’s only worship in [a] different way…..You know, before Christianity or Islam came to Nigeria, into my country, they have deities: that is, the Yoruba gods like Odudua, God of Iron and all those deities are messengers of God. And some people still practice it. Like in my family we have three!! Three in one! We have Christianity, Muslims and the pagans, the people who worship idols….But I was born into Christianity…But when they do festivals we still attend. So we’re still….one way or the other, we’re still connected to that type of religion.

For Sade, her individual and communal identity as a Yoruba woman is inseparable from Indigenous Yoruba cultural beliefs despite being raised as a Christian. Spirituality is also regarded as something that precedes humanity and man-made religious doctrines. Similarly, when Mr. Fayemi was asked to share his understanding of spirituality, he responded: “Well, for me, spirituality goes hand in hand with religion because the idea of being religious is attached to your spirit and spirituality is the core of your religion. Of course, you can also be spiritual and not be attached to any particular religion so spirit is bigger than religion because it is man-made.” On the other hand, Bisi Awoniyi found my question to be directly and exclusively linked to Christianity, and spoke of other religions (such as Islam and Buddhism) as spirituality defunct and “not of God.” Like Bisi, sisters Yinka and Tunmi Oladiran as well as Mama Niyi and her son, Niyi also shared this narrow definition of spirituality and regarded it as existing within the confines of Christian philosophy and doctrine.

The second question I asked participants involved sharing their thoughts on the relationship between spirituality and religion. Given the contradictory and overlapping approaches to both, I wanted participants to reflect upon and explain whether one, or both spirituality and religion were of importance to them, why and how. While participants’
responses varied greatly, there were a number of convergences and divergences that are worthy of note. Most noteworthy was the overwhelming consensus that spirituality (not religion) mattered more to them as individuals within the larger context of their Yoruba community. This is of significance because it allows for, and opens up space for the possibility of critical dialogue about spirituality that both includes and extends beyond the hegemonic confines of dominant religion. The promise of such possibilities are empowering and not to be understated.

The second point of convergence amongst participants is their identification of spirituality as distinct from religion because it was more personal, and involved one’s private individual relationship between self and God. The following are some examples of participants’ responses to this question:

MR. AWONIYI: Hmm. That is a very, very…there is a very thin membrane. You could pass or cross over, both, in whatever aspect of life. Spiritual I would say is a personal thing. Religion is a collective thing. Because if you’re being spiritual, you don’t tell anyone, you just know it’s a feeling that you have. But if you say that you’re religious, it is because there is a ritual you perform that everybody sees and then they associate and say, “Oh that guy must be religious because he goes to church every Sunday” or “there is a prayer group going on around him always, so he must be religious.” But to be spiritual, it’s a very, very, very personal thing that is just between you and God [my emphasis].

MRS. AWONIYI: Yes, religion is just you going to the church...just adhering to what is being said or what you’re reading or what is happening in the church, but spirituality is in you. You sit down, you just think of what you are internally not outwardly. Not what you can do, [or] what you can achieve, but what’s in you! That’s spiritual. And if you sit down and look around your surroundings and know what is happening, you will see many, many things which, inside you, you will now say, ‘oh this is different.’ But religion, yeah on Sundays, I just go and sing and clap and listen to the…it’s a ritual thing. [As for] Religion, I go to church, I pray but spirituality wise, I sit down, I just source around things in me and if there are any changes I like to make, I try to do it [my emphasis].

MR. OLADIRAN: Mmm, okay, spirituality, the way I would interpret it is, ‘where do you stand with God?’ Religion can be anything; anybody can put anything together and say he’s doing a religion. If you don’t know what you are doing, people can use religion to vandalize, to destroy anything. If you want to talk about spirituality, look at where you stand as a spirit person, as a spirit being, the way God created you. Look at where you stand with God and religion, not so much.
MRS. OLADIRAN: Spirituality is just power, power of God. Religion is just a name. A lot of people, when you see how they act, you ask them, are they going to church? [They say] “Oh I read my Bible” but it doesn’t portray their life… But when you spiritually grow, you don’t have to ask before they see you and see the Glory of God upon you. Wherever you go, [there] should be a light. It’s about the relationship you have with God and not what people see.

MRS. FAYEMI: I don’t believe that you have to go to church to be spiritual. Your heart, your mind, whatever you do everyday will show to people the type of person you are, the type of spirit you have. You can be going to church everyday and the way you treat people doesn’t reflect your spirituality. So it’s the way or manner you treat people, or [how] you conduct your life that shows the type of spirit you have (my emphasis).

DELE: Religion I think of it as, um, organized. The more formal part of it; like the Catholic faith. Spirituality is just you yourself. Like it’s more personal. I believe it’s for you to look inside your own self.

While lengthy, I found it necessary to include all of these quotes because it became quite clear that there was a significant theme emerging which needed critical attention: that despite participants’ insistent identification as Christians, they nevertheless made clear distinctions between religion and spirituality which carried with it a number of subtleties that suggested a critique of religion, and the Christian church in particular. This was expressed by Mr. and Mrs. Awoniyi, Mrs. Oladiran and Mrs. Fayemi in particular. All four of these participants spoke about church attendance as a social routine that did not necessarily inform or reflect a person’s spirit, character, or inner being. In this sense, church attendance can be read as an almost necessary external performance that one engages in as a means of gaining respect in the community, as well within larger social/institutional networks. Said another way, church attendance functions as a type of religious yardstick against which one’s respectability and social approval is measured. Even the mere utterance or spoken claim of church attendance acts as a type of unwritten “garment of approval” which one dons, possibly to avoid arousing doubt or suspicion around one’s Christian faith and identity. Another nuance of the distinctions between religion and
spirituality was participants’ shared identification of spirituality as a very personal and private preserve which was not shared with others, and, of importance to note once again, especially within the ‘confines’ of church. In this conceptualization, the church becomes a paradoxical space in which one deliberately conceals and does not expose their interior or most private spiritual self, despite the fact that one of the church’s primary claims is that it provides religious and/or spiritual refuge from the “secular” world. For these participants, spiritual identity is not anchored in the social, cultural and physical structure of the “church,” but rather, identified as a private interior space, or spirit inside the self. This is a space that has relationship and communion with a larger spiritual being, which was overwhelmingly identified as God by the participants.

Worthy of note are also the points of divergence, or differing responses that participants gave with respect to their understandings of spirituality and how it is related, or not, to religion. Differently from other research participants, Sade, Mr. Awoniyi and Mr. Fayemi maintained that being spiritual was not exclusive to Christianity, but also extended to other faiths – including Indigenous Yoruba spirituality – and the non-religious. Again, this is of significance because folded into this understanding is a critical awareness of spirituality as larger than man-made dominant religion. These three participants are actively resisting narrow hegemonic notions of spirituality and, are instead choosing the empowering position that spirituality is diverse, layered and can be engaged in multiple forms and contexts.

The second significant point of divergence amongst participants concerned how they located themselves as spiritual beings in response to my questions about spirituality and religion. While the vast majority of respondents located their spiritual existence within Christian doctrine and philosophy, Ms. Oriola, Mr. and Mrs. Fayemi and Mr. Awoniyi all openly declared that
despite being raised Christian, there still remained with/in them an important connection to and identification with Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. Despite distancing themselves from open or explicit involvement in Indigenous Yoruba spirituality, these four participants did speak of dancing and singing with “Native worshippers” when public ceremonies or festivals were being held. Such participation at first may seem contradictory to some. And I agree that it is. Yet, I argue that this type of contradiction is one where the participants are engaging in acts of resistance and, in essence, insisting that celebratory participation in public Indigenous festivals/ceremonies is part and parcel of who they are as Yoruba people in the context of a larger Indigenous Yoruba collective. Inevitably, such festivals act as emancipatory spiritual spaces of identification for these participants.

Another way in which these four participants identified and connected with Indigenous Yoruba spirituality was through speaking their Yoruba mother tongue or Indigenous language. It is not a coincidence that language is very central in Indigenous ceremony, festivals and rituals; which all four participants (Ms. Oriola, Mr. and Mrs. Fayemi, Mr. Awoniyi) admitted to openly attending and enjoying (for example, the dancing, singing and praising portions of Indigenous ceremony) along with “Native worshippers.” This also supports Wa Thiong’o (1986), Smith (1999), Dei (2000) and Battiste’s (2000, 2002) discussion of orality and language as spiritual and central to the generational retention of Indigenous knowledges and identities for future generations. In addition to this, Ms. Oriola and Mr. & Mrs. Awoniyi found it very important that their children speak Yoruba fluently and therefore insisted on only speaking Yoruba to their children in the household so that they would not lose their language. This is an example of how participants use their Indigenous language as a tool of resistance to colonialism and Eurocentric domination. As Ngugi Wa Thiong’s reminds us:
The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation the entire universe (Wa Thiong’o, 1986: 4).

Additionally, Mi’kmaw scholar Marie Battiste describes the strong connection between language and spirituality as follows:

> Where Indigenous knowledge survives, it is transmitted primarily through symbolic and oral traditions. Indigenous languages are the means for communicating the full range of human experience and are critical to the survival of any Indigenous people. These languages provide direct and powerful ways of understanding Indigenous knowledge. They are the critical links between sacred knowledge and the skills required for survival. Since languages house the lessons and knowledge that constitute the cognitive-spiritual powers of groups of people in specific places, Indigenous peoples view their languages as forms of spiritual identity. Indigenous languages are thus sacred to Indigenous peoples. They provide the deep cognitive bonds that affect all aspects of Indigenous life. Through their shared language, Indigenous people create a shared belief in how the world works and what constitutes proper action…Any attempt to change Indigenous language is an attempt to modify or destroy Indigenous knowledge and the people to whom this knowledge belongs (Battiste, 2000: 48-50 my emphasis).

Indigenous language is the spiritual heartbeat or drum of a people and their culture. It connects and carries. It is the centre through which the cosmological sphere is lived, passed down, and taught to subsequent generations because it holds cultural knowledge. Indigenous language is spiritual and can be read as a powerful form of resistance that these participants engage in.

My research participants’ insistence that spirituality was distinctly different from – although connected to– religion which allowed me to pay closer attention to the complex entanglements and shared characteristics of participants’ understandings of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality versus the more Christian-based constructions of religion. The theme of a concealed Yoruba self –that is both spiritual and physical– which covertly operates inside and outside Christian demarcations of the spiritual, physical and communal self recurred in my conversations with participants. This idea is of significance because it allowed me to tease out the various meanings of self discussed by participants. Yet, I was cautious not to assume that a critique of
church attendance, or the revelation of concealed selves was somehow synonymous with an uncomplicated embrace of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality and practice. Research participants’ constructions of self were sometimes highly congruent with Indigenous Yoruba notions of being, yet, at other times, they were paradoxically and hegemonically entangled in colonial constructions of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. One of the more overt constructions of spirituality overwhelmingly pivoted around most participants’ assertion that involvement in Indigenous Yoruba spiritual belief and practice involved a “lifestyle” riddled with harm, ‘evil’ and moral decadence. I discuss this as an element of closeted life in the following section, and refer to such constructions as “Discourses of Harm and Evil.”

**Spiritual Closets: Dichotomized Discourses of Harm, Danger and Evil**

The “Christian” versus “Native” or “traditionalist” construction of spiritual or religious identity was overwhelmingly present in my conversations with research participants. These constructions were also heavily hinged on binarized character judgments, or notions of “us” and “them,” where people who lived such a “lifestyle” were also implicated in something that was assumed to be “evil.” All participants were asked the same question regarding Yoruba spirituality: What are your thoughts or feelings about Indigenous or traditional Yoruba spirituality? Dichotomized constructions of Christian/Native and Us/Them resurfaced in many participants’ responses to this question. For example, after, and despite alluding to the existence of a private spiritual self that exists outside her church life, Mrs. Awoniyi had the following to say about Indigenous Yoruba spirituality:

Eh, ahh, I…ahh, that to me…it’s a no, no. I don’t like it. I can give you an example, ok? Ah, at one time my Uncle, they wanted to give him a chieftaincy title. His wife called my mother [to tell her] that her brother is about to take a chieftaincy and my mother just ran there [to his house]. She said, “No, no, no!” The thing is, when you go in, you start eating with them. They have lots of different things, traditional things…if you go into the traditional things, it’s not just having a chieftaincy title or being the Oba, there is more to
it when you go inside. Whatever they are doing when you go there, that is what you will be doing too. To them it might be good, but to me...I don’t like the way the Obas, the chiefs, the way they do their stuff. I come from a Christian family and we want it to stay this way. Because, at one point they wanted my father to become an Oba and he had to run away. He said he didn’t like it and didn’t want to be like them.

For Mrs. Awoniyi the “us” and “them” dichotomy is a truth that is very real. In essence, it is a classic form of othering where, for her, “we” refers to the Christian dominant culture that hold “normal” values and beliefs; while “they” are the traditional(ists) who are “different”(read backwards), inferior and not normal. “We” are Christian and therefore modern, progressive and “good”; “they” are Obas (Yoruba word for King) and chiefs who do “different and traditional” things such as enticing you “to eat with them.” This form of othering places those who practice and believe in Indigenous Yoruba spirituality outside popular notions of normalcy, thereby stigmatizing them as abnormal. It is important to remember however, that the type of othering which Mrs. Awoniyi engages in is one that is socially constructed, and bound up with imperialist constructions of the Indigenous Yoruba self as “inferior”, “uncivilized” and “backwards”; notions that she has been socialized to think of as normal. Here, the reality of internalized oppression becomes a visible feature of Mrs. Awoniyi’s self-understanding. This form of othering supports Pieterse’s (1992) position that attributes of otherness can often be assigned – in this case it is the spiritual that evokes such categorizing– and doing so serves multiple functions for the labeling group, such as creating social distance; a claim to a privileged status; or it may also serve to assist in negotiating internal group relations by way of reference to the “outsider” group (230). The “otherness” of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality (and its practitioners) that pervade Mrs. Awoniyi’s psyche serves all three of these functions. Her assertion of Christian identity, and emphasis on Indigenous spirituality as a “no-no” coupled with her insistence that it is a spiritual and social space that one should “run away from,” clearly demonstrates her need to
socially distance herself from Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. In addition, her repeated emphasis on “running away” from involvement in this spirituality suggests images of danger, peril and consequential harm for her if she does not resist becoming one of “them” or, “eating with them.” This conceptualization serves to concretize and give legitimacy to her Christian identity as the one that is “good” and “safe” when juxtaposed with the Indigenous one that is “dangerous”, “harmful” and “evil.” Finally, Mrs. Awoniyi’s reference to Indigenous spiritual believers as “different” and “traditional” fixes them in unevolved time and locates them as the “outsider” group, thereby asserting her position outside of Yoruba social society while claiming belonging to, and status within the dominant privileged Christian norm.

An enduring feature of participants’ constructions of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality was something that I term, “discourses of harm.” Within this discourse participants repeatedly offered anecdotal stories as examples of how people had been harmed by practitioners and believers of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. For them, these stories were the “proof” that illustrated how ‘dangerous’ this Indigenous tradition was. When I asked Bisi to share her thoughts and feelings about those who practiced Indigenous Yoruba spirituality, she said that she was suspicious of them because “they were weird” and “wondered what they prayed to” because she was not sure it was God. In addition to her dichotomous construction of traditional practitioners as “Other,” Bisi’s doubt around who they pray to suggests that it is not “God,” which, for her, meant that they were weird and was therefore justified in her suspicion of them. Such perceptions convey internalized colonial constructions of Yoruba Indigeneity as a “pagan” and therefore “Godless” religion. The enduring Christian-based construction of Yoruba Indigenous spirituality as paganistic is set up to justify suspicion of the “Other.” Since Christian constructions of God are monotheistic, any belief in Gods –or in higher spiritual forces– that are not imagined according
to Christian doctrine, is set up as spiritually, morally and socially inferior. Said another way, the binaries of good/evil, safe/harm, heaven/hell etc. that are fundamental to Christian theology, doctrine and belief, encourage a way of imagining spirituality as fixed and quite rigid. Here, Christianity proclaims itself as “good,” “safe/heavenly” and “of God.” This then relegates the Other to a position of “evil”, “harm/danger” and “of the devil/hell” its binarized opposite: Indigenous Yoruba (African) spirituality.

The suspicion of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality as harmful and dangerous was also voiced by Yinka, who distanced herself from Indigenous spirituality by adamantly denying the existence of any believers or practitioners in her immediate family, while also insisting that her genealogy was exclusively Christian. In response to my question about traditional Yoruba spirituality, she had the following to say:

Um…..okay. If I think back to my Grandfather’s generation, and even going further than that, they were Christians! Like not in the sense of being spiritual, or in the sense of going to herbalists and stuff. And when I say herbalists I mean like, um, voodoo’ doctors and stuff like that. No, he was a Christian. He didn’t know how to read or write, so he didn’t read the bible. But he knew how to pray. And he knew that there was a God and he used to pray like that. Um…my sense of ah, people that go to spiritualists, or go to herbalists and stuff, those are people that……they’re spiritual yeah. But they’re not spiritual in a good sense. No I don’t believe that they are. Some, some could….some…..Ok, going to a spiritual doctor is perceived as being negative. Most times people that go to those kinds of things are people that want to do harm to other people.

The binaries introduced in Yinka’s descriptions of Christian versus Yoruba spirituality conjure up or reproduce highly racist and Eurocentric constructions of “voodoo,” the quintessential (demonized) representation of African spirituality, where notions of harm and danger are central in the European imagination. Yinka’s remarks show how many Africans/Blacks are also affected by these constructions, images and stories, through the enduring traumas of colonialism. As colonized subjects, we often hold deeply internalized colonialist views about ourselves, our
cultures and our histories, albeit with differing consequences. These forms of internalized colonialism are spiritually injurious to us and to our psyches, inducing a different type of spirit injury or fragmentation both individually and collectively.\(^\text{26}\) This is evident in the stories of harm that both Yinka and Bisi relayed to me in our continued discussion of their views on Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. Yinka told me the story of a neighbour who was an old woman that had tried to kill her in Nigeria when she was very young and that it was her mother’s church that had found the old woman out. In Yinka’s words:

I lived in Nigeria for three years from the age of two to five. So there were different apartments within the house but we had separate houses. And there, there was a lady that lived there, a nice lady, an older lady who um…my mom used to let us go play with her and she used to like me a lot. And my mom used to go to a church at that time, a Pentecostal church that was very spiritual. And there was times when they were doing like a revival at the church and the minister that day kept calling my mom’s name, right. He was calling my mom’s name like saying, ‘Yinka’s mother’ but my mom didn’t take it in. But then somebody told her like, ‘aren’t you the one they’re talking about?’ She’s like ah, yeah. Then they’re like, ok, why don’t you go see this person. So she went to go see this person and when she did, right, [she starts to speak in a loud excited whisper] the person told my mom that somebody she lives near is trying to kill me! So my mom had to fast and pray. She had to fast and pray like I don’t know for how long. But what had happened was, it was the lady’s child that died. I used to go to her house, we used to live in the same place because everybody knows everybody in the same duplex. Yeah, so it’s [traditional Yoruba spirituality is] usually associated with negative things. But I guess there’s some people that could use it maybe for money, for monetary gain or something right. But it’s not usually used for good things.

Similarly, the story Bisi told me involved danger, harm and personal violation:

My Aunt, when we were in Nigeria, our house was robbed and apparently the people that robbed the house, they went to one of their oogun (Yoruba medicine) men and told him that they should make it so [that] whoever answers the door, [they] just let them in and take their stuff, and that’s how they take the stuff. And that’s exactly what happened. They came dressed up like they were visitors and cleared out the house. And then my Aunt was so affected [by that] until she passed [away]. So when people say it’s not real, yes it is because they wouldn’t just keep talking about it if it wasn’t, and especially because it happened with someone in my family. So that’s what I think about Yoruba religion.

\(^{26}\) See the final section of this chapter, “Spiritual Closets: Secrecy and Injury of the Spirit” for a more detailed discussion of my particular approach to spirit injury.
This is not to deny participants’ their agency by suggesting that these stories did not happen. In fact, for me, the question is not whether or not such stories are real. Rather, the issue is the manner in which these stories have become the quintessential representation of African spiritual identity for Yinka and Bisi. For these two participants, it seems these constructions of African spirituality have become the only understandings, which, in turn get recirculated into the public imagination. It is not surprising then, that Yinka and Bisi hold similar views because, essentially their perceptions are paradoxically theirs yet not theirs. Dominant discourses about Indigenous Yoruba spirituality are so hinged on the themes of harm and danger that even participants who had more critical sophisticated understandings of Yoruba spirituality also felt the need to qualify their views with what I call a “harm disclaimer.” For example, Sade Oriola argued that she knew many non-Christians who “worshipped idols” yet were still “good” and “very nice” people who had “good hearts.” Similarly, Mrs. Fayemi took the position that it was not necessary to have to choose between Christianity and one’s Indigenous spirituality, provided it (Indigenous spirituality) was used for “doing good” and not evil. In response to a question about Wole Soyinka’s spiritual beliefs, Mrs. Fayemi states:

Yeah, his Orisa [a Yoruba deity] is Ogun. I think it’s good! As long as you don’t use it to harm anybody, just to protect yourself, I agree with Wole Soyinka. You can be a Christian too. As for me, I believe that we should hold onto our traditional culture. You know, we shouldn’t say that because we are Westernized that we should just forget our traditional culture and rely only on Christianity or Islam. No. As far as you are not using it [Indigenous Yoruba spirituality] to do bad things, and you are just using it to protect yourself, to protect your family and you use it to do good to other people, there is no problem in practicing the two.

‘Disclaimers of harm’ such as Mrs. Fayemi’s are evidence of the profound extent to which discourses of danger and looming violence circulate in the public imagination about Yoruba spirituality. Mrs. Fayemi, in her awareness of this construction of her Indigenous spirituality, felt that voicing her support of it also meant proclaiming her disapproval of what it is popularly
associated with: danger, harm and violence. In this sense, Mrs. Fayemi is engaged in a psycho-spiritual act of resistance where, to her, Indigenous spirituality also plays a protective role beyond hegemonic notions of danger, harm and evil.

These notions of danger, harm and evil were ever-present when traditional Yoruba spirituality was brought up and discussed by other participants, suggesting that in their minds, these are characteristics of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. For many participants, their salvation or guaranteed escape from such danger can only come in the form of Christian conversion and identification. Inversely, when themes of evil, harm and danger arise in Christian doctrine or belief, they are assumed (read constructed) to be coming from ‘somewhere else’ outside Christianity, and are not deemed to be inherent to Christian life, belief or practice. My participants in general held to the rigid binaries in Christian theology which dictate that “good”, “righteousness”, “love”, “peace” and “God” are the exclusive preserve of this religious tradition and no others, particularly Indigenous traditions which have been, and continue to be constructed as the classic antitheses to Christian monotheism.

Dichotomized constructions of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality as inherently dangerous, harmful and riddled with evil generate oppressive, yet powerful ideas that racialized Africans always do harm to one another conjure up images of a primitive “tribalism.” What is erased within this pathologizing discourse of Indigenous spirituality is the fact of colonial oppression, and how hegemonic and pathologized constructions of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality are intrinsic to colonial ideology and European ethnocentrism. Eurocentric discourses of harm, danger and evil are deeply embedded in historical amnesia and deny the fact that oppression is an integral part of colonial/imperial ideology and its related cultural, social and legal institutions. These discourses of harm and danger have more contemporary manifestations in other social
arenas such as the news media and similar communications centred institutions where pathologizing notions of danger, violence and peril circulate about African/Black people. One of the most popular and enduring examples of this is the racist discourse of “Black-on-Black crime” in which media audiences are repeatedly fed with images of gun-toting young Black men (read gang members) that hurt, maim and inevitably kill other young Black men of comparable rank. Similar to the discourses of harm, danger and violence regarding African spirituality, discourses of “black on black crime” also reinforce hegemonic notions of “tribalism” and “innate in-fighting” so that again, the impact of colonialism and imperialism are conveniently disregarded, thereby leaving the blame to be placed on the shoulders and spirits of the oppressed: African peoples themselves. What gets created is a highly toxic and anti-African climate that injures the individual and collective psyche. Within such a climate, the open embrace of and identification with Indigenous African spiritualities is not welcome. Such climates encourage Indigenous peoples to deny, conceal and/or completely distance themselves from Indigenous Yoruba (and other African Indigenous) spiritualities because of their popular association with danger, harm and evil. This discourse then becomes written onto both the individual and collective Yoruba/African body. Meanwhile, the sources of such dominating constructs remain invisible and do not enter the public imagination or psyche with even a fraction of the disdain that Indigenous African spiritualities do.

Not only does the circulation and hegemonic dominance of these discourses pathologize African/Black peoples and their Indigenous spiritualities, they also serve the function of eclipsing the significant stories of survival, healing, self-determination, self-love, empowerment and resistance to colonial and imperial oppression that are embedded in Indigenous Yoruba (and other Indigenous African) knowledges and practices. The invisibility of these stories is yet
another layer of the individual and collective psychic and spiritual wounds that Indigenous
people suffer when they have deeply (generation after generation) internalized such
pathologically racist notions about themselves, their culture and their overall collective identity.

**Discourses of Evil and Idol Worshipping: Demonizing the Yoruba Orisa**

The devil is not the terror that he is in European folk-lore. He is a powerful trickster who
often competes successfully with God. There is a strong suspicion that the devil is an
extension of the story-makers while God is the supposedly impregnable white masters,
who are nevertheless defeated by the Negroes.

*(Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men)*

I begin this section with a quotation from Zora Neale Hurston because it quieted some of
the unsettled tensions and questions I had been struggling with around Christianity and
Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. With time, I noticed that this struggle often tapered, to pivot
around one particular figure that was repeatedly evoked as evil incarnate –this figure was the
devil. In many Yoruba Christian communities this figure is called Esu. At various Churches and
ever especially in fervent prayer, Esu’s name is often invoked in concert with what people prayed
would not happen to them and their loved ones –i.e. sickness, failure, loss of employment, death,
poverty, etc. Esu is also largely blamed for any form of evil or negativity in people’s lives. In
the many Yoruba churches in the city I have attended, ‘Esu’ always seems to figure in the same
way: as an ominously lurking force that as a committed Christian, one must to do everything
possible to rebuke and stay away from. As Yoruba Christians, goodness, benevolence and
‘spreading the Gospel’ are your personal and social charge, and is often emphasized by a
preoccupation with the need to conquer and destroy the existence of malevolent and demonic
forces. Such forces are always evoked in connection with Esu’s title and name. At home during
family prayers, Esu is rebuked and cursed. In church and at other social functions, Esu is
rebuked and cursed……The message was clear: Esu was the consummate emblem for sin and evil and every effort should be made to stay away from ‘him’ and all that ‘he’ represents.

In this study, all research participants repeatedly referred to Esu (and other Orisa/Yoruba deities) as “idols” and any form of reverence or embracement for them was viewed as “idol worshipping.” This in turn translated into charges of “not knowing God.” Pejorative words such as “pagan” were used by participants to describe believers and practitioners of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. When I asked Mrs. Olusanmi (Mama Niyi) to share her thoughts on Indigenous Yoruba spirituality, she said it was “idol worshipping” and went on to explain that, as a Christian, she was brought up to “not like it” and “not deal with” the people who practiced it, saying:

Christians don’t deal with those people. Even when they are dancing we Christians will pretend not to see them anyways because the way I was brought up… I was brought up I won’t say to hate them but I was brought up not to like them….The thing I grow up with is still with me. Even up to now, like here, I look at Halloween as something that is similar to the traditional beliefs back home. I don’t like it. I don’t participate in it.

Similarly, Mr. Oladiran named Esu as “the Yoruba idol that is the devil.” When I questioned his assertion that Esu was the devil, and asked him how he came to know this, Mr. Oladiran responded:

Okay, in the Yoruba culture, Esu happens to be representative of the devil because even in the idol worshipping of Esu far back home in Africa, you will find out that it is always placed in the centre of the… wherever they want to do their festival. Even within the complex of the dominion where they are worshipping in, it’s never put inside, it’s always outside because the idea is that you don’t want the Devil in your home because he can only do harm to you. So whatever they the native worshippers want to do, they do it outside. So in the context of us Yorubas, Esu is the devil.

Indeed, within this discourse it seems that all Yoruba deities are, in fact, idols. There is a complete disregard of the historical fact of colonization and how it has influenced Indigenous self-concepts to denigrate Yoruba spirituality. Colonialism deliberately positioned Yoruba
Indigenous knowledges as “backwards,” “uncivilized,” “idolatrous,” and therefore inferior. In fact, colonialism has constructed many Indigenous knowledges as non-knowledge and therefore intellectually, socially and morally inferior. Meanwhile, Euro-Christian ideology is situated as the divinely sanctioned norm, emphasizing the first and second commandments (as delivered by Moses) which stipulate that “making any image of gods” or worshipping any other God than the Christian one is forbidden. Hence, the culturally specific Euro-Christian construct, “idol” becomes a universal norm by which “Other” spiritual traditions are measured against and judged. These traditions – and Indigenous ones in particular – can never quite “measure up” because Christian philosophy is profoundly invested in its own superiority. In Euro-dominant cultures, such constructs have been widely naturalized as universal spiritual doctrine. So, if Christianity asserts itself as constructed as monotheistic, Indigenous traditions are pathologized as polytheistic, and therefore paganistic. In a Christian model, the existence of more than one god in a spiritual tradition invokes accusations of “idolatry.” Other Euro-Christian binaries such as God/devil, good/bad, progress/backwardness, civilization/primitiveness and ultimately, Christian/pagan emerge as natural and normal within this model and within such a frame, there is no tolerance for “Other” approaches to spirituality, and Yoruba Orisa (deities) such as Esu, are rewritten within the naturalized frame of Eurocentric discourse, as “idols.” As the only Orisa that appears in the Yoruba Bible, Esu becomes the unfortunate and most popular casualty of Euro-colonial Christianity.

The Politics of Exile: Spiritual Closets, Secrecy and Injury of the Spirit

Discourses of harm, evil and “idol worshipping” that dichotomize and demonize Indigenous Yoruba spirituality are, in fact, socially constructed colonial agendas where erasures,
amputations and silences of Yoruba identity reign.\textsuperscript{27} Hence, the Yoruba figure of Esu was misinterpreted as an “idol,” by most of my research participants, and this Orisa was ultimately understood to be the devil. It is within a Yoruba Christian community that Esu has come to be understood as “the devil.” However, the reality is that in this climate, such a need is often inextricably connected to dominant notions of respectability; therefore, being a respected member of the Christian Yoruba community has meant aligning oneself with and/or internalizing dominant Euro-Christian notions of normalcy. Jacqui Alexander (2005) reminds us that the notion of respectability is hegemonic and reflective of conventional (colonial/imperial) ideologies, values and beliefs – including and especially religion. To be respectable is to be a member of the dominant culture, and to therefore claim a dominant religious identity. In my study of diasporic Yoruba, that would be Christianity. However, such outward religious allegiances do not completely erase one’s Indigenous consciousness; rather, they push Indigenous ways of being and knowing to the peripheries of Yoruba life in the Diaspora, where they are concealed and engaged in secret. In this way both Yoruba knowledges and their practitioners are forced into spiritual closets, while cleaving onto conventional outward claims of Christian identity and religious normalcy.

For instance, Dele discusses the social and spiritual significance of the head in Yoruba culture, and how this is particularly emphasized in an Indigenous Yoruba ritual that was performed on his own head. While he states categorically that he and his family are Christians, in the same breath, he also recognizes that connections to believing in and practicing Indigenous Yoruba ritual endure. Dele explains:

\begin{quote}
When I was coming to Canada, my Grandma, she did something to my head. She called some man that did something on my head as if [it was] some kind of protection. That was
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} See Chapter six for a more comprehensive discussion of how this Orisa was mistranslated as an “idol” and “the devil.”
when I was coming here [to Canada] like when I was 12 years old. I remember my head being shaved and someone making some kind of…I’m not sure what it was on my head but I didn’t dare say anything about it either because my Grandmother was the boss lady [laughing]. She was the woman of the family kinda thing. And when I got here [to Canada] I remember some other older lady asked me and my mom what happened to my head and my mom was struggling to explain and the lady was like ‘Oh, okay I get it.’ [laughing]. I figured she was another older Yoruba lady that probably knows about it. I actually didn’t know what was …..ahh…going on. But they just did with my head what they did…what they wanted to [laughing]. But it’s also….it’s embarrassing because we’re Christian, you know what I mean? Like our family is known to be Christian and yet maybe there still remains, especially with older people like our Grandparents, they still have their little attachments to their um…what’s it called? The Orisas and stuff.

Dele’s narrative highlights the enduring survival of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality, particularly amongst the older generation. However, his construction is also situated within a framework of shame which, for him, suggests an outward claim to a Christian identity. Dele’s brief but poignant allusion to Indigenous Yoruba spirituality is worthy of attention and, I would argue, reflective of its hidden, subsumed existence with/in the larger milieu of Christian life amongst many diasporic Yoruba youth. In other words, Dele finds the ritual performed on his head to be shameful because he understands that it is not a Christian ritual, and, despite his astute recognition that such an event was carried out to protect him, it does not take away from his embarrassment and shame around it. Notions of shame are endemic to spiritually closeted Indigenous life, and are key contributing factors that force Indigenous Yoruba spirituality and its practitioners into a deeper spiritually closeted existence.

My argument of closeted African spirituality builds on Zora Neale Hurston’s (1978) classic ethnographic study of African-American folklore, where she explores how African Indigenous spirituality is cut in the woes of secrecy and therefore forced to operate in secret. She argues that this is so primarily because it is not the religion of the Nation:

Nobody knows for sure how many thousands in America are warmed by the fire of hoodoo, because the worship is bound in secrecy. It is not the accepted theology of the Nation and so believers conceal their faith. Brother from sister, husband from wife.
Nobody can say where it begins or ends. Mouths don’t empty themselves unless the ears are sympathetic and knowing” (Hurston, 1978:195).

Hurston’s discussion shows us that closeted practice of African Indigenous spirituality reigns above even some of the most intimate relationships in one’s family and community. The need to keep one’s spiritual practices and beliefs secret, or, “in the closet” is necessary in order to avoid ostracization and accusations of practicing “witchcraft,” “juju” or “voodoo”; all of which emerge from Eurocentric discourses where harm, danger and evil are assumed to be the norm amongst Africans/Blacks. This hegemonic or “invisible” discourse of Indigeneity as pathological, diseased and abnormal spirituality as a ‘natural’ fact of Black/African life makes it socially (im)possible for many to disclose belief and involvement in Yoruba Indigenous spirituality. For many colonized individuals, to claim a Yoruba Indigenous spirituality would be to suggest that one is actually pathological, and engaging in practices that are “harmful”, “dangerous” and, essentially, “not of God.” The fear is that these (invisibly Euro-Christian) beliefs are ones that one’s family and closest friends will also hold to be true, thereby opening up the risk of losing the love, honour and respect of those who matter the most. Essentially, to openly embrace one’s spiritual Indigeneity means that you are running the risk of losing your respectability and, inevitably, committing social suicide.

Some may reject, or not be convinced by my argument of spiritual closets, with the opinion that spirituality is an individualized affair and therefore my research participants may not want to speak about it, or may have a particular unspoken interpretation that is not necessarily akin to a closeted knowledge. It has also been argued that not wanting to speak openly about one’s individualized spirituality can in itself be part of a person’s spiritual belief. While this may be true, it is crucial to remember that I make the argument of spiritual closets within the context of colonial and imperial oppression, not forgetting that these forces are pervasive and that people
navigate their daily lives *in negotiation* with these realities. As discussed in Chapter Two, Linda Smith cautions against the temptations of adopting “misty-eyed” models of Indigenous spirituality that are not grounded in the everyday material experiences of Indigenous people: namely the oppressive hegemony—spiritual and otherwise—of colonialism and imperialism (1999:12). Community and collectivity are core elements of Indigenous spiritual philosophy, belief and everyday lived practice. From an Indigenous perspective, it is unheard of to not want to openly speak of or engage in what is for Indigenous peoples the source of their individual and collective being/identity, unless, I argue, there are strategic and/or protective reasons for such secrecy. These reasons include the Eurocentric and pathologically colonialist constructions of Yoruba (African) spirituality that deeply pervade the moral, social and institutional fabric of Western society. It is no secret that African Indigenous spiritualities are often relegated to the lower rungs of colonial stratification, thereby devaluing Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Openly embracing this spirituality carries little, if any currency at all, in terms of social mobility, institutional respectability and overall privilege within dominant Euro-Christian colonial culture. Additionally, to locate Indigenous spiritual practice and belief *solely* at the level of the individual is to adopt New Age interpretations of spirituality which are not grounded in the daily material realities of Indigenous peoples. What is forgotten is the interdependent and multilayered nature of Indigenous spiritual practice/knowledge, where the individual is but one inextricably linked layer of a larger cosmological reality. Sobonfu Some, Indigenous spiritual teacher from Burkina Faso elaborates:

Day by day we work to maintain our state of grace. We do so not only as individuals, but also as a part of several interconnected circles of support. When we fail, the work of coming back into grace is something we cannot accomplish by ourselves; it requires the participation of others.

The cosmos, the universe, is the largest circle to which we belong. This is the realm of Spirit, of goddesses and gods, of our ancestors. The next circle comprises the
planet we live on, Earth. This is the place of air, water, fire, soil, stones and trees. Then comes our country and culture. Nearer to us is the circle of community, the friends and coworkers and others with whom we share our daily life. Our extended family makes up the next smaller circle, including our parents, children, brothers, sisters, uncles and so forth. Lastly, I think of the circle of intimacy, which we share with a spouse or partner (Some, 2003:23-24).

From within the context of colonial and imperial oppression, the realities and experiences of Indigenous peoples are appropriated, and displaced out of the Indigenous communal framework, romanticized and reframed in a depoliticized neo-liberal context which overwhelmingly tends to privilege white individualism. In short, the argument that Indigenous spirituality be seen or approached as an individualized affair does not explain participant responses here in my study, not only because collectivity is a central feature of Indigenous spiritual life, but also because this is a research project that infuses the spiritual with the political. And in so doing, this project highlights social relations of power, particularly with respect to colonialism, slavery and oppression and how they have hegemonically (re)(con)figured Indigenous spiritualities to operate in secret, or in what I term, “spiritual closets.”

I now return to the Orisa Esu whom, I feel is an important figure for my argument. I also return to Yoruba cosmology in order to situate this deity within an Indigenous and anti-colonial context. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Yoruba peoples approach human life as a part of the eternal existence of spirit which resides in Orun (the Otherworld), our everlasting home. This is illustrated by the Yoruba popular proverb, Aiye loja, orun ni ile (this world is a marketplace, the Otherworld is home). In essence, this means that human life is understood to be a journey to the ‘marketplace’ we call Earth, where both matter and spirit are infused, and thereby create the various forms of life that exist here on Earth. In Yoruba cosmology, complementarity (Soyinka 1976; Olajubu 2003) and interconnectedness are central, where Orun (the spiritual world), Aiye
(the physical world of the living human and other beings) and Ile (the earthworld) are all interdependent and cannot exist on their own (Olajubu 2003). Orun is inhabited by the Supreme Being, Olodumare, who is also known as Eleda (the Creator) and Olorun (literally meaning owner of the sky world) and the 401+ Orisa – many of whom once walked the earth as human beings endowed with supernatural powers who are then deified through death. The lives of the Orisa who were once human are continued through the prowess of those supernatural powers and various forces of nature such as water, spirit, wind, land/earth, fire, thunder/lightning and the forest/trees. Esu’s role is vital in Yoruba cosmology because of this Orisa’s two primary responsibilities: messenger and owner of the crossroads; and as keeper of Ase. As owner and messenger of the crossroads, Esu ensures that links between the spiritual and physical members of the African community remain intact. That is, that one’s community of Ancestors, human beings and the unborn remain linked and connected. In doing so, Esu acts as a necessary spiritual medium and messenger. However, it is Esu’s second charge that I want to focus on more heavily in this chapter.28

As keeper of Ase, this Orisa is the keeper of ‘life-force or energy’ and power (Abiodun, 1994), what I like to refer to as “the essential breath of life.” The significance of such a charge cannot be underestimated because it means that this Orisa plays a central role in power and spirit and all matters pertaining to this: meaning everything. It is very difficult and frankly, quite overwhelming to try and muddle through the kinds of consequences (both spiritual and material) such a colonial transposition means. However, I can say confidently that demonizing Esu effectively means demonizing African Indigenous spirituality, and in that sense, Esu becomes both the literal and symbolic representation of how African spirituality has been reconstructed.

28 See Chapter Six for more a comprehensive discussion, and analysis of the Orisa Esu’s first role as keeper of the crossroads and messenger.
reframed and misunderstood. Hence, the internalized words and ideologies that many of the research participants use in relation to Esu echo the very Euro-colonial Christian ideologies and discourses that are repeatedly evoked when discussions about Indigenous African spirituality arise. The concepts of “harm,” “danger,” “evil,” “idol worshipping,” “pagan,” are used interchangeably used by research participants to denote both Esu and Indigenous African spirituality as demonic. I contend that, to be coerced to engage one’s Indigenous spirituality in this manner; that is, to internalize, deny, engage in secret or completely disengage with this aspect of one’s culture is to deny, hide and disengage with aspects of one’s Indigenous African self. It is to stifle what is quite literally a powerful energy or force of life that has the potential to be one of the most spiritually nurturing and liberating parts of self, particularly in colonially oppressive climates such as that within North America. This, in turn, has enduring generational consequences that are both spiritual and material. In essence, the metaphoric and literal transposition of Esu and Indigenous Yoruba (African) spirituality is an acute form of spirit injury, or, what Patricia Williams (1997) refers to as “spirit murder:”

I see spirit-murder as no less than the equivalent of body murder. One of the reasons that I fear what I call spirit-murder, or disregard for others whose lives qualitatively depend on our regard, is that its product is a system of formalized distortions of thought. It produces social structures centered around fear and hate; it provides a tumorous outlet for feelings elsewhere unexpressed…We need to see it [spirit-murder] as a cultural cancer; we need to open our eyes to the spiritual genocide it is wreaking on blacks, whites, and the abandoned and abused of all races. We need to eradicate its numbing pathology before it wipes out what precious little humanity we have left (235).

Spirit injury occurs on both the individual and collective levels, inflicting wounds to the psyche to induce a type of spiritual psychic violence.29

The pragmatic “necessity” of closeting one’s Indigeneity and spiritual beliefs is burdensome and amputative to one’s spirit. Such wounds are also injurious to the spirit in the

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29 I build on and add a spiritual dimension to Patricia Williams’ discussion of ‘psychic violence’ (1997: 233).
sense that closeted forms of spirituality entail a denial or eclipsing of the self, thereby creating internal fragmentation. Such denials of the self can be traced back to the Eurocentric insistence on singular notions of normalcy. The deleterious effects of this colonial fixedness essentially do not allow for the body, mind and spirit to co-exist in multiple and diverse ways. This, in turn, has enduring consequences that are both spiritual and material for subsequent generations.

Unfortunately, for these younger generations, access to Indigenously anchored constructions of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges is generally locked off, stifled and blocked. This allows for the more popular Eurocentric constructions of Indigenous spirituality to propagate, both within and beyond the Yoruba psyche and imagination. This is where the real spiritual harm exists.

Contrary to what popular culture would have us believe, the real danger to one’s person and community lies in the oppressively singular, and hegemonically fixed notions of spiritual normalcy that are dictated by Euro-Christian belief and discourse.
In the critically acclaimed independent film, *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash highlights the importance of language for African/Black people, noting that remaining true to the rich language of the Gullah people was priority for her in the film. Many Blacks who watched the film felt that the Gullah language was not a problem, and therefore resisted the suggestion of incorporating subtitles (Bobo, 1995). However, there was expressed concern that subtitles were needed so that Whites would be able to understand the film. Julie Dash’s position on the issue was very much in line with many Blacks who believed that there was a certain cultural dignity and discernment maintained in the insistence that subtitles not be included, and therefore viewers should patiently sit with the film. For Dash, it was important to respect, and remain true to the linguistic integrity of African-diasporic culture, and the overall story of *Daughters of the Dust*:

To tell the truth, I had problems with *Miller’s Crossing*. It made me realize that I’ve done that all my life, pushed through on accents until I understood them. Why is it with *Daughters of the Dust* that people seem almost offended by it? When they bring it up, I tell them, “Release on it, you’ll understand it in a minute.” You may not understand every sentence but you’ll surely get the general idea, the sensibility of the whole thing (Bobo, 1995:188).

The significance of this discussion, and Dash’s position is that it demonstrates how language and literacy shape ideas about one’s identity. In this particular instance, Dash insists that the audience ‘read’ the on-screen material on its own terms instead of being ‘fed’ and/or distracted by standard English subtitles. Also implicit in this debate is the assumption that the language and culture of the Gullah people can be easily translated into standard English. This is not to say that translatability is impossible or undesirable. Rather, what I want to challenge here is the assumption that standard English can effectively and equitably carry or express the ideas, norms,
idioms and symbols of another culture without significant meaning from said culture being lost, particularly where Indigenous societies are concerned. This problem is what Indigenous scholar Marie Battiste (2000) refers to as “the Eurocentric illusion of benign translatability,” where European-centered cultures do not give serious consideration to the differences between worldviews and languages, and instead assume that they can be easily understood, and therefore translated without misrepresentation or impairment (79-80). This chapter introduces and explores the concept of critical spiritual literacy as an indispensable analytical tool which helps us better understand the significance of Indigenous worldsense/cosmology, and the dangerous implications of assuming that all worldviews can be measured, judged and effectively interpreted according to Eurocentric yardsticks and values.

In their highly influential book, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat define spiritual literacy as “the ability to read the signs written in the texts of our own experiences…and find sacred meaning in all aspects of life” (1996: 15). They also identify children and Indigenous peoples as some of the most spiritually literate people in our world despite the fact that “they may not be able to read letters on a page” (18). What the Brussats point out is the significance of different forms of literacy, particularly where Spirituality is concerned. This form of literacy extends beyond conventional Eurocentric notions of being able to read, which are overwhelmingly confined to comprehension of letters on a page.

Accordingly, this chapter rests on how the sacred is embedded within, and written into our everyday experiences and lives, and how my research participants engaged with or ‘read’ the sacred in their daily lives.

Crucial to note is that the Brussats’ discussion of various blocks to spiritual literacy based on their understanding that the sacred is not separate from daily life. Brussat & Brussat identify
worldview as the most significant block to spiritual literacy and while they do not name or identify this blockage as Christian worldview, they do discuss some of the problems that arise from imbibing a perspective where “the world is seen as Devil-ridden, doomed, and dangerous” (33). They argue that embracing such a worldview blocks one’s ability to see, commune with and engage the sacred in daily life. This perspective is strikingly similar to my discussion in chapter 5, where I point out that such beliefs about the world are overwhelmingly present in Christian doctrine and worldview. Ultimately, the point here is that worldview or cosmology is of utmost importance where matters of the spirit, and spiritual literacy are concerned. However, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat’s conceptualization of spiritual literacy is limited in that it does not consider how historical and contemporary power imbalances have created a hierarchy in terms of how various worldviews are ordered, constructed and valued. Further, their definition of spiritual literacy does not engage the important concept of difference; it fails to address the uniqueness of various worldviews, and how such differences cannot be minimized or overlooked. In short, they fail to identify oppression, inequity and the legacies of imperialism and colonialism as the key forces responsible for the hegemonic ordering of worldviews which are foundational in structuring blockages to spiritual literacy. Finally, the Brussats do not distinguish language as central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, and overall universe (Wa Thiong’o, 1986:4). Since language is a prime communicative vehicle through which knowledge and relationships are built and sustained, it (language) is therefore central to worldsense and the ability to read and engage with the sacred in one’s daily life.

Through their conceptualization of “spiritual literacy” the Brussats have made an important contribution to how we think about literacy itself. However, their understanding of this
concept leaves too many gaps that cannot adequately address inequities which arise from oppression. For this reason, I build on the Brussats’ concept by introducing the idea of critical spiritual literacy to both fill in crucial gaps, as well as address the following research question for this chapter: **What are the challenges of learning Yoruba Indigenous knowledges in a context that pathologizes African Indigenous culture and spirituality?** My conception of critical spiritual literacy builds on theirs to consider the historical and contemporary power inequities that challenge the learning and use of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges by diasporic Yoruba individuals and their communities. These inequities are largely colonial, and I therefore place extreme importance on Indigenous peoples’ abilities in terms of their freedom to commune with and recognize the sacred in daily life. Critical spiritual literacy involves an appreciation of the deep connections between language, cosmology/worldsense and one’s collective and individual identity. Finally, my understanding of critical spiritual literacy requires a deeper exploration of the assumptions embedded in dominant and Indigenous cosmologies and the consequences of taking for granted Euro-Christian discourses and ways of reading the sacred as universal. In developing the concept of critical spiritual literacy, I discuss two related concepts I developed which arose from interviews with my research participants. These concepts are subsets, or smaller components of the larger idea of critical spiritual literacy: ‘cosmological imperialism’ and ‘cosmological difference.’ I discuss these sub concepts by using the Orisa, Esu as my entry point because, again, this is an Indigenous figure that recurrent in my participants’ accounts of religion and spirituality. The figure of Esu is central both symbolically and literally in Yoruba Indigenous culture and cosmology and was repeatedly referenced by participants.

**Demonizing Esu and the Problem of Amputative Ambivalence**

Well evil…evil can be of different categories right? Okay, the belief is that Satan is evil in the Christian realm, that [he was] one of the disciples of God that misbehaved and is
trying to tempt people in the world. And then, in our traditional way they call Esu eh, evil too and he’s a deity too; he’s a god. It’s um, it’s like an intermediary between God and people. So he can...you know, he’s a trickster in the Western world (laughing). They see the red ties on one side, they see the black or something like that on the other. So basically there are two different types: Christianity and the traditional (Sade, research participant).

Sade discusses two figures in the Euro-Christian and Indigenous Yoruba realm: Satan and Esu. At first glance, one may assume that she is suggesting these two figures are equivalents. However, I would argue that this is not the case. Rather, I believe that what Sade means is that she is pointing out is the way Esu is understood by some (read constructed) as the equivalent of Satan, yet this deity is, in fact more than that if one considers the roles and responsibilities of this Orisa within Yoruba cosmology. For instance, Sade notes that Esu is a trickster deity, and she also points out the complicated dualistic character of this Orisa—it is red on one side, and black on the other—where his/her\textsuperscript{30} dualism is not binarized, but complementary (i.e. male and female, hot and cold etc.) and intersecting.\textsuperscript{31} In essence, Sade is identifying some of the differences between the Indigenous Yoruba and Euro-Christian metaphysical systems and suggesting that these differences are important. If this particular Orisa that Sade discusses is demonized amongst the majority of the research participants for this study, and in the larger context of Yoruba Christian social life, this is due, in large part to the generational internalization of Eurocentric Christian discourses. As previously mentioned, such discourses have hierarchically ordered Yoruba Indigenous knowledges as backwards, inferior and uncivilized. However, interestingly, while carrying out extensive research and exploring critical scholarship on Indigenous Yoruba spirituality, these knowledges, and Esu in particular were discussed by critical scholars in quite a different way. In this scholarship, Esu was an Orisa, a cunning and central Yoruba deity that was

\textsuperscript{30} See section titled: “Cosmological Imperialism: Gender and the Essentialized Masculinization of Esu” for more on Esu, this Orisa’s indeterminate gender.

\textsuperscript{31} For a more in-depth discussion of Esu’s roles and responsibilities in the Yoruba cosmos, see the section of this chapter titled: “Cosmological Difference: A Struggle Between Two Metaphysical Systems.”
the owner of the crossroads and keeper of Ase: the power and essential breath of life. I found myself in somewhat of a quandary because I was not able to reconcile these very polarized constructions of Esu. While the research I completed showed that undoubtedly this was emblematic of being a colonized people where many had converted to Christianity, this research did not speak to the present-day tensions I was feeling around how Esu had been positioned and was still very much demonized in contemporary Yoruba Christian life – both socially and spiritually. I was stumped, at a crossroads, ironically enough. And traversing back and forth between Esu, “the Devil,” and Esu, the central Orisa and keeper of Ase was a “nervous condition” that did not feel very healthy (Fanon, 1963; Dangarembga, 1988). I say this because I am of the opinion that while being at a crossroads is an important reoccurring juncture in life, it is a site that one visits; it is only temporary. It is temporary because the crossroads is supposed to propel you into making a choice, or so I thought. Yet again, the irony of this ambivalence is that paradox, contradiction, elusiveness, freewill to choose and ambiguity are also the domains of Esu the Orisa; the deity of the crossroads that sits, stands and traverses between and with/in the material and spiritual worlds.

What this narrative highlights is the problem of amputative ambivalence and how this tension operates as a metaphor for the larger problematic of religion as a site of contestation. My experience is a contemporary metaphor for the conflict and unequal entanglements between the Yoruba and Euro-Christian metaphysical systems. I felt it was necessary to write myself into this chapter because it was largely provoked by my own personal experiences of spiritual ambivalence and negotiation. And, I do suspect that such experiences are not solely mine, but rather, could possibly emblematize the need for further inquiry into the larger phenomenon of cosmological encounter through religious imperialism. Therefore, my aim in this chapter is to
explore and tease out participants’ understandings of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges through the figure of Esu. As a profoundly demonized Orisa, Esu is ideal because this deity is symbolic of how African Indigenous spirituality and Africans/Blacks on a whole have also been demonized and pathologized by imperial and colonial hegemony. Again, Esu is an important deity not only because of this Orisa’s key role and function within Yoruba cosmology, but also because Esu was the Orisa spoken of the most by my research participants. In this sense, Esu is the deity that brings the challenges of learning and engaging Yoruba Indigenous knowledges in Eurocentric contexts to light. Upon deep reflection as to why the Orisa Esu was repeatedly mentioned by research participants, it became clear that it was not coincidental. Esu is the only deity who was stripped and transposed into Christianity via the Yoruba Bible and, consequently, Yoruba social life as the devil and archetype of evil. Given this, I situate the tension between the Yoruba and Euro-Christian cosmologies through two key figures in these worldsenses: Esu and Satan.

Contemporary implications of cosmological encounter – such as blockages to spiritual literacy, which are informed by the amputation of one’s African Indigenous knowledges – have been paid scant attention to date, scholarly or otherwise. My research participants’ ambivalence around the figure of Esu is symptomatic of Christianization – prosyletization and conversion – which continues to be a larger dimension of religious fundamentalism and “globalization”. Again, the existing consequences of this reality amongst the Yoruba diaspora in Canada is not paid much attention. Third, while on the one hand the overwhelming number of people converting to Christianity can be explained through a Marxist conceptualization of religion which posits that it is latched onto in times of social rupture – i.e. globalization – in this chapter I focus on how within diasporic Yoruba individuals and communities, religion and spirituality become sites of contestation, as reflected in many research participants’ understandings of the
Orisa Esu. I consequently argue that such constructions are both informed by and operate as cosmological imperialism. Specifically, I explore how in this context, this type of ambivalence manifests to block spiritual literacy and further the continual dominance of Eurocentric constructions of Indigenous worldsense. In other words, this discussion is important because it draws attention to a new conceptualization of the problem of ambivalence by anchoring it in a cosmological context. I argue that in doing so, we are able to garner a more contextualized understanding of what I define as cosmological imperialism, difference and how they are central to more critical understandings of spiritual literacy. This is an awareness where Eurocentric or pro-Enlightenment understandings of the world often take root in hegemonic notions of race, gender and other social relations, and are written into the Yoruba cosmos through unequal relationships of power. Ultimately, what I am premising here is the need to pay attention to how knowledge is constructed and ordered within the context of worldsense or cosmology. While some participants made no distinction between Western and Yoruba (African) ways of ‘seeing’ the world, others emphasized the differences. Sade addressed these differences as important knowledge that is necessary to retain and pass onto the following generations:

For me, yes I am in Canada, and what we call, *ilu oyinbo*, but as Africans, we see the world in a different way. Um, we have ah, those that we can see, you know like us humans or people. But we also have those we can’t see, at least not with our eyes. And it is all here too, it is all here; a part of the world no matter where you come from or go. This is what we Yoruba believe— and it is all owned and created by God, the highest power. This is very common knowledge for us Yoruba, and most Africans I know anyway. My sons, they know this too, even though we are here they know this. Like, no matter what, for me, they [our children] should know about the culture. It’s very important because if you don’t— like if they don’t know about their culture, they will get lost. And everybody have their own culture. No matter what, even if you integrate into the Western world you still have to know your background, you still have to know your culture, and you still have to know that the way we do things, if it’s different it’s okay if we know God in our own way. So, it’s important for me, but I don’t know about others because some of our kids here don’t know. But then, I know that definitely if you let them know about it, like if you teach them then they will learn and they will know.
Similar to Sade, Mr. Fayemi made distinctions between Western and Yoruba religious perspectives on the world and staunchly defended Yoruba perspective as valid too:

I believe in my own culture and traditional values which is Ifa. In this Ifa, we Yorubas worship God through this and at the same time we worship Osun and then we worship the God of iron which is Ogun, yeah. You see, all of these small gods, they are parts of nature. You know, Ogun is the forest and Osun and Yemoja are water. And Sango is rain and thunder, and I believe in that! These traditional ways teach us to respect nature because God created it all! If you buy a new car, you [are] supposed to slaughter a hen in order to prevent evil occurrence to you, you know. Which is what I…it’s a matter of spiritual belief! Then you believe in something, that if I do this, this will not happen and it’s not going to happen! There are all types of powers around us, and us Yoruba we know that these things work! Your mind is your religion. But religion here [Canada] is not the same. We have been told that these ways of doing things is not civilized. That’s why I told you I don’t go to church. But my wife and children go and I don’t mind. You know, it helps them, to see the world the way we do here. We are here and it helps them.

However, when I extended our discussion of the Yoruba Orisa to Esu in particular, Mr. Fayemi did not doubt that Esu was the devil:

No. Esu is not an Orisa. Esu is the devil. That is the Yoruba word for devil or Satan. Esu is a devil. When they say somebody is Esu, it means it’s a bad person, he’s working for devil. They use it in so many ways. They can use it to describe some human being…Yes that particular word is for evil things, and devilish things. They can use it to describe anybody; they can say, ‘*this girl is Esu!*’ (laughing); that if you are causing problems that’s what it means. It’s not Orisa, whosoever is causing even when a goat or dog is eating your maize you say, ‘this goat is Esu!’

Drawing on my own experience and my research participants’ conceptions of Esu, I present four components that are central to my argument of critical spiritual literacy, which focuses on cosmological imperialism, difference and how the Yoruba and Euro-Christian cosmovisions encounter one another: First, I use my own personal experience of uncertainty and struggle around this Orisa to present a glimpse into the problem of amputative ambivalence. Second, I employ a discussion of cosmological difference by outlining Esu’s role and function in Yoruba cosmology and philosophy. In the third section, I engage a historical analysis of how this problem of ambivalence emerged through the key figure of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who
translated the Bible into Yoruba and Esu unto the devil. This component is particularly significant because it maps how hegemonic constructions of race and gender recur throughout Crowther’s translation. I then build on this by showing how these constructions produce dichotomized and essentialized versions of Esu that then fix this deity as hegemonically masculine and quintessentially evil. Lastly, I draw some conclusions as to what the implications of this amputative ambivalence are and why it is a problem for diasporic Yoruba individuals and communities to bear such a burden.

Cosmological Difference: A Struggle between Two Metaphysical Systems

The term ‘worldview,’ which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West’s privileging of the visual. It is Eurocentric to use it to describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term, ‘worldsense’ is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups …[and] will be used when describing the Yoruba or other cultures that may privilege senses other than the visual or even a combination of senses (Oyeronke, 1997: 3).

I situate my conceptualization of cosmological difference under the larger rubric of cosmological imperialism and draw on Audre Lorde’s (1984) discussion of difference, where she argues that it is imperative to move beyond mere tolerance or ‘pathetic pretense’ that our differences do not exist, but rather to view difference as a primary site where we acknowledge our strengths as different yet equal, and therefore garner the power to seek new ways of being in the world (1984: 111). The philosophical differences between Yoruba and Euro-Christian (British) cosmologies need to be taken seriously. It is important for me to note that in no way am I advocating a dichotomized construction of these cosmologies, but rather, I am attempting to highlight the stratified social relations of power between one, a worldview, and another, a worldsense. Also, in no way am I working with essentialist ideas of cultural identity, purity or ‘authenticity,’ as cultural dynamism reflects the realities of centuries of interaction that occur
both within and beyond distinct cultures in human social life (Hall 1997). Contact, exchange and the various cultural reconfigurations that are born of interactions between different cultures are part and parcel of the human condition. To substantiate my argument of cosmological imperialism and underscore the gravity of what was displaced in the figure of Esu, the following section explicates Yoruba cosmology and the role of Esu within the Yoruba metaphysical system.

In Yoruba cosmology, complementarity and interconnectedness are central, where Orun (the spiritual world), Aiye (the physical world of the living human and other beings) and Ile (the earthworld) are all interdependent and cannot exist on their own (Soyinka, 1976; Olajubu, 2003). Orun is inhabited by the Supreme Being, Olodumare, who is also known as Eleda (the Creator) and Olorun (literally meaning owner of the sky world) and the four-hundred-and-one-plus Orisa, many of whom once walked the earth as human beings with supernatural powers who then became deified through death. The lives of the Orisa who were once human are continued through the prowess of supernatural powers and various forces of nature such as water, spirit, wind, land/earth, fire, thunder/lightning and the forest/trees. African cosmologies are also metaparadigms that function as maps which guide and direct a people on how to live and exist within their culture (James, 1993: 32). As discussed earlier in Chapters Two and Three, these cosmologies tend to be circular, emphasizing and symbolizing the important philosophy of balance, continuity, community and unity between ancestors, the living and unborn and how each entity is connected to the others (John, 2003: 12). All are important threads that come together to make the circle whole where, in essence, there is no beginning or end, but rather a powerful continuity of life through transmutation.
The circle reflects how the individual exists within the context of the larger community and how the living self is intertwined with the world of the ancestors and the unborn. The circle is both literally and figuratively a symbol of eternity in its continuity. I conceptualize the self to be the materialized manifestation of the circle, where each is a dialectic mirroring of the other. The self, then, is actually a layering of many synthesized selves which cross over, move in, out, and between the spiritual and material, making human existence extend throughout the cosmos, as opposed to simply being restricted to the world of materiality. What happens to these selves when central figures in the Yoruba worldsense are displaced? How is balance, community and spiritual literacy affected and how has colonialism re-drawn the Yoruba cosmological map? The figure of Esu gives us some clues as to how this map has been redrawn and disrupted, particularly with respect to the amputative ambivalence that is created when this deity who stands at the nexus of the spiritual and material (Orun, Aiye and Ile) is appropriated, transposed and defamed into the devil.

_Cosmological Difference: Esu and the Yoruba Concept of Ori_

One crucial element of Yoruba Indigenous identity mentioned repeatedly by many participants was the multilayered concept of Ori; what is literally known as one’s head, yet figuratively and spiritually known as one’s destiny. Participants discussed the concept of Ori in various ways. Many were familiar with the complexities and discussed multilayered understandings. Others offered more literal definitions pertaining to personal experiences. All participants understood Ori to be a popular and important idea regularly used by Yoruba peoples in a variety of ways. However, with the exception of two participants, no one mentioned Esu, or the importance of sacrifice and appeasing spiritual forces or deities in connection with the concept of Ori. Esu was noticeably absent from this portion of the interviews.
MRS OLADIRAN: Ori is head. But if you look at it the other way, ori is our destiny like God. Like our God, ori is very, very important. The way we call it, ori— Ori is just like [the] head. Our entire head is just God, our destiny (Mrs. Oladiran, research participant).

MR. OLADIRAN: Okay, you’re talking about your ori, you’re talking about your destiny. And eh, destiny…once destiny…we are making a mistake when we say our destiny is in our hands. Our destiny is not in our hands, you know why? Because even before you were created, God knows what you are going to become. Our destiny is in the hands of God. Or the only thing we human beings have to do is we just have to cooperate with God and whatever he has laid down for our life will come to pass, that is IF we work according to his precept or according to his plan.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Oladiran anchor Ori in the spiritual realm and in the hands of what seems to be a very Christian oriented God/creator. For them, God is the driving force in their lives guiding what they are meant to do or accomplish while on earth. However, Dele offers a more complicated and less linear understanding of Ori where ‘good’ and ‘bad’ luck are spiritual energies that are susceptible to human influence and manipulation.

For Yorubas, there’s something about knocking on your head is bad luck kind of thing. Like if a stranger knocks you on the head or something it’s back luck or something or that it’s not good to get knocked on the head. Or you know when parents threaten you when you’re behaving bad they say, ‘ma fun e nko.’ Another thing is when I was coming to Canada, my Grandma, she did something to my head….she called some man that did something on my head as if [for] some kind of protection…(Dele, research participant).

Dele’s discussion reminds us of Yoruba worldsense (cosmology) and the constant awareness of various spiritual forces that can assist or hinder a person. His discussion also suggests that ritual or ceremony are vital Indigenous tools to empower individuals while simultaneously ensuring that connections with other community members remain intact. Similar to Dele, Mama Niyi understands Ori to be the merging of the material and spiritual, where spiritual forces or energies can be recognized as the driving force behind what appears to only be physical:

Ori is more or less what you call “Eleda” [The Creator]. Well, it’s destiny too. Ori is considered Eleda, which is your creator and the head. People believe in it….With some people, they believe that if anybody [has] offended them, once they beat the head like this [knocking on her forehead with an open palm], that, whatever they say, it’s going to happen to the person. Let’s say I have such a power and somebody [has] offended
me…and I say, oh my goodness you did this to me, then I beat my head like this [knocking on her forehead with an open palm again], in the power of my head, this is going to happen to him or her. Us Yoruba believe that that thing will happen, and it does (Mama Niyi, research participant).

Mr. Awoniyi’s discussion of Ori emphasizes the multilayered quality of this concept, and the various beliefs that Yoruba peoples hold. In addition to understanding Ori as the fusion of spirit and matter that is interdependent, he offers a very detailed understanding of one’s destiny as a state of being that is folded into the circumstances surrounding one’s birth and identity, and notes how important rituals or ceremonies are in determining a child’s destiny to ensure that a good destiny is properly aligned and remains intact:

Okay, now Ori, like here in the human sense we see it as the physical head, but it’s not just the physical head. In English yes, head is head. The only time we change head in the English thing is when we say, yeah he is the head of an organization, and in Yoruba we say he’s the orori. Like, we will talk of the government, oh, orori ijoba. But ori in Yoruba is not just ori, it’s like an aura that surrounds you as a being and it’s not just a one layer aura, it is in stages, in levels…Now all those [that] are referred to as Ori, ori could also mean crown. Because it depends on how you see it, how you describe it. Ori is also your destiny and we believe that it is something you bring with you from Orun (heaven). Now there are people that are born in the Yoruba culture, they are born with a certain type of thing that comes with them. Like, like the Ojo I think comes with a cord around his neck, you know the umbilical cord is around the head. So we say, ‘Ori ti ojo gbe wa aiye niye.’ [that is the destiny that this child with the cord around his neck brought with him]. When a child is born with the cord around the neck, we call him Ojo. Dada comes with locks in their hair, you understand? Dada [is] a group of people that may not be connected physically, but spiritually, unknowing, they are connected, you understand? So you call all of them together…Ori ti Dada gbe wa aiye niyen [that is the destiny that Dada people with prelocked hair from heaven brought with them]. And um, You don’t cut it [their hair]. You just leave it [and] it grows and all you do is just keep it clean, and it becomes a natural lock. Locks just like you have. There is nothing you do to it. Then it gets to a certain age when you want to really cut the hair. For some of them [Dada people], if as soon as you see the locks, you cut it, they might react to it; get ill, create fever or they become feverish. You have to really consult some oracle or do some things, you know to avert anything happening to that child. So, when it gets to a certain age— Um, from one example that I noticed which was my sister, they had to um, it’s like we call it saara. Which is just a type of sacrifice and calling all little children in your whole area and providing them with lots of goodies, you understand? It’s just making it subtle for that child….that now you are cutting the hair. And it will be in the memory of that child forever that you know what? ‘The day my hair was cut, oh boy did I have a very big
party! you understand? But mind you, it’s not just a big party, because you do not know what ori (destiny) that each of these child[ren] that you have called... has. So now, you are appealing, you are giving them gifts, that you know, accept my child into this clan of children, you understand? And then you have really... I will say it in a very shrew or crude way, it’s like buying your way into the community. So, okay, now we are now going into different levels and different layers... but I will just break it down to just the aura, the layers of aura that surrounds a human being.

Mr. Awoniyi’s discussion of “Saara” (a type of community-based sacrifice) reminds us of the centrality of community in Yoruba culture for ushering in important life events like birth. For Yoruba communities, birth is a journey of travel from pure spirit to earth, where one brings certain aspects of one’s being with them that not only make them unique, but also give some clues as to what the new addition to the community’s destiny is. Hence the widespread and popular phrase, “ori to gbe wa”: “the destiny that he/she brought with them.” Similar to Mr. Awoniyi, Sade defines Ori as a multilayered state of being where the spiritual cannot be separated from the material. She emphasizes the significance of sacrifice and ritual where one’s destiny is concerned:

When you talk of ori, it’s just as [any] ordinary human being [where] you have your head, you have your head. Your brain is there, everything is there. But then when we [Yorubas] talk of destiny, the belief is that before you come into the world you have chosen whatever you are going to be. That’s our own belief, I don’t know that of the Western world but then even sometimes in the olden days they used to go and consult the oracle and find out the type of destiny that that child brought into the world. So they try to guide to continue with that.... and if there is anything that is not too good they see—they ask what can they do in order to help him move a better way, get a better destiny, right. Yeah, they used to do that. So destiny can never be changed they say, but then if it’s bad destiny, they still have to appease God or do something in order for that bad destiny to change.

Here, I suggest that Sade’s discussion of alignment of one’s Ori is twofold. She speaks both about alignment of the child with his/her destiny, and what is at the core of this discussion is the importance of an individual’s alignment of their body, mind and spirit/soul; what is popularly spoken of as the body, mind, spirit connection.
In short, Ori is a salient element of Yoruba world-sense because it maps out how people know and understand their world. George Dei notes that Indigenous knowledges are grounded in the cosmos; they are experientially based, holistic and dynamic knowledges in which “through the process of learning the old, new knowledge is discovered” (Dei, 2000: 6). As discussed by many research participants, there is no separation between the secular and the sacred in Yoruba spirituality because spirit is embedded in everyday life from the time before one is conceived, through their birth, throughout one’s physical life as a human being, and after one dies (Mbiti, 1975: 2). As discussed by Mr. Awoniyi and Sade and her son, Dele, ritual is one of the primary sites for interaction between the spiritual and physical (Olajubu, 2003: 3). Ritual helps to maintain links to ensure that connection with the unseen remains active and unbroken. An important element of Yoruba rituals and ceremonies is the communication between the living and metaphysical beings, and how metaphysical beings are recognized as vital members of the community. Yoruba rituals are often carried out to mark important life-altering stages such as birth, baby-naming ceremonies, initiation, rites of passage into adulthood, marriage and burials. All of these life stages are inextricably infused with Indigenous Yoruba spiritual beliefs as a means of communication with all members of the Yoruba community. The Orisa that is responsible for ensuring that these links remain intact is Esu, particularly where offerings and sacrifice during the performance of these rituals is concerned (Abimbola, 1976). Oyeronke Olajubu (2003) describes Esu as key in performing the ritual of aligning an individual with their Ori, their destiny:

Ori (head) is conceived by the Yoruba as a representation of the inner essence in humans; it symbolizes the individual’s essential nature. It’s conception is underscored by the Yoruba perception of self as interior and exterior the latter being dependent on the former . . . The individual whose Ori is to be propitiated sits on a mat, dressed elegantly. Items prescribed for the occasion by Ifa divination are each placed temporarily on the participant’s head, one after the other. Prayers are offered for the participants to solicit
the support and guidance of Ori. Thereafter, a sacrifice is offered to Esu (god of the crossroad and messenger of the deities), to ensure free passage for the requests made (33).

Rowland Abiodun builds on the concepts of interior and exterior self, also known as inner and outer head:

In the visual arts, notably in sculpture, ori-ode (“physical head”) is the focus of much ritualistic, artistic, and aesthetic activity. Not infrequently, the head is given a place of visual command by proportionally subordinating all other parts of the body to it. The enlarged head is further emphasized by detailed artistic treatment with elaborate coiffures, crowns, or other headgear . . . the absence of ori and oju in any sacred or secular activity, whether artistic or not, would be tantamount to anarchy in the human and spiritual realms of existence. There would be no ase. (Abiodun, 1994: 77).

As messenger and deity of the crossroads between the material and physical, Esu has the vital charge of traveling, translating and judging; whether the offered sacrifice is appropriate for the designated spiritual cognates. Esu is the concept of interior and exterior head, and it is Esu’s role in the dualistic dimension of this model upon which I want to focus. This concept is also of importance because it mirrors Esu’s role and function in Yoruba worldsense is important precisely because it entails both literally and figuratively crossing or spanning over more than one aspect of a particular unit/entity. In this case, it is Ori: a Yoruba concept, or rather, state of being that, as many research participants assert, cannot be minimized. The sense of being dual, or multilayered –parallel to Ori– is of particular relevance to Esu because it signals how this Orisa cannot be conflated and confined to a singular role, function or identity –which is what happens to Esu when re-made as Satan. The duality of this Orisa –encompassing material and physical, left and right, male and female, hot and cold– is not parallel to dichotomized qualities that exist, never touching, yet stratified side by side. Rather, Esu’s dualities are intersecting ones that operate in concert with one another, hence the association of this Orisa with the crossroads and its particular insignia as one of flux, transformation and movement. These dualities that Esu
is charged with are also complementary—a key principle in Yoruba philosophy and cosmology (Abimbola, 1976; Oyewumi, 1997). In this way, Esu represents the realm of possibilities and multiple happenings that both incorporate and extend beyond dualisms. The crossroads entails an image of this Orisa which unites and divides in the process of attaining what Eliade would call “divine totality,” which is defined as incarnate perfection (Lawuyi, 1986: 307).

Esu’s role as the judge who either blocks or “ensures the clear passage” of requests made from the material to the spiritual realms is also noteworthy, solidifying this Orisa’s fundamentally important role that operates not only in keeping the “lines of communication” open and linked between the physical and metaphysical, but also in ensuring that people are properly aligned with their destiny, that is, assuring that their Ori-inu (inner metaphysical head) and Ori-ode (physical outer-head) are also aligned. Given this fact, Esu is a key figure in ensuring that Indigenous Yoruba understandings of the self—popularly known as the body, mind and spirit connection are properly aligned. Importantly, Esu is also endowed with Ase which is a vital life-force and divine essence that imbues sound, space and matter with energy to restructure existence in order to transform and control the physical world (Abiodun, 1994: 78).

Another dimension of Esu is this Orisa’s role as trickster or mischief-maker who can cajole one into confusion and into possibly making regrettable decisions (Idowu: 80).是如何, Esu tempts people in complex situations by offering a number of choices to see how they will handle such a situation. Esu is that part of the Divine which tests and tries people to

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32 While the notion of ‘the trickster’ has often been perceived as a negative description, this is not how I, nor Idowu conceptualize the term with specific reference to Esu, who, as I have cautioned above, cannot be reduced to simply one role and responsibility in Yoruba cosmology. To do so would be reductionist, and, in due course, conflates this uniquely complex Orisa. It has been suggested by Ulli Beier (2001, 33) and Oyekan Owomoyela (1997, x-xvi) that the trickster role by itself is a negative portrayal, however, when keeping in mind Esu’s other multiple tasks and responsibilities that operate in concert with the character building agenda behind Esu’s ‘tricks,’ it is clear that Esu as trickster is in fact not a negative description of how this multifaceted Orisa operates in Yoruba cosmology.
reveal or see what the true nature of their character is, hence the application of the trickster title
of Esu as trickster:

[Esu] challenges us to reflect constantly on our lives and not get too blinded by habit. He
is cocky and masterful, but against cockiness and mastery. At first sign of complacency,
Esu keeps us in check by introducing chaos and confusion…He is sometimes referred to
as the “devil.” This is not because he is spiteful or the devil, as the Christian
mistranslation of his characteristics would have us believe. Rather, he wants us to always
be alert, vigilant, and to make active choices by questioning our sense of certainty and
unexamined faith in the world (331).

Communication, translation, sanctioning and bearing sacrifices from the material to the
spiritual, trickster, character builder, deity of choice and of the crossroads include some of the
many facets and faces of this complex Orisa. It is the complexity and multilayered role and
function of this deity that made me pay attention to the contrasts between how Esu was
constructed amongst my research participants and how this deity is understood in Yoruba culture
according to the Indigenous roles and responsibilities of this Orisa. The continued evocation of
Esu as the Devil amongst the research participants was of significance, and therefore in need of
further attention and deeper exploration. Because Yoruba cosmology or worldsense is rooted in
holistic harmony between its various dimensions, forces and entities, and because Esu is a key
figure in the stability and continuity of this harmony, to misunderstand or disrupt this Orisa is to
disrupt a key element that endeavors to ensure the balance of material and spiritual harmony that
is crucial to the Yoruba cosmos. The reduction of Esu’s significance to a Satanic figure is an
example of blockage to spiritual literacy that is anchored in cosmological imperialism and the
denial of difference among cultures. In the Yoruba context, this is when the varied and complex
layers of Esu’ in Yoruba cosmology are stripped, reduced and reconceived into Euro-Christian
conception as the lord of evil, and antithesis to God. Historically, this reconceptualization of Esu has occurred primarily through missionary institutions and prosyletization.

**Cosmological Imperialism: Biblical Hegemony and the Re-Constitution of Esu as ‘the Devil’**

Alongside all research participants’ repeated reference to Esu and other Yoruba Orisa as “idols,” was the insistence that Esu was also the devil. This can be summed up in Mrs. Oladiran’s opinion that, “this idol [Esu] only knows about harm and how to hurt people because he is the devil.” When I asked participants to share their thoughts on traditional or Indigenous Yoruba spirituality, it was suggested by the Oladirans (four participants), the Olusanmis (two participants) and Mrs. Awoniyi that this was a spirituality that was practiced during “igba imo”; translated as a time before the advent of Christianity where ‘primitivism’, ignorance and ‘not knowing God’ reigned. Such a perception indicates an internalization of the widespread imperialist construction of Yoruba worldsense (Indigenous cosmology) as primitive and uncivilized. Among the diasporic Yoruba participants, this internalization of colonial ideology, at minimum warps a Yoruba ability to read and engage with the sacred in the Indigenous cosmos through the key figure of Esu as this Orisa is in Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. The association of Esu with Eurodominant notions of evil curtails the desire of Yoruba individuals to openly embrace the everyday experiences and practices that are guided by this deity and other Indigenous ways of knowing.

One of the most powerful tools used to block spiritual literacy and engagements with the sacred in Indigenous contexts is the Bible, both historically and contemporarily. The Bible is a text that combines Euro-Christian worldview with Eurocentric notions of literacy which have been disseminated among colonized peoples through missionary zeal. This was done for

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33 See Chapter Five, section titled, “Discourses of Evil and Idol Worshipping: Demonizing the Yoruba Orisa” for a more detailed discussion of how Yoruba Orisa are reconstituted as idols in Euro-Christian discourse.
purposes of religious conversion and socio-economic subjugation. The hegemonic ‘necessity’ of engagement with the Bible in order to become ‘literate’ and ‘educated’ is not merely a religious enterprise, but is a political, social and economic act that lays the groundwork for colonization. Ologunde (1982) reminds us of the pivotal role the Yoruba language played in conversion to of the Yoruba to Christianity; citing missionary control as an era where the central goal was to ‘civilize,’ enlighten and spread the word of Christ through the Bible. During this era, missionaries needed people who were literate in their Yoruba mother tongue to become the teachers and catechists through which ‘the gospel’ could be spread. A written orthography was produced and the Bible was translated into Yoruba. In this era it becomes clear how (Eurocentric notions of) literacy became inextricably bound up with Christianity and the missionary agenda to have it spread amongst Indigenous communities, primarily through Biblical translation into Indigenous languages. While technically the Yoruba language was being developed in the sense that it was translated into an orthography in the form of an alphabet, this was done solely for purposes of domination, as coded in colonial discourses of ‘enlightenment,’ ‘progress’ and civilizing projects. In the translation of an oral culture (Yoruba) into an orthography, one form of literacy replaces the other: Eurocentric notions of literacy are positioned as the norm while Yoruba Indigenous literacies are condemned as inferior and obsolete. It is important for me to note that in no way am I advocating a dichotomized construction of literacy, because the two are complexly interwoven and do overlap. What I do want to highlight is the manner in which one’s respectability as a ‘literate’ and ‘educated’ person is entangled with being a Christian and versed in Biblical knowledge and discourse.

Fascinatingly, of the over four hundred Orisa, Esu is the only deity that “makes it” into the translated Yoruba Bible. I argue that this is not a random occurrence but rather reflects a
conscious missionary effort to sabotage Esu –as symbolic of Yoruba Indigenous spirituality– the Orisa that existed specifically because of its unique role and function within the Yoruba metaphysical system. Reassigning Esu the role of “the devil” in the Yoruba Bible not only meant stripping this Orisa of its Indigenous responsibilities and powers, but it also suggests that the Yoruba Bible itself emerged as an amputative imperial tool, because Esu the Orisa is replaced with Esu “the devil.” A number of research participants repeatedly referred to the Bible as their main source of evidence in proving Esu to be the devil and essence of evil. When I asked Mrs. Awoniyi to elaborate on her position that Esu was the devil and how she came to know this, she passionately replied:

That is what they call it!!! Esu. Okay. Je kin le mo ‘le fun e! [translation: Let me break it down for you now]. They say that Esu has red and black, that it follows harm and that if it really wants to do harm, it follows the person until it does this harm. So, Esu…even in the Bible they say he goes up and down throughout the universe until he achieves what he wants to do. So in that case, Esu is an evil thing...an idol that is the devil.

Interestingly, her partner, Mr. Awoniyi understood Esu to be a Yoruba Orisa that was not the devil. He argued that the complexity of the Yoruba language did not make for exact or accurate English translations. Mr. Awoniyi contended that Esu’s name was used in multiple ways by Yoruba people to mean different things:

Esu is not……you see Yoruba is complex, it’s a very, very complex language. We cannot literally say that Esu is the devil. Ah, you can’t just give it a direct meaning, to say Esu is the devil; just to get away from a long conversation you just say Esu is the devil for the person who speaks English to understand where you are going. But this is not so to the fullest extent because ah, ah even in the Bible, Satan is not described as the Devil. In the Oxford dictionary, it’s where the devil is related as Satan, but in the Bible, Satan is Satan and Esu is as powerful as being somebody who is Satanic. You see, with this Esu, it’s the way you say it! You could mean Esu to be really, really, really bad and you could use Esu just for conversation to say that a person is giving you problems. Whereas Esu is the extreme of all evil, which is Satanic.

Mr. Awoniyi’s position appears somewhat contradictory in that while refusing to conceptualize Esu as the devil, he likens this deity to being “really bad”, “Satanic” and problem ridden.
However, there is a powerful counter-hegemonic subtext in Mr. Awoniyi’s position, in the sense that he insists on multiple, and therefore, more complex readings of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality which must be anchored in equally sophisticated understandings of the complexity and uniqueness of the Yoruba language. Significantly, Mr. Awoniyi recognizes that the cultural meanings, ideologies and philosophies embedded in Yoruba language and worldsense can and do become obscured in English/Euro-colonial translation. This is particularly so in colonizing contexts – such as that of the Yoruba – where social relations of power are inequitable, and racist Eurocentric constructions of Yoruba peoples and their knowledges are situated as natural and the norm. Mr. Awoniyi’s position very much echoes Wa Thiong’o (1986) and Oyewumi’s (1997) argument – as discussed earlier in Chapters Two and Three – that Western knowledge production processes are culturally specific to the West, and that Indigenous African languages should be taken seriously on their own terms in scholarly research. I would also argue that Mr. Awoniyi’s insistence on multiplicity reflects an insistence that knowledge be anchored in a cosmological context. Here, Mr. Awoniyi alludes to both the complexity of the Orisa Esu, and his agency as a participant in this study. Mr. Awoniyi’s understanding is in stark contrast to the one-dimensional Eurocentric constructions of Esu voiced by many of the other research participants.

Many participants repeatedly referenced the Bible as an authoritative and reliable source for their position that Esu was, in fact, the devil. In response to my question about what spirituality means to her, Yinka passionately answered:

In the way that I was raised, being a Christian I find is a powerful thing. And the Bible basically guides everything that I do and believe. That’s the centre of the whole world is my religion…..Being a Pentecostal compared to Catholic or Anglican – ‘cause I’ve been an Anglican before– the way in which they worship is completely different. What I’m saying is Pentecostals – well I’m not gonna speak for everybody else but, the Pentecostals that I know have the Holy Spirit and that’s what we work with is the Holy Spirit and it says so in the Bible. So I can’t speak for someone that’s Catholic, someone that’s Baptist
and someone that’s Presbyterian but I feel because I’m Pentecostal, I have a sense of power because I have the holy spirit with me.

Similar to Yinka, her sister Tunmi also places great emphasis on the Bible as a sacred text with divine authority. In her response to my question on whether she felt there was a difference between spirituality and religion, she remarked:

Well there are a lot of people that are not religious but they’re spiritual. They have a relationship with God and they don’t really connect themselves to any certain religion so, yeah, there is a difference….I guess when I was younger I really didn’t have much of an appreciation for my religion. Um, but as I got older I could see like, you know what I mean, like I could see my parents values and the things that they hold dear to them, like reading the Bible and praying. And I even sometimes see it in me whenever I’m doing stuff so it’s like, you know what I mean. Like it’s something that you see growing up and either you respect it or you don’t. But I get a lot of answers when I’m confused about something, the Bible guides me and I never used to see it but now, it’s really important, an important source of spiritual guidance, like you know what I mean?

My analysis here is not to deny participants their agency, nor to deny the Bible as a sacred text that interviewees have a right to value and hold in high spiritual regard. What I want to highlight is how the Bible and Biblical discourse have been used as hegemonic tools in colonial and imperial projects when this text is touted as the universal and sole source of spiritual knowledge at the expense of Indigenous spiritual knowledges.

As an unquestionable source of divine authority, Biblical discourse also becomes unfailingly dependable. Without a doubt, one of the most notorious figures in Biblical discourse is the devil, otherwise known as Satan. The Bible is not the same without “the devil,” for he is needed as the antithesis to all that is good and all that is God. Esu is a central figure in the Yoruba cosmos, while Satan is a central figure in Euro-Christian worldview. However, this is where the similarities between these two figures end. In the Yoruba Bible (and largely in Yoruba Christian social life) the figure of Esu is stripped of its complexity in Yoruba cosmology, to be collapsed and simplified into a singular role, function and identity; forced into the garb of
consummate sin and evil, as both Satan and the devil. In the New King James Version of the English Bible, the title “devil” appears thirty-five times (Youngblood, 1995: 352, 1131-1132). In all thirty-five of these instances, my research shows that Esu is repeatedly reconstituted, bearing the title of “the devil” in the Yoruba Bible. This continuous displacement is particularly striking in the Book of Revelations. Below are three passages that demonstrate this misguided transposition from the King James Version of the Bible (1989) and the Yoruba Bible, Bibeli Mimo (1960 2nd ed.) which was first translated into Yoruba by native agent and missionary, Samuel Ajayi Crowther:

**Rev. 12:12**
Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabiters of the earth and of the sea! For **the devil** is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time (178).

*Ifihan 12:12*
*Nitorina e ma yo, enyin orun, ati enyin ti ngbe inu won. Egbe ni fun aiye ati fun okun! Nitori Esu sokale to nyin wa ni ibinu nla, nitori o mo pe igba kukuru sa li on ni (1057).*

**Rev. 18:2**
And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of **devils**, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird (180).

*Ifihan 18:2*
*O si kigbe li ohun rara, wipe, Babiloni nla subu, o subu, o si di ibujoko awon emi Esu, ati iho emi aimo gbgobo, ati ile eiye aimo gbogbo, ati ti eiye irira (1060).*

**Rev. 20:10**
And **the devil** that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night forever and ever (182).

*Ifihan 20:10*
*A si wo Esu ti o tan won je losinu adagun ina ati sulfuru, nibiti eranko ati woli eke ni gbe wa, a o si ma da won loro t’osan-t’oru lai ati lailai (1062-63).*

However, while the title of “the devil” is **consistently** displaced unto Esu, this is not the case for the name, Satan. In other words, although Satan is largely translated as “Esu” in the Yoruba
Bible, there are a number of instances –approximately 25% of the time– where a Yorubacized version of Satan appears as “Satani” as opposed to Esu. This leads me to wonder why. Why did the translator, Samuel Ajayi Crowther not completely displace Esu by always casting this deity as Satan in the same way this was done with the title of ‘the devil’?

While Satan and the devil are often thought of as one and the same, it could be that Crowther wanted to distinguish between Esu as Satan and Esu as the devil by highlighting the difference between the two and in doing so, to demonstrate his unfailing commitment to Christianity. Consider the fact that “the devil” is a title that connotes pure evil, while “Satan” is the name of a being or fallen angel that has a history of divine origin from God and heaven. As Lucifer, Satan was once good and noble. However, “the devil” does not share this paradox of having noble yet savage qualities, and tends to be understood as evil incarnate. Esu as the devil suggests unwavering evil, while Esu as Satan suggests something different. Interestingly, if it is Satan that has some noble qualities and the devil that does not, it then seems that Esu still remains an absolute subjugated manifestation of all that is evil; the antithesis to good, and inherently demonic. On the other hand, it is possible to also argue that Crowther’s absenitization and failure to name Esu in some parts of the Yoruba Bible –be it as Satan or the devil– suggests a type of sub/conscious, counter-hegemonic resistance to the demonization of this Orisa by retaining Esu’s role and function in Yoruba cosmology precisely through this absence. It also highlights that while the demonization of Esu is undoubtedly symbolic of the political, social and religious agenda in the colonial project, this project was never complete, therefore highlighting

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34 While I can now hypothesize this ambivalence as paradox and even a type of counter-hegemonic resistance to the complete demonization of Esu, ultimately, this is a question that begs further inquiry. However, this does not negate the problem of amputative ambivalence and how human interaction with Christianity and Indigenous Yoruba spirituality are informed by both historical and contemporary unequal relations of power that render Yoruba spirituality demonic.
the impact and power of resistance and participant agency and, I would argue, the power of *Esu the Orisa* to elusively maneuver and slip out of a total displacement from its Indigenous context and role. It is impossible to pinpoint exactly what Crowther had in mind when using the name Esu to index the devil; however, judging from Crowther’s explicit positioning of Yorubaland “as a land of heathenism, superstition and vice,” it is clear that his conception of Esu is not affirming. It is also one that does not demonstrate, but rather, elides a thorough understanding of Esu’s multifaceted roles and responsibilities, be it intentionally or unintentionally (Ajayi, 2001: 29). Paradoxically, despite Crowther’s conversion and declaration of absolute commitment to Christianity, he also carried the cultural burden of amputative ambivalence in his translation of Esu and therefore also operates as a metaphor, albeit historical, of the larger problematic of cosmological imperialism and spirituality as a site of contestation.

*(Resisting) Cosmological Imperialism: Racism, Gender and Counter-Colonial Approaches to Esu / Evil*

Whereas most participants for this study vehemently defended their position that Esu was the Yoruba equivalent of the devil, during this portion of the discussion three interviewees cited racism, not Esu, as evil, and preferred to spend more time discussing how racism affects their lives. This emphasis on racist oppression highlights their agency and ongoing negotiation with/in Euro-dominant contexts that are shaped by material and spiritual inequities.

As a form of oppression which denies Blacks and other racialized peoples their humanity and access to jobs, housing, education and other social and material rights (Dei, 1996; Henry et. al, 1998) racism is traumatic and often debilitating. This reality parallels participants’ experiences of racism which they shared during the discussion of Esu and evil:
BISI: Like I said when I’m praying I don’t talk about the devil or all these evil things right; I talk about self-development, to me anyhow. So, I take that everyday… I don’t even… like…. the racism thing, unless you’re slapping me in my face and calling me a Black whatever, that’s when I’ll let it really affect me. But I know that I’m gonna do whatever I can to show you that this is what it is. Like, I’m gonna get that job, or that A+. And not even to show you, but to prove to myself that I can be this and do this, so… to me, that’s what evil really is, but I don’t let it stop me.

Bisi notes that for her, spirituality does not involve engaging in the negative, and dismisses the value of an explicit discussion about “the devil” or anything that she characterizes as evil.

Instead, Bisi takes a pro-active approach where she focuses on developing and nurturing her being in more affirming ways because this is what allows her to continue succeeding in the Eurocentric context of Canada, to prove racism/racists wrong in the hegemonic scripts that have been discursively constructed about her racialized self and being.

Similarly, yet more explicitly, Sade offers compelling evidence of how much more violent and harmful experiences of racism are than Esu ever could be. Her discussion is a powerful example of her agency and resistance to both dominant hegemonic constructions of Indigenous Yoruba culture, as well as to explicit forms of racist oppression that she is forced to negotiate on a daily basis:

SADE: I think [that] just because it’s [Esu] in the Bible that the devil is Esu, that is why people believe this. But it’s the wrong notion of him…. Everything we blame on the devil, but you know, Esu isn’t the reason I have problems here [pointing outside to the snow, making reference to Canada]. You know, I was in the subway one day and one lady asked me how is life in the jungle when I first came to Canada. And I just joked about it, because I know about the zoo and you know me I’m a joker– I said, “Well, sorry. I’ve been to the zoo” and I said everything in the zoo in Nigeria has been taken to the zoo in Scarborough, so they’re all like that…(laughing). And people were looking at her laughing and she looked stupid. And there was a time I got a job in a company as a data entry clerk, and the data entry people were like four in the office. They relieve the receptionist. So every time I went there, they [would] put the phone automatically on right to the answering service and I’m like, ‘why do they do that?’ But if people come in, I talk to them. But when they call, then the phone goes on to answering service!? So I asked my manager, ‘what happened? Why is it that everybody is there and they answer the phone, but why don’t they give it to me?’ And she said oh, it’s not her, but it’s the
supervisor who is more senior than her... They say that because, maybe they won’t understand my accent. So I was writing one of my essays in York [University] one time and this was one of the examples that I used in my essay when we were doing racism in Canada. So, when I finished my essay I showed my manager and she says ‘you know it’s not me’ and I said ‘I know it’s not you’ and she’s a Canadian too. So there is racism of course and I’ve experienced it.... That is the kind of stuff that harms me, not Esu as the devil. As I said before, when you speak of Esu as devil I know it’s not true. People have the wrong idea about it. I have more problems because of [my] skin colour than I do because of an idol.

Although Mrs. Fayemi does believe Esu to be the devil, similar to Bisi and Sade, she also identifies both racism and sexism as huge barriers to her success in Canada, in terms of access to jobs and education:

MRS. FAYEMI: What is Esu? Esu is the devil. Anything evil really.... You know, my understanding of evil [is] somebody who do[es] harmful things to a human being; somebody who doesn’t wish somebody else good things.... You know what, I always tell my children that, ‘One thing you have to know, even though you are Canadian born, you are Black. They will look at you as being Black first before looking at you as Canadian. I always tell them that, don’t get so comfortable that ‘oh, because I don’t have accent, I have [a] Canadian birth certificate, that people will take you as the way they take white children or white kids, no! They look at you as Black before they look at you as Canadian. And once they see your name is different—Especially at work, once they see your name, they know that English is not for you no matter how good [the] English you write [is]. You know, they believe that English is not for African people. And they use your name to mark you. At work, oh! They look at you; we are just like second class citizens. No matter how smart you are, because of your colour, our problem is you are Black and you are a woman; we have two absurdities.

Mrs. Fayemi offers a powerful critique of Canadian racism and white supremacy by shifting the paradigm of how evil is discussed from one that positions the Indigenous figure of Esu as evil, to one that instead, situates colonial and white supremacist discourse as evil. Her discussion also reinserts gender and sexism into the discussion. Mrs. Fayemi’s insight and reference to racism and sexism as “two absurdities” provides an important segue into discussion of gender, Esu and how this Orisa has been hegemonically constructed as demonically male in Euro-Christian discourses.
**Bible-Thumping Imperialism: Gender and the Essentialized Masculinization of Esu**

Esu becomes increasingly important in this study because it is through almost all research participants’ constructions of this Orisa as distinctly male that we come to see what Oyewumi (1997) calls, the naturalization of Western gender discourses in African thought, life and experience. It is important that research participants’ uncritical identification of Esu as an exclusively masculine figure be given serious consideration because it brings to light the dominance of Western constructions of gender as the norm. When I pointed out to participants that while the devil might be male, the gender of Esu as an Orisa was not quite as clear-cut or one-dimensional, many participants cited the Bible as proof that Esu was both the devil and male. Mrs. Awoniyi argued that “the Bible does not lie” and cited the story of Lucifer, or God’s ‘fallen Angel’ as evidence that the devil is male, as is Esu. For her, the issue was not Esu’s gender, but that this Orisa was simply evil and the devil. Similarly, Mr. Fayemi argued that Esu was male because only men could have that kind of power, be it “good or bad.” He had the following to say when asked to elaborate on his understanding of Esu and male power:

> Yeah, Esu is the devil. Yeah, Esu, that’s the meaning: it’s the Yoruba word for the devil or Satan. And he is very powerful you know, because evil is powerful and you know that he fought God. He still fights God and he knows how because he used to be his [God’s] favourite. It is the kind of war that men do…for power. That is the kind of power that God and the devil have. One is good, while the other is bad, but no matter how powerful the devil is, Esu cannot defeat God because God is the ultimate man power!

Mr. Fayemi spoke of Esu as synonymous with the Christian devil, who is undoubtedly male in Biblical text and Euro-Christian discourse. What is also of interest is Mr. Fayemi’s construction of power as resoundingly male. His position reflects dominant masculinist, and Euro-Christian patriarchal views that eclipse Indigenous understandings of power, gender and the complexity of Esu as an Orisa. Such constructions of gender as a binary are also emblematic of cosmological imperialism because the dominance of Eurocentric worldview does not allow for Indigenous
understandings of gender, Esu and power to exist as valid ways of understanding one’s culture and spirituality. With specific reference to gender, my argument of cosmological imperialism echoes Oyewumi’s (1997) position that “gender does not operate in Yorubaland [many Indigenous contexts] in the same way it does in Western discourse” (x, xi). The gendered mistranslation of Esu is what Oyewumi calls, “masculinizing the Orisa” where, while some Orisa are thought of in gendered terms (i.e. Oya as female and Sango as male), other Orisa are either gender neutral or their gender is context dependent (136). That is, their gender is dependent on the worshippers themselves and how they imagine the particular Orisa (Oyewumi, 136: 140-42). Esu is one case in point.

In her analysis of an earlier study conducted on Yoruba devotees of Esu, Ayodele Ogundipe concludes that Esu’s depiction in Yoruba spirituality is both male and female (Ogundipe in Oyewumi, 1997: 173). However, Oyewumi continues the discussion by cautioning that Esu’s sex or gender should not be interpreted as one of ambiguity or androgyny, but rather as genderlessness; she argues that Esu’s gender is incidental to this Orisa’s role and function in the Yoruba worldsense and points to the vital fact that the ori (metaphysical head and destiny) is without a sex or gender (173-174). The latter is a crucial point. I go back to my earlier discussion about Esu’s role and function in the Yoruba cosmos with specific reference to Ori and how essential Esu is to an individual’s proper alignment with their Ori (destiny). Again, I propose that this Orisa’s complexity –how the deity is multilayered with the insignia of the crossroads, flux, movement, transformation and role of keeping communication between the spiritual and physical worlds intact– has nothing to do with gender. Yet, due to the advent of Christian proselytization, Esu became locked into Eurocentric conceptions of gender, and completely masculinized in the Yoruba Bible. This is also in part because the devil and Satan are masculine figures in the
English Bible and Euro-Christian worldview; inevitably, hegemonic discourse is retained and imposed on Esu.

Another element that must be considered in the mistranslation of Esu is that of language. Similar to Mr. Awoniyi, Sade reminds us that the role language plays in the translation process (gendered or otherwise) needs to be taken into account, even where sacred texts such as the Bible are considered. In Sade’s words:

I think....when you look at it, at Esu....everything we blame on the devil. When we see something good and bad and we go to do the bad one, and then the consequences come, then we say, oh it’s the fault of the devil; it’s the devil’s doing, instead of taking responsibility as Christians should. I think maybe we make Esu to be the scapegoat of any circumstances that are bad. And in the Bible, they gave the wrong name to Esu because Esu shouldn’t be the devil in the Bible. Maybe because of the differences between the English language and the Yoruba language....language is very important sometimes. There are some words even in our language now that we don’t even know how to say it in English, you know. So they gave a wrong notion of Esu because Esu himself is like all those gods [Orisa] like God of thunder, God of water etc. I think [that] just because it’s in the Bible that the devil is Esu, that is why people believe this. But it’s the wrong notion of him.

Sade is drawing attention to the significance of language and how often there are no sufficient equivalents in English to replace or translate certain words from Indigenous languages. What Sade is saying here is that there is no English equivalent for the Yoruba word, deity and Orisa ‘Esu.’ That said, I argue that Sade’s understanding of Esu is more complicated than the binaristic construction of this Orisa as either male or female. Sade (Ms. Oriola) understands that the cultural meanings, ideologies and philosophies embedded in English are limited where Yoruba language, culture and worldsense are concerned. Sade understands that a fluid and genderless (Oyewumi, 1997) Yoruba figure such as Esu, becomes fixed in English and can therefore only be spoken of as a ‘he’ or ‘she’ because these are the only two categories that exist in dominant Euro-Christian discourse, and especially the Bible. Yet Sade navigates these difficult terrains because her consciousness of the philosophical and cultural differences between the Yoruba and
English language allow her to. In this sense then, she is able to speak of Esu as male in English because of the rigidity of English and the dominance of the devil in Christian Biblical discourse. However, she is also able to retain Esu’s fluid gender identity in Yoruba discourse because she knows that there is no equivalent to Esu in English, and also because she knows that Esu is not the Euro-Christian devil. In other words, Sade is cognizant of the importance of understanding cosmology or worldsense when translating an idea or concept from one language to another. These sentiments are echoed in Aboriginal scholar Marie Battiste’s words, which also encapsulate the argument of cosmological imperialism:

> Imposing foreign categories on other people’s lives is sheer folly, primarily because the categories do not apply, at least not without serious revision….The missionaries, for example, attempted to match indigenous spiritual concepts to those of the Christian religion: they sought to exchange one set of verbal symbols for another, based on the assumption that there was a universal God who created the world and a mercantilist version of exchange….The missionaries’ purpose consciously or unconsciously, was to use the sounds of indigenous languages to explain the belief forms of Christianity (Battiste, 2000: 80).

As in the above debate on language and subtitles in *Daughters of the Dust*, it is important to remember that language is of significance because it shapes ideas about one’s culture, philosophy and identity. Implicit in the idea of Esu as the devil, is also the idea that Esu is male: both are inadequate translations. In the example of Esu, we are able to appreciate how gender, language, ideology and identity are highly interwoven, particularly where translation and cosmology are concerned.

Another case which provides a powerful illustration of the linked relationship between these social relations is that of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the Yoruba missionary who translated the English Bible into Yoruba. Arguing that missionaries and their Biblical translation was not innocent, power-barren nor value-neutral is not new, and it has been argued elsewhere that translated alongside the Bible, also came Euro-Christian ideas, beliefs and cultural logics.
(Wa Thiong’o, 1993; Oyewumi, 1997). My premise here rests with the argument of cosmological imperialism where the missionary-orchestrated historical moment of Biblical translation has also endeavored an ideological and cosmological displacement of key elements in Yoruba worldsense. This is evidenced in the appropriation and displacement of Esu in the Bible, and also in essentialized notions of gender where, through the example of Esu, Indigenous Yoruba conceptions of masculinity and femininity have become peripheral to Euro-Christian cosmology and their attendant gender constructs. This is particularly evident in Samuel Ajayi Crowther’s psyche and how he understood his role as missionary to be deeply interlocked with hegemonic Euro-Christian ideas of masculinity. He states:

... about the third year of my liberation from the slavery of man, I was convinced of another worse state of slavery, namely that of sin and Satan. It pleased the Lord to open my heart...I was admitted into the visible church of Christ here on earth as a soldier to fight manfully under his banner against our spiritual enemies [emphasis mine] (Crowther in Ajayi, 2001: 14).  

The role of gender in both the Indigenous context as well as projects of Christianization is significant here. Clearly, being a “man” and “soldier” are essential components to Crowther’s declaration of war against his spiritual enemies, who undoubtedly are non-Christians. It is the ideology of masculinity and its connection to religious projects that is quite interesting, particularly as Crowther imagines his mission to be one of war in his self-identification as a soldier. In the Indigenous Yoruba context, soldiers were often male, making it possible that

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35 To give some background to the above quote and Crowther’s life, he grew up in the town of Osogun, Oyo when, in his early teens (approximately 1821), he was kidnapped into slavery. However, a year into his captivity, the British antislavery ship, The Myrmidon, attacked and intercepted its Portuguese colleague, The Esperanza Felix, and took the 189 enslaved Africans to Sierra Leone. Crowther was subsequently given room and board with missionaries from the Christian Missionary Society (CMS), and as a free man in Sierra Leone, was taught to read and write while simultaneously exposed to the word and philosophy of Christianity through the Bible. He was such an avid student that he was able to read the New Testament and appointed a teacher in one of the local schools within six months of his arrival in Sierra Leone (Ajayi, 2001). By 1825, within three years of his new life in Sierra Leone, Ajayi was baptized and had renamed himself after Samuel Crowther (a pioneer of the CMS), officially becoming Samuel Ajayi Crowther.
Crowther’s utterance may not have been due solely to Western or Christian discourses of gender. However, Oyewumi (1997) argues that occupations in Indigenous Yoruba society were also lineage-based; she notes that both women and men alike were and could be soldiers who fought in wars (69). Hence, while one could make the argument that Crowther’s declaration of war for Christ was simply due to life as he experienced it prior to being converted, what I underscore is Crowther’s avowal to patriotically and manfully fight for Christ and how this falls directly in line with dominant Euro-Christian civilizing projects, all of which were intensely patriarchally gendered. This is reminiscent of how masculinity is often a vital component in discourses of war where the execution of European imperial projects are concerned, as it was often the men who were initially sent to convert “the natives” in distant lands, mostly by themselves. If a female figure was ever to appear on the landscape, it was after the male figures had “conquered” and “settled” the land. In this context, Crowther’s soldier reference alludes to a type of Euro-Christian nationalism because it conjures up images of patriotism to Christianity which is part and parcel of religious fundamentalism. Therefore, the dominant narrative of nationalism here reads as a male-centered or masculine preserve that has a subtext of Christian missionarism, at least, as Oyewumi reminds us, in the early stages of Christianity’s insertion in West Africa (Oyewumi, 136).

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36 Despite the large body of African/Black feminist work in existence, popular misconceptions of African women not fighting in wars still persist. Whereas, Mbua Nehanda, Moremi, Queen Nzingha, Yaa Asantewa, Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru, Oya, the third wife of Sango who was deified to Orisa status upon death, and countless other unsung African women fought alongside African men in wars as both soldiers and military strategists. See Aaronette M. White’s, “All the Men are Fighting for Freedom, All the Women are Mourning Their Men, But Some of Us Carried Guns: Fanon’s Psychological Perspectives on War and African Women Combatants” for more on African women in armed struggles. Also, see Oyeronke Oyewumi, The Invention of Women and Oyeronke Olajubu, Women in the Yoruba religious Sphere for more detailed analyses and discussion of gender and the contributions of women and/or feminine-based entities, such as the Orisa, Osun. Osun is an example of a feminine Yoruba deity that has been excluded and written out of Ifa oral texts and largely Yoruba history as we currently know it. Both Oyewumi (1997) and Olajubu (2003) extensively provide evidence illustrating how these current conceptions of gender in the Yoruba context are largely Western-derived and due to European imperialism.
It also seems that in Crowther’s declaration of himself as a “soldier of God,” his enemies are male. This is evidenced in the many heated religious debates that Crowther had with Yoruba men in an attempt to convert them away from Islam and the Indigenous Yoruba spirituality. Oyewumi discusses this gendered division with respect to the tensions around polygamy and whether a man with more than one wife should be baptized (137). Yoruba men were seen as the potential and principal Christian subjects, while Yoruba women only entered in the debate around polygamy as wives, they had no identity independent their husbands (137). Hence, in the early stages of evangelization, religious contestation was very much a masculine concern. This is not to say that women were not converted and did not contest or resist in multiple and complex ways. However, women were seen as an afterthought to this religious and cosmological encounter.

Similarly, in his classic text on Yoruba culture and society, The History of the Yorubas: from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate, Samuel Johnson stresses that a Yoruba grammar cannot be produced on the same lines and rules of Latin or English grammar. It is for these reasons that he states Yoruba orthography is still rather defective with “English ideas [being] written in Yoruba words” (xxxiv). This results in confusion of thought and vagueness. He states:

[I have] on several occasions read portions of Yoruba translations to intelligent but purely uneducated Yoruba men. They would show that they comprehended (not without an effort) what was read to them by putting pertinent questions, but then they would add, “We can understand what you mean when you say….but what you read there is not Yoruba; it may be book language (ede iwe).”….In taking up a Yoruba book one is forcibly struck by the difference in style between quotations of pure Yoruba stories, phrases, or proverbs, and the notes and observations of the writer. The former runs smooth and clear, the latter appears stiff and obscure, because the writer, with his knowledge of the English grammar and language, wrote English ideas and idioms in Yoruba word. . . (Johnson, 1966: xxxiv my emphasis).
There are two points of interest in this passage for me. First, note that women are absent from the discussion, as Johnson only seemed interested in Yoruba men as intelligent sources of Yoruba language and culture. Again, this is very much in concert with Oyewumi’s (1997) assertion that the introduction of Christianity in Yorubaland was hegemonically gendered and stratified (136). Second, note Johnson’s recognition that Crowther’s translation of the English Bible into a Yoruba version created a different type of Yoruba; a “book language” version where the formerly fluid Yoruba language becomes stiffened and obscured. Given this, it is no surprise then that Esu, as the only Orisa that appears in the Yoruba Bible, is also stiffened and oversimplified through essentialist and hegemonic constructions of gender that are so endemic to Euro-Christian worldview. Crowther’s translation attempted a process where Eurocentric Christian meanings were discursively, textually and spiritually mapped onto Yoruba worldsense and Esu. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, what I want to highlight here is the presumption that standard English can effectively and equitably express the ideas, norms, idioms and symbols of another culture without losing specificity and difference, particularly where Indigenous societies are concerned. It is no wonder then, that many of the research participants had internalized these hegemonic gender discourses to ‘naturally’ assume that Esu is the devil, and therefore male. Additionally, both Samuel Crowther and Samuel Johnson are no exception to internalizing these Euro-dominant constructions of gender. For, in their embrace of Euro-Christian values comes a masculinist position where Yoruba men and male figures are deemed to be the only viable subjects worthy of attention and note, Biblically or otherwise.

My own struggles and ambivalent negotiation with the Orisa Esu, as well as those of the research participants and many others in this Diasporic Yoruba community, are products of the cultural amputations of translating of Yoruba concepts into English. This results in Yoruba
meanings being lost, while English ideas are gained. The Orisa Esu is a powerful case in point because this deity is stripped of its Indigenous and counter-hegemonic significance in the Yoruba Bible, to become essentialized and fixed in the role of a masculinized demonic Other. I argue that this was a deliberate imposition of Eurocentric ideology with the intention of erasing Indigenous Yoruba meanings and philosophy. It was no secret that the explicit goal of both European and native missionaries was to have “uncivilized” Africans know the Christian God and have them jettison their “pagan” ways.

In short, the Yoruba Bible is a classic example of book language that stiffens and overwrites Esu’s multifaceted Indigenous role through cosmological imperialism. Hegemonic notions of Esu as ‘the Devil’ are both historical and contemporary manifestations of Christian fundamentalism and colonial missionarism.

The Euro-Christian Biblical discourse through which Yoruba participants have encountered Esu continues to shape their ideas concerning Indigenous Yoruba identities. Such perceptions demonstrate the dangerous consequences of colonialisit universalisms, and the erroneous hazards of assuming that all worldviews can be measured, judged and effectively interpreted according to Eurocentric Christian yardsticks or values. However, this reality is not to deny participants their agency, and particularly how, while in the minority, not all participants were completely convinced that Esu was, in fact, the devil; instead they named the evils of racism and (to a lesser extent) sexism as more harmful and injurious to their being than Esu the Orisa. These interpretations of Esu, and the insistence on highlighting racist oppression are powerful forms of counter-colonial resistance in which participants are engaged. Additionally, this demonstrates participants’ spiritual literacy and refusal to allow dominant Eurocentric
worldview to obstruct or prescribe how they read the sacred and ultimately, how they know or understand their Yoruba Indigenous knowledges and selves.

Nor is this to deny the agency of those participants whose perceptions of Esu and Indigenous Yoruba spirituality on a whole were more consistent with dominant Euro-Christian constructions. Although most participants of this study demonstrated having internalized Eurocentric worldviews in their perception of Yoruba Indigenous spirituality, there was the underlying subtext of dissent. Because all participants were astutely aware of racism and forced to negotiate discriminatory conditions in Canada on a daily basis–i.e. in the form of struggling for jobs, education and overall fair social treatment–their religious compliance might be viewed as a (strategic) space for solace, self-preservation and survival in oppressive and pathologizing contexts. I am not saying that participants who espoused these problematic views do not genuinely believe Yoruba Indigenous spirituality to be “inferior,” “paganistic” or a “Godless religion.” Rather, what I am arguing is that participants are both compliant and dissenting, and that these types of contradictions speak to the nuances of how both internalization and resistance to colonial oppression are messy, paradoxical and ultimately, unfinished. Regrettably, as Euro-Christian discourses that pathologize Yoruba (and other African) Indigenous spiritualities dominate in participants’ spiritual and social psyches, what is often not tapped into, or, at the very least, remains concealed and hidden is access to the liberating possibilities of decolonization and healing that are embedded in Yoruba Indigenous spirituality. In essence, these are the challenges of embracing one’s Indigenous knowledges in Eurocentric Christian contexts: carving out progressive spaces where one can openly and proudly learn about, engage in and share Yoruba Indigenous culture without the risk of being ostracized by one’s community.

Cosmological Resistance: Recovering the Sacred, Recovering Esu….A Call that Begs the Response
The devil is not the terror that he is in European folk-lore. He is a powerful trickster who often competes successfully with God. There is a strong suspicion that the devil is an extension of the story-makers while God is the supposedly impregnable white masters, who are nevertheless defeated by the Negroes. (Hurston, 1995: 230).

Placing analyses in cosmological context offers important lessons about the often elusive and messy configurations of resistance, empowerment and Ase (life-force or strong energy). Zora Neale Hurston understood this and appreciated the political and spiritual value of African cosmology as a crucial site from which to explain Black life and experience. I return to this passage from Hurston because it addresses and heals some of the unsettling tensions of amputative ambivalence that were discussed in this chapter. Her insightful interpretation of “the devil” serves to mark and expose Eurocentric constructions of Blackness as constructions. She understands the devil in non-Christian terms, and in doing so, muddies the Euro-Christian dichotomy between “good” and “evil.” Also, in repositioning Black/African people as tricksters and powerful story-makers that inevitably defeat white masters, Hurston also (re)positions Indigenous African folk-lore and spirituality as key sites of resistance and foundational spaces that can provide healing to nurture one’s being. In effect, her interpretation of “the devil” is a critically spiritual literate one that is empowering and liberates Yoruba hesitation around embracing Esu as a powerful Indigenous symbol of resistance and colonial subversion.

That said, despite the often disheartening challenges of learning and living Yoruba Indigenous knowledges in Euro-dominant contexts, I feel it is important to “end” this chapter with a politics of hope where the key imperative is to nurture the impulse to achieve wholeness, an imperative that we all have.

This is a call that begs response.
Chapter Seven:
“Ohun ti o wa leyin Offa, o ju Oje lo”
(What follows six is more than seven):
Implications and Applications of the Research Study

Spirituality and language are salient and interdependent aspects of Indigenous cultures. Since these elements have a history of complex entanglement with centuries of colonialism and imperialism, knowledge production, historical displacement, cultural genocide and power are all issues to critically consider. On the other hand, closer inquiry also necessitates that equal consideration be given to how spirituality and language are also bound with/in a complicated framework of agency, negotiation with, and resistance to colonial and imperial hegemony.

Spirituality and language have profoundly figured in my own journey of lived practice and experience of Yoruba Indigenous culture. Accordingly, these elements have been the central focus of discussion with research participants in this study. The principal motivation for this research came from a sense of alienation, or mis-education and knowing very little about my Yoruba Indigenous culture. I wondered if my experience was a shared one and if so, wanted to understand why this was the case. I felt it was necessary to write myself into this research because it was largely provoked by my own personal experiences of uncertainty and spiritual ambivalence. I suspected that such experiences were not solely mine but was unsure if this was the case. My goal then became to engage in deeper learning and exploration of Yoruba Indigenous culture in diasporic and dominant Eurocentric contexts. I aspired to comprehend how others in Yoruba diasporic communities discuss and make meaning of particularly the spiritual and linguistic dimensions of our Indigenous knowledges and identities. What I found during this intense journey can best be summed up by a Yoruba proverb: “Ohun ti o wa leyin Offa, o ju Oje lo” (What follows six is more than seven).
In his work on Yoruba art and the concept of Ase (1994), Yoruba scholar Rowland Abiodun’s discussion of this proverb suggests that “we must look beyond what is easily observed if we are to understand something” (69). I found that, before embarking on this personal/political/spiritual journey in the cold world of academia, it seemed to me that many people in the Yoruba community whom I knew were not particularly interested in Yoruba spirituality and seemed to have abandoned this element of their Indigenous culture as having little or no value in their lives. I observed this to be the case over and over again in different forms and contexts, but the message of explicit disdain for Indigenous spirituality never seemed to wane within the Yoruba community I knew. While in a very real way, I found this observation to be true and shared by most participants in my research study (keeping the wisdom of this proverb in mind), I also found there was more to this story, and if I sincerely wanted to engage in in-depth learning about Yoruba Indigenous culture and knowledges – as I stated in my learning objectives – I needed to look beyond what I was ‘easily’ observing in order to understand what was taking place and why. This is where the intersectional narrative analysis and Ifa methods were of utmost use in my study because these tools allowed me to analyze and explore the underlying subtexts and unspoken or covert meaning that existed underneath the obvious and explicit meanings that participants conveyed.

In the time of “More than Seven”: Discussion of My Main Finding

Central to many participants’ declared preference for Christianity, and the staunch declaration of a Christian identity is the legacy of imperialism and colonization of Indigenous Yoruba peoples and our culture. This legacy has been amply theorized by many anti-colonial and African/Black feminist scholars alike. However, what lies at the heart of research participants’ embrace of Christianity (a type that is overtly engaged at the expense of their Indigenous
spirituality) is the issue of cosmology/worldview, or, as discussed in Chapter Three, what
Oyewumi (1997) accurately refers to as ‘Yoruba worldsense,’ which privileges a range of senses
instead of the Western tendency to over privilege the visual. This study highlights the problem
of cosmological encounter for colonized peoples when religious imperialism has occurred. My
discussions with Yoruba participants brought to light the conflict and unequal entanglements
between the Yoruba and Euro-Christian metaphysical systems that are demonstrated in
participants’ understandings of both. In Chapters Five and Six, my findings were paradoxical,
contradictory and what I realized to be folded into a larger main finding that was also a
contradiction in terms.

First, in Chapter Five, it became clear that participants embraced hegemonic Euro-
Christian constructions of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality as “evil”, “paganistic” and “idol
worshipping.” And this occurred primarily through their understandings of the Orisa, Esu. Yet, I
also found that participants’ outward claims of allegiance to Christianity did not completely
erase their engagements with Yoruba Indigenous spirituality; I found that when drawn upon by
participants, it was a covert engagement that largely happened in secret. This led me to
theorizing participant involvement with Indigenous Yoruba spirituality as one that is hidden and
closeted; what I termed, “spiritual closets.” Similar contradictions were also found in Chapter
Six where, upon finding that participants overwhelmingly read ‘the sacred’ to lie within
Christianity, I was led back to the significance of cosmology or worldsense as foundational to the
politics of knowing –particularly with Indigenous cultures that have been marked by a history of
colonialism. Hence, in this chapter I anchored participants’ approaches to Yoruba Indigenous
spirituality with a concept I term, “critical spiritual literacy” and used this idea to explore
participants’ blockages to critical spiritual literacy, when this was the case. I theorized this
primarily by revisiting and teasing out interviewees’ understandings of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges, again, through the figure of Esu. As discussed in Chapter Five, Esu is ideal because this deity is profoundly demonized by participants in this research. I argue that this is symbolic of how African Indigenous spirituality and Africans on a whole are also demonized and pathologized in imperial and colonial discourses. Esu is an important deity not only because of this Orisa’s key role and function within Yoruba cosmology, but also because Esu is the Orisa spoken of the most by research participants. In this sense then, Esu is a key Yoruba deity for bringing the challenges of learning and engaging Yoruba Indigenous knowledges in Eurocentric contexts to light. Upon deeper reflection as to why this particular Orisa is repeatedly mentioned by research participants, it became clear that it is not coincidental because Esu is the only deity who appears in the Bible by name; and is stripped and transposed into Christianity via the Yoruba Bible as the devil and quintessential archetype of evil.

Hence, I argue that while on one hand many participants of this study are more inclined to demonstrate having internalized Eurocentric worldview in their perception of Yoruba Indigenous knowledges, parallel to this is the underlying subtext of dissent, or, speaking of the Indigenous self and one’s Indigenous culture in ways that are aligned with resistance to the very same Eurocentric discourses they internalize. While research participants understandings of Indigenous knowledges falls complicit with colonial and Christian discourses, this complicity is a type that is negotiated as a way of self-preservation; that is, to keep one’s self safe or protected from harm and injury. In this case, the injury, or harm can be read as being excluded from accessing the currency and dominant social rewards that Christian identification offers, as well as the risk of being ostracized from one’s community if one is to openly embrace Yoruba Indigenous spirituality. Nevertheless, embedded in participants’ understandings and discussion
of Yoruba Indigenous spirituality is resistance, and a way to tell or speak of the self, that is not complicit with Euro-colonial Christian worldview, but rather, aligned with protest against the very same discourses that participants are complicit to. A number of participants demonstrated this in Chapter Five where they offered insightful critiques of the Christian church as a mundane social routine, and type of performance that does not necessarily nurture one’s spirit and inner being, yet serves the function of being utilized to gain respect/ability and social approval within one’s community. An additional example of participant resistance to Euro-Christian colonialism would be the refusal to name Esu as evil, and instead, naming racism as such. Although participants who hold this perspective are in the minority, it does not minimize the significance of their resistance and challenge of Euro-Christian notions of evil. In doing so, participants are active agents in their lives because they demonstrate relevant strategies for survival in Eurocentric dominant contexts, while simultaneously refusing an all-encompassing or complete disavowal of their Yoruba Indigenous spirituality. Accordingly, spirituality is approached as a dynamic process that participants actively engage with. In other words, whereas dominant religion and/or spirituality can be oppressive, exclusive and hegemonic, these systems are also complex processes through which people demonstrate their agency and resistance to these very same colonial hegemonies.

**Revisiting the Aim and Objectives of the Research Study**

This work has taken up three learning objectives. First, because research on Yoruba Indigeneity in diasporic contexts is scant, the initial objective has been to contribute to the production of critical social theory about Yoruba Indigenous knowledges. The second objective has been to initiate an engagement of in-depth critical learning of Yoruba lived experience and understandings of Yoruba cosmology in the context of Euro-dominant culture. And the third
learning objective has been to open a space that engages in critical dialogue about Yoruba Indigeniety that is accessible and more affirming than the naturalized hegemonic discourses of Indigenous Yoruba culture which have largely constructed this knowledge as “inferior”, “backwards” and “demonic.”

1. To produce and contribute to critical social theory about Yoruba (African) Indigenous Knowledges

Although literature on the African Atlantic Diaspora is well-established in the United States, Britain and the Caribbean, the African Diaspora in Canada is often overlooked and rendered invisible. With the exception Adeyanju’s Master’s thesis titled, *The Transnational Social Fields of the Yoruba in Toronto, Canada* (2000), there is virtually no research on the Yoruba Diaspora in Toronto that speaks to the specific realities of this particular Yoruba community. Analysis of the various dis/continuities and retentions of Indigenous Yoruba spirituality and language amongst Yoruba migrants in Toronto, Canada had not been undertaken prior to this study. Such an absence created a silence around how Yoruba Indigenous culture is re-configured in the context of colonialism, and impacted in the face of balancing familial and economic demands. This study contributes to filling this gap on understanding Yoruba communities in diasporic contexts. I illustrate this in the previous section, where I discuss my main finding of participants paradoxically negotiating their Indigenous identities to be complicit to Euro-colonial discourses while at the same time protesting these very discourses. Hence, this research is unique not only because of the participants in the study, but also because of its relevance to other marginalized diasporic communities who are socially positioned in similar ways.
2. To engage in in-depth learning and discussion of Yoruba lived experiences and understandings of Yoruba cosmology in the larger contexts of Euro-dominant culture.

This research study has employed an Indigenous (Smith, 1999) feminist and anti-colonial framework of analysis (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001), and in doing so, has made an important contribution to the production of critical knowledge and scholarship. Very little research investigates how migrants negotiate their Indigenous identities in colonized spaces that are not Indigenous to them. Analysis from this conceptual perspective provides a politically grounded and comprehensive understanding of the linkages between Diaspora and Indigeneity in spaces that are hegemonic and colonizing. These theoretical and conceptual frameworks also challenge the dominance of largely anthropological research methods that have dehumanized and positioned Africans and other Indigenous peoples as objects to be studied, or merely as “sources of data” (Dei et al, 2000). By contrast, this study is anchored in and part of a larger counter-colonial decolonizing project that seeks to give voice to those who have been marginalized, silenced and erased (Lorde, 1994; Amadiume, 1997; Oyewumi 1997; Smith, 1999).

3. To open up accessible and affirming spaces that engage in critical dialogue about Yoruba Indigenous knowledges.

In challenging the silencing of Yoruba Indigenous identities, this study has opened up a space for critical dialogue around the politics of how African Indigenous identities continue to be hegemonically constructed in colonizing contexts. Paulo Freire’s (2000) theorization of dialogue offers an approach that suggests dialogue as an epistemological process:

In order to understand the meaning of dialogical practice, we have put aside the simplistic understanding of dialogue as a mere technique. …dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship…[it] is a way of knowing and…[I] engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process.
of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing.

This project serves as an example of engaging in critical dialogue to illustrate the vital role Indigenous culture and knowledges play in decolonizing projects. Dialogue such as this also opens up a space for imagining how these knowledges can be used as a central politic for progressive change, resistance and especially as a foundation for decolonization to nurture the impulse towards wholeness that colonialism disrupts.

**Pedagogic Implications and Applications of the Research Study for Educators**

As a Yoruba woman doing this work; that is, as a person who is Yoruba, woman, scholar, educator, and most important of all, a mother, I think of these multiple identities and recognize that the common thread woven through all of them is the responsibility of both teaching and learning. More than ever with the advent of this research study, which culminates with my most recent journey of being a new mother, I often think about the many young minds that I have contributed to shaping as an educator, and the many more I will continue to shape as an educator, or at minimum, have some type of influence on. And I wonder what type of contribution, influence or effect that will be…. An immediate and unwaveringly confident answer to this question I do not have. Yet, what I do know is that the question of what this study pedagogically means for educators and overall teaching and learning is an important one that needs to be engaged.

First, in the many years it has taken me to complete this dissertation, I am astutely aware that it is not simply young “minds” that educators and teachers shape; rather, it is a whole person, a human being whose spirit, heart and soul is also part and parcel of the formal schooling and larger educational experience. Because participants’ negotiation of their Indigenous identities in ways that closeted their Indigeneity, and because participants’ spiritual literacy was
often blocked my Eurocentric worldview, this research has taught me, over and over again, of the dangers of not seeing students as whole beings, spiritual beings who have social –not exclusively academic– lives outside the classroom and the importance of making what is taught and learnt in the classroom relevant to their lives and experiences beyond the classroom context. Formal schooling needs to be a place where, as educators, we do not continue to replicate Cartesian models of pedagogy that ideologically and philosophically depoliticize, marginalize or ‘closet’ students’ physical bodies and the dominant social and political meanings that are ascribed to them. What I am speaking to here is the social and political significance of our racialized, gendered, classed, religious and spiritually based identities and the hegemonic Eurocentric inequities that shape them. Cartesian informed pedagogies (which have been normalized in too many educational settings) dichotomize the mind and body. In this model, the question of spirit, or the human spirit is given no consideration at all because the model is limited to dichotomizing and reducing humans to a mind/body split. bell hooks (1994), writing in Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom discusses the Cartesian informed basis of the Western academy and coming to her own realization that she needed to “make a distinction between the practice of being an intellectual/teacher and one’s role as a member of the academic profession”:

It was difficult to maintain fidelity to the idea of the intellectual as someone who sought to be whole–well-grounded in a context where there was little emphasis on spiritual well-being, on care of the soul. Indeed, the objectification of the teacher within bourgeois educational structures seemed to denigrate notions of wholeness and uphold the idea of a mind/body split, one that promotes and supports compartmentalization (16).

In contrast to narrow Cartesian models of pedagogy, this research study asks educators to consider spirit, and spirituality as fundamental to one’s teaching practice. In particular, this dissertation offers the position that Indigenous spirituality is a powerful anti-colonial knowledge source from which all students can learn different ways of understanding the world and living
their spirituality. This includes engaging with their environment and the larger world in different and more harmonious ways. I qualify this with the caveat that in no way am I encouraging the unethical mining or cultural appropriation of Indigenous culture and spirituality in the way it is often taken up in especially New Age discourses and practice. What I am advocating, and offering –in the form of this research study– is an opportunity for educators to critically engage the politics of religion and spirituality and to consider how they are informed by social and historical inequities and imbalances of power. In more specific terms, I am asking educators, teachers and intellectuals alike to re-consider the politics of Indigenous African spirituality and how popular understandings of this spirituality are largely shaped by Euro-Christian hegemony. The school classroom can be a powerful space or site to begin decolonizing and to learn Indigenous based understandings or approaches to spirituality, in the stead of what is most often drawn from where popular ideas and perceptions of Indigenous peoples are concerned: dominant Eurocentric ideology and worldview.

The first implication of my research and my request of educators and teachers would be that a paradigm shift is required where formal education’s approaches to community and pedagogy are concerned. This shift is two-fold and inter-reliant. First, the shift must be philosophical, which is then informed by, and followed with the practical. I say this because Indigenous African spirituality is rooted in Indigenous philosophy and cosmology, of which interconnection and interdependence are foremost. With respect to pedagogy, this therefore means that there is no separation of the teacher from the learner; the two are connected because they belong to and share the same community. So much so, that, the failure of the student is the failure of the teacher. Accordingly, the learner cannot fail because there is a connection that is implicit in the Indigenous understanding of both the teacher and learner. This connection then
becomes the driving force behind the teacher’s commitment to a learner’s success because their success is also the teacher’s. However, this connection between teacher and learner is currently lacking where formal education and schooling is concerned, hence the urgent need for a paradigm shift. It is a type of shift that necessitates revisiting and disrupting dominant Eurocentric constructions of community and expanding them beyond these conventions to include the teacher in formal schools as part and parcel of the community. In this sense, the teacher then becomes responsible and accountable for the learner’s success, as is the case in Indigenous African contexts.

In African Indigenous contexts, the pedagogue or teacher is often the *living* Elder. These Elders are the ones in the community who carry vital knowledge that they are charged with passing on to the next generations. In dominant and conventional contexts however, Indigenous Elders are not “formally” trained, and consequently, not accepted as “real” teachers. Yet, a departure from teachers in the Indigenous context carries spiritually injurious consequences as well as other dangers, particularly for African students/learners who are seriously marginalized in formal schooling contexts. For them, there is a disconnect and dichotomous split between the learner’s academic self (their mind) and their whole self (their spirit, body, emotions and soul). Therefore, there needs to be a philosophical paradigm shift in terms of who is deemed to be a teacher, or what the notion of a teacher is. A pedagogue needs to be understood beyond the narrow confines of *only* the licensed teacher, and made to include Elders: the teachers and keepers of knowledge in Indigenous philosophical contexts. This does not take away from the formally-licensed teacher’s expertise, but rather, expands on and adds to it in a way that both the knowledge base and pedagogical practice offered and taught to students is now more equitable.
and diverse, thereby improving a learner’s probability for success. To reiterate, the student’s success is the teacher and Elder’s success.

In short, the overall implication here is that the paradigm shift must be one that begins with Indigenous cosmology because it is cosmology that provides the philosophical framework for understanding the world around us, especially understanding how that framework is anchored in a particular understanding of community. Because, from an Indigenous perspective one’s community includes Ancestors, living human beings and those yet to be born, this approach to community also carries some important pedagogical lessons. In her article, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” Toni Morrison (1984) discusses the presence of an Ancestor in African-American writing as “…timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). Inversely, she also discusses the consequences of the absence of Ancestors as destructive and a key determinant to the success or happiness of both the character, and the writing or story that frames the character(s). Morrison argues that killing one’s Ancestors is equivalent to killing oneself and being lost because the “conscious historical connection” is lost (344). I would argue that this is also the case in the context of pedagogy and formal schooling because a learner’s success is linked with/in one’s community and therefore, one’s Ancestors who provide that “conscious historical connection” of self. This notion of self is foundational to understanding one’s current living self because, as discussed above, Ancestors are part of one’s community within African cosmology. Hence, to excise Ancestors also indexes another type of blockage spiritual literacy. I refer back to my discussion of the self as circular in chapter one:

The circle reflects how the individual exists within the context of the larger community and how the living self is intertwined with the worlds of the Ancestors and the unborn. The circle, then, is both literally and figuratively a symbol of eternity in its continuity because the self is conceived of as a layering of many synthesized selves which cross
over, move in, out and between the spiritual and material energy fields. In other words, the self is an existence that is extended throughout the cosmos, as opposed to simply being restricted to the world of human beings (Adefarakan, 38).

Pedagogy that only focuses on the learner’s academic self to the detriment of the body and spirit only reproduces the very damaging Cartesian model of learning where students are forced to leave their spirit, soul and political body at the door. This type of pedagogy endorses social amnesia where one’s own history is forgotten and deemed unimportant. From an African Indigenous context you cannot simply teach a learner’s mind, without engaging the body. And you cannot teach the learner’s body and mind without engaging their spirit. You cannot engage the mind, body or spirit without the Ancestor, or Ancestral self which represents a conscious engagement with and knowledge of one’s history. And these particular philosophical approaches to one’s self and community are foundational tenets in African spirituality, as anchored in African Indigenous cosmology. To teach these elements without the larger framework of African spirituality and cosmology is to de-contextualize and fragment the knowledge, which is interwoven and interconnected. African Indigenous spirituality and cosmology are cornerstones to African students’ success and understanding of their whole self and identity.

This raises the important question of how one teaches Indigenous African spirituality and cosmology to Black/African students who most likely will identify as either Christian or Muslim. While the impetus and learning objective behind this research is to engage critical anti-colonial dialogue about Yoruba Indigenous spirituality and knowledges, the goal is not to dichotomize Yoruba (African) spirituality as ‘good’ and Christianity or Islam as ‘bad’. It is very possible to teach and discuss African Indigenous spirituality without framing it in a hierarchical either/or binary, which, ironically enough, both the Christian and Muslim colonizing traditions have done with African Indigenous spirituality. My main finding in this research of paradoxical participant
resistance to, and complicity with colonialist discourse is that this study acts as an exemplar because it demonstrates that a simple either/or paradigm is insufficient in the pedagogical context of teaching and learning about African Indigenous knowledges and spirituality. Much like the research participants in this study, students’ lives will carry contradictions, paradox, ambiguities and complexities that cannot be reduced to a simple either/or paradigm, even though students may identify with dominant colonial religion. Formal education/pedagogy, and the classrooms they occur in offer the empowering possibility of acting as crucial spaces in which students can decolonize their spirits and be taught to deconstruct the many racist myths and stereotypes about African spirituality that pervade the public imagination. In this way, counter-hegemonic and anti-colonial perspectives about African spirituality that have been largely invisible become accessible, affirmed and moved to the centre. This is what Paulo Friere’s (2000) notions of “critical pedagogy” and education for the practice of freedom would look like where African Indigenous knowledges and spirituality are being taught in dominant Eurocentric culture and diasporic contexts.

As a Yoruba woman and educator doing this work, I am excited about contributing to reclaiming Indigenous (African) Yoruba epistemologies as valid (Dei, 2000), and challenging academic circles to open up to a growing body of knowledge about Indigenous peoples and decolonizing methodologies. Hence, this work also offers a number of additional pedagogical implications in terms of how this research study can be applied for educators:

- Offers new articulations and understandings of Yoruba (African) Indigeneity in diasporic and dominant Eurocentric contexts; theorizes how Yoruba in the Diaspora negotiate their Indigenous culture and identities in complicit yet resistant ways. This lived experience is fraught with both complicity with and resistance against dominant Eurocentric discourses.
• Presents new readings of spiritual literacy, where critical spiritual literacy that makes cosmology central is proposed as crucial to knowledge production, teaching and learning.

• Contributes to opening a space where critical and equity-centred teaching and learning about Yoruba (African) Indigenous spirituality and knowledges are accessible and affirmed.

• Suggests the application of key elements of Indigenous philosophy in order to mend disconnection and fosters links between individuals and the larger teaching and learning community.

• Suggests collaboration between researchers, educators, Elders and other members of Indigenous communities, to increase understanding, avoid cultural appropriation and the reproduction of oppressive colonial discourse.

• This study is also beneficial to the educators in the area of sociology, as well as gender and equity studies because it addresses the need for investigation into the material and spiritual consequences of racism and other forms of oppression that affect racially marginalized peoples and their Indigenous knowledges.

In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning—getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system. That is easier said than done. But one of the things that has to be faced is, in the process of wanting to change that system, how much have we got to do to find out who we are, where we come from and where we are going? (Baker as cited in Ransby, 2003).

I return to the Yoruba proverb, “What follows six is more than seven” knowing that there is more to follow this work. I know that there is more work to be done with respect to how African Indigenous spirituality is perceived and constructed in the public imagination. This includes the many Africans who, strategically or not, have also internalized colonialist views of African spirituality. This research study demonstrates the gravity and depth of the impact of Euro-Christian discourse in the lives of Yoruba people. Yet, upon closer examination, if, like the proverb, I look beyond what is easily observed, this study, and the research participants in
particular also demonstrate the incomplete\textit{ness} of a total pathologizing or demonization of African Indigenous spirituality. The significance of Indigenous spirituality and the resilience of the people who, in contradictory and paradoxical ways refuse to let our spirituality die is that this story is not over; there is more to follow. Although marginalized, African spirituality “moves at those margins” (Morrison, 2008). Anti-colonial education can create more opportunities for those margins to be erased so people can develop more affirming and empowering experiences of African spirituality that are their own, rather than recycled hegemonic constructions of our Indigenous spirituality and knowledges. As discussed earlier in this chapter, there is the need for opening up spaces where critical anti-oppressive and anti-colonial dialogue and learning can occur to deconstruct these enduring imperial legacies about Indigenous spiritualities and knowledges. While messy, thorny and complicated, this is where the call to radically change the oppressive systems in which we live begins. It rests in knowing that despite being daunted by the often overwhelming nature of what we are up against, liberation is the only choice, and the ultimate prize.
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Appendix A
Interview Questions and Guide

Thesis Title: “Yoruba Indigenous Identities in a Diasporic Context: Generational Knowledge, Power and the Politics of Dis/continuity”
Summary of Questions
(This is a partial list of questions organized by themes)

I. Biographical Information
1. Name (pre-arranged pseudonym)
2. Age
3. Gender
4. Dialect of Yoruba Spoken
5. Citizenship
6. Years in Canada
7. Educational Background or Highest Level of Education Attained
8. Marital/Partnership Status
9. Number of children

II. Immigration
10. What were some of the difficulties you faced adapting to life in Canada? (i.e. job, housing, education).
11. Describe how your Yoruba culture was affected in trying to adjust?

III. Definitions of Indigenous Spirituality
12. How do you define Spirituality? What are your thoughts/feelings on traditional Yoruba Spirituality?
13. How is it talked about in your family?
14. What role does it play in living in Canada?
15. Describe any traditional practices or ceremonies still practiced and/or believed in within your family?

IV. Yoruba Language
16. Do you speak Yoruba? How did you learn it?
17. Why or why not?
18. What are your thoughts on Yoruba language and the younger/next generation? Is knowing Yoruba valuable?

V. Spirituality and Oppression
19. Have you experienced racism? Sexism? Other forms of oppression based on your religion and/or language?
20. Can you describe what happened?
21. Can you describe how you felt?
22. Have you thought about the reasons why this happened to you?
23. Did this affect what you teach and/or tell your children? Especially concerning traditional Yoruba Spirituality and language?
24. Did you seek help? If yes, what kind of help? If no, why not?
25. How do you resist racism and other forms of oppression in your life?
VI. Generational Knowledge, Age and Seniority
27. How important is respect for Elders to you? Is this always based on age?
28. How is age and seniority talked about in your family?
29. Who is/was the most respected/knowledgeable member of your family? Why?
30. Who was the most influential in teaching you about Yoruba culture? Can you give examples of ways you were taught about your culture? i.e. proverbs, stories etc.

VII. Generational Knowledge, Gender and Seniority
31. Is respect for Elders based on gender? If so, why?
32. How is gender talked about in your family?
33. Who is/was the most respected/knowledgeable woman in your family? Why?
34. Do men and women figure differently in passing your culture onto you? If yes why? If no, why not?
Appendix B  
Invitational Letter for the Study

[OISE/University of Toronto letterhead]

[Date]

Dear prospective participant:

My name is Temitope Adefarakan and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology and Equity studies in Education at the Ontario Institute for studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT). For my doctoral thesis, I am conducting a study that explores how Yoruba parents and their children learn, understand and experience their Indigenous Yoruba identity in their everyday lives in Canada. This study covers a number of issues about Yoruba identity and culture, including language, spirituality, generational knowledge and seniority. The main purposes of this study is to explore perceptions of Yoruba Indigenous culture and identity, how it is learnt and communicated to younger generations, (particularly from parents to children), how this is influenced by living in Canada (and/or outside Yorubaland) i.e. by racism and other forms of oppression, and the coping strategies we use to deal with such challenges. I am inviting you to participate in this research because your knowledge and experiences of Yoruba culture, as well as your experiences as a Yoruba person in Canada will be of great interest and beneficial to other African people and people of colour.

There is very little information available about Yoruba people and our experiences in Canada. Yet, Yoruba people have rich and deep knowledge that we share with each other and others to strengthen our communities and our families. I plan to interview Yoruba parents and their children to tap into their rich cultural sources of knowledge and experiences. Therefore, this is an interview project that examines how Yoruba people know, learn about and live their lives in the context of community, family and the larger context of the West.

I intend to interview 8 parents who are between 40-75 years old, and their children who are between 18 to 40 years old. The participants will number a total of 16 people. The study will select Yoruba parents who have lived and raised their children in Canada for at least ten years to garner a deeper understanding of the difficulties that may have been faced in an attempt to become accustomed to living in Canada, and how this may have influenced their views on their Indigenous identities and how it is utilized i.e. passed on (or not) to their children.

Each individual participant will receive a CAD$50.00 honourarium in the spirit of reciprocity, and as an acknowledgement of my gratitude in taking the time to agree to participate in the study.

The interview will take place at a mutually convenient location (your home, my home or a neutral location). With your permission, the interview – which will last from one to two hours- will be taped and transcribed. You can request that I pause or stop the tape at any time. No
person except me will have access to the tapes and/or the transcripts. Transcripts will be stored on my home computer to which I am the only one with access: original tapes and transcripts will be destroyed within seven years of completing the study.

The names of the interviewees will be kept confidential and will not appear in the study or in my communications with any other person including my thesis supervisor. The information that you provide will be transcribed and I will discuss the findings with my supervisor, Dr. George Dei. However, the identity of the participants will not be made known to Dr. Dei or any of the professors on my committee. Should you have any additional questions about the supervision of my work, please feel free to contact Dr. George Dei at (416) 923-6641 ext. 2513 or by email at gdei@oise.utoronto.ca. The study will be undertaken with the strictest respect for confidentiality and anonymity. Parents and children will not be named and identified. Nevertheless, the shared history between parents and children may lead them to recognize anonymous references to each other in the final study. Therefore, at the beginning of each interview, I will remind each participant that there is the possibility that some of their comments and observations may be recognized by their parent/child also taking part in the study. Other key identifying information such as addresses, places of employment and names of friends will be suppressed and/or changed to protect anonymity.

Prior to the interview, I will provide detailed information about the questions and the research to ensure that all concerns are addressed, and that you are comfortable with the overall objectives of the study. After the interviews have been completed and transcribed, I will forward a copy of the transcript for review to ensure that your words have been accurately recorded.

Should you agree to participate in this study, please sign the enclosed consent form, as well as fill out the form requesting biographical information and return them to me within two weeks from the date of this letter. I have enclosed a self-addressed, stamped envelope for your convenience. If you have any questions whatsoever, you can reach me by phone at (416) 883-0335 or by email at tadefarakan@oise.utoronto.ca. I will also call you to ensure that you have received this letter.

Thank you for your interest in my work. I look forward to speaking with you in a follow-up phone call. I hope you will agree to take part!

Sincerely,

Temitope Adefarakan
PhD Candidate
OISE/University of Toronto
Appendix C
Participant’s Biographical and Demographical Profile

Name (pre-arranged pseudonym):

Age:

Gender:

Ethnicity/Yoruba Dialect Spoken:

Citizenship:

Years in Canada:

Educational Background or Highest Level of Education Attained:

Marital/Partnership Status:

Number of children:

Community/Organization/Workplace Affiliation:

Post/Position if held:
Appendix D
Informed Letter of Consent

OISE/University of Toronto Letterhead

Participant Interview Letter of Consent Form

I, _______________________________________________________ agree to participate in a PhD thesis study being conducted by Temitope Adefarakan of the Sociology and Equity Studies in Education Department of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to explore how Yoruba parents and their children learn, understand and experience their Indigenous Yoruba identity in their everyday lives in Canada. I will be asked to respond to interview questions that require me to give oral narratives on my lived experience and knowledge of Yoruba culture and Indigenous identity in Canada. I am free to answer some questions and not others while my autonomy is fully safeguarded to the greatest possible extent.

I understand that there are no anticipated risks to me other than the risk of daily living. I understand that I will be given the opportunity to read the transcripts of my interview to ensure accuracy of information, comments and analysis. A summary of the completed study will be provided to me upon request, and a copy of the final thesis will be made available for my examination.

I understand that the interview may take approximately 60-120 minutes, will occur at a place and time convenient for me and that upon completion of the interview, I will receive a CAD$50.00 honourarium.

I understand the purpose of the study and know that there are no hidden motives of which I have not been informed. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences. I understand that my answers and oral narratives will be kept confidential. I understand that my name will not be identified (pseudonyms will be used) in the research or any presentations and/or publications that may result from the study. I understand that only the principal researcher and her thesis supervisor will have access to the information collected during the study.

I understand that the study may not benefit me directly. However, the benefit of the study is to resist the marginalization of Yoruba (African) knowledges and open up a space for dialogue, as well as to engage in in-depth learning and discussion about Yoruba lived experiences and worldview in the context of Euro-dominant culture. I understand that institutions and communities that are connected to and invested in educating Yoruba people, other Africans and people of colour will also benefit. The findings of the study will contribute to what is currently very little research on the diasporic specificities of Yoruba
Indigenous Spirituality and language amongst the Yoruba-speaking community in the West (Canada). The study will also add to the growing body of information on African Indigenous knowledges and identities for purposes of empowerment and transformational change from an Indigenous and anti-oppressive perspective.

I have carefully studied the above information and understand this agreement. I freely consent and agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent letter.

________________________________________________________________________

Signature _____________________________________________________________ Date ________________

________________________________________________________________________

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact me, or my thesis supervisor.

PhD Candidate
Temitope Adefarakan
Phone: 416-883-0335
Email: tadefarakan@oise.utoronto.ca

Thesis Supervisor
Dr. George J. Sefa Dei
Phone: 416-978-0460
Email: gdei@oise.utoronto.ca