

UNITY VS DUALITY: DIVERGENT VIEWS OF AMERICAN IDENTITY IN RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S "THE OVER-SOUL" AND AMIRI BARAKA'S "AN AGONY. AS NOW"

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Abstract

In the tapestry of American literary canon, two prominent voices emerge amidst a multitude of writings, each offering two different essentialisations of American identity. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the herald of transcendentalism, in his concept of "The Over-Soul," offers an ethereal notion that signifies the interconnectedness of all living beings under one transcendent Over-Soul God, thereby implicitly advocating that Americans harbour a harmonious cosmic unity amongst themselves. In stark contrast, Amiri Baraka, a fervent poet of the Beat Generation, resists the transcendental romanticised ideal of unity, by vividly entailing a fragmented and fissured approach to the notion of identity as duality that characterises his works. This paper aspires to decipher the divergent views of American identity as implicit within their works. To achieve this, it aims to place Emerson's notion of Over-Soul on a continuum with American identity, thereby euphemising it as an identity of unity, which is characterised by the indiscriminate integration and unity of Americans standing in solidarity with each other to effectuate the image of an all-unifying glorious nation 'America'. It then aims to substantiate Amiri Baraka's "An Agony. As Now" as an individual instance of Emerson's collective identity that testifies against his identity mould by entailing experiences that ascertain that American identity for African Americans is only an identity of duality, i.e. of double disintegration, one in relation to their fellow Americans and the other in the relation to themselves, which in turn unravel the pertinence of 'dual alienation', whereby their first disintegration alienates them from the American world and the latter alienates them from themselves.

Keywords: Unity, Duality, American Identity, Over-Soul, Double Disintegration, Dual-alienation

INTRODUCTION

The canon of American literature reverberates a plethora of prominent voices, each expounding their vision of the country, directed towards shaping and determining the identity of America as a nation. Most often, these voices, along with being distinguished are also distinct. For instance, Walt Whitman, embodying the American aspiration of democracy and liberty, in his poem "America", likens America to a "Centre of equal daughters, equal sons/ All, all alike endear'd [...]" (1888, lines 1-2). Whereas, Claude McKay, a prominent Harlem Renaissance figure, known for depictions of racial inequality and protest, instantiates America in his sonnet "America" as,

"Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess

I love this cultured hell that tests my youth" (1921, lines 1-4).

It can be espied that spoken from an objective perspective, Whitman's concept of America is a consolidated superstructure of oneness and unity. Equated to a centre that holds the structure together, America is promulgated as an embodiment of equality, where all its citizens, irrespective of race, age, etc. are 'alike', thus equalised by an all-unifying identity of being an 'American'. On the other hand, McKay's depiction of America is caused by his personal experience. He does not present a glorified portrait of America being an equalising centre from a third person's perspective. Rather, he decentres it by elucidating his unpleasant experiences with the land, which treated him with resentment and robbed him of his dignity. Therefore, his portrayal of America stands in contradiction to Whitman's all-unifying metanarrative of American identity and presents it as a contemptuous, brutal, discriminatory land, that has to be fought with perpetual resistance to win its envisioned acceptance. America for him, is thus a disintegrated land that discriminates and disfigures.

Similar polarisation of American voices implicitly hailing the identity of America can be discerned in the emergence of two distinct voices, viz. Ralph Waldo Emerson, an early 19th-century American Romantic poet, and Imamu Amiri Baraka, also known by his pen name Leroy Jones, a 20th-century African-American poet. Born a century apart, both profoundly influential, offer differing viewpoints on the human condition and by virtue of the same, on the fundamental nature of the nation and identity. Ralph Waldo Emerson, often hailed as the harbinger of transcendentalism, along with other poets such as Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau,

Margaret Fuller and the like introduces his ethereal concept of the 'The Over-Soul', in his 1841 essay, "The Over-Soul", a notion that intricately weaves together the interconnectedness of all living beings, as evident in his postulation, "By the necessity of our constitution, a certain enthusiasm attends the individual's consciousness of that divine presence" (p. 10). Hence, for Emerson, the very constitution of the human race is sustained by the interconnectedness between one individual and the other, effectuating a sense of assimilating unity amongst all of us as he holds that every consciousness is inspired and is a part of the divine, the transcendent soul, which it eventually becomes one with. Thus, in his vision, he passionately advocates that individual, collectively nurture a harmonious cosmic unity, which when placed in the context of America owing to his identity as an American poet, makes a case for an American identity that is characterised by unity. An identity that connects and unites American citizens.

In stark contradiction to Emerson's transcendental romanticism, Baraka offers a visceral and fragmented lens through his writings. His disfigured sense of self can be well perceived in the poem, "The Liar" as he says,

"Wherever I go to claim
my flesh, there are entrances
of spirit (1963, lines 7-9).

Thus, far from experiencing any unity between himself and his fellow brothers or with the divine, he can't feel a sense of the same within himself in the first place. He views his 'flesh' meaning his body and his 'spirit', meaning his soul to be separate entities, that only treacherously intermingle. When he goes on to claim his flesh, to perhaps get rid of it since his physicality has yielded discrimination and alienation in the American society, his spirit, or his soul does not let him. This dichotomy is a predominant trait of Baraka's work implicating his experiences, which can be viewed as resistance and rejection of Emerson's idealized notion of unity, delving deep into the profound duality of American identity that disintegrates its people.

This research paper endeavours to explore the contrasting conceptions of American identity inherent in the selected literary works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Imamu Amiri Baraka. To effectuate this, it seeks to establish a continuum between Emerson's notion of the Over-Soul with the notion of American identity, thereby characterising the latter as a seamless integration and unity among its citizens, creating the image of a united, unifying and glorious nation, America. Subsequently, it endeavours to apply this identity mould to the experiences of Amiri Baraka illustrated in his poem "An Agony. As Now" as an experiential instance of the collective American identity hailed by Emerson. It consequently aims to substantiate Baraka's entailment of disintegration as an indication of a divergent reality, which, rather than endorsing Emerson's American identity as unity, reveals that, for African Americans, American identity is duality, where duality can be discerned in the experiences of double integration leading to 'dual alienation'; whereby first, the disintegration of African Americans from their fellow Americans leads to their alienation from the broader 'American world,' and second, an internal disintegration between their flesh and soul leads to an internal alienation with themselves.

PLACING EMERSON'S OVER-SOUL ON A CONTINUUM WITH AMERICAN IDENTITY

Ralph Waldo Emerson, born in 1803, shortly after America gained independence in 1776, grappled with the socio-political and literary aftermath of independence and of the becoming of a nation that lay betwixt colonial dependence and national sovereignty. Consequently, disappointed by the discernment of Americans imitating the coloniser's (British) yardstick of writing, he tried to create a mould of an ideal American identity, which in turn, would ignite Americans together, invoking national solidarity in them and would lead to the essentialisation of America as a distinct global superpower. Thus, "to keep the soul forever young and active, to defend its creative energies, the personal and actual character of religious experience, the right for the individual to expand into universal relations, (was) the capital point of all Emerson's lecturing and preaching from 1832 to 1838" (Michaud, 1919, p. 76), as Emerson was building an ideal American.

One of his addresses, an oration delivered before the 'Phi Beta Kappa Society,' at Cambridge in 1831 became the incipience of his conceptualisation of the American identity, which he hoped his fellow counterparts would emulate. Published later in 1837 as an essay titled "The American Scholar", it came to be deemed as the 'Declaration of the Cultural Independence of America', in which, addressing the citizens of America and hailing them towards a distinct creative compelling, he upholds,

"We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds [...] A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men" (p. 20).

This postulation foregrounds all the essential ideological formulations that Emerson contended and urged the American masses to embody. Beginning with the address 'we', a collective pronoun, he impregnates a sense of unity and solidarity among the people, consequently consorting it with the ideal of sovereignty evident in the phrase, "walk on our own feet". Thus, in totality, he is interpellating the people before him, i.e., the Americans to take up this ideal identity mould of being an American, who is not only united with his fellow Americans but is also self-reliant and independent. Subsequently, he makes his vision of American nationalism apparent by hailing the identity of America itself as "a nation of men" that never existed before, owing to his reasoning that the men this nation fosters are all divinely inspired, or "are inspired by the Divine Soul", which inevitably knits

together an integrated identity of these men falling under one remit of being associated with the never-seen-before 'nation', America, and consequently standing in solidarity with each other. Hence, ultimately the imagery of unity conjured initially by his pronoun 'we' ends in a full circle with the same unity being associated with the glorious nation.

Thus, it can be inferred that in "The American Scholar" Emerson strived to etch the identity of an all-unifying America and united Americans. It is also important to note that in this zeal to hail and unite America under an overarching identity of a glorious nation, he persuaded the existence of a cosmic unity prevalent in all human beings, that unites them and ties them to God, evident in his postulation about "the divine soul" bearing a uniform existence in all men, thereby making them spiritually interconnected. This nascency is what reverberates Emerson's latter concept of 'The Over-Soul', as it holds the same,

"... the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other..." (1842, p. 03).

Since, the concept of the Over-Soul was founded in "The American Scholar", a treatise held to unite Americans persuading them of an all-unifying America, it can therefore be substantiated that Emerson's notion of spiritual interconnection evident in his later essay "The Over-Soul", can be put on a continuum with Emerson's vision of American identity.

EMERSON'S AMERICAN IDENTITY OF UNITY THROUGH THE LENS OF OVER-SOUL

"We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE" (Emerson, 2010, p. 03).

In the excerpt above, which can be regarded as the genesis of Emerson's conception of Over-Soul, he begins by acknowledging that human existence is indeed marred with factions and fissures experienced within and without, however, subsequently, he upholds a contrasting belief that domineers over his former exposition. He asserts that within each man is a "soul of the whole". His signification is that every individual is not only whole in himself but is also a constituent sustaining the entirety of the universe, whereby the presence of the overarching soul eclipses the internal divisions as a passing reality and forges a relationship of interconnectedness between people, which in turn is nurtured by equality.

On a continuum, individuals can be equated with American citizens and the "soul of the whole" can be equated with the glorious nation of America. And thence the initial lines also signify that within each American is the identity of belonging to the all-unifying nation, America, whereby even though an individual American identity can at times be experienced in fissures, but as a constant reality, it is necessarily eclipsed by the effectuation of the larger unifying America that connects its citizens together and treats them with equality. Thus, Emerson, through spiritual interconnectedness, interpellates an American identity that is integrated, whereby people feel united with each other by the virtue of being a part of the same land, a larger soul, ultimately leading to solidarity.

Conjuring up the universal and aesthetic ideals of wisdom, silence and beauty, he further illuminates the nature of the "soul of the whole" which, by alluding to divinity, he deems to be Eternal, and, to which "every part and particle is equally related". Thence, Emerson's eternal soul can be likened to Whitman's centre, before which every individual instance and existence is equal. On this ground, undertones of American nationalism can be apparently perceived, wherein by upholding that the greater soul present in every individual is characterised and constituted by equality, Emerson inevitably signifies that the greater eternal soul present within each American, i.e., of America is also characterised by equality, to which 'every part is equally related'.

Thus, in substantiation, it can be held that Emerson ultimately foregrounds the notion that America is a unifying land, that does not discriminate, only unites, and an American identity that is unified and integrated harbouring a sense of solidarity between Americans. In other words, as accurately encapsulated by Lawrence Buell, The Over-Soul "provided a way of talking about the unity-in-diversity of American society" (2016, p. 330).

BARAKA'S IDENTITY OF DUALITY FORGING DUAL ALIENATION

Imamu Amiri Baraka, born in 1934, was a Black American in a nation where slavery was abolished by law but practised by ideological prejudices. The racial discrimination that he faced led to his association with the 'Black Artists Movement' and 'The Beat Generation'; movements which made a case for the distinct creative expressions of African Americans by claiming and embracing their roots. Inevitably, he did not experience his American identity as transcendentally unified as Emerson conceptualised it. Rather, his experiences were marred with discrimination and cruelty, which led him to experience his identity in a state of duality or a state where "the self remain(s) in the divided condition" (Buell, 2016, p. 330). This state of duality and its manifestation into dual alienation can be discerned as below.

a. American Alienation

The objectively essentialised outlook of American identity by Emerson is contradicted by the lived experiences of Baraka, who in “An Agony. As Now” writes,

I am inside someone
who hates me. I look
out from his eyes (1964, lines 1-3).

Baraka begins with an imperious pronoun ‘I’, which stands as a foreboding testimony to the fabric of American identity carved by Emerson a century ago, building on which he poignantly declares that his individuality, his ‘I’ is inside someone. Thus, this ‘I’ can be deemed as a distinct American voice that refers to the individual man that Emerson spoke of, who, by evoking an expression of imprisonment, is testifying against any sort of unity that Emerson envisioned for American individuals. In other words, it brings to the fore an individual instance of the collective American identity that Emerson anticipated.

Retrospectively, in relation to Emerson’s lulling notion of interconnectedness between people, Baraka starts off by building on the presence of one inside the other only to subvert it by ascribing it to a feeling of imprisonment, ultimately effectuated by the iteration that whoever he is inside hates him. This portrayal of imprisonment can be better comprehended in the social context of American society practising slavery. Being an African American, a race that was historically subjugated to the inhuman horrors of slavery and dehumanisation, Baraka thus expresses his existence to be imprisoned, enslaved and bound by his master: the White Americans, who are also his fellow Americans. This contextual specificity thus refutes the ideal of America being a unifying land as it foregrounds the long-existing discriminatory practice of a group of people enslaving the other, and hence it also refutes the seemingly romanticised sovereignty or self-reliance that Emerson propounded in “The American Scholar”. Furthermore, Baraka’s asseveration of imprisonment at the hands of his own people contradicts the American unity Emerson was staunch about as he highlights his disintegration from the rest of the American society in which he is imprisoned, which subsequently also alienates him from the society, foregrounding the first level of alienation. Therefore, this prevalence of enslavement, disintegration and alienation ultimately debunks Emerson’s utopian bubble of spiritual interconnection, united American identity and consequent solidarity between people.

In the same line of thought, his indomitable ‘I’ can be viewed as a representative testimony of all Black Americans, bringing to the fore the plight of their community at the hands of the hospitality of their nation, or rather the absence of it, as it was discerned in McKay’s “America”, whereby far from being treated equally by the all-prevalent soul, America, their identity and individuality is discriminated against, imprisoned and perpetually wounded. Thus, Baraka and his community feel subjected to the nation’s hatred rather than feeling a cosmic part of it, and hence for them, America is not an all-unifying whole, it is hostile, discriminatory and disintegrated, that alienates an entire community, again fortifying the former disintegration and alienation by extending its application to the disintegration and alienation of his community too.

It is only justified to deem Baraka’s account as a representative testimony of the experiences of African Americans as other poets like Maya Angelou also invoke the discriminatory deposition of American land that effectuates alienation of an entire community of people from the rest of the American society. It is evident in her contrasting imagery of “a free bird” who “dares to claim the sky” (1997, lines 1, 7), representing white Americans and antithetical imagery of “the caged birds” singing “with a fearful trill” (lines 15-16) representing African Americans, both pitted in stark contestation against each other, where one has all the freedom the land has to offer, and the other can only dream of it.

b. Internal Alienation

As a consequence of imprisonment, Baraka poignantly upholds; “I look out from his eyes”. Thus, his sense of self is not only disintegrated and aloof from American society but the goriness of his imprisonment has also caused a psychological bearing, owing to which, he has now internalised the hatred he was subjected to, to the point that the eyes of the master has become his own’s. This phenomenon is what W. E. B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* termed “double-consciousness”, a term propounded to comprehend the experiences of African Americans, illuminating which, he says,

“This American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world [...] It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (1903, p. 214-215).

DuBois’s theorisation starts with appertaining to the ‘American world’, invoking it as a distant land that alienates African Americans from the rest of the world as iterated above in the analysis of the first level of disintegration and alienation. Consequently, he holds that this world bereaves them of their true sense of self and their distinct consciousness. Instead, inevitably it compels them to look at themselves through the eyes of their oppressors, making them feel contemptuous towards their own soul and their own Africanness as the critic Edward Margolies once accurately summarised:

“In order to sustain himself in the American environment, the Negro has had to fashion a culture that could preserve some semblance of his dignity and at the same time would not appear to threaten the paranoid white civilization” (1968, p. 127).

Therefore, this internalised identity, necessitating a filter of what an African American should be and should not be, leading to a double consciousness, accentuates the second duality of identity which is experienced as a disintegration of self, as here, African Americans, instead of accepting their distinctiveness and embracing their individuality, grow hostile and disdainful towards it, ultimately becoming alienated from themselves.

In fortification, the latter half of DuBois’s deliberation also foregrounds a quintessential ‘two-ness’ that characterises much of the existence of African Americans, whereby far from feeling one with his fellow white Americans, an African American in himself harbours a feeling of duality, a division of his own consciousness or sense of self that, as iterated above leads to his own alienation. As he is perpetually pulled apart by two opposing identities, i.e., being an American and a Black, not only does his African American identity stand disintegrated by the virtue of being hyphenated, but his own identity stands contested too, harbouring “two-souls”, and a fragmented physicality, which is very evident in Baraka’s musings:

“This is the enclosure (flesh,
where innocence is a weapon. An
abstraction. Touch” (lines 12-14).

These verses explicitly build on the initial sense of imprisonment consolidating the first level inference of alienation. Further, the phrase, “This is the enclosure” signifies a separation between the soul from the body as the word ‘flesh’, conjures an image of a disfigured, fragmented self. It imparts a reality where people are trapped in their own flesh, alluding to the fact that the cause of their enslavement was the colour of their skin, an impeding physicality that forbode their doom. This fragmented imagery of flesh is also likened to an “abstraction” which highlights that perceptions of race and ethnicity are social constructs, they are merely abstract concepts with no empirical substantiation. Likewise, the speaker feels entrapped by such abstract concepts, causing a disintegration between his physical body and his true self, which leads him to a feeling of alienation from himself. This disfigurement is a stark refutation of Emerson’s Over-Soul’s tenet, “And so, always, the soul’s scale is one” (06), which holds that the soul is indivisible and a unified whole. On a continuum, it is also a refutation of Emerson’s notion of the identity of an American being predominantly integrated and united. Subsequently, it can be fortified that American identity for African Americans indeed “falls short of a unified, “true” self-consciousness. It is part of a more complex feeling of “two-ness” [...] This is not an episodic or occasional sensation, but a persistent form of consciousness” (Pitman, 2016). Thus, Emerson’s initial argument about identity being only occasionally divisive if at all is also disproved.

Emerson’s conceptualisation of internal unity is further refuted by Baraka in the subsequent lines,

“[...] if you are the soul I had
and abandoned when I was blind and had
my enemies carry me as a dead man (lines 15-17).

After explicating physical disembodiment, the duality between the body and soul becomes screechingly perpetuating as the poet rhetorically throws open the possibility of his soul literally belonging to the other after he himself abandoned it being “blind”. Here, the overtones of double consciousness and internalisation can be strongly discerned as the poet suggests he turned a blind eye towards his soul, i.e., towards his consciousness and his ethnicity, as he was perhaps made to feel ashamed for embodying it. Thus, internalising his master’s gaze, he looked at himself with shame and deserted his soul, which was inevitably robbed by the other, who now stands not merely as a master of his body but also as the owner of his soul. It is important to note that the speaker’s suggestion of his soul belonging to the other also implicitly suggests a lack of spiritual existence on the part of his master. Therefore, Emerson’s premise of spiritual unity is nullified by Baraka as he suggests that the whites do not have any authentic soul in the first place, and the soul the blacks harbour is alienated and deserted by succumbing to the gaze of the whites, which leave them merely as ‘dead men’, as empty vessels, devoid of any substance and spirituality. The imagery of the “dead man” being carried by his “enemies” ultimately refutes Emerson’s belief in brotherhood and solidarity bred by the greater soul that connects them (America), as Baraka deems his master, his fellow white Americans to be his enemies. Thus, for him, rather than being an all-unifying indiscriminately land, America is a land divided on account of race and ethnicity, whereby one group of people not only feels alienated from the other but also hostile towards them and towards their own selves.

Evincing spiritual disembodiment and building on blind eyes, the poet again turns to physical fragmentation revealing,

“Cold air blown through narrow blind eyes. Flesh,
white hot metal. Glows as the day with its sun” (lines 37-38).

Baraka puts across a negative or melancholic connotation of nature depicting air as “cold”. Interestingly, it is not the only instance where he uproots nature from its dominant romanticised context, as evident in other imageries, “withered yellow flowers” (line 28) and “a white sun in wet sentences” (line 31). This appropriation of nature counters another essential tenet of Emerson’s Over-Soul, reflected in his earlier essay, “Nature”, in which he likens nature to a season “whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the

powers they supply” (1836, p. 10). The negation of this life-enforcing essence of nature that unites is congruent in the musings of African American counterparts as evident in Hughes’s “Dreams” which insists, “Life is a barren field/ Frozen with snow” (1994, lines 7-8), perhaps suggesting that even nature cannot strike any chord of hope, solidarity or life’s vitality to the lot that has been enslaved and alienated in their own land.

Furthermore, Baraka’s correlation of ‘flesh’ with ‘white hot metal’ propels his illustration of the internal duality of self between flesh and soul a notch higher by describing flesh, or the physicality of existence as metallic. This symbolism delineates the conventional perception of bodies being soft, familiar, and hence often figuratively referred to as ‘home’. Instead, it conveys the idea that one’s own body too can become hard, alien, unwelcoming and unfamiliar when met with the goriness of fate that African Americans were historically subjected to. Additionally, it also suggests that when the body separates from the self, it becomes an industrial object like metal for people to exploit, which in turn alienates and confines the existence of the person, where only the residue of a disfigured self remains, in the aftershock of which the consciousness continuously feel torn between its ‘two-ness’, reverberating the inner existential duality that questions, “Flesh or soul” (lines 32-33). A question that seems an irresolvable paradox of African American’s existence, as reflected in Baraka’s poignant pondering in “The Liar”,

"When they say, 'It is Roi
who is dead.' I wonder
who will they mean? (1963, lines 26-28)

CONCLUSION

The analysis sketched above unravels two divergent views of American identity implicit in the selected literary works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Imamu Amiri Baraka respectively, that can be conclusively substantiated as below:

To usher Americans out of a stage of creative imitation and evoke America as a glorious nation; a global superpower that unites even in the face of diversity, Emerson created a mould for the collective American identity. The eventual making of this identity created a utopian image of Americans who are integrated together by the postulation of the prevalence of spiritual interconnectedness and cosmic unity as evident in his conceptualisation of the Over-Soul. Hence, when put on a continuum with American identity, Emerson’s Over-Soul only ascertains an imagined all-unifying American identity characterised by the indiscriminate integration and unity of Americans who stand in solidarity and sovereignty with each other owing to the overarching presence of the greater soul in them, i.e., of the glorious nation ‘America’.

However, when applied to the testimony of an individual instance of this collective identity by undertaking an analytical reading of Baraka’s poem “An Agony. As Now”, Emerson’s collective identity mould stands refuted. Baraka’s poem bespeaks the identity of those Americans who are not one and integrated but are different and disintegrated. It makes it apparent that rather than being cosmically united, American identity for a community of its people, viz. African Americans are disintegrated at two levels, effectuating a ‘dual alienation’, one in relation to their fellow Americans, alienating them from the ‘American world’ and the other, in relation to their own self, ultimately alienating them from themselves. Therefore, American identity for African Americans is only a testimony of duality, i.e., of double disintegration and ‘dual alienation’, against the romantically idealised vision of Emerson’s American identity, which is overwhelmingly essentialized by unity. Owing to these divergent views, in conclusion, it is justified to hold that American identity was and remains to be a contesting field, which treats people differently and hence lead to its people perceiving it differently.

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