Notes

1. The proverb of the dancing mask is often evoked to show that traditional Igbo society was one of multiplicity, one in which the recognition and adoption of plural subject positions were a value: "The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place" (*Arrow* 46). It is important to emphasize that this value of traditional animist culture is anchored in a single, overarching discursive order: the dancing mask thus shows different faces of the same epistemic-ideological order rather than contested normativities.

2. The simultaneous interpellation I refer to here is different from the concept of hybridity as used in current postcolonial criticism and cultural theory. It is also different from the multiculturalist perspective that finds its conceptual resources in the old anthropological conception of culture as bounded entities.

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How We Read *Things Fall Apart* Then

EILEEN JULIEN

There are two ways to lose oneself: through segregation, walled off in the particular, or through dilution in the "universal."

—Aimé Césaire (my trans.)

Things Fall Apart is from another century, another time and place.

Drawing its title from "The Second Coming," William Butler Yeats's modernist poem, and emanating from an as-yet-innocent Nigeria, it is a preface to the coming storm of decolonization and seemingly endless cycles of violence and upheaval in sub-Saharan Africa.

There can be no question about Chinua Achebe's extraordinary revisioning of history, his grasp of the capacity of literature—specifically, the novel as shaped by his compelling prose—to force on the world a new reading of colonial conquest. Achebe examined the premises of empire and colonialism with a freshness and force that were remarkable and unprecedented. And he did so in a short narrative accessible to millions of people around the world, schooled and less schooled.

Achebe's writing did not spring, as it was long supposed and often intimated, from his pen and head in a fit of intuitive, surrealist night writing but clearly drew at the very least, alongside Igbo oral traditions, on his readings of the Bible and works of creative literature and anthropology, which offered models of voice, motif, and phrasing (Cobham-Sander).

Achebe was not only a conjurer of worlds through words, however, but also a sage. We looked to him because of his deep faith in humanity and his unabashed moral vision, which earned him authority and respect, even when we might disagree with his interpretations and assessments of, for example, Joseph Conrad or Ayi Kwei Armah or Yambo Ouologuem. Besides the archaeological unearthing of an ignored or, more often, willfully

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obscured past that he performs in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Achebe's storytelling has a utopic, visionary dimension informed by his faith and hope (Gikandi).

I admit my great skepticism vis-à-vis "world literature," but it is hard to think of another twentieth-century author whose work has been translated into so many languages and traveled so far. He is the exemplar—if not the theorist—of early "postcolonial" literature, the one who inaugurated what would be known for fifty years as "African literature."

Despite the burdens of the term, the world still speaks of "African literature." Other novels by Africans—Félix Couchoro's *L'esclave* (1929; "The Slave"), Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930), Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (written in Sesotho and first published in English translation in 1931), Ousmane Socé's *Karim* (1935), Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy* (1946)—preceded *Things Fall Apart*. But this nomenclature is in large measure the legacy of African writers of the 1950s and 1960s. We might say with Jorge Luis Borges that it took Chinua Achebe to make us see the patterns connecting these "precursors" and subsequent writers. It was first and foremost Achebe, then, who inaugurated African literature as a literature of anticolonialism, of antiracism, of reclamation of identity and the precolonial past, the writing/righting of misrepresentations.

A reflection on this most extraordinary book and its author might take many directions. This might be the occasion to ponder Frantz Fanon's complaint that the creation of an "African" novel—and thereby already, I would argue, a pan-African or diasporic consciousness—undermined nationalist sentiment and engagement, for him the sine qua non of liberated African societies. One might also consider the way in which disciplinary fields shift because of ever-changing institutional, scholarly, and publishing practices as well as the massive displacement and circulation of African writers and artists and the intensive impact of technologies. What was for half a century or more "African literature" may now be considered "national" or "ethnic" literature or, conversely, literature "from," "about," or "in" Africa, regardless of its author's phenotype or place of residence. Such literature today may be designated postcolonial (still) or tricontinental, or—given a prize or multiple translations—it may be admitted to the ranks of "world" literature, a powerful and transformative paradigm that nonetheless seems to me arbitrary and ultimately a classification without substance, one that still fails—do I ask too much?—to equalize, given the innumerable rolls of the dice required to propel any locally anchored text, written, say, in Arabic, Hausa, Swahili, Wolof, or Zulu, onto the international circuit (Julien, "Arguments"). One might, on the other hand, recall the extroversion of the Euro-language novel—not only its responsiveness to theories, isms, and social-scientific agendas generated by scholars, policy makers, and readers to the west and north but also its capacity to reach out beyond locality to readers everywhere (Julien, "Extroverted African Novel"). One might examine, too, the implications of the novel's finding some of its most fertile soil in the postcolonial South, a "contact zone" par excellence.

What I should like to explore here briefly is how we read *Things Fall Apart* and its sister texts when African literature was born. Anyone who has read Achebe's forceful essays, including, for example, "The Novelist as Teacher," is aware of the intellectual burden that this literature and its authors took on, as I indicated above. I would argue that the aesthetic protocols that came to signify Africa were in part a legacy of Achebe. By this I am referring to how we perceived the relation between the novel as a genre and local or indigenous resources, such as oral traditions.

Looking back at the 1969 Fawcett World Library paperback edition of *Things Fall Apart*, for example, one finds a testimony to the time and place of the novel's early reception. The back cover refers to the work as

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"uniquely and richly African." The *New York Times* is also cited: "*Things Fall Apart* takes its place with that small company of sensitive books that describe primitive society from the inside. In a few years there can be no more. Then these books will become a rich storehouse for the future, full of nostalgia, and (perhaps) a never-to-be-recaptured truth."

The two templates for reading African literature in these early years come through loud and clear: first, the teleology that imagines African societies' moving from tradition to modernity, with the angst-filled existential crisis this implies, and, second, the inclusion of or reference to oral traditions as formal adjustments that will convert the novel into an almost authentic African text (Moretti).

The premise of such readings is, of course, that the modern novel is European. What made African literature, including Achebe's early novels, intelligible, then, was the assumption of the novel's traveling from center to periphery and of its indigenization through the insertion of oral discourse. This engagement with "European form" has been read sometimes as appropriative (Pratt) but more often as derivative (Todorov).

Given the territory that he staked out and on which he planted the flag of African literature, Achebe set the bar high indeed for subsequent writers, in both the stories he told and the language in which he told them. "African" thus came to designate a challenge to imperial discourse and its underpinnings as well as an aesthetic of oral traditions, proverbial speech, and inflected syntax. What would African literature have become without this model, which necessarily was read as singular, real, and true? Would we have had African literature at all?

Today I should like my students to read the Achebe of the 1950s and other writers of the age of African literature while keeping in mind the urgent imperatives and damning assumptions of the age, even as more recent creative texts and scholarship have forced us to see the limits of early gender-bound, nationalist, realist texts, with their mostly omniscient narrators, and to read even these texts more irreverentially, more playfully, more audaciously.

What if it was the traversing of boundaries, what if it was empire, as Edward Said claimed, that made the novel possible? What if the novel was less an imported, stable genre than an effect of publication, scholarly, and readerly practices—a *forma franca* that allows us to express our differences across cultures and to be intelligible not only in Africa and its proximate diasporas but also around the world?

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