

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as Chinua Achebe's (Unruly) Literary Daughter: The Past, Present, and Future of "Adichebean" Criticism

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the—already much-discussed—literary relationship between Nigerian writers Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Following an introduction on the state of what the article calls, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, “Adichebean” criticism, the essay investigates how Adichie’s ambiguous interventions on the topic of her affiliation with Achebe have defined her own literary identity but also, more generally, how her declarations may provide food for thought in regard to the wider field of contemporary African writing and its criticism. One of the central points developed in the essay is that existing comparative studies of Achebe’s and Adichie’s works have tended to focus on particular topics and use similar methods of inquiry and that further lines of investigation need to be pursued if we are to build a nuanced and comprehensive picture of the connections and divergences between Achebe and his increasingly “unruly” literary offspring. It is to this “rebelliousness” that the final part of the essay attends by appraising the possible significance of Adichie’s oppositional stance in her two lukewarm assessments of Achebe’s final opus, his nonfictional *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012).

Not all jargon-filled openings to academic essays will stand the test of rigorous intellectual scrutiny; conversely, seemingly trivial anecdotes may provide points of entry into topics worthy of more serious consideration. In this spirit, let us start with the unremarkable fact that, like many of my colleagues, I have an account on an academic file-sharing platform—one of

the scholarly equivalents to the more widely known social networks. Among the services offered by this particular website, one is especially appealing to procrastination-prone researchers in need of a gentle ego-boost, namely the possibility for them to view notifications indicating that people from certain geographical areas have found their publications using particular search terms. Thus it is that, one day, I discovered that “someone from Nigeria” had accessed one of my papers and had done so by entering the following keywords: “*Things Fall Apart* by Chimamanda Adichie.”

The reader of this essay will instantly return the title of this seminal novel to its rightful author, Chinua Achebe, but this incident provides an eloquent illustration of the ways in which Achebe and his younger compatriot Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have become inextricably associated in the minds of many, be they lay readers, students, or professional critics. This article intends to investigate this literary relationship—with less levity, of course, than the opening of this text suggests. At the onset, it must be pointed out that the topic has already received considerable scholarly attention: no less than a dozen articles have probed the connections between the two figures, in discussions ranging from a few paragraphs citing biographical commonalities to entire pages devoted to possible intertextual parallels between the writers’ works. If this wealth of material testifies to the considerable interest in the topic, one may legitimately question the usefulness of yet another essay on the subject—after all, the existing studies make a number of important claims that do not need to be reiterated here. If the benefits of a descriptive synthesis of these studies would indeed be limited, an approach based on a critical investigation of the tendencies found in them, on the other hand, might yield more revealing insights into what is, in effect, African literary history in the making. In so doing, I hope that the analysis will also facilitate a reflection on our scholarly practices, which, in turn, may help us to gesture toward new directions for research in the field of Nigerian literature. As Eve Eisenberg has aptly put it, “the thoughtless tendency to link Achebe and Adichie” could be more profitably replaced by the act of “asking ourselves *why* it makes sense to include them in the same breath” (*Descent or Dissent* 54; emphasis added).

Using this injunction as a point of departure, the present essay will adopt a threefold structure to reappraise, and hopefully further elucidate, the relationship between Achebe and Adichie. First, by way of introduction, I will briefly review some of the facts that have motivated the comparison between the two writers; I will also discuss the manner in which their literary connection has been presented and what the potential limitations of such a presentation might be. Secondly, I will investigate how Adichie’s ambiguous interventions on the topic of her affiliation with Achebe may help to reframe the debate not only in regard to her own literary identity, but also, more generally, in relation to the wider field of contemporary African writing and its criticism. Thirdly, attending more closely to the idea of rebelliousness announced in the title of this essay, I will concentrate on the oppositional stance taken by Adichie in her two lukewarm assessments of Achebe’s final opus, his nonfictional *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012). In sum, the aim of this essay is both to assess the ways in which the connection between Achebe and Adichie has been approached and to gesture toward further

lines of inquiry into this literary relationship. What follows should by no means be regarded as either prescriptive or comprehensive.

Before entering the heart of the matter, one must begin by stating the obvious: namely, that journalists' and literary critics' compulsive comparisons between Achebe and Adichie are based on indisputable connections between the authors that extend well beyond their common Nigerian nationality and Igbo ethnicity. A long list of these literary ties can be drawn up without even opening any of the writers' books. For example, it is widely known that Adichie has repeatedly called Achebe "the writer whose work is most important to me" (e.g., "The Writing Life" 11). She has, furthermore, identified him as "the writer whose work gave me permission to write my own stories" ("African 'Authenticity'" 42), and she has consistently singled out *Arrow of God* (1964) as her all-time favorite novel, especially praising the "wondrously unwieldy and . . . deep complexity" of its main character, Ezeulu ("Introduction" xii). Achebe, for his part, expressed his admiration for Adichie by writing a laudatory blurb for her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), in which he called his younger colleague "a new writer endowed with the gift of ancient storytellers." Adichie was so touched by Achebe's paragraph-length endorsement of her book that she memorized it in its entirety ("Achebe at 82"). Then, following Achebe's death in 2013, the younger author paid a public tribute to her literary idol by writing an elegy in Igbo in his honor. The list of such connections is all but endless; one might, I suspect, fill entire pages with further similar examples.

In both journalistic and academic circles, one of the most common manifestations of the association between the two writers has taken the form of a genealogical metaphor, whereby Achebe is cast into the role of the "father of African literature" and Adichie into that of his "literary daughter." Elleke Boehmer, in a tribute to the late Achebe, questioned the relevance of this familial metaphor, pointing out that "only one biological father is possible," whereas, she says, "we would be hard-pressed to raise up a *single* father of modern African literature" among all the "novelists, poets, playwrights, and journalists" that have marked the history of the continent's writing, even before Achebe embarked on his career (238). Moreover, Boehmer continues, the genealogical image is "flawed, since it takes for granted the existence of a monadic and homogenous Africa" (238). Having made these points, she nonetheless acknowledges the possibility, put forward by her fellow critic Lyn Innes, of "credit[ing] Achebe with the foundation of modern imaginative literature in Africa" (238). Then, illustrating Achebe's undeniable influence on "new generations of writers" across the continent, Boehmer goes on to cite the case of "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, one of his literary *daughters*" (239; emphases added). Coming from a perceptive critic such as Elleke Boehmer, the use of the very metaphor that she has only just severely criticized is far more likely to be a sign of playfulness than inconsistency—a fact also supported by the prominent place given to the genealogical image in the title of her article, "Chinua Achebe, a Father of Modern African Literature," where the indefinite "a" replaces the more usual definite "the." Whatever Boehmer's intentions, her repeated recourse to familial expressions—as well as my own use of the word "daughter" in the title of the present piece—points to the irresistibility of this particular metaphor, a pervasive motif across literary traditions of all kinds.

While Boehmer primarily objects to the paternal component of the genealogical metaphor in regard to Achebe, Eisenberg pays closer attention to the implications of its use for the literary offspring. Considering that Achebe, in the course of his career, consistently identified as a political writer, Eisenberg interestingly states: “when literary critics and journalists describe Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s relationship to Chinua Achebe within a kind of ‘father-daughter’ narrative, they discursively figure her authorial persona according to this image of the African writer as resistance activist” (“Real Africa” 9). Furthermore, the scholar argues, commentators have imposed this image on Adichie despite the fact that she writes stories that actually “resist the very call to literary-political activism about which they speculate” (10). To be more precise, Eisenberg shows that such a critique of “the discourse of African authorship that emphasizes the mimetic exposure of atrocity as a primary obligation of the literary-creative enterprise” (10) is particularly prominent in Adichie’s short story “Jumping Monkey Hill” (2006, later republished in 2009), set around a fictional Nigerian author’s experience at a writing workshop during which a white Oxford-educated man tries to dictate to young African writers what constitutes “authentic” African literature (13–17).

It is at this point that my introductory remarks give way to a more explicit argument: even if I wholeheartedly support Eisenberg’s excellent interpretation of “Jumping Monkey Hill,” I would suggest that Adichie’s apparent rejection of her status as a political writer marching in Achebe’s footsteps is not as straightforward as this short story might lead us to believe. In 2005, around the time that “Jumping Monkey Hill” was being either written or imagined, the question was put to Adichie in an interview whether she thought that, “as a writer,” she had “a political role to play” (“Interview”). She responded as follows:

I don’t think that all writers should have political roles, but I do think that I, as a person who writes realist fiction set in Africa, almost automatically have a political role. In a place of scarce resources made scarcer by artificial means, life is always political. In writing about that life, you assume a political role.

In this excerpt, Adichie does not seem unwilling to take on the role of the “resistance activist” that Eisenberg had pointed out as being a problematic component of the Achebe-Adichie “‘father-daughter’ narrative” (“Real Africa” 9). Even if Adichie’s statement is more restrained than some of Achebe’s declarations—most obviously, his unambiguous affirmation that “I am a political writer” (qtd. in Povey)—she seems to tacitly acknowledge her elder’s assertion that “an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant” (Achebe, “The Biafran Cause” 78; qtd. in Franklin). Yet, if Adichie’s stance at this point appears to diverge from Eisenberg’s conclusions, it is not because the two positions are incompatible, but because their contexts of enunciation differ. Despite the fact that, in the above indented quotation, Adichie starts by recognizing her status on the international scene as “a person who writes realist fiction set in Africa,” the bulk of her response concerns her political role within the *continental* context—where “life is always political”—rather than in the global, Western-dominated publishing market that constitutes the target of her acerbic “Jumping Monkey Hill.” That it is this particular form of Western prescriptivism, rather than political intervention in itself, that

Adichie aims to criticize is also apparent in an interview conducted several years later, in which she deplors that

Whatever I write, somebody is somehow going to find a way to show that I'm *really* writing about political oppression in Africa. Often I'm asked, "Were you trying to use that as a metaphor for the politics of your country?" And I think, "Well, no. No, it was a story about a woman and a man. It was not about bloody political oppression." ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: A Conversation with James Mustich")

Adichie's use of the hackneyed phrase "political oppression in Africa," as well as that of "*your* country" (emphasis added), signals that the typical conversation she is recounting is one with a non-Nigerian, presumably non-African, reader. This realigns Adichie's stance with Eisenberg's observations regarding the pigeonholing of African writers by dominant Western discourses. However, the crux of the matter lies in the fact that Adichie's position as an African writer in the twenty-first century differs from Achebe's in the second part of the twentieth. Whereas Achebe mostly denounced what had been written about Africa by white European writers such as Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary, and went on to redress the balance by crafting his own stories about the continent, Adichie, while continuing to condemn the policing of literary discourses about Africa by the West, also finds herself in a context where many African stories have already been written but have not yet properly been *read*. Both writers, in sum, are battling very similar reductive stereotypes from different temporal vantage points, a fact that in turn largely conditions their responses. In the mid-twentieth century, Achebe needed to identify as a "political writer" to draw attention to the intellectual seriousness of the assertion that precolonial African societies were not made up of "savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet" (Achebe, "An Image of Africa" 7). Adichie, half a century later, is still investing herself with the mission of reclaiming the humanity and dignity of African peoples in her dialogues with the West, but she does so by shunning the "political" tag so as to resist the now pervasive idea "when you're not a white male writing about white male things then somehow your work has to *mean* something" ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'When You're Not'"). Ironically, the younger Nigerian writer's rejection of the political can be regarded as an eminently political act.

In the context of this essay, the importance of Adichie's remarks on the subject of politics cannot be overemphasized, for they reveal blind spots in contemporary scholarship that many academics are loath to admit. In what follows, I would like to develop this idea, not for the purpose of flagellating our discipline, but rather because Adichie's provocative statements may provide pointers on how the multiple facets of her work might be more productively analyzed, either concurrently with Achebe's texts, or independently from them. First of all, it might be worth considering at some length an intervention that elaborates on some of the ideas already found in several of the quotations cited above. The particular statement I wish to expound on was made by Adichie in the course of a 2011 literary conversation with her Kenyan colleague Binyavanga Wainaina, during which she said: "Sometimes I get very upset when people talk about my work" and its "political importance. . . . It's really about love" ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with Binyavanga Wainaina").

Admittedly, it is difficult to take such a declaration entirely at face value, considering that Adichie has extensively written on explicitly political subjects such as the Nigerian civil war or the brutality of the country's leaders during the military era. Yet, Adichie undeniably has a point. For instance, even if, in both newspaper reviews and scholarly articles, her Biafran War novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* has been praised for its subtle exploration of the links between the personal and the political, the more than fifty academic essays and book chapters that at least partly deal with this work display an almost exclusively political focus. Among these studies, only one (Justin and Cauveri) announces that it will concentrate on the theme of love and human relationships, only to then devote close to its full length to the political context of the Biafran War. In a somewhat similar vein, an article by Susan Strehle pertinently remarks that the love stories in *Half of a Yellow Sun* have been "neglected in the criticism to date" (660), but her (otherwise interesting) piece goes on to subject these elements to largely symbolic and political interpretations.

Needless to say, studying the politics of Adichie's writing is an entirely legitimate endeavor, but it remains striking that very little has been done to investigate the emotional and psychological dimensions of the writer's characters—in other words, hardly anyone has attempted to focus on the very things that distinguish a literary text from a political treatise. Of course, studying love in Adichie's work does not mean that politics is to be entirely left aside; as the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo reminds us, love and the wider social and political context in which it occurs are inextricably intertwined.¹ In fact, this approach, built around the idea that the personal is also political, has been successfully implemented by critics of (especially twentieth-century women's) African literatures (see, e.g., Andrade, *The Nation Writ Small*), and it has done much to elucidate how female writers from the continent have made cogent political interventions through a seemingly innocuous focus on personal and domestic issues. However, the point that I wish to make here is different: while the psychological struggles of Adichie's characters are undeniably shaped by the politics of gender and nation, they also, and perhaps primarily so, illuminate the human condition. Thus, Olanna's decision to forgive her lover Odenigbo's infidelity in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, or Ifemelu's distancing herself from her boyfriend Obinze in *Americanah* (2013), simply cannot be understood without at least some comprehension of the workings of human emotions.²

Incidentally, in the field of "Adichebean" studies—to use a slightly tongue-in-cheek portmanteau—no attempt has been made to study this central component of human relationships from a comparative perspective. Hardly anyone would deny that both Achebe and Adichie display a keen interest in humanity and in the complex feelings inherent to this condition. At the same time, I would hazard that the majority of readers would agree that the two authors do not write about love in quite the same way, a difference that goes well beyond the obvious fact that Adichie foregrounds sexual and romantic relationships much more insistently than her predecessor did. Investigating such a "poetics of love" might, for instance, help us to determine what accounts for the singularity of the disturbing fatherly affection displayed by Eugene Achike in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as opposed to that expressed (or withheld) by Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, considering that the two characters have so often been put side by side

by virtue of other personality traits, starting with their headstrong adherence to extreme versions of particular sets of cultural values. These two patriarchs' modes of emotional functioning have been broached in passing in works focusing on more conventional sociopolitical issues, but one may legitimately ask what putting such a subject at the center of a scholarly study might teach us about the specificities of (or the commonalities between) the writers' characterization techniques, as well as about their approach to human intimacy—both of which, of course, are bound to reflect sensitivities influenced by factors such as gender, generation, and philosophical worldview, while also involving distinct sets of writerly skills.

Such an all-encompassing comparative approach, which would explore emotions without losing sight of their possible political undercurrents, might also go some way toward resolving the contradiction into which Adichie appears to have talked herself when it comes to love and politics. In the previously cited conversation with Binyavanga Wainaina, she vigorously rejected the political tag; by contrast, a few years later, she tacitly reclaimed the label when pointing out that the central position given to the love story in *Americanah* did not turn her book into a substandard romance: "All literature is about love. When men do it, it's a political comment on human relations. When women do it, it's just a love story" ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'Don't We All Write About Love?"). On paper, Adichie's contrasting statements might appear to contradict each other, since the former asserts the right for her texts to exist independently of a political subtext, while the latter demands that such a subtext be assigned by default. In context, however, both claims bespeak a common oppositional strategy that aims to resist pigeonholing, whether as an African writer or as a female one.³ That Adichie's work, including *Americanah*, deals with *both* love and politics should be clear enough to anyone who has read the text with attention. As the writer herself has commented, the romantic relationship depicted in her 2013 novel is "very much rooted in reality. It's the kind of love story where your inability to get a visa gets in the way of love" (Bady). Thus, in the supposedly globalized world of the twenty-first century, no Nigerian love story involving border-crossing can remain entirely apolitical.

The resistance strategy that informs Adichie's statements about love and politics is helpful in decoding her positioning in regard to Achebe too. Indeed, she has not only implicitly denied her connection with her elder by shunning the "political" label, but she has also done this much more explicitly by denying any sense of affiliation with him. Invoking the familial metaphor once again, one might say that the obedient child of Adichie's literary beginnings, who had politely asserted her individuality while still "writing forth" in the spirit of her literary idol, had by the late noughties turned into an unruly teenager bent on "talking back." This rebelliousness found a particularly straightforward expression in a 2009 television program dedicated to both writers, in which Adichie, despite expressing respect and admiration for Achebe, boldly stated: "I don't think that our styles are similar in any way" ("Out of Nigeria"). As in the case of Adichie's declaration about her work's exclusive focus on love, one does not need to adhere to a literal interpretation of her words to detect their implied meaning—namely, that enough comparisons between herself and Achebe have been drawn and that

it is time that commentators moved on to other preoccupations. Two years later, Adichie voiced similar thoughts in a more cynical way:

Being a sub-Saharan African writer, you're supposed to be like Chinua Achebe, who is called the father of modern African literature. But you're probably compared to him because people don't know any other writers from Africa. (Umachadran)

That Adichie's irritation is couched in the genealogical metaphor discussed earlier in this essay may indicate her own reticence toward this pervasive image and its potential misuse, but her words more subtly betray a genre-related paradox. Going through the relevant material from Adichie's "rebellious" phase onward, one can indeed put her comments about Achebe—on the one hand, those that cultivate her affiliation and, on the other, those that reject it—on different piles that largely reflect a generic distinction: Adichie's vehement denial of her Achebean (af)filia-tion is expressed in interviews, but this rejection is counterbalanced by ubiquitous references to the older author's work and writerly vision in her nonfiction, whether in lectures or essays. For instance, Adichie's 2012 speech "To Instruct and Delight," which expounds on the power of realist literature, mentions Achebe as many as fourteen times. Moreover, the younger writer's 2009 TED lecture on "The Danger of a Single Story" recounts the crucial personal impact that her first reading of *Things Fall Apart* had on her; equally significantly, this speech's overarching theme directly draws on the Achebean idea of the "balance of stories," an influence that is acknowledged in the talk itself.⁴

Doubtlessly, Adichie's emphatic denial of her connection with Achebe in interviews, despite her many approving references to him in her own nonfictional work, testifies to her wish to cultivate her literary genealogy on her own terms, without having its parameters dictated by uninformed Westerners who, as stated in the passage cited above, "don't know any other writers from Africa." Remarkably, however, the ignorance disparaged by Adichie does not apply to the majority of critics of African literatures; yet, we too have repeatedly compared her to Achebe. This fact warrants at least a little introspection on our part. I would suggest, perhaps a little provocatively (and not without a tinge of irony considering the topic of my own essay), that Adichie's comments do not simply castigate the West's ignorance and cultural arrogance, but that they also criticize a form of journalistic and scholarly predictability. Consider, for instance, the treatment given in the literature to the opening line of Adichie's first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, "Things started to fall apart at home ..." (3). These words, hailed as a case of "explicit intertextuality" (Ouma, "Childhood(s)" 50) by virtue of their similarity with the title of Achebe's classic novel, have been said to perform the function of "alert[ing] the reader that familiar terrain—both the events and the Nigeria of Achebe's novel—will be rewritten and remapped" (Hewett 79). After the publication of *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie rapidly admitted that the Achebean borrowing was entirely "unintentional" ("A Conversation with Adichie") and "unconscious" ("Out of Nigeria"), but her confession, which is a little inconvenient for us critics, has been largely ignored. Of course, acknowledging the accidental nature of Adichie's textual appropriation does not invalidate the relevant, sometimes thought-provoking, intertextual readings of *Purple Hibiscus* and *Things Fall Apart* performed by critics

such as those cited above, since literary allusions do not have to be intentional to carry significance. Some might even go as far as arguing that Adichie's non-fictional interventions should be disregarded altogether, since taking them into account might amount to basing our interpretations on a decoding of authorial intentions rather than on evidence found within the texts themselves. However, I would contend that, in cases such as *Purple Hibiscus*, the wider literary context cannot be brushed aside. Indeed, in the global literary market of the twenty-first century, in which African writers wage constant war against commodification (and, in the West, exoticization), ignoring their voices seems more than a little problematic. This does not mean that one should rush to the other extreme, and uncritically view any authorial statements as keys to the interpretation of literary works, but I would argue that we cannot overlook writers' intentions without at least questioning our own in disregarding them.

In the particular case of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, many scholars' steadfast belief, despite evidence to the contrary, that the author was willfully providing them with an intertextual compass to navigate her novel has had at least one major consequence: that of contributing to the heavy promotion of the Achebe-Adichie comparative discourse at the expense of all others—to the extent that, nowadays, some critics go as far as stating that Adichie's oeuvre, even beyond *Purple Hibiscus*, "is difficult to talk about outside the intertextual relationship with Achebe" (Goyal 234). Once again, what I would identify as potentially problematic is not the existence of a legitimate comparative perspective, but rather the disproportionate importance of this specific approach in the intertextual criticism on *Purple Hibiscus*.⁵ Significantly, the ubiquity of Achebean readings of the novel has been matched only by the Jameson-inspired argument, rehearsed by countless critics (myself included), that the violence inflicted by Eugene Achike on his family mirrors the treatment of Nigerian citizens at the hands of the military state. While I still believe this reading to be legitimate, the easiness with which it has been repeatedly put forward as an interpretative paradigm, as if discovered anew every time, betrays our willingness to adhere to a standardized analytical framework for African literatures. In other words, for lack of time or imagination, we too are guilty of devising our own "single story" of African literary criticism—no wonder, then, that Adichie has started to recoil at the mere mention of the family-state interpretation in interviews. Whereas, in 2004, the writer presented her first book as "a portrait of a family and a country" ("*Writers Notes*" 68), a decade later, she insisted that *Purple Hibiscus* was *not* to be read as "a political allegory of Nigeria," but was simply "about a messed up family" ("*Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'When You're Not'*").

On the one hand, Adichie's comments—both her distancing herself from Achebe and her rejection of political interpretations of her work—can simply be heeded as constructive warnings to readers and critics. On the other, her injunctions may pose a more serious epistemological problem, for the human mind cannot but make sense of the world by categorizing and drawing comparisons to develop networks of meaning. In the field of literary criticism, and certainly within that of literary history, the establishment of connections between writers and movements is a central methodological paradigm. Avoiding relational gestures, then, is all but impossible; however, a more mindful practice of our discipline might consist in more consciously acknowledging the ways in which the

iteration of certain connections becomes itself ideologically loaded. This point was abundantly illustrated above in relation to the Achebe-Adichie relationship, but this mechanism might be further elucidated by citing another example involving Adichie, namely the ubiquitous links established between the Nigerian writer and the R&B singer Beyoncé in the wake of the latter's sampling of Adichie's speech "We Should All Be Feminists" in her song "Flawless." Following Beyoncé's appropriative gesture, references to the singer abounded in interviews with Adichie and in press articles about her: *Elle* magazine published a conversation with the writer under the headline "Meet Beyoncé's [sic] Favorite Novelist" and by the time *Vogue* did its own interview with the author (at the end of a long line of public events in which Adichie was repeatedly questioned about the African American singer's use of her work), the Nigerian novelist no longer made any effort to disguise her irritation: "I'm so bored with this question" ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Her 'Flawless' Speech"). In this interview, Adichie may not display the level of patience that characterized Achebe, the famous "novelist as teacher" who tirelessly delivered his message even to those pupils a little slow on the uptake, but the point lies elsewhere: the fact that Adichie's feminist lecture is constantly viewed through the lens of its incorporation into the work of a popular American singer betrays a dynamics of validation whose superficiality is surprisingly similar to that which has characterized much of the Achebe-Adichie relationship so far. To reformulate this assertion more clearly, the issue at stake is not the legitimacy of the connections between Beyoncé and Adichie, on the one hand, and Achebe and Adichie, on the other, but rather their constant repetition, often without probing their specifics outside a predefined and largely predictable comparative mold (a mold in which, I hasten to add, my own work fits as well).

There are, of course, countless ways in which this mold may be broken. In relation to Achebe and Adichie, I will cite only two possible lines of inquiry. The first is situated within a loosely intertextual framework, and it proposes that our understanding of the Achebe-Adichie relationship might be enhanced by bringing into the comparative equation other—not necessarily African—writers whom both Nigerians have either written about or repeatedly expressed admiration for. The second angle of approach, which might appear counterintuitive at first, is based on the idea that the thematic scope of the father-daughter comparison could be significantly broadened by engaging in close readings of Achebe's and Adichie's texts. These two suggestions reflect general orientations, but they are obviously not water-tight analytical categories: one can easily imagine how investigating broadly intertextual parallels (by which I simply mean thematic or formal convergences between texts) necessarily involves close reading and how a close reading of Achebe's and Adichie's works might lead to discovering intertextual links. Nevertheless, these two principles serve as a basis for conceptually different lines of investigation, and they will therefore be exemplified separately in the remainder of this essay.

The first idea rests on the simple observation that Achebe and Adichie have common literary connections that have been underexploited in comparative studies of the Nigerian writers so far. Two rather different examples come to mind: James Baldwin and Graham Greene. As is well-known, the former is a giant of African American literature who repeatedly addressed the topic of race in his works, and the latter is a white English author who wrote several novels

and travel books set in Africa. Achebe and Adichie have often referenced these writers in their fiction, nonfiction, and interviews, in the form of homages or allusions. To take the example of Baldwin, Achebe wrote several tributes to the writer, whose books “blew [his] mind” (“The Day I Finally Met Baldwin” 502; see also the pieces “Postscript” and “Spelling Our Proper Name”). Adichie, for her part, featured his work in *Americanah*, where Obinze recommends the book of essays *The Fire Next Time* (1963) to the main character, Ifemelu (135), who becomes so engrossed in its reading at the library that she “[takes] down every James Baldwin title on the shelf” (135). From the perspective of an Achebe-Adichie comparison, the interest lies not so much in the possibility of tracing direct influences going from Baldwin to either author (though this might yield interesting findings), but rather in the prospect of establishing whether Achebe and Adichie’s joint engagement with the American writer from different gender-based and generational vantage points might perchance bring to light common thematic and aesthetic concerns, or contrasting approaches to them. Among such concerns might be the issue of white liberalism, copiously commented on by all three writers: Baldwin outspokenly called its proponents an “affliction,” people with “a certain missionary complex” (Baldwin et al. 37); Adichie has often taken to ridiculing the well-meaning cluelessness of white American liberals in her fiction (most recently in *Americanah*), and Achebe has commented on European liberalism’s ambiguity (see, e.g., “An Image of Africa” 10–11). Another issue discussed by the three authors is the relationship between Africa and its diasporas, which they have broached from different perspectives influenced by their diverse biographical backgrounds. My contention is thus that the existing comparative studies on Achebe and Baldwin might be usefully complemented by an examination of Adichie’s figurative dialogue with the American author, so as to ultimately delineate with more precision the two Nigerian writers’ stance on issues such as race and diaspora.⁶

A somewhat similar triangular exercise might be conducted in relation to Graham Greene. It is common knowledge that Achebe explicitly references the English writer in his novel *No Longer at Ease* (1960), in which the protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, is said to be “a great admirer of Graham Greene” (35). The young Nigerian character even finds the Englishman’s *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) “[t]he only sensible novel any European has written on West Africa and one of the best novels I have read” (36).⁷ Achebe’s own response to Greene’s work was more moderate than his protagonist’s—he stated, for example, that he “like[d]” Graham Greene even if he found him “a bit heavy going now and again” (“Chinua Achebe” 7). Incidentally, however, Obi Okonkwo’s passionate enthusiasm for Greene does find a real-life counterpart in Adichie’s admiration for the English writer. She is known to have said that “I really admire Graham Greene” (“Take Note”) and, even more revealingly, she has stated that “*The Heart of the Matter* is close to my idea of a perfect novel” (“A Conversation with Chimamanda”). It is hardly a coincidence, therefore, if this volume is mentioned several times in *Americanah*, where Obinze’s mother reads it twice a year because “It is a wise book” (70). The role of *The Heart of the Matter* as one of *Americanah*’s intertexts would be worth exploring in and for itself but, with the Achebe-Adichie relationship in mind, I would also argue that a detour via Greene might ultimately help us to shed light on the Nigerian writers’ boundless or more cautious admiration for particular elements

found in the English novelist's work. More specifically, it is rather intriguing that two authors who have such largely convergent positions on the "reclamation of the African story" by Africans themselves (Achebe, "Today" 73; see, e.g., Adichie, "Freedom to Write Lecture," for a similar idea expressed by Adichie) should have a positive response to the work of an English writer who wrote novels set in Africa. Admittedly, it might be reductive to read Achebe and Adichie's common interest in Greene only in terms of the latter's Africa-centered work—after all, *Americanah* also references Greene's London-based *The End of the Affair* (1951; see *Americanah* 269). In any case, the point made here is that an in-depth examination of Achebe's and Adichie's responses to Greene might ultimately highlight the Nigerian writers' (common or different) positions toward the politics of representation and toward other aesthetic considerations that are independent of their status as African writers.⁸

Of course, the idea of putting Achebe and Adichie in a triangular relationship with another author is not new in itself, but most of the attempts made so far seem to have taken place within a "writing back" paradigm that has seen the work of Achebe and Adichie pitted against Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). This is not to say that this particular triangle does not hold its own interest too. As Eisenberg has demonstrated in her analysis of Adichie's "Jumping Monkey Hill," Achebe's reading of Conrad's novella, famously presented in his essay "An Image of Africa," has had such an overwhelming influence on young African writers that the Nigerian's accusations of racism against Conrad have become the "lens" through which *Heart of Darkness* is systematically perceived by these authors ("Real Africa" 14). Interestingly, the argument put forward by Eisenberg rests on clues found in only three lines of text within Adichie's nineteen-page-long short story, which suggests that the close reading of individual fictional or nonfictional works can lead to statements with more wide-ranging implications for the domain of Nigerian writing—or even African literatures—as a whole. With this methodological guideline in mind, I would like to focus in the final part of this essay on Adichie's discussion of Achebe's *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* and try to determine whether her comments on this book, found in the essays "Things Left Unsaid" and "Achebe at 82: We Remember Differently," might open up wider questions worth investigating.

The first installment of Adichie's discussion of Achebe's final opus, "Things Left Unsaid," takes the form of a review published in the *London Review of Books*. However critical of the choices made in Achebe's book, the text never questions the author's talent, as it praises his writing style as well as the "brief" but "moving" passage recounting the death of Achebe's friend, the famous poet Christopher Okigbo, during the Nigerian civil war. The general tone of the essay is nonetheless one of mild disappointment. Adichie outspokenly calls *There Was a Country* "a Nigerian nationalist lament for the failure of the giant [i.e., the state of Biafra] that never was," and she shows particular frustration with the second section of the book that focuses on the Biafran conflict per se. This section, Adichie writes, "mostly forgoes personal memory," and, as a result,

the reader is left with a nagging dissatisfaction, as though things are being left unsaid.... I longed to hear more of what he [Achebe] had felt during those months of war—in other words, I longed for a more novelistic approach.

Considering that Adichie, not Achebe, is the author of a full-length novel on the Biafran War (her 2006 *Half of a Yellow Sun*), the above statement takes on an implied, presumably unintended, meaning—namely, that Adichie wishes Achebe wrote more like herself. It may have been such slippery passages that prompted the younger writer to clarify her position vis-à-vis Achebe's book in a second piece, "Achebe at 82: We Remember Differently," published on the occasion of what was to be the older writer's final birthday. In this essay, Adichie does not retract her earlier misgivings about *There Was a Country*—if anything, she is more explicit in her criticism. However, even if this piece may seal Adichie's newly affirmed status as Achebe's "unruly" literary daughter, one should underscore that the text is anything but a gratuitous attack delivered by an insubordinate offspring. Quite the contrary, in fact: while the essay is oppositional, hence potentially controversial, it is an insightful piece in which Adichie takes firm political stances that explicitly diverge from Achebe's. In the process, she also reveals an artistic sensitivity that may have larger implications on how her literary genealogy is to be charted.

The essay starts with a preamble in which Adichie expresses her admiration for Achebe and in which she recounts how her awe of her literary idol systematically led her to "[run] away from him" whenever occasions for conversations with him arose. This laudatory introduction eases the reader into a decidedly more critical discussion of *There Was a Country*, but one that remains respectful in regard to the book's literary value and importance. For instance, Adichie elegantly—and, in my view, legitimately—puts her reticence toward the volume's aesthetic qualities down to its poor editing and adds that "these flaws do not make [the book] any less seminal: an account of the most important event in Nigeria's history by Nigeria's most important storyteller."⁹ Having expressed this mark of respect, Adichie openly voices her dissent in relation to Achebe's analysis of the political events surrounding the Biafran War and its aftermath. Using unambiguous phrases such as "I do not believe" or "I do not agree," she interprets a number of political statements and events in a manner that markedly diverges from her elder's take on them. For example, unlike Achebe, Adichie does not think that "one of the main reasons for Nigeria's present backwardness is the failure to fully reintegrate the Igbo"; rather, Adichie continues, "institutional and leadership failures run across all ethnic lines." Interestingly, even as she disagrees with some of Achebe's evaluations, she deplores the hostile and "blindingly ethnic" responses to his book and goes on to make the following key comment:

For Achebe, all this was deeply personal, deeply painful. His house was bombed, his office was destroyed. He escaped death a few times. His best friend died in battle. To expect a dispassionate account from him is a remarkable failure of empathy.

This declaration is important in several respects. Perhaps most striking is Adichie's use of the word "empathy." Since the term refers to the ability to understand another person's feelings and experience, it positions Achebe *not* as a writer-observer with an incisively critical or "objective" view of Nigerian society but, simply, as a fellow human being. Adichie's call for "empathy" with Achebe constitutes a rupture with her usual expressions of awe toward him, found even at the beginning of the very essay in which the above statement is found. Importantly, it also appeals to readers'

emotions rather than their sense of cold, deductive reasoning. In other words, even as Adichie develops an intellectual argument to defend her position on historical events, her approach in this essay is ultimately both novelistic and humanistic—so perhaps her writing is, after all, “really about love” (“Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with Binyavanga Wainaina”).

Yet the indented quotation that I have just discussed also lends itself to a less generous reading. By emphasizing Achebe’s personal involvement in the war, Adichie draws a clear distinction between the experiences of her elder’s age group and those of her own. Speaking of her generation, born after the war, she comments: “We inherited memory. And we have the privilege of distance that Achebe does not have.” The idea of a “privilege of distance” in relation to traumatic events is certainly not new but, at first sight, one might nonetheless frown at Adichie’s positioning of her own “generation of postmemory”—to use the title of Marianne Hirsch’s influential book—as a more reliable commentator on the history of Biafra than Achebe’s contemporaries.¹⁰ Even the subtitle of the younger writer’s essay, “We Remember Differently,” might be regarded as an all too brash appropriative gesture, considering that Adichie’s own “remembering” is, of her own admission, mediated through other people’s accounts “of property lost, of relatives who never ‘returned’ from the North, of shadows that hung heavily over family stories.”

However, rather than suggesting that Adichie should be indicted for her self-confident declarations, one might more constructively consider the larger context in which her assertions are situated. For instance, “the privilege of distance” claimed by the younger writer was undoubtedly granted to Achebe himself when he wrote his novels about Nigeria’s colonial history (see also Wenske 71): few contemporary scholars would dispute the fact that Achebe was able to recount the Christianization of Igboland in a more clear-sighted manner than his father would have been, considering that the latter was an “early Christian convert” and catechist who tried to instill into his son a “doctrinaire, self-righteous strain of the Christian faith” (*There Was a Country* 7, 12). Moreover, to regard Adichie’s claim to “remembering” as disrespectful appropriation is perhaps to misinterpret her fundamental message, which she expresses explicitly at the end of her essay: “All of these stories [about the Biafran War] can sit alongside one another. The Nigerian stage is big enough.”

Regardless of how one chooses to appraise Adichie’s position in this instance, her disagreement with Achebe over the Igbo participation in the “institutional and leadership failures” of the post-Biafran Nigerian state is emblematic of her wish, which is far more explicit than her elder’s, to “start a conversation about the war” (“Interview: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie”) across ethnic divides—a possibility perhaps afforded by the “privilege of distance” that the writer talks about. From the literary-genealogical perspective at the heart of this essay, this observation opens up a more general line of inquiry: could it be argued that, by fostering a dialogue between North and South, Adichie and other writers of her generation have in any way reshaped the concept of “Nigerian literature?” In 2001, Joanna Sullivan provocatively declared the country to have no truly “national” literary tradition, since the book that is generally regarded as the quintessential Nigerian novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is “about the Igbo experience” rather than the

Nigerian one and “in no way represents the Hausa experience” (77, 78). To what extent, one might wonder, is this statement about Nigerian literature still valid today? Does Adichie’s inclusion of minor Hausa characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, or her featuring of both Igbo and Hausa protagonists in her short story “A Private Experience” (which is set in the northern city of Kano), contribute to the progressive creation of a less ethnocentric, more markedly national literary tradition? If so, is this inclusionary gesture a generational trend, seeing as how a writer such as Helon Habila (who is of Tangale ethnicity and grew up reading in Hausa and English) has also crossed the North-South divide in his work, with opposite points of departure and arrival?

These are but some of the interrogations that may emerge from a close examination of Adichie’s recent engagement with Achebe. Needless to say, a more extensive comparative analysis of the writers’ fictional and nonfictional texts would be necessary to unveil the full extent of their literary (dis)connections. As suggested in this essay, this can only be done if we take into account Adichie’s resistance to Achebe as much as we do her admiration for him. Moreover, if we are to do justice to the writers’ rich bodies of work, we need to move beyond the reiteration of predictable interpretations by adapting our methodologies and broadening our thematic foci. A few tentative suggestions as to how this might be done were made in this essay—though it bears repeating that this piece makes no claim to exhaustiveness or, for that matter, authoritativeness and rather invites readers, first of all, to decide on the (in)felicitousness of the ideas developed above and, subsequently, to contribute their own.

In any case, if one reappraises the literary relationship between Achebe and Adichie today using Eisenberg’s clever homophonic pair, “descent or dissent,” one inevitably reaches the conclusion that Adichie increasingly situates herself on the dissenting end of the scale. However, the path that the younger author has taken of late is perhaps not altogether incompatible with Achebe’s line of thought. Consider in this respect the older writer’s comments about his and Adichie’s Igbo culture in *There Was a Country*:

... museums are unknown among the Igbo people. They do not even contemplate the idea of having something like a canon with the postulate: “This is how this sculpture should be made, and once it’s made it should be venerated.” No, the Igbo people want to create these things again and again, and every generation has a chance to execute its own model of art. So there is no undue respect for what the last generation did, because if you do that too much it means that there is no need for me to do anything, because it’s already been done. (59)

Adichie’s daughterly “unruliness,” then, may be but the expression of the same legitimate creative impulse that drove her literary father to develop his own writerly voice. It is ironic, of course, that such a comment should once again present the younger writer as marching in her elder’s footsteps. But it is perhaps precisely *because* Achebe showed the way to his strong-minded daughter that she has now started to make her own distinctive and indelible mark on Nigerian literature. This seems to be confirmed by Adichie’s own words: “Achebe,” she writes with gratitude, “emboldened me, not to find my voice, but to speak in the voice I already had” (“Achebe at 82”).

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Hellen Roselyne L. Shigali for drawing my attention to Ama Ata Aidoo's position regarding the links between love and politics.

2. My suggestion is not that critics of Adichie's work have disregarded the topic of emotion altogether, but rather that the latter has tended to be subordinated to other (especially political) concerns in the existing literature. Closer attention to the psychology of Adichie's characters has featured in analyses focused on trauma (e.g., Novak 33; and Wenske 75–76), but trauma is itself an ideologically loaded framework in the context of African literary studies—one that inevitably leads back to issues of (post)colonial oppression. As far as I can ascertain, the only published essay at the time of writing that studies emotion in Adichie's work in greater depth is Jennifer Leetsch's article on love in *Americanah*, where the scholar examines, among other things, Ifemelu and Obinze's "emotional border crossing" (3).

3. It is interesting to note that when Adichie's statements about the interpretation of her work associate race (rather than geographical origin) *and* gender, as in the previously mentioned quotation about "a white male writing about white male things" ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'When You're Not'"), the author chooses the same oppositional strategy as in the case of the African writer who sees the scope of her work restricted by compulsory political interpretations. It might be worth conducting more extensive research into the position that Adichie adopts when making statements that include multiple criteria such as gender, origin, race, and age.

4. In her lecture, Adichie refers to "what the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls 'a balance of stories.'" This idea is developed in Achebe's essay "Today, the Balance of Stories." I wish to thank Okey Ndibe for drawing my attention to the striking conceptual parallel between the themes at the center of Achebe's essay and Adichie's talk.

5. This point may need clarification. There are a large number of essays that put *Purple Hibiscus* side by side with works by other authors for comparative purposes, but these studies do not generally attempt close intertextual readings—that is, they do not focus on tracing the possible influence of specific motifs or characters on Adichie's novel as they do with particular scenes and protagonists from Achebe's books. A notable exception is Susan Z. Andrade's "Adichie's Genealogies," which argues that the relationship between *Purple Hibiscus* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is one of "dialogue or elaboration" (96). Notice, however, that Andrade carries out this intertextual analysis after discussing the links between Adichie's works and ... Achebe's (92–93).

6. Another Nigerian writer on whom Baldwin may have had an even more significant influence is Chris Abani (see, e.g., Abani's essay "A Young Seminarian," in which he states that "James Baldwin made me want to be a writer"). Since Abani shows some resistance toward the work of Achebe, whom he calls "[his] complicated literary father" in an eponymous essay (notice, again, the genealogical metaphor), it might be interesting to investigate what Abani and Achebe share with Baldwin and perhaps how they address similar Baldwinian concerns in different ways.

7. For an interesting intertextual analysis focusing on the main characters of Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* and Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, see Rogers (172–73).

8. It is only coincidental (though, I concede, somewhat unfortunate) that the two writers I have briefly evoked here, Baldwin and Greene, are men. One might of course conduct a similar comparative exercise involving a female writer with whom Achebe and Adichie share(d) a relationship of literary appreciation—I am thinking, for instance, of Toni Morrison.

9. In regard to the book's editing, one could actually go one step further than Adichie and raise the issue of editorial *interference*. For example, anyone familiar

with Achebe's essays will find it rather puzzling that the writer should refer his readers to the website "about.com" for an introduction to Négritude (*There Was a Country* 303).

10. On Achebe, Adichie, and postmemory, see Ouma, "Late Achebe" (56–58).

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