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"The Danger of a Single Short Story: Reality, Fiction and Metafiction in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'Jumping Monkey Hill'"

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "Jumping Monkey Hill" was inspired by its author's experience at the inaugural workshop of the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2003, during which, the writer says, she was faced with the lustful and patronizing attitude of the then-administrator of the award. Adichie's piece, by virtue of being a short story about writing itself, is a so-called "metafictional" text. It is on this self-reflexive quality that this essay focuses. More precisely, the article examines the interaction between reality and fiction in Adichie's story, paying particular attention to the ways in which the text uses techniques of *mise en abyme* to comment on gender subjection, colonially tinged condescension, and resistance to both of these forms of oppression. Ultimately, the essay argues that "Jumping Monkey Hill" can be read as a literary manifesto that incarnates its own theorization, a conclusion that is, however, shown to be problematic in more than one respect.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; metafiction; short story; *mise en abyme*; genre; gender

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In an essay published in *The Guardian*, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013) recounts how she once took a walk in her ancestral home town of Abba at Christmas. Ahead of her on the road were two local girls conversing in what the author identified as a "rural Igbo dialect" (para. 1). Unexpectedly, one of the girls slipped and fell. Shifting to English, she suddenly exclaimed: "Fuck!" Adichie, who describes herself as "an unrepentant eavesdropper and a collector of stories", promptly took out her notebook to record the moment, thinking that she might "later mould [it] into fiction". Because of how unlikely it was for the expletive "fuck" to come out of the mouth of a rural Igbo girl, the writer reflects, a future reader might very well dismiss a fictionalized version of this incident as implausible – "a reasonable protest", Adichie concedes. Yet, as her essay goes on to argue, such resistance on the part of the reader reveals a tendency to judge fiction "only by the conventions of the general" (para. 2), whereas often the episodes that seem most unbelievable in novels and short stories are actually "those that are most closely based on the real" (para. 4). Or, to rephrase this idea using the title of Adichie's own piece: "Facts are stranger than fiction".

Such reflections on the interplay between reality and some readers' expectations of its rendering in fiction are at the heart of Adichie's "Jumping Monkey Hill", a short story that was first published in the literary journal *Granta* in 2006, and which was later included in the author's collection of short stories *The Thing around Your Neck* (Adichie 2009a). The piece centres on a young woman named Ujunwa Ogundu, a fictional Nigerian author who attends an African writers' workshop outside Cape Town in South Africa, where she is faced with the lustful and patronizing attitude of the white, British, Oxford-trained organizer of the event. As Adichie has repeatedly stated in interviews, this short story is "quite autobiographical", and its writing "was propelled by rage" (2009b). Indeed, the author has made no secret of the fact that her acerbic piece was based on her "horrible personal experience" (Adichie 2015) at the inaugural workshop of the Caine Prize for African Writing, which she attended after one of

her short stories had been nominated for the award. At the event, Adichie recounts, she not only had to put up with the "sexist and lecherous" administrator of the prize (2015), but the man also had

> the audacity to tell a group of young, impressionable writers from different countries in Africa what an African story was, what qualified as African. So if you were writing about Zimbabwe you couldn't write about people who fall in love, you had to write about the horrible Mugabe. (Adichie 2009d)

Importantly, Adichie has insisted that the purpose of "Jumping Monkey Hill" was not to launch a personal attack on the then-administrator of the Caine Prize, but that the text rather broached "the larger question of who determines what an African story is" (Adichie 2009b). As the author recalls, "I remember feeling helpless. You're sitting there thinking, this is the result of 200 years of history: we can sit here and be told what our story is" (2009b).

In line with these comments, my aim in this article is not to read "Jumping Monkey Hill" as gossip or "revenge fiction", but my interest rather lies in the story's self-reflexive-qualities; that is, in its status as a metafictional piece. Metafiction, as is well known, aims "simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction" (Waugh 1984, 6). The implications of this assertion are unmistakable: the metafictional text "places itself on the border between fiction and criticism", and "takes that border as its subject" (Currie 1995, 2); or, to put it another way, the self-reflexive text "blurs the distinctions between creative writing and literary theory" (Mwangi 2009, 7).[1] The significance of this generic hybridity in relation to "Jumping Monkey Hill" will be investigated in this article.

As commentators of metafiction have shown, self-reflexivity in literary works tends to go hand in hand with a number of other textual features, including playfulness. The latter quality partly accounts for the fact that metafiction has often been associated with

postmodernism (Waugh 1984, 21-22), although scholars have amply demonstrated that self-reflexivity is by no means a prerogative of the postmodern text (Currie 1995, 15; Ommundsen 1993, 83). Neither is the use of typically postmodern techniques – such as parody or structural fragmentation – necessarily indicative of a postmodern world view synonymous with "a crisis of civilization and meaning" (Maes-Jelinek 1994, 145; see also 146). These observations constitute a starting point for the argument that I now wish to formulate in relation to "Jumping Monkey Hill". As I will demonstrate, the story playfully explores the interface between reality and fiction, most notably (but not exclusively) by using typically metafictional devices such as *mise en abyme*. At the same time, the thematic concerns at the heart of the story are anything but light-hearted, since they pertain to issues of cultural, racial and gender-related oppression in the postcolonial world. As Eve Eisenberg (2013) has argued, "Jumping Monkey Hill" exposes "the position of the African writer from whom only certain narratives are being solicited" (16) and it condemns "the act of attacking the limits on creativity" (23) – here, in the specific context of a short story competition. This fact explains my reference, in the title of this article, to the "danger of a single short story" – an obvious allusion to Adichie's (2009e) well-known TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story", in which the writer explains how reading accounts of Africa that depict the continent only as ravaged by war, disease and poverty lead to a blinkered and stereotyped view of its peoples and traditions. Taking my cue from this central tenet in Adichiean thought, I will focus in this article on how "Jumping Monkey Hill" deploys self-reflexive means to deliver a trenchant critique of race-, culture- and gender-based power structures. My reading, unlike those that have preceded it, will focus on how the text explores the interplay between different ontological levels – reality, fiction and fiction-within-fiction – to emphasize the common dynamics between different forms of oppression and resistance. By way of conclusion, echoing the self-reflexivity of the text examined here, I will show my own findings to be

problematic for two reasons at least – the first related to the fictional writer's stance, the second to the critic's. First, I will highlight how the writer-protagonist's actions within the text appear to contradict the short story's own position about African fiction. Second, for reasons that will become clear only as I proceed, it will emerge that a focus on the story's self-reflexivity generates the very type of counter-discursive interpretation against which the text simultaneously warns its readers. This paradox, it is important to note, can only be highlighted by paying extensive attention to the story's self-consciousness – that is, by reading it as metafiction rather than as mere fiction.

The self-conscious quality of metafiction has often led self-reflexive texts to be associated with terms connotative of a form of self-absorption, such as "narcissistic" or "self-referential" (Hutcheon [1980] 2013, 1-2; Currie 1995, 2). However, it has also repeatedly been demonstrated that metafiction's introspective strategy can in fact be regarded as a way "of reflecting and commenting on the extra-textual world" (Ommundsen 1993, 3; see also Currie 1995, 2). "Jumping Monkey Hill" achieves such extra-textual relevance if only through its status as a fictional commentary on a writing prize that is based on a real award – more specifically, Adichie's piece comments on a short story prize through the very medium of the short story. While this quality does not necessarily define the text as metafictional, a few of the echoes that the piece establishes between reality and fiction are worth commenting on, as they offer a useful point of entry into the story's more clearly metafictional agenda. Thus, one may for instance surmise that Adichie's (2009a, 98) decision to rename the Caine Prize for African Writing the "Lipton African Writers' Prize" is motivated by more than a simple desire to criticize the Caine Prize under the cover of fiction, for the imaginary name speaks volumes about the status of African writers both in the story and in the real world. It is indeed likely that the Lipton Prize – which borrows its name from a famous brand of tea – is to be regarded, on the one hand, as an allusion to the commercialization of the contemporary writing industry,

and, on the other, as a reference to the British Empire's exploitation of its colonies' natural wealth and human resources. That the Lipton Prize is positioned as an inheritor of colonial power structures is confirmed by the fact that the award is organized under the auspices of the British Council (96) and that it is funded by the "Chamberlain Arts Foundation" (98), a fictional organization presumably overseen by the Lord Chamberlain, the senior officer of the royal court.[2] As the case of the invented prize illustrates, the interaction between different ontological levels – reality, fiction, and later fiction-within-fiction – allows readers to draw inferences that open up interpretative possibilities both within and outside the text, hence adding to the generic complexity of the story. This is a key strategy in "Jumping Monkey Hill", which will be explored in greater depth when analysing the story's use of *mise en abyme*.

The text also capitalizes on echoes between reality and fiction in another way by relying on the idea expressed by Adichie in her *Guardian* essay: "facts are stranger than fiction" (2013). Indeed, the title of the short story, "Jumping Monkey Hill", is the name of the resort at which the fictional creative writing workshop takes place, but it is also an unmistakable reference to the "Monkey Valley Resort", where the real workshop of the Caine Prize for African Writing was held in 2003.[3] Significantly, to Ujunwa, Adichie's fictional alter ego, the name of the venue sounds "incongruous" (2009a, 95). The full weight of this remark becomes clear when, shortly after Ujunwa's arrival at the resort, she "look[s] out [...] for lurking monkeys" but is told that "there are none, unfortunately" (97). It then dawns on the reader exactly who the jumping monkeys of the story's title are supposed to be – namely, the African workshop participants themselves. While one might initially hesitate to read such a highly offensive association into the text, this interpretation finds confirmation when, during an informal discussion between the workshop writers, the conversation veers towards Joseph Conrad's (in)famous depiction of the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* ([1902] 1994):

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> The Senegalese [writer at the workshop] said she nearly vomited when a professor at the Sorbonne told her that Conrad was really on *her side*, as if she could not decide for herself who was on her side. Ujunwa *began to jump up and down*, babbling nonsense to mimic Conrad's Africans. (102; first set of italics in original, second set of italics mine)

As indicated by the reference to Conrad (and, as Eisenberg [2013, 14] astutely notices, to Chinua Achebe's essay "An Image of Africa" (1977), which denounces Conrad's racism in *Heart of Darkness*), Adichie's casting of the workshop participants into the roles of the jumping monkeys is meant to recall racist perceptions of African people in colonial times – and, as the short story makes clear, such dehumanizing perspectives are far from being a thing of the past, the only difference being that openly hostile racism has morphed into a more subtle form of condescension. As much is suggested by the fact that the workshop organizer, Edward (who, probably not incidentally, has "chosen the resort" [Adichie 2009a, 95]), deems the short story written at the retreat by the female Senegalese participant to be "[un]reflective of Africa" (108) because it deals with a character telling her family that she is a lesbian. Such incidents exemplify one of Adichie's short story's most crucial points, namely that, if Edward is neither more nor less sophisticated than the average reader in his tendency to judge fiction "only by the conventions of the general" (Adichie 2013, para. 2), his is not a benign attitude, as the peremptory expression of his convictions amounts to the wielding of racial and cultural power inherited from colonial history.

At this juncture, it starts to become clear that Adichie's short story is more than a clever fictionalized account of her Caine Prize experience, but that the text actually lends itself to a more sophisticated metafictional reading. In the story, the Senegalese writer whose text is deemed un-African by Edward had earlier told the other participants in the workshop that her piece was actually based on her own experience of "com[ing] out to her parents"

(Adichie 2009a, 102), leaving the reader in no doubt as to what the "reality" of Africa actually is (see also Zabus 2013, 123). Importantly, by basing the Senegalese writer's text on "real" events within the fictional world, "Jumping Monkey Hill" does more than wrench the reader from the generalizing disposition mentioned in Adichie's *Guardian* essay; indeed, the story also embodies its own theorizing by including an openly gay African character. This ties in with Eisenberg's observation that "the very fact that Adichie's story exists [...] and that it exposes Edward instead of acquiescing to his demands, demonstrates that there is a place for African literature beyond the limitations of stereotypes" (2013, 22).

One of the central strategies of "Jumping Monkey Hill" is thus to subvert the rules laid out by Edward as self-appointed censor of African literatures; another is to expose his abusive attitude towards the young writers – who are treated like children in need of enlightenment about their own cultures – as a modern incarnation of the colonizer-colonized relationship. As further examples will show, this is done with only minimal subtlety, a fact that has led at least one reviewer to complain that Adichie "resorts to easy stereotypes of Westerners" in "Jumping Monkey Hill" and in some of the other stories in her collection *The Thing around Your Neck* (Kakutani 2009). Yet, in relation to "Jumping Monkey Hill", such a critical statement ignores a key metaflctional fact, namely that the text caricatures its white British characters in a way that reflects those individuals' prejudiced views of Africans within the short story itself. Edward, for example, appears to endorse the "evil savage" image of the African, praising only creative writing about "killings in the Congo" (Adichie 2009a, 109), and stating that stories about Zimbabwe are "terribly passé" unless they directly address life "under the horrible Mugabe" (107), a stance criticized by Adichie in one of the interviews cited at the beginning of this article. Furthermore, Edward s wife Isabel (called Hillary in the 2006 version), who is also present at the workshop, oscillates between convictions akin to her husband's, and beliefs evocative of the "noble savage" stereotype, the latter suggested by her

reflection that Ujunwa's "exquisite bone structure" must mean that she "come[s] from Nigerian royal stock" (99). Mischievously, Ujunwa greets this bizarre compliment with the reply "that she [is] indeed a princess" (99); later, talking about her faux ivory pendant, the young writer deliberately shocks "animal rights activist" Isabel (99) by telling her that the piece of plastic "[is] in fact real ivory" (113). Ujunwa even considers "add[ing] that she had killed the elephant herself during a royal hunt" (113). Although the latter remark remains unvoiced, it is clear that, in her interactions with Isabel, Ujunwa ridicules her interlocutor by deliberately playing up to both sides of the stereotypical coin – she starts out by posing as a "noble" savage, but later blends in elements of the "evil" incarnation of the figure.

In its exposure of absurd but harmful stereotypes of Africa, "Jumping Monkey Hill" emerges as a fictional equivalent to the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina's (2005) satirical "How to Write about Africa". Wainaina's now classic piece of mock-advice about how to depict the African continent recommends that would-be writers avoid including "taboo subjects" such as "ordinary domestic scenes" (92), and that they rather focus on "naked warriors" or "corrupt politicians" (93), all the while making sure that they "never, ever say anything negative about an elephant or a gorilla" (94). In Adichie's story, the fact that Ujunwa both indulges and provokes Isabel is an act of defiance akin to Wainaina's, as Ujunwa's attitude places the Englishwoman in the same position as that of the eager but prejudice-filled reader ridiculed by the Kenyan writer's text. It is interesting to notice, however, that for much of "Jumping Monkey Hill" similar resistance is offered to Edward mainly by the text itself, rather than by its protagonist within the fictional piece. Before the final climactic scene, during which Ujunwa walks out on Edward, the young woman speaks out against the administrator on a single occasion, only to be silenced by his allegedly expert explanations. This exchange occurs right after the group has just read the Senegalese participant's story:

> Edward chewed at his pipe thoughtfully before he said that homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really.
>
> "Which Africa?" Ujunwa blurted out. [...] Edward chewed further at his pipe. Then he looked at Ujunwa in the way one would look at a child who refused to keep still in church and said that he wasn't speaking as an Oxford-trained Africanist, but as one who was keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues. (107-108)

This incident evidently illustrates how Edward infantilizes Ujunwa, who is given the impression that she must listen in silence to the white westerner's sermon. The power imbalance between the two characters is emphasized by the repeated mention of Edward's pipe, which (by contemporary western standards at least) tends to position him as a father-like figure: a member of an older generation but also, importantly, a man. Using a pair of now common neologisms, one might say that Edward is not only "whitesplaining" but also "mansplaining" in this exchange. Hence it appears that Ujunwa's relationship with Edward – and, by extension, Adichie's relationship with the administrator of the Caine Prize – is complicated by another historical power imbalance besides that between races and cultures: that between genders. This is most eloquently illustrated when, in an initially unremarkable scene, the Nigerian contestant suggests giving up her seat in the shade to the older Edward, asking him, "Would you like me to stand up for you [...]?" (106). The Englishman greets this polite proposal with a lecherous reply: "I'd rather like you to lie down for me" (106). To this, Ujunwa offers no reaction but stunned laughter; it is only later in the story that she feels "a self-loathing burst open in the bottom of her stomach", thinking that "she should not have laughed when Edward said I'd rather like you to lie down for me. It had not been funny. It had not been funny at all" (109).

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The analytical elements outlined so far highlight three key aspects of "Jumping Monkey Hill". First, by incarnating both European condescension towards Africa and sexism within the single figure of Edward, the story not only draws on its author's experience but also insistently suggests a parallel between two forms of domination inherited, respectively, from colonialism and patriarchy. These types of oppression are shown to be inextricably intertwined: as the white South African workshop participant says to Ujunwa, "Edward would never look at a white woman like that" (Adichie 2009a, 109). Second, the short story reveals itself to be as much about resistance – or the (temporary) lack of it – as about oppression, a fact that shifts the focus from the aggressor's motivations to the victim's reaction to different forms of abuse. Third, as the incident involving the Senegalese writer's piece and her presence in Adichie's fiction reveals, what happens on one ontological level in the text directly echoes, or indeed impacts on, another. This, in effect, is the very definition of metafiction, in which one "element is at the same time part of the story and something else (comment on the story)" (Ommundsen 1993, 10). "This kind of relationship", Ommundsen continues, "is generally referred to as *mise en abyme*, which means an embedded self-representation of mirror-image of the text within the text" (10; italics in original).

Interestingly, it is precisely the most obvious instance of *mise en abyme* in "Jumping Monkey Hill" – namely, the inclusion within the text of (what one assumes to be) a short story written by its Nigerian protagonist during the workshop – that allows us to connect the three key thematic strands mentioned above.[4] On the surface, the piece written by Ujunwa is a straightforward story-within-the-story: it is clearly set out from the rest of the text using wider margins and a smaller font – the layout, one might say, is used to neatly separate ontological levels. Yet this formal orderliness is a mere diversion from the more interesting mirror effects that the embedded text produces. Not only does the content of this story-within-the-story echo the narrative frame of "Jumping Monkey Hill" (a fact also noticed by critics such as

Eisenberg) but, more subtly still, Ujunwa's story constitutes an intertextual joke that all but Adichie's most avid readers are bound to miss. Indeed, the fictional writer's untitled piece eerily echoes a short story entitled "Lagos, Lagos" (Adichie 2003), which Adichie herself wrote at the actual Caine Prize workshop in 2003. To those familiar with Adichie's wonderfully paced and elegantly written short story, the opening paragraph of Ujunwa's text reads like an unmistakable parody:

> Chioma lives with her mother in Lagos. She has a degree in economics from Nsukka [...], and every Thursday she buys *The Guardian* and scours the employment section and sends out her CV [...]. She hears nothing for weeks. Finally she gets a phone call inviting her to an interview. After the first few questions, the man says he will hire her and then walks across and stands behind her and reaches over her shoulders to squeeze her breasts. She hisses, "Stupid man! You cannot respect yourself!" and leaves. (Adichie 2009a, 100)

This rushed and stylistically awkward rewriting of "Lagos, Lagos" leaves little doubt that there is humorous self-depreciation involved on Adichie's part. However, once the joke is over, Ujunwa's tale develops into a more sophisticated text, whose importance can be fully appreciated only by putting the fictional Nigerian writer's piece side by side with the original "Lagos, Lagos" and with the framing story of "Jumping Monkey Hill". This three-way comparison holds the key to Adichie's metafictional strategy – hence, to how my own generic reading contributes to unpacking the multilayered structure of the short piece at the heart of this article. The connections between the three stories will, therefore, be discussed in some detail now.

First, let us examine the echoes between the beginning of Ujunwa's piece and the short story that Adichie wrote at the Caine Prize workshop. In "Lagos, Lagos", a young woman named Chidera attends a job interview at a bank, during which she meets the handsome

manager of the company, to whom she feels attracted. She is offered the job she applied for, which is in the "Public Relations department" of the firm (Adichie 2003, 81) and which, she is told, involves "going out a lot, on publicity purposes" with a female colleague, Yemisi (82). Her job, she gradually learns, actually consists in "charm-talk[ing]" wealthy men "into opening an account with the bank" (84). On her first day of work, Chidera accompanies the more experienced Yemisi to the office of an Alhaji, a titled Muslim man. Before even asking for Chidera's name, the man "casually enclose[s] her breast in his hand, squeezing" (85). Chidera first stands frozen in disbelief and humiliation, but eventually decides to walk away.

Despite the evident parallels between "Lagos, Lagos" and Ujunwa's short story, the fictional writer's piece modifies at least three key elements found in the original text. First, Ujunwa's story places the scene in which a man in a position of power touches the heroine's breasts at the beginning rather than the end of the tale, so that the reader's attention is immediately drawn to the thematic importance of sexual harassment – Ujunwa's piece, one might say, puts clarity ahead of subtlety. A second major change occurs in Ujunwa's story when, after this initial incident, the heroine attends another job interview at a bank, where she meets a manager, as in "Lagos, Lagos"; however, in this case the manager is not a man she feels attracted to, but one whom she "wishes [...] would notice her", because "[s]he is used to men's attention" (Adichie 2009a, 104). The importance of this change will become clear shortly. Third, in Ujunwa's story, Chioma accepts a job similar to Chidera's in "Lagos, Lagos", and goes to the house of an Alhaji, who, instead of squeezing her breast (recall that a similar incident was set earlier in the story), asks her to sit on his lap while she explains to him the benefits of opening an account with her bank. She complies and, later, when the man wants to show her and her colleague some perfumes, she suddenly decides to leave.

These factual differences matter as much as the similarities between the two texts, as will be elucidated now. The similarities, first of all, can be extended to the framing narrative

of "Jumping Monkey Hill": all three stories feature men who sexually harass or exploit women, who in turn show active or passive acceptance of this treatment, either by sitting on a man's lap (as Chioma does in Ujunwa's untitled story), or by failing to react, as Chidera and Ujunwa do in their respective realities. Importantly, and somewhat uneasily, all three stories examine the extent to which the exploited women are potentially complicit in these scenarios. In "Lagos, Lagos", Chidera had, prior to the breast-squeezing incident, pragmatically "come prepared to charm [the Alhaji], to flirt, to smile, because rich old men liked that" (Adichie 2003, 85). The ambiguous sexual power conferred upon women is made even more explicit in Ujunwa's untitled piece, where Chioma is disappointed when the manager at the interview "does not look at her as a man looks at a woman" (Adichie 2009a, 105). Here, Chioma's reaction does not arise out of frustration at unreciprocated sexual attraction (a type of attraction present in "Lagos, Lagos"), but rather out of a belief that men's perception of her as a sexual being is a form of privilege to which she is entitled. This difference between "Lagos, Lagos" and Ujunwa's piece cannot be incidental, for Chioma's situation finds a disturbing counterpart in the narrative frame of "Jumping Monkey Hill", in which Ujunwa is at some point "upset" when she learns that Edward has been "making suggestive remarks" to another female workshop participant (Adichie 2009a, 111). Ujunwa asks herself: "Had she come to see his ogling as her due? She was uncomfortable thinking about this" (111). Thus, with different levels of awareness, the women in all three stories appear to find a form of gratification in what ultimately perpetuates their exploitation as sexual beings.

The metafictional component of this argument may as yet be unclear, but the link between the three women's reactions and the self-conscious quality of "Jumping Monkey Hill" comes into sharper focus when considering that mirror effects such as those discussed above allow us to definitely cement yet another connection, already evoked earlier in this piece: that between gender oppression and the remnants of colonial subjection. Indeed, in the

three stories compared here, the heroines eventually walk away in a final act of resistance – but, significantly, in the framing story of "Jumping Monkey Hill", Ujunwa does not leave her conversation with Edward over a question of sexual harassment, but over his verdict that the short story that she has written during the workshop is "implausible" (Adichie 2009a, 114). The parallel narrative incidents, in short, establish a link between resistance to gender subjection and to colonially tinged condescension which, in view of all three female protagonists' temporary complicity in gender oppression, foregrounds another theme more directly linked to literary creation, namely the responsibility of the African writer in the perpetuation of his or her own exoticization. Indeed, just as Chidera and Chioma are, up to a point, ready to use their sexuality for their personal benefit, so the African writers at the workshop indulge Edward because, as the Tanzanian participant says, he "is connected and [can] find them a London agent" (113). In other words, the writers' desperate need for recognition in the former colonial metropolis leads them to perceive the stifling of their creativity as a gateway to literary success. Such misplaced deference, "Jumping Monkey Hill" suggests, amounts to a form of intellectual prostitution.

The short story incarnates its own response to this accusation by having Ujunwa walk out on Edward: Adichie, the writer of "Jumping Monkey Hill", echoes Chidera's, Chioma's and Ujunwa's acts of resistance by firmly rejecting the terms set by the administrator of the prize. However, Adichie appears keenly aware that she is at risk of simplifying a complex issue. For example, in a scene where Ujunwa exhorts the other participants to stand up to Edward, the black South African writer says that the organizer is but "an old man who mean[s] no harm" (Adichie 2009a, 112). To this, a furious Ujunwa replies: "This kind of attitude [i.e. this kind of passivity and resigned acceptance] is why they could kill you and herd you into townships and require passes from you before you could walk on your own land!" (112). In this scene, the fictional writer comes dangerously close to placing the

responsibility of the entire apartheid system on the black population of South Africa, which effectively lays the blame at the door of the victims instead of the perpetrators.

No doubt Adichie s personal opinion on the subject is widely divergent from that of her fictional alter ego, as intimated by the fact that the author attributes to her character a judgment that relies on a factual inaccuracy – the black people of South Africa did, of course, resist apartheid, and sometimes violently so. Yet Ujunwa's comment is significant as it hints at a transposition to the racial sphere of a tendency to blame the victim that often occurs in cases of sexual harassment. This misguided act of condemnation is even endorsed by the victims themselves: as previously stated, in "Jumping Monkey Hill", Ujunwa feels "self-loathing" for laughing at Edward's inappropriate sexual innuendos (Adichie 2009a, 109), thereby implying that she should have resisted but failed to do so. In a strikingly similar way, Adichie herself has spoken of the "sense of self-blame" (2015) that she experienced when failing to react to the prize administrator's sexually loaded comments. In this sense, "Jumping Monkey Hill" can be regarded as a delayed response to the sexual harassment endured by Adichie, just as Ujunwa's untitled story can be considered an indirect condemnation of Edward's sexism even as the character herself fails to express vehement opposition to the Englishman's lewd behaviour. In both cases, writing is positioned as an act of resistance that helps the victim work through her misguided sense of guilt.

That Adichie herself only verbally "challenged" the administrator on a few occasions at the Caine Prize workshop (Adichie 2015) underscores the courage of Ujunwa's audacious act of defiance at the end of the story – and, one might add, of Chidera's and Chioma's as well. Ujunwa's confrontational move is also an opportunity for Adichie to playfully drive home her metafictional point. Indeed, before walking away, Ujunwa reveals that the story of Chidera, which Edward had dismissed as "agenda writing", not "a real story of real people" (Adichie 2009a, 114), is in fact based on her own experience, very much like the Senegalese

participant's story was – at which point readers may recall that Ujunwa had told Edward, much earlier in "Jumping Monkey Hill", "that she had lost her job just before she left Lagos – a job in banking" (96). With this revelation, two ontological levels collapse, and the story-within-the-story is exposed as a near carbon copy of a "real" event chronologically set before the workshop. In light of the metafictional echoes that pervade "Jumping Monkey Hill", this fact intimates even to those readers unaware of the inspiration behind Adichie's short story that the text may be a fictionalized reflection of reality (a conclusion indeed drawn by Eisenberg [2013,16]).[5] The irony, of course, is that "Jumping Monkey Hill", much like Ujunwa's piece, is based on real events, but falls within the same category of stories that Edward would regard as not being illustrative of the "real Africa" (Adichie 2009a, 108).

The text closes on an eminently self-reflexive note as Ujunwa, having walked out on Edward, "wonder[s] whether this ending, in a story, would be considered plausible" (Adichie 2009a, 114). From a metafictional perspective, this "line about the ending of a story that serves as the ending of a story" (Eisenberg 2013, 16) merely asks a rhetorical question, for Adichie herself has already answered in the positive by choosing Ujunwa's retort as the ending to her own piece, much like she did with Chidera's departure from the Alhaji's house in "Lagos, Lagos". "Jumping Monkey Hill" therefore ends as Ujunwa and Adichie firmly take back the reins of their respective narratives, and thereby reassert their power and, ultimately, their dignity.

The sense of finality suggested by the above comment allows for a first set of concluding remarks. As I hope to have shown in this article, reading "Jumping Monkey Hill" through a metafictional lens highlights how the story creates an interaction between different layers of reality and fiction, with at least two major effects. First, by putting different ontological levels into dialogue, the story establishes how multiple themes and incidents may illuminate each other, and how they eventually converge to comment on the position of the

African writer in the contemporary literary market. Most obviously, a parallel is established through the different levels of the story between colonially tinged condescension and gender oppression, a fact that in turn offers a clearer view of their common dynamics and of the fraught position of the victims, who are torn between, on the one hand, a complicity that may bring them a form of material gain (but which ultimately perpetuates their plight) and, on the other, a resistance synonymous with unemployment or an otherwise uncertain future. Second, the interaction between ontological levels within the specific setting of the writing workshop featured in "Jumping Monkey Hill" leads these levels of fiction and reality to become literary commentaries of each other – thus, Ujunwa's experience with the Lagos bank asserts the legitimacy of her untitled short story and of "Jumping Monkey Hill" as a container both of that story and of a framing narrative that mirrors the fictional writers "reality". In this way, Adichie's piece once and for all asserts its metafictional character, since it devises "a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction" (Waugh 1984, 2; italics in original): although fictional, the text can, in many ways, be read as a literary manifesto. That this manifesto is about African fiction in particular, and that it can be defined as such as a result of Adichie's and her fictional alter ego's resistance to an illegitimate form of white European authority, appears to firmly place "Jumping Monkey Hill" in a postcolonial, counter-discursive tradition. The story tells its readers, in no uncertain terms, what contemporary African fiction is entitled to be.

It would be tempting to end this reading of "Jumping Monkey Hill" on such a triumphant note, but two paradoxes resulting from the above analysis undermine the possibility of a simple empowering conclusion. The first paradox can be summarized as follows: while "Jumping Monkey Hill" argues that no restrictions should be imposed on African writers' creativity, the workshop participants in the story repeatedly find themselves justifying the legitimacy of their fiction by arguing that the latter has a basis in reality. Such a

defence strategy may be considered problematic, as is pointed out by Adichie in the *Guardian* article with which I opened this article:

> you cannot use real life to defend your fiction. If a reader tells you a character or scene is not believable, you cannot say – well, it actually happened like that. Because if it is unbelievable to the reader, then you, the writer, have failed at your art, which is to use language to achieve the suspension of [dis]belief. (2013, para. 6)

Presumably Adichie, who wrote these lines almost a decade after "Jumping Monkey Hill", did not have the narrow-minded likes of Edward in mind when she spoke of readers who point out that certain characters or scenes are unbelievable. But even so, her statement cannot but intimate that, in the short story examined here, the writers' appeal to the factual veracity of their fiction more readily amounts to a defeat than to a victory. After all, in voicing their protest, the workshop participants are merely reproducing Edward's mode of thought, which prescribes the use of certain themes in fiction because these are reflective of the "real" world. While the two parties may disagree on the nature of the reality in question, neither challenges the validity of the real as a rightful basis for literary fiction.

That the African writers in "Jumping Monkey Hill" should defend such a position is, at first sight, puzzling to say the least. Indeed, as Adichie has stated elsewhere, "realist fiction is not merely the recording of the real"; rather, such writing "seeks to infuse the real with meaning" so as to enable readers to "make connections with emotive significance" (2012). "Realist fiction", Adichie continues, "is, above all, the process of turning fact into truth" (2012). This is an important definition, for it is precisely such "truth" that Edward fails to perceive in at least three of the short stories written at the workshop. On this score, he might be contrasted with Ujunwa, who, despite her eventual appeal to "reality", is in fact endowed with a writerly sensitivity akin to her literary creator's, which manifests in the character's

deeming the story written by the Zimbabwean participant successful because it sounds not just real but also "true" (Adichie 2009a, 107; my italics). This observation, then, may offer a way out of the above-mentioned paradox. It could indeed be argued that, despite Adichie and Ujunwa's common writing philosophy, the fact that the fictional writer can only claim literary value for her work by appealing to its factual veracity evinces the limited means available to contemporary African writers to defend the value of their craft, especially in western-dominated settings.

As "Jumping Monkey Hill" makes clear, those primarily responsible for the stifling of African writers' creativity are its critics, and it is probably no coincidence that Edward is not only Oxford-trained, but also used to be "a lecturer at the University of Cape Town" (Adichie 2009a, 95). This allusion to the role of the academic in reading African fiction leads me to the second and final paradox that I wish to address. The contradiction might be put in the following terms: the present analysis, like much of Eisenberg's before it, has been conducted using a framework of postcolonial inspiration, focusing on issues of oppression and resistance. In her study, Eisenberg established how African writers' artistic inventiveness had been hindered by a critical tradition that, ever since it started to engage with the seminal works of Chinua Achebe, had systematically cast the African writer into the role of the "resistance activist" (Eisenberg 2013, 8). In a similar spirit, the present article has sought to establish how "Jumping Monkey Hill", through metafictional means, at once advocates African writers' right to artistic freedom and alludes to their potential complicity in their own oppression. Ironically, scholarly readings such as those proposed by both Eisenberg and myself can only be devised by analysing "Jumping Monkey Hill" in precisely the way that the short story tells its readers that they should not approach African fiction: as eminently political texts that expose various forms of exploitation, rather than as artistic explorations of human emotions.

Daria Tunca, "The Danger of a Single Short Story: Reality, Fiction and Metafiction in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'Jumping Monkey Hill'", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 54.1 (2018), pp. 69-82, special issue on "'Minor' Genres in Postcolonial Literatures", ed. by Bénédicte Ledent & Delphine Munos.
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This being said, the blame cannot entirely be laid at the door of the critics, for Adichie herself has implicitly validated such counter-discursive readings by declaring that her text was about "the larger question of who determines what an African story is" (2009c), as mentioned in the introduction to this article. The inevitable conclusion, then, is that if "Jumping Monkey Hill" is to be viewed as a postcolonial text, it must also be seen, despite initial impressions, as dispensing a hefty dose of postmodern-inspired absurdity as well, since the story can only be meaningfully decoded by going against its own metafictional grain – that is, by reproducing the epistemological limitations exposed by the text itself. Therefore, unlike other postcolonial metafictions, "Jumping Monkey Hill" does not "*accommodate[e]* the self-questioning ambiance of the postmodern and the politicized stance of the postcolonial" (Gamal 2011, 1; emphasis added), but it rather undermines its own apparently counter-discursive ethos through recourse to a form of postmodern-like absurdity. Interestingly, the awareness of such absurdity in turn leads to the very postcolonial-cum-metafictional conclusion that critics who interpret Adichie's text in a political light tend to read it as "agenda writing" in a manner disturbingly similar to what Edward does with Ujunwa's piece in "Jumping Monkey Hill".

Such paradoxes brought into relief by a metafictional reading of the story are, however, ultimately instructive, for they show how self-reflexive texts may in turn enhance critics' self-reflexivity and, in this case, foster a better understanding of African fiction and its reception. As a metafictional piece, "Jumping Monkey Hill" is thus best read as an expression of the work that still lies ahead – for African writers, the task consists in practising their craft without compromising their integrity; for critics, especially those writing from a white western perspective, the aim is to stop imposing preconceived ideas on African writers and be more attuned to the emotional scope of these artists' work. With this in mind, critics might do worse than heed Adichie's indignant – but ultimately hopeful – words:

> Whatever I write, somebody is somehow going to find a way to show that I'm really writing about political oppression in Africa [...]. But the hope, of course, is that even if somebody does insist on finding political imagery and metaphors in your work, they also, in addition, recognize the humanity of the characters. (2009b)

The development of such sensitivity remains a challenge for the heavily politically oriented discipline of postcolonial studies. Frustratingly, the recognition of "the humanity of the characters" in "Jumping Monkey Hill" cannot but go hand in hand with a counter-discursive methodology until the story's urgent message about African writing starts to become obsolete.

Notes

1. These are not exceptional statements: similar comments about metafiction can be found in Boyd (1983, 9; quoted in Ommundsen 1993, 9), Hutcheon ([1980] 2013, 15) and Waugh (1984, 2).

2. Incidentally (or not), the Lord Chamberlain has historically been associated with the policing of creativity through his presiding over theatre censorship until 1968.

3. The name of the original location is mentioned in Elam (2003, 6).

4. My comment about the inclusion of Ujunwa's short story is hedged by "what one assumes to be" because, while the text is unambiguously presented as her story (the different sections of her fiction are systematically preceded by a mention of Ujunwa sitting in front of her laptop [Adichie 2009a, 100, 103, 110]), a minute dissonance at the end of "Jumping Monkey Hill" indicates that this fact should be approached with caution. Indeed, when the participants gather to discuss Ujunwa's story, one of them praises her for "captur[ing] Lagos well, the smells and sounds" (113), while her untitled piece actually does no such thing: even if it is set

in Lagos, it does not describe the city's olfactory or aural atmospheres. The text that does do this, however, is Adichie's short story "Lagos, Lagos", which I discuss later in this paragraph.

5. This mirroring of reality in fiction actually extends to the genesis of "Lagos, Lagos" itself, and to its reception at the Caine Prize workshop. Indeed, Adichie has said in an interview that this short story was "literally lifted from [her] friend's life in Lagos", and that the administrator had deemed it to be "agenda writing" (Adichie 2011).

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