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Appropriating Achebe:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

and "The Headstrong Historian"

[W]hile the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted,  
and how we may triumph is never new,  
it must always be heard.  
James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"<sup>1</sup>

It is almost a truism – and if not, then certainly a well-worn cliché – to say that one of the main characteristics of literature is its capacity to either fight or reinforce prejudice, be it social, racial or cultural. However evident, this fact deserves to be occasionally repeated and reflected upon, especially in relation to African writing, a tradition in which readers hardly ever dissociate 'high' literature from the social and political messages that it may be trying to convey. In this regard, the West African state of Nigeria is no exception. Indeed, the potential bearing of the literary medium on local and international readers' mentalities, and thus both on the fabric of the nation and on that of the world at large, has been repeatedly commented on in this country, not least by the writers themselves. One of the most notable contributions to this ongoing discussion has been that of Chinua Achebe, who, in his seminal essay "The Novelist as Teacher", declared:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.<sup>2</sup>

If this quotation indicates that Achebe's primary objective is to address an African readership, his use of the English language also points to a wish to reach an international audience, including the former colonizer and Western societies in general, both of which have been largely responsible for disseminating stereotypes

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<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, James, "Sonny's Blues", in: James Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*, London 1984, 82-116, 115. This epigraph appears in a slightly different form at the end of Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience", in: *Transition* 99 (2008): 42-53.

<sup>2</sup> Achebe, Chinua, "The Novelist as Teacher", in: Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, London 1975, 42-45, 45.

about the alleged backwardness of African civilizations.<sup>3</sup> There is no denying that Achebe's literary project has achieved a certain measure of success: his work, particularly his first and most famous novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958),<sup>4</sup> has made a substantial contribution to the struggle against the perpetuation of clichés about Africa in the West. Yet, for all its linguistic mastery and narrative subtlety, this book has not completed the task at hand – for stereotypes persist, not only despite *Things Fall Apart*, but also, ironically, *because* of it. This much transpires from an anecdote recounted by the younger Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who recalls her roommates' disappointment upon meeting her for the first time after her arrival in the United States. The American students were stunned by the ostensible 'un-Africanness' of Adichie's appearance and musical tastes, an episode which led the author to consider the possible correlations between her friends' expectations and Achebe's book:

I remember looking at them and being surprised that twenty-year-olds knew so little about the world. And then I realized that perhaps *Things Fall Apart* had played a role in this. These students, like many Americans, had read Achebe's novel in high school, but I suspect that their teacher forgot to explain to them that it was a book set in the Nigeria of a hundred years ago. [...] Clearly, they had expected that I would step out of the pages of *Things Fall Apart*.<sup>5</sup>

This incident underscores the glaring need for a contextualized reading of Achebe's novel, but the story related by Adichie here also eloquently illustrates a pitfall on which she was to offer a fuller reflection two years later, in a lecture entitled "The Danger of a Single Story". In this address, Adichie explains how class- and culture-based prejudice is often fostered by individuals' adherence to hegemonic narratives of societies and histories. In the context of her argument, Achebe's novel is presented as a counter-discursive response to the unflattering "single story of Africa" transmitted by Western literature.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, one can easily imagine how reading *Things Fall Apart* as the unique narrative of the continent might flatten the perspective which Achebe was trying to enhance, and thus give rise to further pre- and misconceptions.

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<sup>3</sup> While Achebe has stated that he does not "write in English *because* it is a world language", but rather because it plays a central role in Nigeria (Achebe, Chinua, "Politics and Politicians of Language in African Literature", in: Chinua Achebe, *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, London 2009, 96-106, 100; emphasis in original), he has nevertheless insisted that he wanted his literary response to "the insults that have been poured on the history of [the Igbo]" to be understood globally, just as the abuse formulated by the former colonizer had been ("Out of Nigeria", in: *South Bank Show*, ITV, 10/17 May 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Achebe, Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, Oxford: Heinemann 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Adichie, "African 'Authenticity'", in: *Transition*, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, *The Danger of a Single Story*, 2009, [http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html) (accessed 30 April 2010). This opinion of Achebe's novel is not shared by all of Adichie's literary peers. For instance, Chris Abani thinks that "*Things Fall Apart* performs a certain reassuring expectation of Africa", and states that "all [his] work is about resisting that performance" (Tóibín, Colm, *Chris Abani*, 2006, <http://bombsite.com/issues/96/articles/2840> (accessed 30 April 2010)).

In Adichie's own words, "The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story".<sup>7</sup>

Of course, one should not indict Achebe for the manner in which his first novel is read, especially since he later wrote several other works of fiction – for example dealing with corruption around the time of Nigerian independence –, thereby implicitly signalling his unwillingness to let *Things Fall Apart* become his "single story" of Nigeria. Inevitably, however, even Achebe has in his books covered only a very restricted number of aspects of his society; the spectrum of *any* author's work is bound to be limited in this way, which only emphasizes the need for other voices to be heard. In Nigeria and its diaspora, many of such remarkable voices arose at the turn of the twenty-first century, marking the advent of the so-called 'third generation' of writers from the country.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, while it is alleged that the young authors, many of whom are novelists, distinguish themselves from their predecessors by "explor[ing] more diverse themes" and taking an increasing interest in "place and identity",<sup>9</sup> if only because most of them live outside Nigeria, the echoes of Achebe's pioneering novel still resonate throughout their writing. According to Elleke Boehmer, Achebe's influence has been so profound since *Things Fall Apart* that "he has become a dominant point of origin, a *hyper-precursor* [...] in whose aftermath virtually every African author self-consciously writes".<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Boehmer's statement applies with equal force to *critics* of African literature, many of whom have consistently measured up the work of the younger African – especially Nigerian – writers against Achebe's earlier achievements.

Nowhere perhaps has this academic obsession with Achebean (af)filations been more evident than in scholarly responses to the books of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. To give but one example, ever since the publication of her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), she has repeatedly been called the "21<sup>st</sup>-century daughter of [...] Chinua Achebe".<sup>11</sup> Adichie herself has frequently acknowledged the crucial influence of the older novelist's work on her own imagination – for instance, she has called him "the

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<sup>7</sup> Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*.

<sup>8</sup> On the division of the Nigerian literary tradition into three generations of writers, see e.g. Adesanmi, Pius/Dunton, Chris, "Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations", in: *English in Africa* 32.1 (2005): 7-19.

<sup>9</sup> Habila, Helon, *Is This the Year of the Nigerian Writer?*, 2007, [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/article2223011.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article2223011.ece) (accessed 30 April 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Boehmer, Elleke, "Achebe and His Influence in Some Contemporary African Writing", in: *Interventions* 11.2 (2009): 141-153, 142; emphasis in original.

<sup>11</sup> This phrase originally appeared in a *Washington Post* review of Adichie's debut novel, where it addressed only a precise point. Reviewer Bill Broun, talking about Adichie's attitude towards the "limitations" of "political truth", wrote that: "In this thinking, she is very much the 21<sup>st</sup>-century daughter of that other great Igbo novelist, Chinua Achebe". Predictably, the quotation lost its specificity when it was lifted out of its context (Broun, Bill, *A Moveable Feast*, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&contentId=A46513-2003Dec31&notFound=true> (accessed 30 April 2010)).

writer whose work is most important to [her]”<sup>12</sup> and has identified him as “the writer whose work gave [her] permission to write [her] own stories”,<sup>13</sup> but on the other hand she has also firmly insisted on her individuality. As years go by and the idea of her being Achebe’s successor is put to her again and again, one begins to discern a note of concealed irritation in her response:

I’ve heard that so often. [...] Because I have enormous respect for Chinua Achebe, I find it in some ways flattering, I’m honoured to hear that, but then on the other hand I don’t think that our styles are similar in any way. And when people talk about writing about the same things as Chinua Achebe, I think, well, you know, when you write a story in which colonialism features in some way – which, by the way, I think, is the story of Africa – then you would be writing [on] the same subject as Chinua Achebe, wouldn’t you?<sup>14</sup>

In spite of Adichie’s reticence to be considered “the new Achebe”,<sup>15</sup> comparisons between the two writers have proliferated, fuelled by factors ranging from trivial coincidences – such as Adichie’s temporary occupation of Achebe’s former house in the Nigerian university town of Nsukka – to potentially more significant literary intersections. Indeed, so many points of convergence with *Things Fall Apart* have been detected in *Purple Hibiscus* that at least one critic has claimed that Adichie’s first novel could be considered a “rewriting” of Achebe’s book.<sup>16</sup>

It is around this suggestion – namely, that Adichie rewrites Achebe in some of her works – that I propose to articulate my argument in this essay, using the concepts of adaptation and appropriation as analytical tools. More precisely, I shall first appraise the critical potency of these two notions in the assessment of the relationship between *Things Fall Apart* and *Purple Hibiscus*. While it will be argued that the idea of authorial intention, which is one of the key notions in both Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation*<sup>17</sup> and Julie Sanders’s *Adaptation and Appropriation*,<sup>18</sup> is potentially problematic when dealing with Adichie’s first novel, it will nevertheless be contended that the theoretical models developed by these two critics – neither of whom discusses Adichie’s work – may help one to shed light on the reception of *Purple Hibiscus*. Then, focusing on Adichie’s short story “The Headstrong Historian”, which appropriates Achebe’s novels – especially *Things Fall Apart* – far more explicitly than

<sup>12</sup> E. g. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, “The Writing Life”, in: *Washington Post* (17 June 2007): 11.

<sup>13</sup> E. g. Adichie, “African ‘Authenticity’”, in: *Transition*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> “Out of Nigeria”, in: *South Bank Show*.

<sup>15</sup> The association between the two authors has recurred with such insistence that the Lagos *Guardian* newspaper asked several Nigerian writers to determine whether “Chimamanda [was] the new Achebe”. The overwhelming majority of those questioned insisted on the distinctness of Adichie’s writerly voice.

<sup>16</sup> Hewett, Heather, “Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation”, in: *English in Africa* 32.1 (2005): 73-97, 97.

<sup>17</sup> Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation*, London, New York 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Sanders, Julie, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, London, New York 2006.

*Purple Hibiscus* does, I shall attempt to demonstrate that the younger writer builds on the views expressed by her senior compatriot, but also departs from them, to express her own convictions on gender, religion, historiography and literature.

Even if *Purple Hibiscus* addresses Achebe's first book less directly than "The Headstrong Historian", the converse impression may dominate when reading the suggestive, and by now much-quoted, opening sentence of Adichie's debut novel, in which the young female narrator states: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère".<sup>19</sup> This (alleged) instance of "explicit intertextuality"<sup>20</sup> has led commentators to elaborate on the possible parallels between Achebe's and Adichie's novels – thematic and narrative analogies which are, indeed, numerous. For instance, both stories feature stubborn and violent patriarchs with unshakable moral values;<sup>21</sup> both novels describe family tensions across three different generations; and both books even present "a slightly different version" of the same folktale at some stage.<sup>22</sup> It seems unnecessary here to add more elements to this list, or to rehearse the details of the arguments put forward by the different critics in their comparisons of the two novels, especially since a broad consensus was rapidly reached around the ideas that *Purple Hibiscus* "both reflect[ed] and revise[d] *Things Fall Apart*",<sup>23</sup> and that the younger writer's "revisionary gesture"<sup>24</sup> mainly lay in the fact that she "refocuse[d] the inquiry by adding gender".<sup>25</sup>

Despite the aforementioned intertextual connections, *Purple Hibiscus* probably presents too many divergences in plot and characterization to be considered an adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* as the term is usually understood in studies of the phenomenon – that is, Adichie's novel is arguably not an "extended, deliberate, announced revisitation"<sup>26</sup> of Achebe's book in the same way as, for example, Biyi Bandele's stage adaptation of the same novel is.<sup>27</sup> However, considering that *Purple Hibiscus* does extensively re-examine, and transpose to the twentieth century, some of

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<sup>19</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, *Purple Hibiscus*, Chapel Hill 2003, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ouma, Christopher, "Childhood(s) in *Purple Hibiscus*", in: *English Academy Review* 26.2 (2009): 48-59, 50.

<sup>21</sup> See comparisons in e.g. Hewett, "Coming of Age", in: *English in Africa*, 78-80; Highfield, Jonathan, "Blood and Blossom: Violence and Restoration in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Vera's *The Stone Virgins*", in: *International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability* 1.2 (2005/2006): 161-168, 163 & Toye, Deji, "Unmasking the Okonkwo Complex in *Purple Hibiscus*", in: *Guardian* (Nigeria) (24 January 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Cooper, Brenda. "Breaking Gods and Petals of Purple in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*", in: Brenda Cooper, *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language*, London 2008, 110-132, 123.

<sup>23</sup> Hewett, "Coming of Age", in: *English in Africa*, 80.

<sup>24</sup> Hewett, "Coming of Age", in: *English in Africa*, 79.

<sup>25</sup> Hewett, "Coming of Age", in: *English in Africa*, 80.

<sup>26</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 170.

<sup>27</sup> Significantly perhaps, this example involves a transposition of medium (or, at the very least, genre). Even though adaptations occur "both across genres and media and also within the same ones" (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, xii, my emphasis), there seem to be very few adaptations of novels into novels. When such books serve as source texts for other fictions, the process involved is often one of appropriation – i.e., the result diverges more markedly from the source text than in the case of an adaptation, as will be detailed below.

the issues raised in *Things Fall Apart* – most notably the conflict between the Christian and traditional Igbo religions – it might perhaps qualify as what Sanders considers an “appropriation” of Achebe’s novel, that is, a work which “affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product or domain”.<sup>28</sup> But let us momentarily leave aside terminological debates over the status of *Purple Hibiscus* to examine the striking fact that both Hutcheon’s and Sanders’s theories heavily rely on the concept of authorial intention.<sup>29</sup> Hutcheon, for example, insists on considering “extratextual statements of intent and motive” as a complement to textual interpretation.<sup>30</sup> And it is here that, in the case of *Purple Hibiscus*, things truly start to fall apart.

Indeed, commentators so far have chosen to treat the beginning of Adichie’s novel as an obvious case of intentional intertextuality. The author, asked whether she had inserted a reference to the title of Achebe’s book on purpose, offered the following reply:

Do you want the truth, or do you want the made-up response to that? The made-up response is that it was not an accident, but actually the truth is that I wasn’t consciously aware. And then later when my editor pointed it out, I thought it might have been an unconscious nod to Chinua Achebe, but I really didn’t set out to do that. But then when I realized I had done that it seemed to fit very nicely into the story of my... [laughter]<sup>31</sup>

Keeping in mind the importance of author intentionality in Hutcheon’s and Sanders’s studies, one cannot help but wonder: what if Adichie had decided to stick to the embellished version of her story, or had further embroidered it by identifying her first novel as a direct response to Achebe? Would *Purple Hibiscus* then have qualified as an unproblematic case of appropriation, or even as a loose adaptation? Based on textual evidence – particularly the fact that Adichie’s book features storylines that are quite different from those found in Achebe’s novel – one might then still have argued that *Purple Hibiscus* was not truly an “extended”<sup>32</sup> or “sustained”<sup>33</sup> revisitation of *Things Fall Apart*. But how does one decide how “sustained” is sustained enough?<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 81 & Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 108-109.

<sup>30</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 109.

<sup>31</sup> “Out of Nigeria”, in: *South Bank Show*. I have slightly edited Adichie’s oral reply for the purpose of this article. Her evocation of the “made-up response” is, of course, made in jest, since her first mention of the reference to *Things Fall Apart* as being “unconscious” predates this interview by at least five years (Lalami, Laila, *A Conversation with Adichie*, 2004, <http://lailalalami.com/2004/a-conversation-with-adichie> (accessed 30 April 2010)).

<sup>32</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 170.

<sup>33</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 97.

<sup>34</sup> For instance, while Hutcheon understandably rejects broad definitions of adaptation for “pragmatic” reasons (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 9), she nevertheless considers the reality television show *Survivor* to be an “adaptation” of “the ethos, as well the story of Robinson Crusoe” (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 143). Whether such an example fits into her initial definition is debatable.

The example of *Purple Hibiscus* perhaps shows that adaptation theory treads on slippery ground when faced with borderline cases, yet these possible limitations do not mean that the application of the discipline's principles necessarily leads to a dead end here. To demonstrate this, suffice it to reverse the critical equation: rather than trying to decide if, or to what extent, Adichie's novel can be considered an adaptation or appropriation of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, one should perhaps attempt to establish whether insights might be gained from applying adaptation theory to Adichie's book, regardless of the precise nature of its relationship with Achebe's narrative.

The most notable of such analytical contributions probably resides in the ability of adaptation theory to account for the way in which Adichie's novel has been received and interpreted. According to Hutcheon, adaptation "involves both memory and change, persistence and variation";<sup>35</sup> citing George Kubler, she further writes that the phenomenon owes much of its success to "the desire to return to the known pattern, and the desire to escape it by a new variation".<sup>36</sup> Scholars' insistence on the Achebean intertext in *Purple Hibiscus*, I would argue, results from a similar wish on their part to appraise the original components of Adichie's book from a safe critical vantage point, a desire which they (or, should I say, we) – legitimately or not – project onto the text. For instance, commenting on the first line of the novel, Heather Hewett has remarked that the Achebean reference "alert[s] the reader that *familiar* terrain – both the events and the Nigeria of Achebe's novel – will be *rewritten and remapped*".<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Cooper indicates that Adichie's inclusion of the same folktale as Achebe "signals the *changes* and also the brutal *continuities*"<sup>38</sup> between nineteenth- and twentieth-century Nigeria. In other words, the multiple intertextual allusions that appear in Adichie's book provide an opening for critics to satisfy the ambiguous compulsion they share with other readers, namely the desire to see "the known pattern" combined with "a new variation".<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 173.

<sup>36</sup> George Kubler quoted in Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 173.

<sup>37</sup> Hewett, "Coming of Age", in: *English in Africa*, 79; my emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> Cooper, "Breaking Gods", in: Cooper, *A New Generation of African Writers*, 123; my emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 173. If the establishment of parallels between *Purple Hibiscus* and *Things Fall Apart* is based on textual clues here, the wish to discern "known patterns" in Adichie's narratives has verged on the ridiculous on at least one occasion. When her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, London 2006) was featured on *Richard and Judy* as part of the television programme's Book Club, host Richard Madeley referred to the novel as "a sort of Nigerian version of *Gone with the Wind*" (*Richard and Judy*, Channel 4, 14 March 2007). The comparison was enthusiastically taken up by his co-host and one of the guests present, and repeated several times on the show. Madeley was, of course, trying to emphasize the book's relevance to British audiences: "within three pages I felt as if I was reading about something that happened here in Britain – the parallels between all of our lives are just so identical" (*Richard and Judy*). A few years before, Adichie had commented on the questionable nature of such contrived universalist gestures: "Have you wondered why reviewers and blurb-writers are quick to reassure readers that a book about Africa (usually one written by a Black African about Black Africans) IS NOT JUST AN AFRICAN BOOK, BUT IS UNIVERSAL, as well? As if 'African' and 'Universal' are mutually exclusive" (Wickett, Dan, "Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie", in: *Emerging Writers Forum*, 6 April 2004; capitals in original).

Interestingly, Hutcheon also attributes the “positive reaction” to the “repetition with variation”<sup>40</sup> found in adaptations to what Leo Braudy calls “‘unfinished cultural business,’ or the ‘continuing historical relevance (economic, cultural, psychological) of a particular narrative’”.<sup>41</sup> While these factors may explain the favourable reception enjoyed by adaptations, they shed equally powerful light on writers’ and filmmakers’ urge to repeatedly engage with specific stories – or, more broadly, to recast “literary archetypes”.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Adichie’s feeling that, “although Achebe’s characters [in *Things Fall Apart*] were familiar [...] in many ways, their world was also incredibly exotic because [...] they did not have cars and electricity and telephones”<sup>43</sup> may have prompted her to set her first novel in the late twentieth century. Put differently, Adichie’s choice of temporal backdrop may have been motivated by the “continuing historical relevance” of the conflicts and experiences recounted in Achebe’s book, combined with a wish to more fully explore the religious legacy of colonization in the contemporary period, this time from the perspective of a female narrator. The focalizer and subject matter selected for *Purple Hibiscus* further suggest that the representation of gender and religion in *Things Fall Apart* partakes of the “unfinished cultural business” mentioned by Braudy. Indeed, Achebe’s depiction of women and Christianity in particular have, for reasons that will be examined in the following paragraphs, elicited different responses on the younger writer’s part.

Nowhere has Adichie expressed her wish to address her Achebean heritage more clearly than in the short story “The Headstrong Historian”. Unlike *Purple Hibiscus*, this piece may uncontroversially be labelled a conscious ‘appropriation’ or ‘rewriting’ of some of Achebe’s novels, and particularly *Things Fall Apart*. There are, first of all, overarching correspondences between Achebe’s works and Adichie’s short story: the beginning of “The Headstrong Historian” is set in Igboland towards the end of the nineteenth century and recounts the arrival of the first Christian missionaries, in a manner similar to *Things Fall Apart*; Adichie’s piece covers a timeframe spanning three generations, as does Achebe’s so-called ‘African trilogy’.<sup>44</sup> These broad common features are supplemented by a long list of more precise intertextual allusions, only a few of which need to be mentioned here: the husband of Adichie’s main character Nwamgba is called Obierika, as is Okonkwo’s friend in *Things Fall Apart*; the names Okoye and Okafo, attributed to minor characters in Achebe’s first novel, resurface in “The Headstrong Historian” in relation to Obierika’s cousins;

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<sup>40</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 116.

<sup>41</sup> Leo Braudy quoted in Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 116.

<sup>42</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Adichie, “African ‘Authenticity’”, in: *Transition*, 42.

<sup>44</sup> This phrase has often been used to designate the triad made up of *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964). *No Longer at Ease* explores the downfall of Obi Okonkwo, Okonkwo’s grandson, while *Arrow of God* focuses on Ezeulu – a character who, though not related to Okonkwo, embodies the generation of the latter’s children. The three novels have recently been published in a single volume under the title *The African Trilogy* (Achebe, Chinua, *The African Trilogy: Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God*, New York 2010).



Nwamgba speaks of “the young girl from the *Okonkwo* family”;<sup>45</sup> the heroine later sends her son to a missionary school despite her own religious beliefs, as does Ezeulu in Achebe’s *Arrow of God*;<sup>46</sup> and her granddaughter Afamefuna – also referred to as Grace – owns a textbook containing a chapter on “‘The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria,’ by an administrator from Worcestershire who had lived among them for seven years” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 215) – an obvious reference to the District Commissioner’s book *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 148),<sup>47</sup> a work also read by one of the white characters in *Arrow of God*.<sup>48</sup>

Many of these intersections have particular significance in the revisionary project undertaken by Adichie in “The Headstrong Historian”, and several of these convergences will feature in my analysis of her piece. However, it is probably the short story’s main difference with *Things Fall Apart* that conveys Adichie’s message most forcefully: the narrative is indeed largely recounted through the eyes of a *female* character, an alteration of perspective – technically known as “transfocalization”<sup>49</sup> – typical of appropriative gestures. Because the identity of the main source text or, to use Genette’s term, of the hypotext, of “The Headstrong Historian” is far more obvious than in the case of *Purple Hibiscus*, the significance of such a change in narrative consciousness cannot be doubted. Yet its motivations are perhaps not as straightforward as one might expect. Consider Adichie’s view on the representation of gender in Achebe’s first novel:

It is impossible, especially for the contemporary reader, not to be struck by the portrayal of gender in *Things Fall Apart*, and the equating of weakness and inability with femaleness. More interesting, however, and perhaps more revealing, are the subtle ways in which Achebe interrogates this patriarchy: [for example,] Okonkwo denigrates women and yet the child he most respects is his daughter Ezinma, the only character who dares to answer back to him and who happens to be confident and forthright in a way that his male children are not.<sup>50</sup>

While this specific argument might be counterbalanced by the fact that Okonkwo constantly wishes that his daughter were a boy (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 46, 122), other commentators have similarly refuted the accusations of misogyny levelled at

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<sup>45</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, “The Headstrong Historian”, in: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Thing around Your Neck*, London 2009, 198-218, 201; my emphasis.

<sup>46</sup> Franklin, Ruth, “Things Come Together”, in: *New Republic* (23 September 2009): 52-55, 55.

<sup>47</sup> Franklin, “Things Come Together”, in: *New Republic*, 55 & Mikailu, David/Wattenberg, Brendan, “‘My Name Will Not Be Lost’: Cosmopolitan Temporality in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s ‘The Headstrong Historian’” (unpublished essay).

<sup>48</sup> Achebe, Chinua, *Arrow of God*, Oxford 1986, 32.

<sup>49</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 49.

<sup>50</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, “Introduction”, in: Chinua Achebe, *The African Trilogy: Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God*, New York 2010, vii-xvii, xi.

Achebe's novel.<sup>51</sup> In any case, Adichie's praise of her compatriot's book indicates that her female-centred narrative is probably not to be interpreted as a confrontational response to *Things Fall Apart*, but rather as a wish to "pay homage"<sup>52</sup> to the appropriated text, and filter it through the prism of her own feminist agenda. Her qualms, I would argue, do not lie so much with Achebe's novel as with the abusive exploitation of historiographical blanks: just as Africa was declared to lack a history because it could not advance written records of its past, so the relative silence of women in *Things Fall Apart* has been read as signifying their submission and inferiority – either in the eyes of the older novelist, or in the history of the Igbo people altogether. Therefore, in recounting the story of the colonization of Igboland from a female perspective, Adichie erases some of the blind spots of Achebe's narrative, empowering women in the process. To cite but one example, the younger writer has the protagonist, Nwamgba, insist that her husband take a second wife – which he refuses. By including this incident, the author seems to indicate that women in polygamous societies are not necessarily the passive and frustrated beings Westerners make them out to be. In fact, it may not be a coincidence if the only woman in the story who, according to Nwamgba, displays "limp helplessness" (Adichie, "The Headstrong Historian", 215), is *not* a polygamist, but the Christian wife of Nwamgba's catechist son Michael/Anikwenwa.

Equally meaningful in Adichie's supplementation of the historical picture drawn by Achebe is her choice to reincarnate in a slightly different form one of the supporting characters in *Things Fall Apart*, Obierika.<sup>53</sup> This figure is the voice of wisdom, loyalty and moderation in Achebe's novel, and he is also depicted positively in "The Headstrong Historian": Nwamgba's loving husband, Obierika is a man who owes his high status in the community to his hard work, his only major flaw being the trust he places in his two cousins who, if Nwamgba is to be believed, end up poisoning him (Adichie, "The Headstrong Historian", 202-203). Adichie's desire to remap Okonkwo's ideal of masculinity by foregrounding Obierika is all the more obvious to the initiated reader as, in what can only be a veiled reference to Achebe, Obierika and Nwamgba first meet at a wrestling match (Adichie, "The Headstrong Historian", 198). However, unlike in *Things Fall Apart*, in which much is made of the fact that Okonkwo wins such a contest "by throwing Amalinze the Cat" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 3), in "The Headstrong Historian" the actual match, in which Obierika may not even be taking part, is not described; rather, mention is later made of a benign fight in

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<sup>51</sup> An interesting overview of the critical responses to gender representation in *Things Fall Apart*, and further discussion on the matter, is provided by Íde Corley, who argues that "reading the novel as one which legitimizes male domination" amounts to missing the "irony in the narrative" (Corley, Íde, "Conjuncture, Hypermasculinity and Disavowal in *Things Fall Apart*", in: *Interventions* 11.2 (2009): 203-211, 206). It might indeed be suggested that Okonkwo's demise points to the untenability of his hyper-masculinized worldview.

<sup>52</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 20.

<sup>53</sup> While there is little doubt that Achebe's Obierika inspired Adichie, the details of the character's situation are different. In *Things Fall Apart*, Obierika has several wives and children; in Adichie's story, he has only one of each, with first names unrelated to those of his family members in Achebe's book.

the family circle, in which the young Nwamgba, wrestling with her brother, “throw[s] [the] boy” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 199). Adichie not only endows her heroine with one of Okonkwo’s most valued qualities, i.e. physical strength, but she further challenges the Achebean model of masculinity by making Obierika a flute player – one of the main characteristics of Okonkwo’s despised, ‘unmanly’ father Unoka in *Things Fall Apart*. Blurring gender boundaries a little more insistently, the author also has Nwamgba believe that Obierika is reincarnated in his granddaughter Afamefuna/Grace, and not in his first-born grandson Michael/Anikwenwa, as the old woman had initially expected. As Okonkwo’s scale of values is turned upside down in “The Headstrong Historian”, the character himself is relegated to the margins of the story: his family name is mentioned only twice – ironically enough, both times in relation to his daughter (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 201, 202).

By playfully rewriting Achebe’s novel, Adichie challenges Okonkwo’s rigid worldview, yet she does not deny the existence of normative gender values in nineteenth-century Igbo society. Nwamgba may indeed have “wrestled her brother to the ground” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 199), but her father “warn[s] everyone not to let the news leave the compound” (ibid.); similarly, as an adult, the heroine displays gender bias when, visiting a missionary school, she passes unfavourable judgement on the fact that girls are taught what her people consider to be a masculine activity: sewing (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 208).

Arguably, the latest example illustrates that gender roles are cultural constructions. The impact of this subtextual statement is reinforced by the author’s skilful use of focalization, as her character’s description of the girls’ sewing as “silly” (ibid.) inevitably alerts contemporary Western(ized) readers to the arbitrariness of the value system they usually take for granted. On several occasions in the story, Adichie reverses the direction of the colonial gaze in this way to comment on racial, linguistic or cultural prejudice. For example, the narrative briefly recounts the misfortunes of Iroegbunam, a young Igbo man abducted by slave traders. After walking for hours on end,

Iroegbunam passed out. He awoke to find a white man rubbing his feet with oil, and at first he was terrified, certain that he was being prepared for the white man’s meal. But he was a different kind of white man, a missionary who bought slaves only to free them [...]. (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 207)

This humorous inversion of the ‘usual’ colonial scenario through refocalization works on several levels. Most obviously, the incident exposes the irrationality of the colonizer’s fear of African cannibalism by featuring a black character who attributes anthropophagic intentions to a white missionary. Of course, this assumption turns out to be unfounded – at least on the literal level, for the anecdote may suggest that priests engaged in an insidious form of cultural cannibalism in Africa. More subtly perhaps, Iroegbunam’s misreading of the Christian ritual of anointment indicates that this

practice, if taken out of its context, merely consists in “rub[bing] some filthy oil” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 215) on another person’s body, to use Nwamgba’s words. This indicates that, just like gender values, Christian signifiers are culturally specific fabrications, and by no means essential expressions of a universal philosophy, as hegemonic Western discourse would have us believe.

Having pointed to the artificial nature of religious rites, the story also highlights the absurdity of the very foundations of Christianity. Thus, it is reported that many people in Nwamgba’s village walk away when the missionaries “spoke about their god [...] who was three but also one” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 205). This allusion to the irrationality of the Christian doctrine finds its source in the Achebean intertext, where, in the eyes of the Igbo people, Christianity rests on “the mad logic of the Trinity” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 103), and where missionaries are deemed to be “crazy men” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 106). Like Achebe too, Adichie denounces the overzealousness that leads converted Igbos to disrespect their ancestral culture and its representatives. For instance, in *Things Fall Apart*, a character “desecrate[s]” an *egwugwu* masquerade by unmasking it (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 132) and kills a sacred python (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 126; a similar incident also plays an important role in *Arrow of God*); in “The Headstrong Historian”, Nwamgba’s son Michael “stop[s] eating her food, because, he said, it was sacrificed to idols” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 210).<sup>54</sup>

In condemning the excesses that resulted in the denigration of traditional society, both Achebe and Adichie attempt to restore dignity to precolonial Igbo culture. However, neither of them glosses over the flaws that led its beliefs to be superseded by the Christian faith. In *Things Fall Apart*, the throwing away of twins in the Evil Forest causes at least one mother of such children to join the ranks of the Christian converts. The morality of these traditions is less overtly questioned in “The Headstrong Historian”, which places stronger emphasis on the *way* in which man, regardless of historical circumstances, exploits religious creeds for personal profit or gratification. Nwamgba’s visit to the *dibia* – the traditional medicine man – after several miscarriages is a case in point. To be able to conceive children, she and her husband are asked to “sacrific[e] a whole cow”, upon which Nwamgba wryly remarks that “Obierika certainly had greedy ancestors” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 202). The text does not explicitly state that the meat is destined for consumption by the oracle consulted by the *dibia* or the *dibia* himself, but the feeling that this might be the case is reinforced in another passage: when, several years later, Nwamgba visits the oracle because her Christian daughter-in-law has problems conceiving too, she notices “how even the gods had changed and no longer asked for palm wine but for gin. Had they converted, too?” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 214). While these two

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<sup>54</sup> This incident is strongly reminiscent of Eugene Achike’s insistence in *Purple Hibiscus* that his children should not eat anything while visiting their non-Christian grandfather. There are many other echoes between the novel and the short story which would deserve further attention.

anecdotes may primarily illustrate that Nwamgba is not blinded by her faith, and that religion has been manipulated for profit across centuries and civilizations, these comments acquire particular resonance if read against the backdrop of twenty-first-century Nigeria. Indeed, although the excesses described in the story are set in nineteenth-century Igboland, they equally apply to contemporary Nigerian society. One could therefore reasonably suggest that Adichie relies on “the alert reader’s recognition”<sup>55</sup> of parallels between her fiction and the historical context of writing and reception to get her point across.<sup>56</sup>

In sum, Adichie’s objections to current religious practices may be traced back to Achebe’s historical critique of the Igbo and Christian institutions, yet her commentary is markedly different in scope and tone from her compatriot’s. The same could be said of the younger writer’s description of the colonial encounter and its impact, a depiction which initially follows the Achebean trail but eventually serves the expression of a recognizably individual stance. As Ruth Franklin has argued, one of the specificities of Adichie’s vision is that it may be deemed more “optimistic”<sup>57</sup> than Achebe’s. Equally important, however, is the fact that Adichie’s examination of Nigeria’s colonial legacy significantly expands upon Achebe’s project by offering a fictional exploration of the intellectual’s role in the shaping of the future. This self-reflexive facet, perhaps the most stimulating aspect of Adichie’s response to her literary predecessor, is what I would like to investigate in the final part of this essay.

A fitting point of departure to develop this argument is once again provided by the scene, featured in both *Things Fall Apart* and “The Headstrong Historian”, in which the missionaries first address the Igbo villagers. As mentioned above, Adichie’s reworking of the incident found in Achebe’s book underscores the irrational foundations of Christianity, but it further parallels the passage from the hypotext by reproducing an identical scenario. In Achebe’s novel, the Christians tell the locals that Igbo deities are mere “pieces of wood and stone”, causing some of the villagers to “br[eak] into derisive laughter” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 103) and leave; in “The Headstrong Historian”, the missionaries’ explanations about the nature of the Christian god similarly lead some of the members of the gathering to “[laugh] loudly” and “[walk] away” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 205). Interestingly, the hilarity that marks the encounter between the missionaries and the villagers is featured on another occasion in Adichie’s story, with the result that laughter is turned into a more readily identifiable trope of resistance. This second incident is triggered by Nwamgba’s granddaughter’s discovery of anthropological material about the Igbo:

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<sup>55</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 146.

<sup>56</sup> The validity of this reading is reinforced by Adichie’s other writings, in which she has criticized Nigerian religious leaders’ dishonest appeal to the moral authority of religion; see e.g. the short story “The Shivering” (Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, “The Shivering”, in: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Thing around Your Neck*, London 2009, 142-166) and the essay “Nigeria’s immorality Is about Hypocrisy, Not Miniskirts” (Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, *Nigeria’s Immorality Is about Hypocrisy, Not Miniskirts*, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/apr/02/gender.equality> (accessed 30 April 2010)).

<sup>57</sup> Franklin, “Things Come Together”, in: *New Republic*, 55.

Grace [...] read about these savages, titillated by their curious and meaningless customs, not connecting them to herself until her teacher, Sister Maureen, told her she could not refer to the call-and-response her grandmother had taught her as poetry because primitive tribes did not have poetry. [...] Grace [...] laugh[ed] loudly until Sister Maureen took her to detention and then summoned her father, who slapped Grace in front of the teachers to show them how well he disciplined his children. (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 216)

That Grace’s apparently harmless reaction of hilarity elicits an aggressive response from her indoctrinated Christian father clearly suggests that her laughter conceals a form of menace. Crucially, this episode seems to act as a metaphorical illustration of the colonial encounter as a whole in “The Headstrong Historian”, in which peaceful resistance is almost systematically countered with brutality, such as when an entire village is razed by the colonizer because its elders “refused to place their thumbs on a paper” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 204).

This uncalled-for unleashing of savagery is later condemned by Grace who, as an adult, writes a historical book called *Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria*. As Mikailu and Wattenberg have correctly observed, this title “implies violence”,<sup>58</sup> but I believe that it also holds the key to many of the story’s most significant self-reflexive insights. The oxymoronic first part of the title obviously denounces the barbarity of the colonizer’s ‘civilizing’ mission, but it conceals additional undertones, which become apparent when the opening phrase is read in conjunction with the subtitle. Putting the two fragments side by side, one is indeed able to recognize the title’s “polyphon[ic]” nature, that is, to assert the co-existence of a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses”<sup>59</sup> in its different components. On the one hand, the term “pacification” – whether borrowed from the title of the District Commissioner’s book in *Things Fall Apart* or from the administrator’s chapter in “The Headstrong Historian” – clearly evokes the voice of the colonizer, who was also actively engaged in this act of “pacifying”. On the other hand, the need to “reclaim” local history is expressed by the postcolonial Nigerian subject, who is the agent of this gesture of repossession. This shift of perspective and agency may indicate that, even though the history of Nigeria inevitably involves dissonance, the formerly colonized have – legitimately, as suggested by the semantics of the verb “reclaim” – taken the reins of their own national narrative.

In putting the story of this reappropriation in writing, Adichie seems to be as much of a “headstrong historian” as the actual scholar in her story, Grace.<sup>60</sup> This possible parallel between the writer and her fictional character is reinforced by intriguing biographical analogies. For example, Grace “change[s] her degree from chemistry to

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<sup>58</sup> Mikailu/Wattenberg, “‘My Name Will Not Be Lost’” (unpublished essay).

<sup>59</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Minneapolis 1984, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Mikailu/Wattenberg, “‘My Name Will Not Be Lost’” (unpublished essay).

history” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 216), reminding one of Adichie’s own reorientation from medical science to the humanities while at university. Moreover, at the end of the story, the character “officially change[s] her first name from Grace to Afamefuna” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 218), the Igbo name that her grandmother had given her.<sup>61</sup> This fact may echo Adichie’s decision to stop writing under the Americanized ‘Amanda N. Adichie’ to adopt the full Igbo version of her name, ‘Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’.

Beyond the anecdotal, such correspondences appear to underscore the interlocked nature of the functions of the artist and the historian. For instance, Grace’s work for “international organizations” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 218), which consists in reporting on “commonsense things for which she nevertheless received generous pay” (ibid.) is strongly reminiscent of Adichie’s own worldwide advocacy for the respect of African cultures. The crux of the matter is that, in “The Headstrong Historian”, the eponymous figure’s task is not limited to retrieving ‘objective’ facts; rather, her job consists in addressing the historical imbalance of power by providing new perspectives which illuminate the past and help to work towards a better future. This definition of the historian’s mission approximates the role traditionally assigned to the more ‘subjective’ artist, especially the writer – a link further evidenced in the subtitle of Grace’s book, *A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria*, where the indefinite article suggests that her version of history is only one among others, just like the creative author’s work merely provides one perspective among many possible.<sup>62</sup>

This complex network of connections between art and history ultimately informs the story’s metafictional agenda. In her self-conscious exploration of the potential of literature, Adichie again draws on Achebe’s first novel or, more accurately, she picks up where the older writer left off. At the end of *Things Fall Apart*, the narrative is suddenly taken over by the voice of the District Commissioner, who decides to include the events around Okonkwo’s death in his book on *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*:

The story of this man [Okonkwo] [...] would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 147-148)

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<sup>61</sup> The meaning of “Afamefuna” – “My Name Will Not Be Lost” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 214) – leaves no doubt as to the significance of the character’s decision. Considering the religious connotations of the name “Grace” – which literally refers to divine influence – one might even contend that the heroine’s gesture challenges the power of Christianity itself.

<sup>62</sup> Even if I mainly argue here that the figures of the historian and the artist are combined in the character of Grace, the same could be said, to a certain extent, of her grandmother. Indeed, while Grace may incarnate the ‘historian as artist’, the “headstrong” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 199) Nwamgba may well embody the ‘artist as historian’. Although she does not formally carry out either of these functions, her “pottery” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 198) and “poetry and [...] stories” (Adichie, “The Headstrong Historian”, 215) facilitate the transmission of her people’s cultural heritage, much in the same way as her granddaughter’s historiographical work.

The Commissioner's wish to pack the novel which the reader is about to put down into a single chapter, or even a short paragraph, points to the colonizer's reductive vision of Africa.<sup>63</sup> Achebe's rather depressing conclusion is subverted in "The Headstrong Historian", in which it is the District Commissioner's entire work which has been reduced to a "chapter" (Adichie, "The Headstrong Historian", 215) in one of Grace's textbooks. Counterbalancing this optimistic touch of irony, however, is the fact that Grace is still made to learn the history of her own people from the administrator's point of view. Similarly, other elements testify to the enduring presence of mental colonization in the postcolonial world – for example, a Nigerian character is "appalled that African history [can] even be considered a subject" (Adichie, "The Headstrong Historian", 216), while Grace's husband George tells her that "she [i]s misguided to write about primitive culture" (Adichie, "The Headstrong Historian", 217).

These allusions within the text to the persistence of the colonial spirit justify the existence of the short story itself, not only as a *historical* corrective, but also as a *fictional* piece. The role of literature is indeed addressed, albeit indirectly, in the final pages of the story, which may be considered an oblique response to the ending of *Things Fall Apart*. In a gesture that rewrites Achebe's gloomy prediction about the future of the Igbo, "The Headstrong Historian" ends with a "rhetorical ascension" (Mikailu/Wattenberg) that anticipates Grace's future life and achievements as a historian. Following this long passage, in which the words "It was Grace who" are repeated twelve times, the story suddenly returns to the moment when Grace, still a teenager, is attending to her dying grandmother:

But on that day as she sat at her grandmother's bedside in the fading evening light, Grace was not contemplating her future. She simply held her grandmother's hand, the palm thickened from years of making pottery.  
(Adichie, "The Headstrong Historian", 218)

While the characters' interlocking hands may symbolize the passage from one generation to the next, or even the connection between the past and the future, the description of Grace's loving gesture also lends itself to a metafictional interpretation. Indeed, having foreseen the character's future and her influence on the macrohistorical level, the narrative backtracks to describe a small but meaningful gesture of affection, as if to intimate that all of literature's visionary insights are grounded in the microhistorical, and must necessarily start in the present – a time which also carries traces of the past, just like Nwamgba's hands. It may therefore be argued that, if Adichie's optimistic stance partly stems from a belief in her historian character's ability to improve the future, the author's tentative hopefulness is above all a testimony to the power of fiction to impart emotional understanding.

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<sup>63</sup> Franklin, "Things Come Together", in: *New Republic*, 55.



Like other writers interested in the fictionalization of history, Adichie seems to be suggesting that one should look (in)to the future without losing sight of the past. The author follows this very adage by creatively appropriating the work of Chinua Achebe, whether intentionally, as in “The Headstrong Historian”, or unconsciously, as in *Purple Hibiscus*. Hers is not an attempt to copy the older novelist, or to ‘write back’ to him as first-generation postcolonial authors did to the English canon, but rather to write *beyond* Achebe, that is, to convey an original artistic vision suffused with echoes of the literary past. Importantly, Adichie’s engagement with Achebe demonstrates that novelty does not necessarily lie in thematic innovation. As the younger writer has put it herself, “Many of the stories we tell have already been told. It is the freshness we bring to the re-telling that matters” (“Hibiscus Blooming”). In this essay, I have attempted to show that this “freshness” in the “re-telling” of stories pervades Adichie’s writing, and especially “The Headstrong Historian”, in which she wittily recasts Achebean elements in a non-confrontational – but nevertheless incisive – manner to reassess gender values, comment on contemporary religious practices and interrogate her own role as writer-cum-historian. If one may advance Adichie’s return to tropes and subject matters explored by Achebe to justify her being called the latter’s “twenty-first-century daughter”, then one must at least acknowledge that this particular offspring is a bold, strong-minded one.

While this article has hopefully contributed to mapping out the literary relationship between Achebe and Adichie, its coda should nevertheless point to some of the issues that still need to be addressed. The attentive reader will no doubt have noticed that, after using adaptation theory to unravel the mechanisms informing the reception of *Purple Hibiscus*, this essay has returned to the theories proposed by Hutcheon or Sanders on only three brief occasions in its extensive comparison of Achebe’s works and Adichie’s “The Headstrong Historian”. This has been the case for one precise reason: while adaptation and appropriation studies provide stimulating frameworks of investigation into such aspects as medium transposition or paratextual factors, the specificity of the discipline’s method of *textual* analysis is not so clearly defined. How, for example, is Julie Sanders’s interesting analysis of adaptation and appropriation different from any other examination of intertextuality? Does the distinctness of her study not lie more in its *object* than in its *methods*? Similarly, is it a coincidence if Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* successively scrutinizes the “forms”, “adapters”, “audiences” and “contexts” of adaptations, but not their *content*? Where, in sum, does the contribution of adaptation theory lie when, rather than emphasize form-related or context-informed aspects, it tackles content-based elements such as the recasting of a particular scene, theme or character?

The above remark should not be seen as an indictment of adaptation studies – indeed, it is rather striking that the other obvious candidate for the examination of appropriation in African fiction, namely postcolonial theory, does not seem to offer any ready-made analytical models for cases such as those explored in this essay,

either. While it is true that some notions developed in postcolonial studies – including the contrasts and interactions between the colonizer and the colonized – prove helpful when comparing texts that deal with Africa's past, the discipline does not seem equipped to approach source texts and rewritings whose relationship lies outside, or even beyond, the colonial/postcolonial dichotomy described by Ashcroft et al. in their influential (but by now perhaps slightly dated) *The Empire Writes Back*.<sup>64</sup> However, rather than bemoaning the inescapable fact that critics always lag behind creative writers, let us – with an Adichiean twist of optimism – look forward to the many exciting challenges that still lie ahead in our study of postcolonial adaptation and appropriation.

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<sup>64</sup> Ashcroft, Bill/Griffiths, Gareth/Tiffin, Helen, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London 2002.

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