

Loving and Leaving:  
The Ethics of Postcolonial Pain in  
Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*  
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Taking as a starting point her brother's act of defiance against their father, the fourteen-year-old first-person narrator of Chimamanda Adichie's 2003 debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* begins her story with the following declaration: "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" (3). Most critics have noted that the opening line of Adichie's narrative is a tribute to that seminal text of modern African literature in English, Chinua Achebe's 1957 novel *Things Fall Apart*. As *Purple Hibiscus* unfolds, it becomes clear that her narrator's first announcement is not the young novelist's lone nod to the mastery of Achebe's iconic work.<sup>1</sup> *Purple Hibiscus* draws on *Things Fall Apart* in ways that speak to the foundational categories of postcolonial diaspora, yet in so far as its more immediate intellectual and political frame is concerned, the novel stands at a respectful distance from its prominent predecessor. In keeping with this observation, I argue that for the purposes of understanding the current occasion in postcolonial African literature, it is valuable to consider Adichie's intimate engagement with a closer contemporary such as Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1989 *Nervous Conditions*. While this essay generates a conversation between three debut novels—*Things Fall Apart*, *Nervous Conditions*, and *Purple Hibiscus*—I first show how it is precisely from amidst the involved intimacies of the latter two texts that we can glean new insight into how young African intellectuals such as Adichie are re-visioning earlier understandings of postcolonial displacement and difference.

Susan Andrade argues that "[t]he history of the novel in Africa offers repeated examples of a triangulation that joins two female writers to each

other and to the politics of their times” (92). In so far as Andrade brings into conversation the work of Achebe, Dangarembga, and Adichie, my essay draws on and extends her excellent observations, and I am particularly indebted to her insights in relation to the structural similarities between *Nervous Conditions* and *Purple Hibiscus*.<sup>2</sup> However, whereas Andrade shows that *Purple Hibiscus* articulates the relations between national, familial, and gender politics more sharply than does *Nervous Conditions*, I demonstrate that in terms of the shift from the margins to the centre that postcolonial displacement often follows, Adichie’s novel marks a significant departure from its earlier counterpart. Both *Purple Hibiscus* and *Nervous Conditions* are unambiguously impelled by a concern with the formation of women as postcolonial African intellectuals. As coming of age first-person narratives, both novels investigate the effect of strong, even despotic, patriarchs on the structures of family, while also revealing the ways in which the tyranny of such figures functions as a refracting surface for modern regimes of discipline put in place by colonial masters and, more recently, the allegedly pre-modern violence of dictators empowered by puppet regimes. In both texts, the young narrator emerges as a critically aware woman with the ability to tell her story; in the case of *Nervous Conditions*, however, Dangarembga exposes the “situational ideology of the affirmative *Bildungsroman*, and the racist and sexist stereotypes that portray the educated African woman as an anomaly” (Slaughter 238). At the end of the novel, there is a diegetic division between Tambudzai the narrator and Tambudzai the actor, and thus the formulation of *Bildung* involves not the synthesis, but rather the separation, of narrator-protagonist. Despite the similarities between the novels, such a fission is not at the forefront of *Purple Hibiscus*. Indeed, I argue that the way Adichie’s narrator reconceptualizes the material effects of fission—or, more specifically, of postcolonial difference—charts an intellectual and political trajectory that differs from the one Dangarembga’s protagonist must follow.

### The Condition of Native

*Nervous Conditions* and *Purple Hibiscus* are so close in terms of their intellectual and political compulsions that the delicate filigree of char-

acters and events, as well as the topographies of which these characters are a part, can be almost synchronically mapped on to each other. The first novel is narrated by Tambudzai, a young teenager who begins her story, like Kambili of *Purple Hibiscus*, with a reference to her brother. Raised on her family's homestead, Tambu initially comes into being as a classic figuration of the postcolonial subject. She is described through a semiotics of colonialism that constitute her as an integral part of a transitional terrain caught between pastoral signifiers such as the "river, the trees, the fruit and the fields" and metropolitan invasions such as "Fanta and Coca-Cola . . . a gramophone . . . a beer hall" (Dangarembga 3–4). When at her rural home, Tambu is framed by the cattle kraal and positioned against a backdrop of the termite-infested *dara* from which she must fetch water; she is suffocated by the smell of blood when, having quieted a stridently protesting bird, she pours boiling water over the headless creature to loosen its feathers before preparing a special meal for her family. The idyllic constellation of river-tree-fruit-fields quickly becomes peripheral in relation to the gross animal processes of Tambu's everyday chores, just as it recedes in the face of the impinging mantras of the metropole: Fanta-Coca-Cola-gramophone-beer hall (although the pressure of this last constellation only makes a substantial dent on Tambu's life when she moves away from the homestead).

As these markers of space trespass upon each other and struggle to dominate the spatial coordinates of the narrative, Tambu also changes in the face of her approaching pubescence. While she is an ebullient dancer as a child, Tambu's movements soon grow "stronger, more rhythmical, and luxuriant" (42). Her audience, alas, is no longer entertained and, made aware of the sexual implications of her undulating curves, Tambu compresses her dancing into rigid, tentative gestures. She worries that she will grow "so big" as to have to wash with the women rather than "swim [with her friends] in the deeper, cooler, more interesting pools" (7). Mired in the fleshly squalor of a daily existence on the farm—aphoristically punctuated by a keen awareness of her own bodily transformations and the relationship of these changes to other bodies in her vicinity—Tambu dreams of educating herself. For Tambu, education may suggest the possibility of extricating herself from a banal corporal-

ity, but more significantly, it offers a means of inserting herself into the grand enlightenment designs of progress and emancipation and aspiring towards a world-historical subjectivity endowed with transcendent consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

Tambu is aware that when her brother Nhamo returns from the school at the mission where the children's uncle is headmaster, he bears marks of a sea change on his very person:

He had added several inches to his height and many to his width, so that he was not little and scrawny anymore but fit and muscular. Vitamins had nourished his skin to a shiny smoothness, several tones lighter in complexion than it used to be. His hair was no longer arranged in rows of dusty, wild cucumber tufts but was black, shiny with oil and smoothly combed. (52)

Despite noting this somatic metamorphosis in her brother, however, Tambu is far more attuned to the extra-corporal and therefore metaphysical effects that education has had on her uncle Babamukuru. Not only did he excel as the protégé of an early band of missionaries and receive a scholarship to study in England but, more importantly, "Babamukuru was God" (70), and he "stoically accepted his divinity" so much that, "filled with awe," everyone around him "accepted it too. [They] used to marvel at how benevolent that divinity was. Babamukuru was good. [They] all agreed on this" (88). More significantly still, Babamukuru was always right about everything. Initially, wanting nothing more than to follow in the footsteps of her deific uncle, Tambu aspires to a selfhood framed by the cognates that constitute her uncle: "goodness-stoicism-righteousness." Yet as she grows accustomed to the kind of instruction that Babamukuru has received, the narrative increasingly emphasizes the relationship between a modern Western—and admittedly Christian—education and the very banal corporality that education promises to erase.

It is only when Nhamo suddenly dies while a young student at the same mission school and her uncle intervenes to lift her from her immediate surroundings that Tambu is afforded an opportunity otherwise unavailable to the girl-child of a family strapped by its circumstances. After

Nhamo's untimely death, Babamukuru, the oldest male in his generation of the extended family, ordains that Tambu take her brother's place at the school; it is in reference to this decree that Tambu announces at the novel's opening, "I was not sorry when my brother died" (1). Given the opportunity to school herself—and in the early part of the narrative, such schooling signals the making of an emancipated Self endowed with a universal consciousness—Tambu must undergo a process of progressive expatriation, liberating herself from the clutches of the homestead to go first to the mission school and finally to a convent, even further removed from what used to be "home."

When she comes to live with her uncle and his family in the intermediate space between the convent and the homestead, Tambu's cousin Nyasha demonstrates for her that the civilizing process, which began in early modern Europe and became increasingly universalized with the spread of capitalism, the emergence of the nation-state, and the influence of colonialisms, is not restricted to large-scale macro-political processes or metaphysical formations of world-historical consciousnesses.<sup>4</sup> Rather, as a kind of somato-power, it impinges on the minutest details of daily life: on mannered practices, codes of behaviour, and—perhaps most viscerally—on physical experiences such as "the management of bodily effusions and the evacuation of waste" (Jeyifo 608). Thus, before she can be led to the elevated heights of Enid Blyton, the Brontë sisters, and Louisa M. Alcott, Tambu must first learn to use cutlery to dine at a glossy table, train herself to abhor the most invisible specks of dirt, and learn to sit rather than squat on a paneled toilet, facing away from the cistern rather than toward it.

Nyasha introduces Tambu most viscerally to what, following Michel Foucault, we may call those technologies of discipline that make their object the human body, constituting the individual as an effect of normalized manners, trained gestures, and regulated processes of everyday life. Nyasha also views the body as a site of resistance. That is to say, if for Foucault—undoubtedly the most searching genealogist of what is today known as "bio-power" or "somato-power"—the diffuse and nebulous circulations of such power entrap the subject and produce docility, then Nyasha treads a precariously fine line between acknowledging how

she herself is an effect of the micro-politics of power and continually transgressing that very line.<sup>5</sup> When Tambu begins to menstruate, Nyasha offers her younger cousin a tampon, on the one hand training her away from the mess of washable and recyclable rags women use at the home-stead, while on the other demonstrating how such training can turn upon itself.<sup>6</sup> After all, “tampons were offensive [and] nice girls did not use them,” but as Nyasha points out, Tambu “is better off losing [her] virginity to a tampon which wouldn’t gloat over its achievement, than to a man who would add [hers] to his hoard of hymens” (Dangarembga 97).

Always precariously balanced on the brink and preventing herself from growing into a “good woman” such that she is forced to leave behind the “intelligent girl” (89), Nyasha continually tests the bounds of propriety by wearing short dresses, smoking cigarettes, going dancing, and, when forced to eat, “gagging and choking” to maintain as much control over her body as possible (193). Indeed, while her father emerges more and more surely as the exemplar of “a good boy, a good munt . . . [,] a bloody good kaffir” and at the same time accepts his divinity vis-à-vis his backward brethren, thus placing himself firmly on a ladder of relayed power relations, Nyasha’s rebellion more elementally addresses itself to the corporeal effects of the colonizing process (204). In this context, it is significant that Nyasha’s voracious appetite for the study of political and historical questions is made clear early in the text; she demonstrates an interest in “the condition in South Africa,” the “Nazis and Japanese and Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” and the “Jews’ claim to Palestine” (94–95). Her appetite, however, culminates in a *kamikazi* “shredding of [her] history book between her teeth . . . and [a] jabbing [of] the fragments viciously into her flesh” as she documents both on and through her body her response to the way in which modern colonial technologies of discipline, while promising to cultivate traditions of the mind, simultaneously urbanize and sanitize the body as a suitable cognate for such a mind (205). Indeed, as Ann Elizabeth Willey notes, Tambu’s adult narration is also an effect of these processes of regulation: “while Tambu develops the voice and technologies to tell the story of the women around her, her own body seems to disappear, covered over by the technology of writing” (80).

### Breaking the Gods

Ostensibly far away from such an engagement with power, in the city of Enugu nestled in the valleys of the Milliken hills in Eastern Nigeria, Kambili Achike, the teenage narrator of *Purple Hibiscus*, is—along with her brother Jaja, her mother, Beatrice, and her devoutly Catholic, if draconian, father Eugene—closeted away behind high walls topped with electric wire. Political unrest and violence rage outside. Unlike Tambu, Kambili is shrouded in plush surroundings: dense velvet Persian rugs on stretches of gleaming marble floor; silky silences at grace before meal time; soft, safe blankets; and a sense of eternity created by a décor in which shades of cream are barely distinguishable from one another. “The softness, the creaminess, the endlessness” engender a space for Kambili that she describes as “never [ending], as if you could not run even if you wanted to, because there was nowhere to run to” (Adichie 41). In so far as she briefly observes that there is nowhere to run from the terrifying security of such splendid surroundings, Kambili demonstrates that she does not know a possible world outside her home. Yet she also extricates herself from any desire to “run” toward such a possible world by articulating her passing observation with the second rather than the first-person pronoun: “*You* could not run even if *you* wanted to” she declares rather than “*I* could not run even if *I* wanted to” (Adichie 41, emphasis added).

To be sure, Kambili—at least in the early stages of the novel—is largely harmonized with the taut magnificence of her immediate context. She dwells in a condition of fullness and immediacy; she is unmoved by absence and loss, unperturbed by the irreconcilable gap between self and other, and undisturbed by the irredeemable distance between home and world. For instance, Kambili understands time only in and through the structured schedule her father has drawn up for her everyday activities; her life is so rigidly routinized that she is unable to react in any significant way to even the most meaningful events. Unlike Tambu, whose ebullient body catches the attention of those around her and only later is reined in by disciplinary instruments, the contours of Kambili’s pubescent frame are forced into conformity with the starkly even, carefully folded edges of her school uniform. Most notably, Eugene Achike

habitually beats his wife and children, and Kambili is aware of her body only in so far as it is a tangible mass that must bear ostentatious pain at the hands of her father in order to, paradoxically enough, beget a soul the patriarch will deem worthy of love. In keeping with this paradox, Eugene Achike's methods of inflicting punishment on bodies are monstrously flamboyant, and such flamboyance is only heightened in the schizophrenic professions of love and tenderness that immediately follow each brutal chastisement.

When he finds that Kambili has, with her mother's and brother's help, broken the Eucharist Fast to stave off cramps from her menstrual period, he ritualistically unbuckles his heavy, layered belt with its "sedate leather-covered buckle" and "with a switch, each smack of the switch swift and precise," lands the weapon on his son's shoulder, his wife's upper arm, and his daughter's back (102). Short, spasmodic, fitful outbursts—which the narrative consistently develops as expressions of tenderness—follow as Eugene Achike, "face crumpled . . . eyelids sagged" crushes his children to his body, asking, "Why do you walk into sin? . . . Why do you like sin? . . . Did the belt hurt you? Did it break your skin?" (102). According to Eugene Achike, the signatures of pain left on Kambili's body are markers of sin, but they are also, in his twisted view, markers of his love for her. Kambili's self-liberation from this understanding of the relationship between pain and love is precisely how she comes of age and discovers "a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup" (16).<sup>7</sup> Much like Kambili, Dangarembga's Tambu promises to tell a story of her escape from entrapment. Similarly, her escape is based on a new understanding of the relationship between love and pain—specifically, the pain of expatriation.<sup>8</sup>

These similarities notwithstanding, there is a radical difference between the displacements that bring Kambili to her awareness as a critical thinker and those that form Tambu as a postcolonial intellectual in her own right. Just as Tambu traverses the distance between homestead, mission, and convent in a fairly fluid motion, Kambili—albeit in a critically different direction—moves between her home in Enugu, the family's equally luxurious country house in Abba, and her aunt Ifeoma's modest but boister-

ous flat on a university campus in Nsukka. When she is first transported to Nsukka, Kambili's senses are immediately energized by the stark difference of the space from what she quickly comes to recognize as the lifeless lushness of her father's mansions—an inanimate splendour that closets spectacular displays of pre-modern punishment behind innocuous and diffuse technologies of modern discipline. At the flat on Marguerite Cartwright Avenue, Kambili and her brother walk into a space where ideas of "modern" and "pre-modern" cannot be kept apart. Kambili and her brother are overwhelmed by a wealth of unadulterated sensual experiences: fumes of kerosene waft around deep purple onions in the curry, bright blue kitchen tiles chipped at the corners blend with low ceilings so intimate that one can almost touch them, and the rhythmic rise and fall of heated arguments contaminates throaty, cackling, enthusiastic laughter that "bounc[es] around all the walls, all the rooms" (140).

In this space, Kambili experiences a radical interruption to the earlier fullness of her being in relation to its dwelling. She quietly notes to herself: "It felt as if my shadow were visiting Auntie Ifeoma and her family while the real me was studying in my room in Enugu, my schedule posted above me" (125). The rift between her shadow and her "real" self is a moment of transition for the protagonist of Adichie's story. It echoes Tambu's lone moment of resistance in *Nervous Conditions*, in which her rebellion against Babamukuru's authority is figured as a moment in which her composite self splits into two severed entities: "the body on the bed" and "the mobile, alert me" who "had gone somewhere he could not reach me" (Dangaremba 168). While in Tambu's case bodily decomposition gives her escape from the tyranny of her uncle, the "real" Kambili's separation from her shadow is a masochistic return to the dictator. Although Kambili is at Nsukka, she tells herself that it seems as if her real self is back at Enugu and only her shadow is in Nsukka. The ghost of herself that Kambili conjures up comes into proximity with the most animalistic, primeval of daily life processes as they unfold in Auntie Ifeoma's flat, and it is in these processes that the spectre is increasingly, and paradoxically, corporalized. The scene that perhaps most elementally communicates this shows Kambili urinating in the bathroom of her aunt's flat and then finding that she is unable to flush:

Our water runs only in the morning *o di egwu*. So we don't flush when we urinate, only when there is actually something to flush. Or sometimes, when the water does not run for a few days, we just close the lid until everybody has gone and then we flush with one bucket. It saves water. Aunty Ifeoma was smiling ruefully. (Adichie 121)

Soon after, Kambili dreams that her cousin Amaka has submerged her, head first, in a toilet bowl overflowing with greenish brown lumps. The bowl expands in her dream, and her whole body sinks into the mire, with Amaka chanting, "Flush, flush, flush" and the narrator "struggl[ing] to break free" (126). Despite its dream-like insubstantiality, the shadowy part of herself that Kambili relegates to her aunt's flat is thus made one—and wholly so, for the toilet in her dream swallows the entire mass of her flesh—with precisely those bodily excretions that ground us most forcefully in our materiality. In fact, I argue that the struggle to break free highlighted in this scene is already, or at least becomes in retrospect, erotically charged; as the narrative develops, Kambili's growing intimacy with her newfound family, as well as with her own body, is closely tied to her involvement in handling waste and, more broadly, to her attraction to the materiality of household duties.

For instance, Kambili watches spell-bound "the measured movement of [Amaka's] hand and the increasing length of the peel" as her cousin expertly sheds brown skin, exposing the creamy white insides of a yam and creating as she does so the irresistible impression of "a continuous twirling soil-studded ribbon" (134). Similarly, when her brother Jaja prepares to kill a chicken, holding the bird's wings down under his foot, knife glinting and meeting the sun's rays to give off sparks, Kambili's ardour is unmistakable. She looks away as Jaja slits the bird's feathery throat but is almost hypnotically drawn to the chicken "danc[ing] to the frenzied tunes of death . . . flap[ping] its gray wings in the red mud, twisting and flailing. Finally . . . [lying] in a puff of sullied feathers" (235). In contrast to Amaka's "measured" precision as well as the clinical single-mindedness of Jaja's effort, Kambili's involvement in these events is tenderly erotic. Her heightened erotic involvement in bodily

matter reverses Tambu's developmental trajectory in *Nervous Conditions*. Tambu, in comparison, squashes her erotic sensibilities as she grows into womanhood, learns how to remove herself from the loathsome task of handling waste, and is trained to carefully manage her bodily effusions. Tambu progresses from the squalor of her family's farm, to the shiny surfaces and soft contours of her uncle's home at the mission, and finally to the "geometrically cut stone" and "corridor[s] of creamy white roses" at the College of the Sacred Heart (Dangarembga 197), while Kambili moves away from the endless creaminess of her father's house. As Kambili's narrative arcs toward its severe climax, the erotic sensuousness that replaces the luxury of her youth congeals in the boyish figure of Father Amadi. The young priest is an intimate friend of her aunt's family and someone whose proximity serves as an important conduit for the young narrator's rising awareness of a relationship between love and pain that both differs from the one she had known in her father's home and that which Tambu recognizes as she comes of age.

### **An Ethics of Love**

Almost sacrilegiously different from other priests she has known "in an open-neck T-shirt and jeans faded so much [Kambili] could not tell if they had been black or dark blue," Father Amadi becomes an erotic part of Kambili's imaginative universe as soon as she meets him (Adichie 135). The aching she experiences in relation to the priest is initially a manifestation of the void that exists between her need to confess her feelings for him and her complete inability to focus on her sins when she is proximate with this priestly gallant. Yet as the music of his voice pulses in her ears, the clean scent of his cologne penetrates deep into her lungs, and the light in his eyes pierces every nerve of her flesh, the torment of Kambili's yearning becomes more and more deliciously blissful. Her swelling ardour means that love is precisely such an expression of the body in its relation to "other" bodies, and it is this kind of otherness or the rift of difference that is foundational to pain. In other words, difference or otherness is in fact pain. But it is the kind of pain that without being realized on the body is constitutive of the bodies it keeps asunder; it actually makes these bodies, creates them, and calls them into being.

Thus, it is also, at one and the same time, love. For instance, when Father Amadi asks Kambili whether she loves the Lord, the two are alone in a football stadium; startled, she responds, “Yes. Yes, I love Jesus” (176). Suddenly, her priestly paramour dashes off in a flash of blue, looks back at her, and says to her as he runs, “Then show me. Try and catch me, show me you love Jesus” (176). Here, love is inseparable from the pain of distance as Kambili runs toward the escaping figure. It is the middle or the in between that draws Kambili and the priest toward one another, while still keeping them apart. Despite trying a few times, Kambili is actually unable to catch her priest. Yet when they sit down together after the game is over, it is through Father Amadi’s eyes that Kambili is made aware of her body: her good running legs, her lips and cheeks which crinkle into a smile, and her sweaty hands smeared with lipstick. In *Purple Hibiscus*, then, love is pain as difference and the making of bodies.

It is precisely the making of bodies and keeping them asunder that, in *Purple Hibiscus*, constitutes the relationship between what we have come to know as the implacable opposites of colonial thought:<sup>9</sup> tradition and modernity, darkness and light, self and other, and religion and reason are, in Adichie’s hands, neither kept stringently binarized such that they may only be dialectically resolved nor allowed to settle into a fatal fusion that democratizes all distance and difference on a single plane of sameness. Instead, distinct syntaxes of being are, in the most critically charged situations of the novel, absolutely intimate. They divide themselves cleanly and remain separated, but in their midst, in their between, prevails a difference that is not merely an abstraction extracted from what appear to be irrepressible binaries as their relationship after the fact, that is to say, after they have already been established as binaries. In other words, difference does not merely mediate opposing lines of force through a middle prosthetically added on to them—instead, *being the middle*, it determines black and white, colonizer and colonized, man and woman, and word and deed in their very making, or in what we might call their being toward one another.<sup>10</sup> This conceptualization of difference is what enables Kambili to reverse what is commonly understood as the developmental trajectory of the postcolonial exile. She comes to understand love as an effect of the profound relationship between dif-

ferent worlds rather than as an agonistic struggle between them. It is as an effect of such an understanding of difference that in Auntie Ifeoma's home the "heathen" irreligion of the children's paternal grandfather can co-exist in a penetrative intermingling with the "enlightened" faith of the inhabitants of the flat—an intimacy which is constituted by "pain as difference" precisely because such pain gathers toward itself what is held apart in separation. This understanding of difference is also why in *Nsukka* the airiness of song lends itself to the solemnity of prayer, American fashion magazines and Mexican soap operas cling to indigenous music and ancient folk tales, Igbo is not torn irrevocably apart from English, and religion and reason are simultaneously binarized and borne toward each other in what the syntax of the novel calls love.

While Eugene Achike foregrounds a rather spectacular demonstration of the relationship between love and pain, his expression of this coupling requires that pain be actualized on the body and, therefore, that it be irredeemably torn from an intricate texture of affiliations that may remain un-literalized but nonetheless continue to figuratively pay address to the body. If at *Nsukka*, Kambili learns to understand love as an anguish that sustains the difference between radical others while at the same time engaging these others to itself, folding resistant life practices into one another, and therefore *making them* precisely in their relation to one another, then in Eugene Achike's home which for long is Kambili's dwelling, love is that which subdues such difference. Love is the scar that impresses itself upon the pious body, making the body forfeit to the soul, tearing the two irremediably apart; it is that which restrains a young pubescent man from his sexual awakening; it is the immutable divide between an "intelligent girl" and a "good woman." As Kambili slowly distinguishes the love she learns at her aunt's home from the love that her father espouses, she increasingly moves away from her almost umbilical attachment to her brother Jaja; by the novel's final chapter, she even wonders whether she had "imagined it all" (Adichie 305).<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that Kambili no longer loves Jaja. Rather, the love Kambili discovers at *Nsukka* has little to do with familial ties or conjugal fulfillment. Instead, it has to do with understanding the nature of difference and pain as well as knowing the foundational place

of this particular kind of difference and pain in creating relationalities, in *making* love. It is through such love that Kambili discovers a freedom that can only be defined in its distinction from the freedom publicly celebrated by throngs of citizens; as she observes, “Nsukka could free something deep inside your belly that would rise up to your throat and come out as a freedom song. As laughter” (299).

Tambu also claims to have escaped entrapment, albeit in a manner that marks the rather slippery point at which *Purple Hibiscus* departs from its forbearer. Unlike Kambili who, in traversing the tertiary spaces in the novel, gathers to herself a rich plethora of relationalities, Tambu’s crossing severs ties rather than forges them, precisely because in her making as an expatriate intellectual, she comes to understand love as the very pressure of entrapment. When, with her uncle’s permission, Tambu decides to move further away from her native homestead to the Sacred Heart Convent, her already ailing mother is completely devastated. Tambu knows she can restore her mother’s health by turning down admission at the Convent and staying “home,” but she silences the possibility, saying that “it was asking too much of [her]” (Dangarembga 188). Securing herself to the bonds of love would rein in her progressive emancipation. For Tambu, the distance between her native homestead and the Westernized convent, between tradition and modernity, and between the vernacular and English, is mediated by the tortuous syntax of a continual homelessness and escalating exile, which is also a metonymic signature of the classic early modern occasion of man’s insertion into secular history, or the moment in which he recognized that paternalistic gods do not hover over his earthly aspect and that he has lost an immanent sense of plenitude, a circular totality of being.<sup>12</sup>

Augmenting her belated participation in the narrative of historical progress is the very specific vector of Tambu’s migration, a centrifugal flight from periphery to centre, which by its very existence requires, indeed demands, that she inhabit love as a force which manfully resists the making of the postcolonial artist as a young woman. In fact, it is in re-negotiating this demand that *Purple Hibiscus* plots its withdrawal from the schema of Dangarembga’s novel, for Kambili’s conceptualization of love allows her to radically rethink the distance between those

implacable binaries of colonial violence. Her escape thus disrupts the diasporic direction that has, for at least the last century, dogged the passages of intellectuals from the postcolony. Given Kambili's understanding of love, displacement for her is an immersion rather than an extrication, and therefore it moves in a centripetal rather than centrifugal pattern. That is, in her emergence as a thinking being, Kambili engages herself in erotic sensuousness, whereas Tambu restrains herself from corporeal banality; Kambili moves *inwards* toward precisely those spaces that Tambu must leave behind.<sup>13</sup> If, in reading *Purple Hibiscus*, we were restricted to classic colonial and postcolonial terminology, we would have to determine the "internal," "local" space of Nsukka as a periphery in relation to the central Enugu. In so far as this is true, we could say Kambili merely reverses a well-established cartographic course. Yet *Purple Hibiscus* does not chain us to the familiar mores of postcoloniality as we know it nor does it confine itself to the tortured terrain prepared by a semiotics of colonialism.

Instead, Adichie's is that rare text which clears its domain of categorical opposites such as centre and periphery, thus transforming inward movements toward the native space and outward movements toward metropolitanization into false binaries. Kambili does move inward from her father's house to Nsukka, but she also returns to her father's house, different as that space is after Eugene Achike's death. Unlike Tambu, Kambili does not leave things behind; she is not constituted by the terms of escalating expatriation or the insurmountable differences of opposed worlds. In breaking down the incurable opposites of Western imperial thinking, *Purple Hibiscus* elaborates difference as a void but as a void that innocuously arcs toward those radical elsewhere and others which it exists in holding apart, a void that in this very arcing constitutes self and other, body and soul, and love and pain in their figurative gathering toward one another.

### The Centre Does Not Hold

The image of such a figurative gathering together provides a place to return to the conversation between *Purple Hibiscus* and *Things Fall Apart* that I promised at the beginning of this essay. Adichie draws most pro-

vocatively on the expressive universe of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in her understanding of difference as a *generative* gap and a *constitutive* chasm. More specifically, I argue that in *Things Fall Apart* the celebration of difference and otherness is in fact inherent to pre-contact culture. As just one example of many, such celebrations of difference and otherness mean that, when the men of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* speak of the upside-down customs of a neighbouring tribe, they do so with a warmth that makes those outsiders seem almost cherished for their foreignness. When the Umuofians declare that their unfamiliar neighbours also enjoy their foo-foo, the only difference being that in that tribe, the men pound it for the women, they bawdily imagine that this is perhaps the same as saying that when these people make children, their women lie atop their men. The differences between the two tribes are neither a sign of empty heterogeneity nor a tool for governing populations always already assumed to be irredeemably separated. Instead, it is an arcing middle that bears them tenderly toward one another.

*Things Fall Apart* brings to our attention the delights of being able to distinguish between the many heterogeneous strands—of folktales, dialects, and customary practices—that go into making the multiplicity that is Igbo land. Indeed, the pleasures afforded by the fine divergences between closely aligned but still distinct local contexts are generated by the intricate story-telling skills of one of Achebe's most memorable yet short-lived characters. Ikemefuna, the child who calls Okwonkwo "father," who becomes one of the most beloved members of his household, and who is fated to die a heinous death at Okwonkwo's own hands, is also the same child who makes readers aware that folktales, while often sharing broad structural similarities, are perhaps most richly textured when they are flavoured by the discrete circumstances of their emergence. These delicately yet distinctly different folktales that Ikemefuna narrates give Achebe's work a rich density that is only made further piquant by the tasteful gradations in the Igbo that the characters speak, each so elegantly varied that the variations cause their speakers to gently laugh, not *at*, but *with* one another—just as Ikemefuna's "foreign" stories endear him to, rather than isolate him from, the members of Okwonkwo's household.

In *Things Fall Apart*, such a way of being in the world is the stuff of a pre-colonial reality—something that is irrevocably shattered by the violence of the colonial encounter and the imposition of difference as an abstract tool for governing, managing, and regulating what are constituted as irrepressible binaries in their relation to one another—for instance, the home and the world of tradition and modernity. This is the point at which *Nervous Conditions* enters the conversation, for these binaries are what burden the formation of Dangarembga’s protagonist as a postcolonial woman writer in the making. Tambu *has to be* displaced from her traditional home; she *must* leave behind a part of her formation and she *must* repress her love for her mother in order to emerge as narrator/author. It is a heightening of exile that allows Tambu to achieve maturation so as to write the story of the four women in her life, just as in the face of insurmountable worlds of difference, Okwonkwo must drastically end his life in order to write himself into Achebe’s story. In contrast, Kambili employs a radically anachronistic understanding of difference to critically overturn established patterns of exile and write her story as one of creating love and relationalities rather than one of having to sever them. Within this constellation of the three novels, Adichie’s achievement involves imaginatively recovering a “lost,” indeed apparently inaccessible, world of “difference” as Achebe presents it prior to the encounter between the Igbo and the white man. More importantly, however, the achievement of *Purple Hibiscus* involves Adichie taking the risk of mapping such a conceptualization of difference—without nostalgia—onto her contemporary postcolonial occasion. It is in this sense that the novel actually draws most provocatively on the sumptuous but nuanced heterogeneity—of stories, customs, dialects, and therefore, most notably, of ways of being in the world—that *Things Fall Apart* tells us was the very marker of Igbo land.<sup>14</sup> As she shapes her contemporary occasion in her dialogue with both Achebe’s pre-colonial imaginary and the structural terms of Dangarembga’s novel, Adichie not only rehearses and restages lost worlds of difference but offers new directions for thinking about the shifting semiotics of postcolonialism in an African context.

## Notes

- 1 See Gikandi's "Chinua Achebe and the Invention of Modern African Literature."
- 2 In setting up an exchange between Achebe and Adichie, Andrade discusses the structural similarities between *Things Fall Apart* and Adichie's second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which she argues employs Achebe's novel as a critical point of departure.
- 3 For an elaboration on the intersecting realities of Tambu's two processes of development, "the one she is subject to despite herself (bodily maturation) and the one she actively seeks out (her education)," see Willey's "Modernity, Alienation and Development" (66).
- 4 According to Zwicker's "The Nervous Collusions of Nation and Gender," Dangarembga  

very carefully sets *Nervous Conditions* in the context of the Zimbabwean independence movement. The novel opens in the early 1960s, at the important if also inadequate nationalist stage at which Rhodesia's white minority government was negotiating, and then demanding independence from Britain. . . . [The narrator] Tambudzai's growing self-consciousness coincides with Zimbabwe's emergent national awareness. (9)

For similar arguments about the emergence of nationalist consciousness in colonial Rhodesia, see also Slaughter's *Human Rights Inc.* and Andrade's "Adichie's Genealogies: National and Feminine Novels."
- 5 See p. 186 of Foucault's *Power/Knowledge* for a further elaboration of bio-power and somato-power.
- 6 See Basu's "Trapped and Troping" for an excellent reading of the way in which *Nervous Conditions* details how progress and emancipation are material, bodily processes.
- 7 For an extended analysis of how Adichie's novels show the relation between the domestic unit of the family and the political unit of the nation—and therefore, between the freedom of Kambili and the freedom of the national whole—see Andrade's "Adichie's Genealogies."
- 8 Even though, much like Nyasha of *Nervous Conditions*, Kambili bears the signatures of pain on her body, the former, according to the terms of the narrative, remains trapped, while Kambili and Tambu both find liberation (albeit different kinds).
- 9 See Prakash's "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography."
- 10 For an extended analysis of difference in the way I have elaborated it, see Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought*.
- 11 For an explication of how Nyasha of *Nervous Conditions* and Jaja of *Purple Hibiscus* occupy the same narrative positions in relation to the narrators of the two novels, see Andrade's "Adichie's Genealogies."
- 12 See Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*.

- 13 An argument can be made that although Kambili reverses the diasporic direction that has dogged the intellectual from the postcolony for many decades, her Aunt Ifeoma and cousins actually consolidate that older cartographic course, for they move from Nsukka to America and, in that sense, from the periphery to the imperial center. However, her family's movement is completely unlike the mobility that takes Tambu to the Sacred Heart Mission; in the case of the former, the family is acutely aware that their exile does not necessarily insert them into a narrative of historical progress.
- 14 Like Achebe, Adichie too liberally peppers her English with the "native tongue," rendering language a material bearer of histories of domination rather than a second-order representation of a primary reality. In other words, this Adichie crafts a prose that with an almost ingestible texture and consistency strains at the restrictions of the colonial lexis, bending its resources such that it may shape and express a reality commensurate with what Achebe calls "the peculiar experience" of the African writer (Ogbaa 219). For further discussion of Achebe's use of language, see Ogbaa's "*Things Fall Apart* and the Language Choice Debate."

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