

Never Kill a Man Who Says Nothing:
Things Fall Apart and the
Spoken Worlds of African Fiction
Mrinalini Chakravorty

Abstract: Can the novel, rendering as it does imaginative worlds in written prose, ever adequately capture the expressive oral dimensions of Africa's lived cultures? What violence is incurred in the transcription of oral socialities into written imaginaries? This article reads Chinua Achebe's iconic novel *Things Fall Apart* to argue that the most powerful aspect of Achebe's prose is its multiply signifying oratures. Orature, defined as the fusion of oral and textual narratives, unsettles the idea that oral and written cultures are entirely distinct. Instead, as Achebe's work illustrates, in the African context, orature is the novel. Advancing a theory about orature's exceptional framing for the African novel, the essay proposes that the novel presents alternative oralities, including very differently inflected colonialist, nativist, and gendered oralities. In *Things Fall Apart*, orature marks African encounters with the racially inscribed imperatives of colonial literacy and becomes a mode for rendering a plurality of African cultural postures against colonialism.

It was humiliating to have to speak to one's countrymen in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one's own. . . . Let them come to Umuofia now and listen to the talk of men who made great art of conversation. Let them come and see men and women and children who know how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live.

Chinua Achebe (*No Longer At Ease* 53)

Set on the brink of Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960, Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1969) returns us to the thresholds of a familiar problem faced by the African novel. Can the novel, rendering as it does imaginative worlds in written prose, ever adequately capture the expressive oral dimensions of Africa's lived cultures? What violence is incurred in the transcription of oral socialities into written imaginaries? Obi Okonkwo, a student of literature in London and the grandson of Okonkwo from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959), dwells on the insecurity with which oral cultures anticipate their relations with and entry into scripted postcolonial regimes. Achebe's celebrated first novel details the problems caused by colonial intrusions into Umuofia; the "humiliation" Obi suffers when communicating with fellow Nigerians in English a century later shadows those dysfunctions (*No Longer at Ease* 53). The novels are connected by their shared concerns over the risks and repeat violations that spoken cultures encounter when confronting a colonial modernity articulated exclusively on chirographic registers.¹ Obi's wish that "they"—the English—"come" to Umuofia and "listen" to the "talk of men" for whom "conversation" is itself an "art" and a way of "living" gestures towards an impossible resolution (*No Longer at Ease* 53). Such acts of postcolonial redress are impossible because, as Achebe demonstrates in *Things Fall Apart*, the English have already been to Umuofia and used the ruse of "listening" as an initial tactic to enforce rigidly codified, violent forms of governance.

Still, what Obi desires, and what *Things Fall Apart* addresses, is the need to reconcile Igbo representational habits of orality with the compulsive inscription that accompanies colonial enterprise.² Obi, Achebe's pathetic anti-hero, is charged with corruption as a result of racial persecution. The experience leads him to recognize that just as the use and circulation of various languages indicate relative power relations amongst colonial cultures, so do modes of linguistic expressions index dominance.³ British colonial governance of Nigeria harnesses power and success for the regime by suppressing extemporal, spoken forms of governance amongst the Igbo who take oral discourse as their formative condition for social organization. Whereas colonial power legitimates the idea of control by a remote sovereign by conjoining force with lit-

eracy, Igbo conferences revolve around rites of delivery, performance, and dialogue, making proximity and sociality necessary requisites for the governance of local communities.

This bind between script-driven and spoken cultures that is exacerbated by colonial presence in Africa is signaled by orature, a fusion of oral and written narratives that is, arguably, the most distinctive feature of the African novel.⁴ African novelists such as Achebe grapple with the need to find familiar forms of expression that resonate with indigenous oral practices while acknowledging that, to some extent, these oral forms may already be subsumed under forms of textuality associated with the imposition of colonial control. Because neither oral nor textual discourses are singular, the task of adapting orality to the form of the English novel comprises an especially difficult syncretism, one that Chantal Zabus identifies as a uniquely “African palimpsest” (3, 11). For writers responding to this syncretism, the task is especially vexed and delicate because it must acknowledge the hegemonic role of script culture in post-conquest Africa while also showcasing multiple forms of orality still in circulation. Postcolonial African modernity actualized through the practice of a multiply inflected orature, such as the one Achebe invents, conveys contestatory claims that inhere to both discourses of literacy and orality. Achebe’s orature, which Isidore Okpewho reminds us “emphasizes the oral character of literature” (3–4), thus captures the rift between spoken and graphic representation that is constitutive of, as well as critiqued by, a novel such as *Things Fall Apart*.

Beyond marking the lacunae between spoken and written worlds, the most powerful aspect of Achebe’s orature, I argue, is its ability to unsettle the idea that oral and written cultures are entirely distinct.⁵ Instead, as Achebe’s work illustrates, in the African context, orature *is* the novel. *Things Fall Apart*, therefore, represents many alternative oralities, including the sly appropriation of orality by colonialists, as well as the multiply inflected gendered oralities that are customarily Igbo. In other words, orature evinces the occasion of Africa’s encounter with the racially inscribed imperatives of colonial literacy, while resisting hermeneutic closures that simply align oral cultures with masculinist voices for representing anti-colonial Africa. Moreover, the novel as orature opens

the aesthetic field of the novel itself to the play of dialogism, a play that unsettles the idea that textual representations, at least in the African context, are necessarily always monolithically aligned with colonial force. Over fifty years after its first publication, Achebe's novel remains "a total expression" of the cultural language of African modernity for its syncretism of multi-faceted oral and written registers (Brathwaite 273).⁶ Through its creative use of orature, the novel tackles the polyphony of spoken word (as stutter and stories) expressed ironically within the violent dominance of the written script to suggest the conjoining of radically disparate narrative worlds. In so doing, orature within *Things Fall Apart* assuredly marks the measure of postcolonial African alterity. In the process, the novel itself is repurposed as a material conduit for primarily oral worlds.⁷

The African Novel: Counter-Modern Storytelling

In the second volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol offer a radically new conception of orality as a ubiquitous counter-practice to modernity. Orality, they suggest, arises from within modern social structures to create a symbolic order of otherness to modernity's dominant textual orthographies. de Certeau, Giard, and Mayol argue that orality, by its assumed "naturalness," lingers beside the predominant technologies of writing, information, and knowledge that produce the modern individual subject's relation to history (253). Practices of orality, these social theorists maintain, motivate all social contact, and continually evoke the space and attachments of community, relationships to the other, and an ethic of reciprocity in action that tests the limits of what is permissible in a modernity obsessed with recording individual triumphs and violent trespasses as history proper.⁸

"Orality," according to de Certeau, Girard, and Mayol, "is everywhere, because *conversation* insinuates itself everywhere" (253; emphasis in original). Lurking surreptitiously under the structured edifices of modern existence, oral practices, however precarious and transitory, generate alternate scenes of social interactions that are otherwise routinely obfuscated. It is in these ephemeral, undocumented moments when

“social exchange demands a correlation of gestures and bodies, a presence of bodies, a presence of voices and accents, marks of breathing and passions,” de Certeau, Giard, and Mayol write that “orality demands the recognition of its rights . . . because . . . the oral has a founding relation to the other” and because “orality also constitutes the essential space of community” (251–52).

For de Certeau and his co-authors orality as an alternative that is constant yet perpetually undermined in modern, textually-inflected consumer culture is designated as a “practice” because “it is a way of operating” that is predicated on “the non-autonomy of its field of action” (de Certeau, Giard, and Mayol 21). That is, this practice as such is always subject to usurpation by textual fields but simultaneously thrives in alternate registers. Orality thus circulates haltingly and frequently re-invents itself in fragments that allow for disparate and ever changing loci for resisting its total incorporation within dominant social orders. This sense of orality as a practice that is damaged by scriptive modernity while remaining self-repairing is reflected in the orature of *Things Fall Apart*.

It is important to note that, for Achebe and others, the synergism of orature—its discursive bends inside and outside text⁹—allows it to approximate the paradoxes of the novel’s prominence in postcolonial Africa. The novel becomes the site of a unique play of representational worlds that both instantiates the terms of power in postcolonial Africa and enables a new interplay between elusive and antagonistic symbolic orders. “The African novel” whose “existence” Achebe insists he “has no doubt at all about” is the site of a new aesthetics of the oral for querying the claims to colonial and postcolonial relations of power routinely made on the basis of textual assertions (*Hopes* 99).¹⁰

Much has been made of Achebe’s dispute with Ngugi wa Thiong’o over the continued relevance of English for representing the African struggle against a violent modernity.¹¹ Yet both Achebe and Ngugi return unquestionably to the novel as a politically expeditious form of African protest against the ethos of a colonial inheritance that persistently champions individuality, progress, and capitalism as benchmarks of success in the postcolony. Whether writing in Gikuyu as Ngugi has

committed to doing or advocating fiercely for Africa's claim to English as Achebe does, both see the novel as a useful instrument for recasting the extent of modernity's influence in Africa. Their respective work points to the postcolonial African novel's provenance in orature, which rubs decidedly against the grain of textual representation to which the Western novel is committed.¹² As Ngugi maintains, "The African novel as an extended narrative in form had antecedents in African oral literature" (69).

That Achebe and Ngugi hold fast to the novel may seem surprising given their oft-cited contentions over the future orientation of African literature. What is evident in the case each makes for the novel, however, is the degree to which they refashion this most prescriptively textual of aesthetic forms towards the oral. For Ngugi, for example, the success of his Gikuyu novel comes from its proximity to oral practices that fall outside the kinds of cultural contact warranted for books in print. He writes of the raucous read-aloud jams during lunch hours and in bars prompted by its publication: "The process I am describing is really the appropriation of the novel into the oral tradition. *Caitani Mutharabaini (Devil on the Cross)* was received into the age-old tradition of storytelling around the fireside; and the tradition of group reception of art that enhances the aesthetic pleasure and provokes interpretation, comments and discussions" (83). In this account, the African novel catalyzes a sense of a counter-modern community that recasts the novel as intrinsic to the formation of a new *socius* that comes together because of the convergence of oral and textual practices. The scenes of pleasure, sociality, and interlocution Ngugi describes co-opt the novel into recreating the "essential space of community" that de Certeau identifies with orality.

The novel, as Achebe and Ngugi suggest, is culturally assimilated through an oratory impulse that reconvenes that profound scene of storytelling by the "fireside" which is the hallmark of oral cultures (Ngugi 83). The circulation of the novel as a communal artifact in specific oral contexts, along with its textual orality, is what pits it against the "notion of proprietorship" (Achebe, *Hopes* 48) that Achebe identifies with a "will to ownership" allied distinctively with the commodity form of the bour-

geois colonial novel (*Hopes* 49).¹³ As Zabus notes, despite the novel's ties to a European bourgeois culture that has historically effaced collective participation in favor of individual expression, if read as a cultural palimpsest, the novel can also be seen as the inevitable offspring of the oral art or "orature" of Africa (5). Indeed, she suggests that orature is an intrinsic aspect of African novels; novels, in other words, are mere textual prisms for orality itself. The African novel, in this sense, inexorably points to submerged postcolonial identifications with spoken word communities that are radically at odds with those "malignant fictions" of modernity that impel book cultures so absolutely toward individuation and capital (Achebe, *Hopes* 148).¹⁴ An African worlding of the novel, premised on such dialogic oral exchanges, has the capacity to reorient claims of authorship and belonging in stories even when they are written down. "The story told by the fireside," Achebe reminds us, "does not belong to the storyteller once he has let it out of his mouth. But the story composed by his spiritual descendant, the writer in his study, 'belongs' to its composer" (*Hopes* 47).¹⁵ As a composite of oral and written practices, the African novel remains of note because it mediates unpredictably between these two scenes of storytelling, the communal fireside and the writer's study.

Beyond the Oral/Written Divide

Abdul JanMohamed provides the most influential readings of orality and literacy in Achebe's novels in his book *Manichean Aesthetics* (1983) and article "Sophisticated Primitivism" (1984). JanMohamed's motivating question is one that I share: "How is the encounter between the predominantly *oral* cultures of Africa and the *literate* cultures of the colonizer represented and mediated by Anglophone African fiction?" ("Sophisticated" 20; emphasis in original). JanMohamed's answers to this question are premised, however, by his characterization of oral cultural forms as rigid. He argues that while "Achebe is able to capture the flavour of an oral society in his style and narrative," the contours of this flavor are determined mostly by the static aspect of orality itself ("Sophisticated" 28). Orality, according to JanMohamed, proceeds from a homeostatic platform where structures of repetition, and the

absence of syntactic subordination, create the effect of a “flat surface” in Achebe’s prose (“Sophisticated” 28). Drawing on the work of Jack Goody and Walter J. Ong, JanMohamed proposes a schematic outline of orality that emphasizes its unchanging, structured, and overly orthodox qualities. “The phenomenology of oral cultures,” he asserts, “tends to be characterized by the following traits: it defines meaning and value contextually rather than abstractly; it is conservative and homeostatic; its universe is defined by mythic rather than historical consciousness; it valorizes collectivity rather than individuality; and it is dominated by a totalizing imperative” (“Sophisticated” 23).¹⁶

Certainly, Achebe’s treatment of orality reproduces some of its static features. But the stasis associated with spoken forms, I argue, is merely one register of orality among others that *Things Fall Apart* presents and, more importantly, critiques. As a fixed and ritualized form of culture, orality is structured as a hierarchy ingrained in patriarchy that, despite its conflict with colonial social orders, seems designed to be aligned with them. While JanMohamed holds fast to singular Ongian differentiations between oral and written texts, I argue that Achebe’s orature compromises any such stark differences. As Eileen Julien convincingly notes, the divide between orality and script is always over-determined because “the coexistence and reciprocity of oral and written languages . . . characterizes most societies” regardless of how technological they are (22). In her excellent study, F. Abiola Irele makes a similar case for the various registers of oral articulation that combine denotative and connotative or rhetorical contexts to produce an “African orality” in which “the imagination finds its proper manifestation as *organized text*” (32; emphasis in original). Irele argues that literature and orality are always already intertwined such that literary representations may be understood as “approximat[ing] the oral mode,” while orality—counter-intuitively—is often textual (31–32).¹⁷ Indeed, there are multiple lines of orality and literacy at play in *Things Fall Apart* that preclude seeing the former as always formulaic and mythic and the latter as spontaneous and historical. *Things Fall Apart* remains an important work because it provokes a contemplation of the degree to which spoken and written worlds are mutually constituted and fungible.

JanMohamed's insistence on the rigidity of oral structures ultimately results in his reading Achebe's text as doubly critical of both orality and literacy in the colonial context. Thus he affirms, for example, that "Achebe . . . has depicted in his fiction not only the material, political, and social destruction of indigenous societies caused by colonization but also the subtle annihilation of the conservative, homeostatic oral culture by the colonists' introduction of literacy" ("Sophisticated" 21). Such an assertion substantiates his claim that Achebe's texts serve mainly "as chirographic representations of oral cultures" which are "syncretic" only because they "deterritorializ[e] . . . the English language and the novelistic form" ("Sophisticated" 21).¹⁸ For JanMohamed the "syncretic" force of Achebe's work arises exclusively because of the chirographic feature of the novel. In contrast, I argue that Achebe poses the limits of novelistic discourse from within the novel itself by insisting on a multiplicity of oral discourses, some of which exceed the orthodoxies that govern both homeostatic orality and the violent incursion of the alphabet on the colonial scene. Extending JanMohamed's argument that what Achebe produces is a "written oral narrative" that "transcends the manichean relations by a brilliant synthesis of oral and chirographic culture" ("Sophisticated" 36) makes it possible to read Achebe's orature as a radical supplement to the "chirograph" of the novel. Achebe's orature is resonant because it carries the written word beyond its narrative closures. In other words, *Things Fall Apart* stands apart for its multiply-inflected oral plays: those excesses of orality that deconstruct the novel's stability as a written text. For instance, *Things Fall Apart* does not necessarily end, as is commonly understood, with Okonkwo's death and entry into the District Commissioner's memoir. It ends equally with the pronouncement by Okonkwo's friend, Obierika, that "That man [Okonkwo] was one of the greatest men in Umuofia" (Achebe, *TFA* 208). If we remember that the novel opens with the story of Okonkwo's greatness and that Obierika is the man who "thought about things" deeply enough to question the Oracle's static pronouncements (*TFA* 125), we are returned circularly to a re-reading and reconsideration of the narrative as is endemic to the oral style. Obierika's pronouncement serves as an impetus to re-read the novel beyond the end of Okonkwo's death at the hands

of the missionaries. In effect *Things Fall Apart* opens every time it ends and offers a new impetus for re-reading the various extra-textual threads of the narrative.¹⁹

Reading Orature as Ethnographic Impulse

Critical reflections on Achebe's use of Igbo linguistic references and forms continue to generate symptomatic interpretations of the texture of his work that insist on its value simply to inform readers, particularly Western ones, of the nature and workings of African civilization. As Okpewho notes, the tendency to study orality in isolation, apart from Western literary traditions, has a history that begins with "evolutionist" and "diffusionist" views of culture as scientific progress in the nineteenth century (7–8). So pervasive is this tendency that one critic includes in his reading of Achebe's work the caveat that "oral materials in the text (folktales and proverbs) should not be seen simply as a way of naturalizing the novel within an African environment" (Ngaboh-Smart 20). Others, meanwhile, continue to insist that in novels such as *Things Fall Apart*, which are "set in tribal society, the narrative itself is studded with proverbs and similes which help evoke the cultural milieu in which the action takes place" (Lindfors 49). Still others argue that "[t]he very proverbs and phrases which have become cliché for their Igbo speakers, which no longer have a living relation to things signified, are yet for the western reader creative of a world in which the tension between word and referent, the awareness of metaphor as such, is alive and vibrant" (Innes 36).

While these critics are uniformly generous in their approach to and esteem of Achebe, their enthusiasm for his work flattens the complexity of his prose in favor of didactic and identitarian readings. Wahneema Lubiano writes that by "insisting on the ethnographic value of Achebe's work," students who read *Things Fall Apart* in the classroom reduce Achebe's text to "a simplicity" and "anthropology" that "represses the structure and form of black texts" (107). Hence, the proverbs and stories in his novels function merely to create a flavor of "tribal society" and are significant only in that they initiate Westerners to vibrant language games that supposedly have no "living" significance for the Igbo.

Orality, in such readings, is assumed to be metonymic of a singular Igbo culture; the mimetic play of metaphor that imbues it is ignored. Although such claims reinforce Achebe's novels as significant reminders of the dispossessions effected by colonialism, they also cast the texts as preoccupied with obscure traditions and dead pasts. Angela Miri's enthusiastic reading, for instance, rehearses such a claim to bewildering effect; she asserts that "it is possible and sensible to consider Achebe's fiction, namely *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* as oral accounts of Igbo life and culture" and argues that the texts "successfully root the modern in tradition" (101). At most, these critics suggest that Achebe gives voice to a unitary Igbo protest against oppression that is otherwise barely audible.

Other critics of Achebe's work who mark the irony of Achebe's "us[ing] the written word brought by the colonizers in order to record and recreate the oral world obliterated or denied by them" (Innes 35) also remain skeptical, and at best ambivalent, about the efficacy of such a strategy in challenging the norms of colonialism and its literate canon. Rather than reading orature—inflections of orality within the written text—as an orchestrated undoing of the program of textual knowledge production, some view *Things Fall Apart* as a mostly negative work. For these critics, the novel represents little Igbo resistance to colonialism and instead portrays the complete destruction of Igboland at the hands of colonialists. According to Raymond Williams, for example, the novel centers on the "process of internal contradictions and external invasions" that destroys Okonkwo and his mode of life (286).²⁰ On the surface, such an appraisal of the text is adequate, but it nevertheless fails to address the more complicated relationships that the novel traces between what Williams marks as the "internal" and the "external," and the manner in which the former routinely negotiates its responses to colonialist interpellations.

Along the same lines, Gareth Griffiths argues that, for Achebe, the position of the insider and outsider is one, and that in reproducing traces of orality in his work, Achebe assumes the violence of the colonizer seeking to obliterate the oral world altogether. "By the very act of writing," Griffiths insists, "Achebe's stance is contiguous to that of the commis-

sioner. Both seek to reduce the living, oral world of Umuofia to a series of words on the page: and they are English words, for Achebe as well as for the commissioner” (68).²¹ Such a superficial alignment of Achebe and the Commissioner ignores Achebe’s use and manipulation of the English language to disrupt, challenge, and refigure dominant narratives about the Igbo written by the likes of G.T. Basden and the District Commissioner. Indeed Achebe famously asserted the case for English’s double cultural bearing: “I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings” (*Morning* 103).²²

Things Fall Apart draws attention to Africa’s syncretic cultural alterity to the purely script cultures of colonial modernity through its consideration of the transition between oral and written traditions, which are represented as two divergent, contending, and yet mutually assimilative epistemological paradigms within Nigeria. The novel famously begins in mythic time, recounting the fame of Okonkwo, a figure of epic repute: “Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. . . . That was many years ago, twenty or more, and during this time Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan” (*TFA* 3). The widespread word-of-mouth dispersion of Okonkwo’s feats as a wrestler in these opening lines is perpetuated by a sense of time that is deliberately open-ended in its imprecision. As JanMohamed notes, “[t]he narrative, as an aggregation of already known, circulating stories, exists in seamless mythic time rather than segmented historical time” (“Sophisticated” 33). The novel initiates an oral temporality that does not proceed in a linear or teleological order, and it is only in the context of such indeterminacy that Okonkwo can be cast as the subject of an alternative narrative form. Amongst the Igbo, knowledge of this legendary figure, it seems, grows and circulates because it is not constrained by the limits of legibility, in time or on paper.

Things fall apart, however, when the circularity of this form of knowing is circumscribed in the closing moments of the novel by the book

within the book, “*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*” (TFA 209). Moments after Okonkwo’s suicide, the District Commissioner, with academic determination, proposes to shrink Okonkwo to book size:

In the many years in which he [the District Commissioner] had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. . . . In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself 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. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm about cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (TFA 208–09)

Condensed and edited, Okonkwo is placed within the annals of an amateur anthropologist’s colonial ledger as little more than a passing reference contrived to bolster support for the colonial civilizing project in Africa amongst a British readership. Pared down to a “paragraph,” Okonkwo is legible in the colonizer’s text only as an incendiary and irrational figure of savage violence.

In many ways Achebe’s novel itself stands in contrast to the archetype of colonial record keeping, the personal memoir of the British civil servant abroad, that is envisioned by its author as an indispensable handbook for fortifying the frontlines of the British imperial project. Significantly, Achebe’s conclusion that the District Commissioner’s self-satisfied memoir is a pronounced symptom of the violent intrusion of colonialism into Umuofia is drawn from the life and works of G.T. Basden, a missionary turned anthropologist and longtime friend

of Achebe's father.²³ In his monograph *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, which was first published in the 1920s, Basden writes of the Igbos:

Let not this [the fact that the African 'character' for the most part is unknowable and baffling for Europeans] be thought strange, for the black man himself does not know his own mind. He does the most extraordinary things, and cannot explain why he does them. The will of the tribe or family, expressed or implied, permeates his whole being, and is the deciding factor in every detail of his life. (9–10)

Notably, for Basden and his successors such as P. Amaury Talbot, an early colonial anthropologist whose role in charting Igboland has been discussed by Robert Wren, the inscrutability of Africans is the result of a lack of exegetic prowess and an over-dependence on communal living. As Achebe's text implies, Africans seem unknowable to Europeans precisely because of the presumed radical difference between codes of orality and literacy that make explanations given in one register unintelligible in another. Moreover, as the novel also demonstrates, oral exegesis depends on active participation and exchanges within communities, while texts such as the Commissioner's attempt to explain the whole from an individual viewpoint. Again, the two modes are incompatible. Rather than account for these dissimilarities, early anthropologists such as Basden instead excoriated Africans' lack of knowledge (of self and world). *Things Fall Apart* thus becomes an antidote to such racist dismissals.

In fact, the orature of *Things Fall Apart* is given over in its entirety to elaborating the supplementary stories about the Igbo that are so perniciously excised from officially sanctioned documents about "pacification." Yet the irony of such a task, as JanMohamed observes, is inescapable: "The African writer who uses English, then, is faced with the paradox of representing the experience of oral cultures through literate language forms" ("Sophisticated" 21). However, the difference between the beginning of the novel and its end also excavates the gap between the multiple registers of storytelling—both oral and literate—in order to comment on the chasm between colonized and colonizing culture in Igboland in affirmative ways.²⁴ Thus Achebe's use of oral features such

as ritual greetings, public and prolonged addresses, formal speeches, proverbs, and digressions in storytelling within *Things Fall Apart* often attend to a perceived incommensurability between oral and literate ways of knowing and being in the world and affirm Igbo sentience. Simon Gikandi notes that Achebe's work insists on the politics of the paradoxical tensions of a scripted orality. Igbo voice emerges, Gikandi observes, through the conflation of voice and text, being and novel:

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe seems to be making a case for the absolute and inescapable linkage between being and voice. After all, the most obvious sign of the destruction of Igbo culture and its authority is the repression of Igbo voices at the end of the novel when colonialism imposes its grammatology and henceforth represents the African as a subject with neither a voice nor a logos. . . . In *Things Fall Apart*, the very act of narration is often a celebration of the power of the Igbo voice. (33)

In other words, Achebe is well aware that all kinds of oralities reside alongside and even within discourses of literacy in postcolonial Nigeria.

Notwithstanding her reading of *Things Fall Apart* as an instance of "pure orality," Miri's conclusion that the novel is a testament to the fact that "oral forms do doubtlessly survive despite the adoption of the written medium in communicating literature," is salient (100). However, orature's political efficacy as an alternate cultural formation is best evoked from within the structures of narrative textual discourse.

Oral Deceptions, Violence, and Competitive Masculinities

A terrible massacre dominates the conversation between neighboring Igbo villagers in *Things Fall Apart*. Obierika, visiting an exiled Okonkwo in his motherland of Mbanta, brings news of the vicious and excessive violence that has accompanied the arrival of the British in Abame. Seated in a circle comprised of visitors from Umuofia and men from Mbanta, Obierika offers his eyewitness account of the scene of desecration that unfolded in response to the initial killing of a "white man" whom the Oracle predicted was the first of many to take over the area (138):

‘Abame has been wiped out,’ said Obierika. ‘It is a strange and terrible story. If I had not seen the few survivors with my own eyes and heard their stories with my own ears, I would not have believed. . . . The three white men and a large number of other men surrounded the market. . . . And they began to shoot. Everybody was killed, except the old and the sick who were at home. . . . Their clan is now completely empty.’ (138–40)

The scene’s brutal violence crucially represents the circuits of orality with which the novel marks the distance as well as the complicity between colonizing and colonized cultures. It is significant that the credibility and extent of the injury, as well as the indelibility of the colonizer’s transgressions against an entire community, are confirmed by an offering of testimony. Obierika’s “strange and terrible story” unfolds on the basis of witnessed horrors and hearsay. These stories, traveling from Abame to Umuofia to Mbanta, produce a narrative map for the circulation of oral narratives between the Igbo. More importantly, however, they also channel apprehensions of and counter-valences to the episodic violence of colonial entry into Igboland. Obierika’s retelling, for example, does not lessen the import of the massacre’s setting, the “big market in Abame,” and thereby integrates British economic design into his recitation and the oral culture’s understanding of its own geographies of habitation in relation to British motivations for colonialism.

These motivations, as Obierika’s account indicates, structure the ethos of colonial rule, which is marked by direct, explosive bursts of violence used to secure domination over peoples, places, and the markets they constitute. Additionally, the effect of calling forth this eruption of violence within a representation of oral discourse indicates its particularly pernicious difference from the context and ethics of permissible violence within oral cultures. In response to Obierika’s story, Uchendu, Okonkwo’s elderly maternal relative, advises: “Never kill a man who says nothing. Those men of Abame were fools. What did they know about the man?” (140). The conversation thus returns to the scene of the first violation—the killing of a white stranger—and invests this initial transgression with an introspective ethical responsibility guarded by ut-

terance. In this moment, Uchendu's retort indicts both colonizers and Igbo men for senseless acts of retaliatory violence.

Uchendu's transparent demand that an oral imperative limit violent action, even when directed against colonizers, is astonishing, but purposeful in its subtext. *Any* man who "says" nothing, Uchendu insists, must not be harmed *because* he is not yet the subject of history, the subject of knowledge: "Those men of Abame were fools. What did they *know* about [him]?" (Achebe 140; emphasis added). These words lend the novel's representational frame conceptions of historicity and epistemology that are attached to the discursive play of oral exchange. Uchendu's response, unreadable within the logic of racialized force and counter-force employed by the colonial occupiers and anti-colonial responders, opens Achebe's text to the possibility of an ethical response to violence that lies outside this configuration. Importantly, as further illustration of his lesson, Uchendu "tell[s] the story" of the Mother Kite and the duckling, reiterating through this digression that "[t]here is something ominous behind . . . silence" and that "[t]here is nothing to fear from someone who shouts" (140).

The novel's orature repeatedly stages a disavowal of violent action within oral contexts and contrasts this with the torturous exercise of colonial power that inflicts silence on the other in order to consolidate itself. The moment of conflict between the Igbo of Umuofia and the British escalates significantly when, with encouragement from a fire and brimstone preacher, one of the converts, Enoch, "unmasks an *egwugwu* in public" (186). The defilement of an ancestral spirit is a symbolic killing and a crime so momentous that it sparks a furious reaction in the tribe. The crisis is portrayed in terms of a tumultuous confrontation between the villagers and the occupiers. Achebe describes Umuofia gathered in a fierce show of protestation:

On the next day all the masked *egwugwu* of Umuofia assembled in the marketplace. They came from all quarters of the clan. . . . It was a terrible gathering. The eerie voices of countless spirits, the bells that clattered behind some of them, and the clash of machetes as they ran forwards and backwards and saluted one

another, sent tremors of fear into every heart. . . . The band of *egwugwu* moved like a furious whirlwind to Enoch's compound and with machete and fire reduced it to a desolate heap. And from there they made for the church, intoxicated with destruction. (*TFA* 187–88)

The Umuofians feel violated; their customs have been disparaged. The scene anticipates a volatile and ominous confrontation between the procession of *egwugwu* and members of the makeshift British church. The stage is set for a violent turn against colonialism from within a cultural space that has previously managed dispute through debate and dialogue. The outcome of the furious confrontational procession is all the more striking for its sudden recourse to orality. The confrontation between the Igbo and the preacher, accompanied by his interpreter, after the initial “onrush” plays itself out thus (189):

Then an unmistakable voice rose above the tumult and there was immediate silence. . . . Ajofia [the head of the *egwugwu* in charge of administering “justice”] began to speak . . . “The body of the white man, I salute you . . . [and then to the interpreter], Tell the white man that we will not do him any harm. . . . Tell him to go back to his house and leave us alone. . . . Our anger is great but we have held it down so that we can talk to you.” (*TFA* 189–90)

This style of resolution—patient, pacifist, and committed to verbal exchange—is what Achebe most directly identifies with the Igbo. In a moment of crisis, outraged by the colonizer's blatant disregard for their practices, oral exchange interrupts more violent options as the most effective form of reconciliation.

By contrast, Okonkwo is notable for his singularly vigorous defiance of British incursions (both military and civic) into Umuofia. Intensely resistant, Okonkwo refuses to capitulate to the colonizer's threat of force or to programmatic efforts at cultural conversion routed through the institutions of school, church, and court. Unconvinced by the arguments Mr. Brown and his followers make in favor of religious conversion and

education, Okonkwo becomes increasingly convinced that the British are simply “mad” (*TFA* 147). Okonkwo, who is renowned in Umuofia for his “prowess in inter-tribal wars” and for his skill as a wrestler (*TFA* 8), stands firm—but alone—in his agitation for the violent removal of the British from Igboland. His response to the massacre is distinctly non-pacifist; he provocatively calls for the need to meet force with force. The Abame, he says, “should have armed themselves with their guns and machetes even before they went to market” (*TFA* 140). Okonkwo feels duped and chained by the District Commissioner and is consumed by his desire “to kill the white man” (*TFA* 195). With the exception of the British, Okonkwo the warrior is the novel’s most confirmed representative of violent action. He regularly beats his wives, participates in the murder of his adopted son, accidentally kills a fellow clansman, kills a British messenger, and, finally, commits suicide.

Okonkwo’s stark position in favor of violent action against colonialism is drawn, I argue, on the basis of his nonconformity with the expectations of oral interchange that organize sociality amongst the Igbo. In this sense, Okonkwo is an exception to Umuofia’s sociality from the outset of the novel. His unwillingness and inability to participate in customary forms of spoken mediation situates him in a place of opposition from which an uncompromisingly violent anti-colonialism may more easily erupt.²⁵ Early in the text, Okonkwo is described as being known for his infelicitous speech. He lacks the talent for easy or fluent verbal exchange, and his frustration with words is clearly linked with his impetuous tendency toward violence. We are told that Okonkwo “pounce[d] on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get words out quickly enough, he would use his fists” (*TFA* 4). In a novel that “suggests that individual development in Igbo society entails, or at least is emblemized by, a coming into, and a facility with, language and stories” (Slaughter 130), or in other words, in a novel which insists that “[a]mong the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” (Achebe, *TFA* 7), Okonkwo’s impairment closes him off from vital engagement within his community. His violent opposition to British rule, indeed his predilection towards vio-

lent action, is presented within the frame of the novel as deviant from Umuofia's accepted social forms of arbitration. Okonkwo's "stammer" arrests his full participation as a village leader; his ineffability is replaced by his resurgent turns toward violence.²⁶

Okonkwo's position outside the register of orality through which Umuofians negotiate and resolve disputes is reinforced time and again. First he is contrasted to his father, Unoka, whose "love of talk had grown with age and sickness" such that "it tried Okonkwo's patience beyond words" (*TFA* 25). Later, Okonkwo discloses his outright antipathy to "sweet-tongued" endeavors to verbally manage the conflicts brought on by colonial presence: "'The greatest obstacle in Umuofia,' Okonkwo thought bitterly, 'is that coward, Egonwanne. His sweet tongue can change fire into cold ash. When he speaks he moves our men to impotence'" (*TFA* 200). Rather than read Okonkwo as an emblem of Igbo culture, as do some critics, I find that the novel designates him in exceptional relation to it in order to show the full range of the desecration, and responses, that colonialism evokes within the Igbo community.²⁷

As a result of colonial domination, assurances of a unitary Igbo center, especially one based in orality, disintegrate. Instead, what takes shape is an elaboration of the complexity of responses generated in answer to colonialism, and the limits of their articulation. Neither orality, as an elaborate tradition, nor a frenzy borne of parapaxes, is sufficient. Thus Okonkwo's truncated speech disaffects him from the community and results in an act of aggression that does not have a far-ranging effect on the colonial agenda.²⁸ Similarly, the public and masculine registers of orality traditionally used to adjudicate matters of concern to the Igbo are silenced and unable to offer a solution or plan of resistance. Indeed, their very survival is put into question.

It is important to note that the scene of the Abame massacre is significant in that it is explicitly gendered. The dual responses to the massacre of innocent civilians—the first a pacifist oral etiquette in the face of violence, and the second Okonkwo's thunderous call to arms—are also registers of Igbo masculinity. The novel suggests that both are stifled by the trappings of colonialism. Public forums in Umuofia adhere to an exclusive patriarchal sense of empowerment that clashes with and

is subsumed by a competing masculinity shored up by colonialism. Patriarchal sensibilities underscore the *egwugwu*'s collective debates over the problems of clan governance as much as the masculinist rage that Okonkwo manifests against imperialism.

Within Achebe's novel, the primary scene of orality for the Igbo is enacted in the public, cultural space of village life and is identified in terms of a masculine privilege that deliberately eschews the participation of women. A description of the *egwugwu*'s sacred space, for example, emphasizes the gender segregation within the village that the space perpetuates:

The *egwugwu* house was now a pandemonium of quavering voices[;] . . . women never saw the inside of the hut. No woman ever did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. If they imagined what was inside, they kept their imaginations to themselves. No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and most secret cult in the clan. (*TEA* 88)

The communal work of the *egwugwu* consists of conflict resolution in the interests of justice. This work relies, the novel implies, on the exploitation of women's labor, as well as their exclusion from the sites of communal decision-making. For example, the *egwugwu* debate and decide a case of marital violence against one of the women. By the end of the novel the power of the collective is greatly reduced as it falls from the practice of conversation into the habit of silence, a tragedy the novel orchestrates with some ambivalence.

In contrast, the operative colonial strategy for securing domination is constituted in a coercive use of violence that, through silencing the indigenous population, produces its cultural and literal subjection to colonial rule. The colonial tactic of enforcing silence through the protracted use of torture is represented in *Things Fall Apart* through a well-planned ruse that involves a spurious gesture of oral exchange that is then sublimated to the use of violent force. Orality, for the colonizers, is a mode of deception designed to induce the submission of people who take it to be discursively meaningful in the production of social

relations. After the *egwugwu* uprising that results in the Igbo's lenient discharge of Mr. Smith, the District Commissioner's "sweet-tongued messenger" summons the leaders of Umuofia to a meeting with him. The Commissioner opens the meeting with the following address: "I have asked you to come . . . because of what happened during my absence. I have been told a few things but I cannot believe them until I have heard your own side. Let us talk about it like friends and find a way of ensuring that it does not happen again" (*TFA* 193). His invitation to dialogue is received earnestly and results in an effusion of "story" from the Umuofians: "Ogbuefi Ekwueme rose to his feet and began to tell the story" (*TFA* 193). What unfolds reveals the manner in which the novel understands colonialism's exploitation of oral culture: oral exchange is the basis of a colonial deception that opens a space for oral expression only as a guise through which a program of violence and enforced silence is naturalized.

As Ogbuefi Ekwueme begins his story, the dynamics of the exchange between colonizer and colonized are made transparent: "It happened so quickly that the six men did not see it coming. There was only a brief scuffle, too brief even to allow the drawing of a sheathed machete. The six men were handcuffed and led into a guardroom" (*TFA* 194). Deceit and demonstrative force are quickly followed by prolonged humiliation and torture as the men's heads are shaved and they are mocked and starved into abjection. The result is a spread of silence that impacts, it seems, not just the prisoners but all of Umuofia: "Even when the men were left alone they found no words to speak to one another. It was only on the third day, when they could no longer bear the hunger and the insults, that they began to talk about giving in. . . . Umuofia was like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run" (*TFA* 195–96).

The novel presents a key alteration that the disciplinary mechanisms of colonial domination unleash on oral cultures previously given to unrestricted and expansive exchanges of conversation. Joseph Slaughter observes that "[a]fter Okonkwo and his family return to Umuofia from his motherland Mbanta"—and, I would add, after a rigorous and violent working over—"silence obtains greater import in the narrative de-

scription of life among Okonkwo's people" (139–40). Moreover, the silence that fills Umuofia is offset by the dominant regime's oral proselytizing for a conversion to script-life. It is relevant that the orature of the novel, which braids together different modes of representation, places the rising silence amongst the Igbo in the context of the most vigorously chirographic social institutions that have been used to normalize colonial presence: the school, church, and court.²⁹ *Things Fall Apart* describes the concerted use of oral rhetoric by colonial middle-men to replace spoken worlds with institutionalized literacy:

He [Mr. Brown] went from family to family begging people to send their children to his school. . . . Mr. Brown begged and argued and prophesied. He said that the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learnt to read and write. If Umuofia failed to send her children to school, strangers would come from other places to rule them. . . . In the end Mr. Brown's arguments began to have an effect. (*TFA* 181–82)

The duplicitous use of orality to lure the Igbo, and the unrestrained use of violence to obtain their submission and silence, is followed by the maintenance of colonial rule through the corollary operations and promotion of institutions that reproduce script culture and guard the hierarchical measures of success within it. The material incentives Mr. Brown proffers effect the establishment of institutions of chirography that in turn cultivate amongst the colonized what Gramsci describes as "hegemony," or domination through consent.³⁰

Orature Feminized

Scholarly readings of the rise and fall of the *egwugwu* as the only representation of Igbo agency and communality within *Things Fall Apart* criticize the work for being too complacent with the secondary status of women in society. Some critics argue that *Things Fall Apart* is a nostalgic, atavistic text that reinvents the past in chauvinistic ways and excises the significant role women typically play within the Igbo culture-scape. For instance, Rhonda Cobhan writes that "[w]e do not see them [women

in *Things Fall Apart*] planting in their farms, bartering their goods in the market place, sitting in judgment as members of their community or taking action alongside or against their men” (28). In a similar vein, Emmanuel Egar argues that “*Things Fall Apart* depicts a unified society nurtured and sustained by a complexity of relationships. This society maintained its tenuous unity through the exclusion of women, children, slaves, and foreigners. It was a society ruled by powerful men who made sure the weak felt the force of their power” (32). Such readings of the novel are meaningful insofar as the critics consider the highly ritualized registers of Igbo life, such as the elaborate displays of ancestral conventions at village meetings, to be the only register of oral practice in the text. In so doing, the readings ignore the polyphony of voices that constitute Achebe’s version of women’s storytelling. Orature is, however, explicitly feminized in the novel’s recounting of Igbo women’s field labors, their domestic chores, and their important customary roles as priestesses or oracles. This demotic orality, an allegory for Igbo daily life, suggests the play of a counter-oral counter-literacy that cannot be easily (con)scripted into the masculine-centered village meetings or the equally sexist institutional structures of colonial rule.

In the aftermath of the unimaginable humiliation and violence experienced by the Igbos, it is this alternative, ambivalent form of feminine storytelling that lingers and persists as the oral dimension of the novel. In fact, the more overt register of oral exchange is sharply reduced and nearly silenced. This other circuit of orality gives resonance to alterior mnemonic attachments in the community that are specifically counter to what JanMohamed and others have identified as the formulaic and public repetitions within the masculine oral register that intone lineage and recall kinship as the basis of belonging in the Igbo *socius*. Okonkwo, who tells “masculine stories of violence and bloodshed,” is bested by the tales his wife tells Nwoye, their son: “Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children—stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest” (*TFA* 53).

Within the economy of the novel, these allegorical stories increasingly supplant the metonymic parataxis of masculine performances. Irele, drawing on the work of Solomon Iyasere, observes that Okonkwo's hyper-masculinity is countervailed by the "female principle" that organizes the "collective life" and "communal consciousness" of Umuofia (Irele 130). Through digressions, ambiguities, and metaphor the women's allegorical stories provide a critique of lexical representation from within the narrative itself. Metaphoric, rather than metonymic, they offer the possibility of looking out from within the protocols of the text by initiating a mode of self-critique that the novel, as a text written in complicity with the regimes of the literate world, would otherwise be unable to accomplish. Slaughter observes that "[t]he associative gendering of stories in the novel creates a competition between genres of speech and storytelling. . . . The distinctiveness of story forms in the novel suggests the existence of alternative relationships to knowledge and modes of organizing that knowledge" (130). The attractive stories women tell— attractive to both their sons and daughters—suggest orature's turn away from scripted gender binaries in articulating the sociality of Igbo post-colonial life.

The ready dissolution of gender identifications in certain stories that circulate amongst the Igbo is not surprising if we account for radical differences between Igbo spoken languages and the languages of colonialism. In her remarkable work, Oyeronke Oyewumi begins to chart this terrain. Oyewumi convincingly argues that gender categories for the Yoruba were a product of colonial historiography. Through careful readings of transcriptions of oral language recorded by colonial historians such as Reverend Samuel Johnson, Oyewumi tracks the systematic transformation of non-gendered pronouns in oral Yoruba in a chiro-graphic scheme for the language invented by colonials. Oyewumi aims "to draw attention to the fact that writing Yoruba history has been a process of gender attribution in which kings and men have been created from oral traditions that were originally free of gender categories" (87). My suggestion is that Achebe's orature, aligned with Oyewumi's study, contests the relevance of "gender as an organizing principle" within oral cultures (31). While *Things Fall Apart* inaugurates the possibility

of recognizing a gender-neutral form of orality for the Igbo, both the novel and Oyewumi demonstrate that colonial gender categories are “being reabsorbed into [Yoruba] oral traditions in a process of feedback” (Oyewumi 87).

Indeed, the story of the Tortoise with the “sweet tongue” that Okonkwo’s wife Ekwefi tells her daughter, Ezinma, and all the other women who gather together in the evening to listen or tell tales, foretells the end of the novel. The cunning Tortoise, greedy for power and food, sweet-talks his way into the convocation of the birds, and “because he was a great orator” and acted “happy and voluble” he is chosen to be their speaker (Achebe, *TFA* 99). Of course, moments after their arrival in the sky, the Tortoise assumes a false name, “All of you,” and greedily consumes the food offered for “All of you” by the hosts (*TFA* 97–98). The birds, angered by his betrayal, leave hungry and abandon the Tortoise in the sky. The Parrot, the most aggrieved, agrees to send word to the Tortoise’s wife to cover the ground with soft things to break his fall. The Parrot takes his revenge by instead telling the wife to put out all the sharp objects at home. Falling on machetes, hoes, spears, guns, and a canon, the Tortoise cracks his shell, which has never since been smooth (*TFA* 99). It is not difficult to extend the metaphor of self-interest and betrayal in this story to the experience of colonialism in Igboland, or to the ways in which orality has both served and dissimulated the interests of Igbo self-empowerment. Equally relevant is the recognition that orality itself has been modified by the colonial encounter, such that the self-structuring stories that Ekwefi tells include “guns” and “canon[s]” alongside “spears” and “hoes.”

This critique of orality, both the guise of it that masks colonialist gestures of accommodation, and its rigid invocation by nativist masculinity from within a genre of speech, is markedly feminine. The women’s claim on the story opens new ways of reading the politics of gender and orality in Achebe’s orature. Barbara Harlow comments on the efficacy of the Tortoise tale for clarifying an instance of feminist recalcitrance that identifies “women as the main storytellers” (79). The role of women as storytellers is “a function,” she writes, “that, on the one hand affirms women as the bearers and nurturers of African traditions but that, on

the other hand, subjects that charge to a new interpretation when these very traditions are rewritten and given a vital alignment within the strategies of national liberation” (79). The full scope of Achebe’s feminization of the oral can be sensed if we consider that one of the main instances of anti-colonial uprisings in Igboland was the women’s revolt in the Owerri and Calabar Provinces in 1929 that successfully destroyed the local colonial outpost and instigated in its stead the establishment of an indigenous administration mindful of native customs.³¹ With one oral register silenced, *Things Fall Apart* suggests that survival and change must be envisioned not in archaic, rigidly gender-centered terms, but in more covert, but nevertheless perceptively adaptable, ways. As Kwado Osei-Nyame has aptly observed, “The personal narratives of “marginalized” individuals such as Obiako and Unoka together with those of women” indicate that *Things Fall Apart* encapsulates a “framework of resistance and survival” (155). “In the context of the gender politics of *Things Fall Apart*,” Osei-Nyame notes more specifically, “meanings become unstable” (160). This instability is what lends suppleness to feminized fables in the novel and conditions orature’s ability to “embrace pluralities” (160). Women in the margins retain their voices and may be poised to effect this change so long as their tales refrain from codifying gender fixities.

Coda: Bookish Voices, Persistent Oralities

Over fifty years after its publication, Achebe’s novel remains prescient because it carries the circular metaphors of the Umuofians much past the blatant conflicts of colonialism as well as the restraints of Nigeria’s postcolonial present. The novel reveals its own insufficiency in capturing the Igbo encounter with modernity and gestures continually beyond itself to narrative possibilities that lie beside the given script. Storytelling, as Achebe reminds us, is insistently linked to the creation of a people: “People create stories create people; or rather, stories create people create stories” (*Hopes* 162). In this sense *Things Fall Apart* remains an irreducible expression of the unique oral heteroglossia of the Igbos. It persistently frames the fraught syncretism of many oralities with the written text.

Finally, Achebe's orature calls into question the assumed alliance between race, culture, and the exclusively chirographic registers of colonialism. His narrative explores orality as a constituent aspect of Igbo social life and, in so doing, excavates both its difference from the textually motivated incursions of colonial violence, and the cleavages within Igbo culture that lend differing valences to the practice of orality. As an instance of orature, the novel reflects the multiple and often contradictory ends of storytelling as an intrinsic aspect of oral cultures invested in resisting colonial dominance, even as they adapt to changing circumstances. The spoken word, situated at the interstices of several conflicted social registers—colonial rule and autonomy, patriarchy and feminism, ritual and change—becomes itself a vexed site in the novel's framing of a variety of responses to the racial and gender politics of pre- and post-colonial Nigeria. Multiply voiced, the polyphony of oral enunciations in *Things Fall Apart* conjures no simple trace of authenticity or aboriginality. Rather, complex, conflicted, and situated pronouncements produce a multilayered narrative of Igbo voicing that offsets the racist documentary impulses of the colonial regime. Moreover, in calling attention to various gender inflections within spoken practice, the dynamic registers of orature suggest that Igbo oralities exist in a mutually plural tension with one another in responding to colonialism.³²

In short, if Achebe's orature foregrounds multiple oral indices within written fiction, it does so by alternative articulations of Igbo recalibration against racist domination by a foreign sovereign, as well as a feminist performative that does not always coincide with the terms of such resistance. If masculine oral habits enact ritualized forms of Igbo tradition that consolidate patriarchal social customs against colonialism, the feminization of orality in *Things Fall Apart* is a form of orature that remains incommensurable with the fundamentals of such a staged and static conflict. Ultimately, Achebe suggests that through inquisition, rehearsal, and innovation, Igbo storytelling, particularly in its gendered parlance, creates the terms for recognizing the heterogeneous and complicated responses to colonialism and patriarchy present within indigenous discourses.

Notes

- 1 I borrow the term “chirographic” from JanMohamed’s discussion of orality and epic forms in “Sophisticated Primitivism.” Although my reading of Achebe’s use of orality differs from JanMohamed’s, I find his use of “chirographic” to describe the textuality and literacy of colonial cultures helpful in drawing the distinction Achebe makes between the oral practices of the Igbo and the archival and documentary compulsions of the British.
- 2 In “A Mouth With Which to Tell the Story” Slaughter presents archival correspondence between officials of the Royal Niger Company that shows how the Company produced excessive, and often deliberately erroneous, documentation about the Niger in order to deflect responsibility for the gross violations (in commerce, treaties, governance, human rights) that occurred in the Niger delta under their charter. Although Britain’s sovereign attitude was one of benevolent rule providing justification for a “civilizing” mission, the company ledgers and correspondence that were kept secret until the 1950s reveal an explicit agenda of economic exploitation and deceit.
- 3 JanMohamed convincingly argues that in *No Longer At Ease* Achebe represents the Africans’ dilemma of having internalized the “racial pathetic fallacy” which is “the ascription of moral character to race and environment and, therefore, ultimately to nature” that British colonialism perpetrated in order to justify its dominion over Africa (*Manichean Aesthetics* 158). As JanMohamed demonstrates, such ascriptions of the “racial pathetic fallacy” consolidate racist hierarchies that elevate the superiority of Europeans while calling into question the very humanity of Africans.
- 4 Achebe’s orature echoes Bakhtin’s theorizing of the modern novel as polyphonic and heteroglossic. For Bakhtin the novel is a site of dialogic utterances that unites a complexity of social differences and subject positions and speaks to the genre’s pliability for writers who wish to inaugurate new speech styles and subjective perspectives. In Achebe’s novels, orature grafts the interplay between spoken and written cultures as the dialogic basis of recognition of otherness, similar to how Bakhtin frames his discussion of “utterance” in novels. Bakhtin’s “living utterance” falls unquestionably into the fold of the novel’s textuality: “The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue” (276). The “social dialogue” of this “living utterance” remains easily contained in the written text of the modern novel’s dialogized heteroglossia. Achebe’s orature, like Glissant’s “oraliture” (77, 14, 245), however, also questions the dialogic effect of the novel as a chirographic endeavor and suggests that novels remain a heteroglossic mode for addressing the problems of oral societies worked over by compulsions of literacy. See also,

- Osei-Nyame's "Chinua Achebe Writing Culture" for a reading of Bakhtinian dialogism in *Things Fall Apart*.
- 5 This divide between written and spoken worlds was influentially reaffirmed by Derrida's intervention in *Of Grammatology*, in which he proposes restoring writing (*écriture*), violated by the conventions of speech (*parole, logos*), to its proper role. Speech, aligned in this account with the metaphysics of subjectivity in the West, needs to be supplemented by textuality. A consequence of this is that orality comes under deconstructive erasure to secure the importance of script as text. In the French context, Glissant contemplates the ramifications of this emphasis on textuality for French Creole colonies steeped in oral habits. (See Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse*.)
- 6 I am extending Braithwaite's characterization of orality as the "total expression" of Creole meaning systems in the Caribbean, inclusive of spoken word, sound, song, story, and noise to denote the submerged experience of language that he has so famously theorized as "nation language" (273). Braithwaite emphasizes the distinct difference between oral practices of nation language that draw on the supple participation of interpretive communities and the isolated activities associated with book technologies:
- Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression. The oral tradition, on the other hand, makes demands not only on the poet but also on the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the poet makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him. Hence we have the creation of a continuum where the meaning truly resides. And this total expression comes about because people live in the open air, because people live in conditions of poverty, because people come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their own breath patterns rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums. They had to depend on *immanence*, the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves. (273)
- 7 See Lubiano's "Narrative, Metacommentary, and Politics in a 'Simple' Story" for a brilliant analysis of the way *Things Fall Apart* manages language, including storytelling, conversation, and proverbs in order "to provide a meta-commentary on the ability of language to construct a counter-narrative" that affects "material reality" (108).
- 8 In the context of postcolonial historiography, Chakrabarty's argument about the manner in which the liberal humanist modes for writing the history of colonialism deliberately bypass social practices (of leisure and contact) antagonistic to colonial logics of cultural and economic domination is prescient. See "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History" and "Adda: A History of Sociality" in *Provincializing Europe*.
- 9 Thus orature has a deconstructive track; we might recall Derrida's aphorism that "there is nothing outside of the text" to sense the trouble orature poses to the oral-textual binary (*Of Grammatology* 158; emphasis in original).

- 10 Indeed the novel has been claimed by African writers as a legitimate form for representing the African experience. Achebe writes that “[i]n the area of literature . . . we have sometimes been informed by the West and its local zealots that the African novels we write are not novels at all because they do not quite fit the specifications of that literary form which came into being . . . in specific response to the new spirit of individual freedom set off by the decay of feudal Europe and the rise of capitalism” (*Hopes* 54). African novels arguably challenge such assumptions of novelistic discourse as individualistic and capitalist and hence constitutively turn on the misrecognition of their aesthetic form as “not novels at all.”
- 11 See “The Language of African Literature” in Ngugi’s *Decolonising the Mind*.
- 12 For discussion of the coincidence between the novel and colonialism see Brantlinger’s *The Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism*, Azim’s *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*, and, of course, Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*.
- 13 This, however, is not how the novel’s role in Africa is commonly appraised. Due to its Western provenance, the novel remains firmly aligned by most critics with a notion of modernity in which reading publics and a culture-wide prescriptive textuality are taken as the markers of a modern and functional society. See Griswold’s *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* and Valdez-Moses’ *The Novel and the Globalization of Culture*.
- 14 Again relevant here is Brathwaite’s seminal notion of “Nation-language” as “the submerged area of dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean” (“History of the Voice” 266). Brathwaite’s idea of Nation-language serves as a reminder of orature’s diasporic importance for an Afro-Caribbean poetics steeped in orality and habituated to censure. “I don’t need to remind you,” writes Brathwaite, “that oral literature is our oldest form of “auriture” and that it continues richly throughout the world today” (“History of the Voice” 267).
- 15 Brathwaite makes a parallel distinction: “Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression. The oral tradition, on the other hand, makes demands not only on the poet but also on the audience to complete the community” (“History of the Voice” 273).
- 16 JanMohammed’s list of the traits of orality are drawn mainly from the psychosociological theses on primary orality in Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*. Ong identifies certain psychological and social features in oral societies that he claims are still “untouched by writing” (31). Ong’s text presumes an unbreachable distance between orality and literacy, myth and history, situation and abstraction, memory and event, and tradition and modernity that sets up predictable hierarchies between these dichotomies.
- 17 Elsewhere, Irele identifies “transliteration, transfer, reiteration, and transposition” as the four formal methods through which “the oral matrix of African imagination” is successfully conveyed by Achebe (58). These formal differentiations help clarify why his orature is complex and multiply inflected.

- 18 JanMohamed argues that cultures of writing are more doubt-based and more open to study, “encourag[ing] greater reflexivity and self-scrutiny” (“Sophisticated” 23). JanMohamed’s predilection to celebrate the arrival of literacy in a world unused to it and to see the scriptive force as a source of both development (historical, teleological), acumen (analysis), and superiority attaches too much and too idealistic a value to cultural relations formed in such domains.
- 19 JanMohamed notes the ambivalent turn to literacy in Achebe’s text. While he reaffirms dichotomies between the literate and oral, modernity and tradition, secularity and religion, and history and myth to mark a developmental difference between written and spoken cultures and insists that even the “mnemonic need [within orality] establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that tends to inhibit experimentation and innovation” (“Sophisticated” 23), he also unexpectedly acquiesces that “at the very least, one can say that because the noetic economy of oral/mythic consciousness is not burdened by the needs of ratification, it enables a more fluid symbolic exchange system” (24). It is this oral “flexibility” above all that is feminized and violently reduced by colonial interjection: “The invading culture penetrates Igboland through the acquiescence of the feminine, flexible, and adaptable elements of Igbo society” (*Manichean Aesthetics* 165).
- 20 Okhamafe takes this type of internalized conflict as the exclusive concern of Achebe’s text and argues that “[t]he tragedy of Umuofia, therefore lies not so much in white missionary arrival as in Umuofia’s hierarchical failure to fruitfully engage certain internal cultural differences that were already simmering in the general economy of Umuofia long before and even after the presence of any formidable Christian difference in Umuofia” (125). Against much evidence in the novel that shows its concern with the imposition of colonial social orders based in literacy (school, court, church) upon Igbo society, Okhamafe insists upon the complete irrelevance of the colonizer-colonized divide to *Things Fall Apart*.
- 21 Griffiths also makes the claim that what Achebe undertakes in his work is no more than a “sociological” project that ultimately assumes a defeatist attitude towards Igbo oral narratives, and that adapting them to the conventions of the English novel ensures their obfuscation: “The very choice of language involves him [Achebe] in a deliberate public stance; his use of dialect or of phrases in his native language, are cultural gestures as well as rhetorical devices; while his movement from one register to another in the recording of speech is a direct sociological comment” (69). Griffiths joins other early critics of Achebe’s work such as Innes and Lindfors who contributed to the “initial critical characterization of his [Achebe’s] fiction as anthropological literature” (JanMohamed *Manichean* 160). This is particularly ironic when we consider the incisive turn against anthropological documentation with which *Things Fall Apart* ends.

- 22 It is this claim in favor of an Africanized English against which Ngugi launches his polemic, *Decolonising the Mind*, in which he calls for an end to the use of English for representing African struggles against neo-colonialism.
- 23 Gikandi, Wren, and others also note this historical and biographical connection.
- 24 As Begam argues, Achebe's ending gives force to the difference between inside and outside perspectives on Igbo cultural formations. "Igbo culture," Begam observes, "is now [at the conclusion of *Things Fall Apart*] presented not from the inside as vital and autonomous, but from outside as an object of anthropological curiosity and its collapse is understood not as an African tragedy but as European triumph" (401). While Begam's summation of the novel is too pessimistic, he identifies a crucial difference between a "vital and autonomous" orally configured indigeneity and its opposite: the rigidly codified structures of colonial violence.
- 25 Okonkwo's position as a figure mediating two behavioral paradigms—Igbo pacifism and British violence—is even more interesting when one considers with Slaughter that "[c]olonialist discourse in southern Nigeria, both through its conformity to the representational exigencies of secrecy and in the mode of its ordering, configures the native as speechless, and, having justified that relegation of the people to a pre-linguistic existence with an organic model of civilization, it proceeds to malign their capacity for action" (146–47).
- 26 Curiously, at a recent event arranged by the *Washington Post* to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe responded to a question about the importance of storytelling by stating that "Even people who stammer have a story and if they are telling it, don't go and finish it for them because they want to finish it themselves" ("Colloquium Celebrating *Things Fall Apart*"). Okonkwo's impediment frustrates his ability to finish his story, implying that his inability to speak is the source of his crisis that impels subsequent moves toward a more repressive mode for making his presence felt.
- 27 Ngaboh-Smart, for instance, reads Okonkwo as an archetypal representative of the Igbo: "Okonkwo is thus at the center of the novel, a symbolic node for the norms of the clan. His basic impulses are also the impulses of his society" (9). In a similar vein, Begam writes that "Okonkwo functions as the true representative of his people" (11).
- 28 In a sense, Achebe's text intercedes in Fanon's claims about the intrinsic link between decolonization and violence in *Wretched of the Earth*.
- 29 For a very different reading of the ontology of silence in *Things Fall Apart* as an aspect of the Igbo being partly defined by a Heideggerian notion of *Dasein*, see Wise's "Excavating the New Republic."
- 30 See Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* for more on the idea of hegemony and the operation of ideological state institutions in modern societies. Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* offers an incisive Gramscian critique of the role of English education in buttressing British governance of India.

- 31 The women's uprising of 1929 is especially significant given that, over the course of the British occupation of the Niger territories (beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century when, after the parceling of Africa in the Berlin conference of 1884–85, Britain was allotted the area by exclusive European consent), theirs was the most notable and effective protest against colonial occupation in the region. While a reading of Achebe's text as a novel of Black nationalism would be relevant for many reasons, including the repercussions and revisions to my thesis on Achebe and gender that such a reading would no doubt necessitate, it remains beyond the scope of this particular project. Instead, I point to the work of Ngaboh-Smart; despite the limitations of her argument, discussed earlier in this paper, she draws on Gikandi's terms to begin addressing the issue. She writes that "When his [Achebe's] *TFA* was published . . . it suddenly became a source of Black Nationalist pride in that it 'provided a new way for organizing African cultures' as well as showed the 'limitless possibilities of inventing a new national community'" (3). Harlow follows through on the basis of such an argument to situate storytelling in *Things Fall Apart* in the context of feminist anti-colonial nationalism.
- 32 See Mugo's *African Orature and Human Rights* in which she argues that in Kenya various performative, verbal dimensions of orature exist in unequal relationship with one another but nonetheless are key to articulating the aspirations, rights, and complaints of different social groups.

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