

My Name Will Not Be Lost: Cosmopolitan Temporality and Reclaimed History in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Headstrong Historian"

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Abstract: This essay offers a consideration of cosmopolitan temporality in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "The Headstrong Historian." Spanning the late nineteenth century to the 1970s, Adichie presents three generations of cosmopolitans and three distinct iterations of cosmopolitanism. We argue that the cosmopolitan is a person privileged with a poly-visional sensibility and that cosmopolitan temporality is informed by multiple, often overlapping, narratives of family, heritage, and historical time. With emphasis on Grace, the eponymous historian, we examine manifestations of cosmopolitan temporality, from the village, to the mission schools, to postcolonial Lagos. Grace aims to resituate Nigerian history from a Nigerian perspective, influenced by the lives of her grandmother, her parents, and her husband, all of whom experienced Christianization and intercultural contact in radically different ways. She also writes "reports for international organizations about commonplace things." In both endeavors, Grace reappraises colonial tracts, which once denied the true historicity of her people. As three temporalities collapse into and upon her writing and worldview, we see Grace as a "citizen of the world" and an active participant in reclaiming the history of southern Nigeria.

Citizens of the World

At the end of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "The Headstrong Historian," a young woman named Grace travels home from boarding school to visit her dying grandmother, Nwamgba. Grace has been reading "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria," a chapter in her history textbook, penned by an English colonial administrator. Intended to be an authoritative document, Grace instead finds the descriptions amusing and foreign: "It was Grace who would read about these savages, titillated by their curious and meaningless customs, not connecting them to herself."¹ Decades later, as a historian herself, Grace publishes a book entitled *Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria*. Readers familiar with *Things Fall Apart* will instantly grasp Adichie's resonant allusion to the final sentence of Chinua Achebe's iconic novel, in which a District Commissioner, collecting

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material for his report on pacifying the Lower Niger, reflects on the suicide of Okonkwo, whose story merits a chapter, or at least “a reasonable paragraph.”²

Spanning nearly one hundred years of Nigerian history, from the late nineteenth century through the age of independence, “The Headstrong Historian” chronicles the temporal sites where memory, language, culture, and education are in contest. As the title of Grace’s book suggests, the action of rewriting history is meant not only to correct the received version promulgated by the colonial apparatus, but also to reclaim Nigerians as the subjects of their own national narrative. Adichie follows the example of Achebe by positioning fictional characters as the torchbearers of social identity. It was Grace who, as a young academic pondering the “stories she was not sure she believed,” would make “a clear link between education and dignity, between the hard obvious things that are printed in books and the soft, subtle things that lodge themselves into the soul.”³ Holding in balance the “hard” texts of the archives and “subtle” memories of her grandmother’s world, Grace, and by extension Adichie herself, illuminates the cosmopolitan temporality of historical fiction informed by the convergence of multiple, often contradictory perspectives.

Achebe states that the colonial depiction of Africa and Africans is “a deliberate invention devised to facilitate two gigantic historical events: the Atlantic slave trade and the colonization of Africa by Europe.”⁴ As such, it is the headstrong historian, who, having taken stock of these distortions, must confront the responsibility of reclaiming the histories of a people and telling the world “about commonsense things.”⁵ The historian does not fully erase the “original text” but interrogates and, finally, overwrites by placing the “new” ahead of the “old.” The historian is a type of cosmopolitan—a person privileged with poly-visional sensibility, a person in whose hands time is translated. Cosmopolitan temporality, therefore, is an active and strategic mode of looking across time in search of new definitions. Adichie was born in 1977 and did not live through the eras described in “The Headstrong Historian.” Yet, like Grace, her collaboration with memory and reclaimed history shows how cosmopolitan temporality can provide a method of reading postcolonial narratives in the millennial era.

This essay does not claim to distill a political position from Adichie’s fiction, nor, in the given space, does it rehearse the immense, and frequently elliptical, literature on cosmopolitanism. This essay is concerned with one African writer’s concept of cosmopolitanism in its utilitarian functions: cosmopolitanism as a means to a literary character’s personal advancement, and cosmopolitan temporality as a device for storytelling. In Grace, Adichie shows a woman who is at first confounded by, in the words of Achebe, a tradition that has “invented an Africa where nothing good happens or ever happened.”⁶ To repair such a disconnect, mired by “mischief and prejudice,” Achebe urges authors to “recover what belongs to them—their story—and tell it themselves.”⁷ In telling, they reclaim an accurate narrative of their histories.

Cosmopolitan temporality is a worldview, a state of mind. In the years coinciding with the rise of postcolonial studies, cosmopolitanism, a quality classically associated with men and women “at home in the world,” has become a debate, as Vinay Dharkwadker argues, “freighted with politics rather than aesthetics.”⁸ Western academics fret over the perceived cosmopolitanism of savvy intellectuals traveling abroad, skimming the surfaces of globalization and returning to the metropolis or the university armed with exotic expertise. Bruce Robbins

has written extensively and from various angles on the subject, claiming that cosmopolitanism can, at times, seem “deeply unattractive” because it delivers no “remedy” for the “great historical injustices of colonialism and neo-colonialism.”⁹ Cosmopolitanism is equated with detachment from community and politics. “The cosmopolitan,” he writes, in contrast to Dharkwader, “is held to be incapable of participating in the making of history, doomed to the mere aesthetic spectatorship that he or she is also held secretly to prefer.”¹⁰ In “The Headstrong Historian,” Adichie presents characters who fall into the ranks of cosmopolitan privilege, particularly Nigerians who study in the United Kingdom and return with worldly opinions, whose pretensions are greeted alternately with uncritical admiration or cold skepticism. But, the “making of history,” insofar “making” is construed as progressive action, also indicates, quite literally, the creation of history: as the cosmopolitan historian, Grace doesn’t influence history so much as write the book.

Cosmopolitanism in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century is at odds with itself. To attain the enlightened, purportedly liberal knowledge of other cultures and other places, which can be transformed into a commodity in the service of higher education or media, necessarily entails a reckoning with the structures of capitalism. Robbins seeks to break this down. Not singular cosmopolitanism, he argues, but a plurality of cosmopolitanisms, is operative today.

[Cosmopolitans are] weak and underdeveloped as well as strong and privileged. And again, like the nation, cosmopolitanism is *there*—not merely an abstract ideal, like loving one’s neighbor as oneself, but habits of thought and feeling that have already shaped and been shaped by particular collectivities, that are socially and geographically situated, hence both limited and empowered. ... Like nations, worlds too are ‘imagined.’ For better or worse, there is a growing consensus that cosmopolitanism sometimes works together with nationalism rather than in opposition to it.¹¹

Cosmopolitan temporality derives both from “habits of thought” and worlds that are “imagined,” not in the sense of detachment, but in the process of definition: worlds in the making. For Grace, who was born under British rule in Nigeria, and who came of age in the 1950s and ‘60s at the threshold of independence, the very concept of imagining a world was inseparable from fostering a sense of nationalism, or at the very least inhabiting an authentic social identity at the convergence of past and present. If Robbins calls for reading cosmopolitanism in its vagaries and multiplicities, against the false opposition of local and worldly citizens, what is the work that the cosmopolitan performs? For James Clifford, the answer is the “risky work of translation.” Comparing cosmopolitanisms, as so many cross-disciplinary social theorists have attempted to do, requires a cosmopolitan view of history—a view that would activate “disparate histories.” At a distance from “its (European) universalist moorings,” Clifford states, the concept “becomes a traveling signifier, a term always in danger of breaking up into partial equivalencies: exile, immigration, migrancy, diaspora, border crossing, pilgrimage, tourism.”¹² Translation, therefore, is essential to the cosmopolitan worldview. To question, to research, to reimagine former worlds in order to make sense of the current one—these are the self-assigned tasks of headstrong historians who exemplify cosmopolitan temporality.

The impulse to correct a perceived wrong, or to write a missing chapter, is also a quest for renewed knowledge. One facet of cosmopolitanism, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, “is what philosophers call fallibilism, the sense that our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence.”¹³ The experience of revision is central to Grace’s career in “The Headstrong Historian,” not only in her historical research, but also the revelation of the void: the gradual process by which Grace begins to rethink her education altogether. Yet, as she appears only in the last paragraphs of “The Headstrong Historian,” Grace is not even the story’s lead character. That would be Nwamgba, her grandmother and her muse.

“The Headstrong Historian” is the final story in Adichie’s collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Preceded by stories of otherwise contemporary settings, “The Headstrong Historian” is a departure in tone and content. In contrast to “Cell One,” a harrowing account of a middle-class family’s encounter with arbitrary law enforcement; “Jumping Monkey Hill,” an acerbic vignette about a group of African writers at a workshop retreat in Cape Town; and several other pieces on Nigerians in the United States that read like a sketchbook for Adichie’s novel *Americanah*, “The Headstrong Historian” evokes the wide canvas of an historical narrative in a masterfully concise form.

The story opens onto a memory of a memory: “Many years after her husband died, Nwamgba still closed her eyes from time to time to relive his nightly visits to her hut.”¹⁴ Nwamgba’s husband, Obierika, an only child, comes from a family where miscarriages are common. Against the advice of her mother, Nwamgba insists on marrying Obierika, with whom she felt an immediate connection when they met as children. In payment for the bride price, Obierika brings two cousins, Okafo and Okoye. Nwamgba’s several miscarriages trouble their standing in the community; ultimately, after visiting an oracle, Nwamgba gives birth to a son, Anikwena. Nwamgba and Obierika’s contented family life is destroyed by the sudden death of Obierika, who, Nwamgba suspects, was poisoned by his jealous cousins. Sanctioned by the elders, Okoye and Okoye wrest control of Obierika’s farmland, and the ensuing dispute with Nwamgba sets the plot of “The Headstrong Historian” into motion.

Nwamgba seeks advice from Ayaju, a trader, on regaining her late husband’s land. A descendent of slaves, Ayaju faces limited prospects for marriage, but accrues a form of cultural capital through her interactions with, and observations of, multiple communities, as well as her subsequent reports upon returning to the village. Ayaju is the character Adichie explicitly describes as a cosmopolitan:

Ayaju’s long-limbed, quick-moving body spoke of her many trading journeys; she had traveled even beyond Onicha. It was she who had first brought tales of the strange customs of the Igala and Edo traders, she who first told of the white-skinned men who arrived in Onicha with mirrors and fabrics and the biggest guns the people of those parts had ever seen. This cosmopolitanism earned her respect, and she was the only person of slave descent who talked loudly at the Women’s Council, the only person who had answers for everything.¹⁵

Ayaju embodies a sense of pragmatic cosmopolitanism. Within the social world of “The Headstrong Historian,” Adichie stages a reversal: it is Ayaju, a woman of the lower class, whose knowledge—informed by travel and exchange—merits a position of relative honor. According to Ulf Hannerz, cosmopolitanism is a “matter of competence,” implying “a state of readiness, a

personal ability to make one's way into other cultures through listening, looking, intuiting, and reflecting."¹⁶ Indeed, as Ayaju persuades Nwamgba to send her son, Anikwena, to a new mission school, where Ayaju's son is already learning about "foreign ways," she reminds Nwamgba that "people ruled over others not because they were better people but because they had better guns."¹⁷

Unable to resolve the question of land ownership within her local judicial system, Nwamgba learns from Ayaju about the white men who have established a courthouse in Onicha. Two people, in Ayaju's retelling, brought a land case to the court: "The first man was lying but could speak the white man's language, while the second man, the rightful owner of the land, could not, and so he lost his case, was beaten and locked up and ordered to give up his land."¹⁸ Nwamgba comes to consider the court her only recourse. She herself has no interest in learning the white man's language, which she finds "nasal and disgusting," but "she was suddenly determined that Anikwena would speak it well enough to go to the white men's court with Obierika's cousins and defeat them."¹⁹ Nwamgba enrolls Anikwena in an Anglican school and takes pride in his mastery of English, particularly when, with the help of a missionary, he is able to file the paperwork stating Nwamgba's rightful ownership of her land. But Anikwena, who is baptized and renamed Michael, is fully inculcated by the Anglican mission. Seeing in his eyes a new "ponderousness," Nwamgba realizes that "her son now inhabited a mental space that was foreign to her."²⁰ To his mother's dismay, Michael begins to reject traditional customs. He moves to Lagos to study, returns to the clan years later as a catechist, and marries another Christian convert. As she grows older, Nwamgba, who staunchly resists converting to Christianity, finds herself disoriented by a "world that increasingly made no sense."²¹

Achebe's influence permeates several of Adichie's novels and stories, none more so than "The Headstrong Historian." The story is set in the cosmos of the "Okonkwo Generation" — premised in *Things Fall Apart* as the last generation in Southern Nigeria to live according to ostensibly traditional customs before the incursion of European colonial rule and widespread Christian evangelism. As Daria Tunca notes, Adichie borrows several names from Achebe's fictional village of Umuofia: Okoye, Okafo, and Obierika.²² In Achebe's novel, Okoye is a neighbor of Okonkwo's father, a "great talker" with the habit of skirting around a subject before "hitting it finally"; Okafo is a victorious wrestler for whom the village composes a praise-song; and Obierika is the closest friend of Okonkwo and messenger from Umuofia during the seven years Okonkwo is exiled to Mbanta.²³ While Adichie's characters of Okoye and Okafo, Obierika's malevolent cousins, or Nwamgba's idealized stature of Obierika himself, don't hew closely to Achebe's, the appropriation roots "The Headstrong Historian" in a familiar literary world, claiming affiliation to a specific cultural perspective (Okoye and Okafo are also, as Achebe has noted, common Igbo day-names).²⁴ By the story's conclusion, the act of naming becomes, for Grace, a singular act of defiance and self-actualization.

Apart from naming and setting, among the many intertextual dialogues with *Things Fall Apart*, the theme of education and social alliance in "The Headstrong Historian" is the most pronounced. Nwamgba, on the advice of her cosmopolitan friend Ayaju, pushes Anikwena to learn English for a very specific, utilitarian intention. But English is yoked to the Anglican mission; in this first generation of converts, as Achebe writes, "religion and education went hand in hand."²⁵ In *Things Fall Apart*, Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son, attends a meeting of

missionaries and finds himself captivated by “the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow.”²⁶ Renounced by his father for joining the Christians, Nwoye turns away from his family; he becomes known as Isaac and he is sent to a teacher training college. Mr. Brown, a white missionary who is deeply proud of his success with Nwoye, builds a school in Umuofia and appeals to the community to send their children:

He said that the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learned to read and write. If Umuofia failed to send her children to the school, strangers would come from other places to rule them. They could already see that happening in the Native Court, where the D.C. [District Commissioner] was surrounded by strangers who spoke his tongue.²⁷

Where Ayaju perceives English as a means to an end—a skill acquired for personal gain and family protection—the missionaries, for their part, seek the “redemption of black heathens.”²⁸ Mr. Brown similarly hopes to win hearts and minds.

In both narratives, the converts, Nwoye/Isaac and Anikwena/Michael, experience a revelation: they hear the good news of the gospel, they see themselves anew, and their futures become clear. Under the incredulous observation of Nwamgba in “The Headstrong Historian,” Anikwena grows into a strict and humorless adherent, a cipher dismissive of traditional, ancestral culture. However, the instinct toward education also represents a form of worldliness; the search for knowledge, in this case a brand of religious enlightenment spurred by foreigners, leads to opportunities for travel and the formation of new spiritual and social connections. Insofar as Grace later judges her father for his complete repudiation of Nwamgba’s cultural beliefs, it’s imperative to consider the perspective of Michael and his fellow converts who, in the process of accepting Christian teaching—notwithstanding their profound acculturation—must have felt themselves at the vanguard of modernity.

“The Headstrong Historian” unfolds largely from the perspective of Nwamgba, allowing Adichie to picture the transformation of the community by the missionaries at a remove. Nwamgba refuses Michael’s requests to participate in Christian rituals, of which she is skeptical; she finds her son’s church marriage “laughably strange.”²⁹ Crucially, she insists upon giving her grandchildren traditional names. In contrast, Achebe allows partial access into the conflicted social emotions generated by the presence of missionaries. After building a church in the “Evil Forest,” the only land available to the mission, villagers are convinced that no man would survive the ominous punishments of the gods and ancestors. However, the scheduled doomsday passes without incident: “At last the day came by which all the missionaries should have died. But they were still alive,” Achebe writes. “That week they won a handful more converts.”³⁰ Realizing the empty threat of their original religion, newly anointed Christians begin to join the new religion. The mission’s ranks soon become populated by citizens who were ostracized from the village for various reasons and who chose to build their own community under the auspices of the church. Yet, in the example of Nwoye, conversion requires sacrifice. Disowned by Okonkwo, Nwoye decides to attend the Christian mission school to learn reading and writing. Later, when asked by Obierika about Okonkwo, Nwoye responds: “I don’t know. He is not my father.”³¹ Nwoye would return to his mother and siblings to convert them, but, unlike Nwamgba’s strained but intact relationship with Michael in “The Headstrong Historian,” Nwoye’s severance from his father is permanent.

Amanda Anderson argues that the reconfigurations of contemporary cosmopolitanism spring from a broad, humanist sensibility: “Cosmopolitanism is a flexible term, whose forms of detachment and multiple affiliation can be variously articulated and variously motivated. In general, cosmopolitanism endorses reflective distance from one’s cultural affiliations, a broad understanding of other cultures and customs, and a belief in universal humanity.”³² Adichie’s fiction, and her intertextual dialogue with Achebe, suggests a qualified view on this idea. In *Americanah*, for instance, the primary character Ifemelu, a Nigerian expatriate and successful “race blogger,” visits a New Jersey salon staffed by a coterie of pan-African immigrant women. There, she meets Kelsey, a young white woman who wants to have her hair braided. Kelsey will soon be traveling to Africa and she’s reading books to get ready. “Everybody recommended *Things Fall Apart*,” she tells Ifemelu, “which I read in high school. It’s very good but sort of quaint, right? I mean like it didn’t help me understand modern Africa.”³³ Ifemelu says nothing in response. In this droll and pedantic reference, which is meant to imply, by the same logic, that one couldn’t possibly learn much about modern England by reading Shakespeare, or France by reading Proust, Adichie leaves open for inquiry the question of how Achebe’s world relates to our own.

Kelsey might consider her foreign adventures and seeming curiosity to be cosmopolitan, but Ifemelu sees only the naïve nationalism of liberal Americans whose leisure travels to Africa are for the most part self-aggrandizing. Indeed, for Hannerz, “tourists are not participants,” and therefore shouldn’t be mistaken for cosmopolitans, as they don’t seek to engage in cultural relationships.³⁴ Despite the dismissive judgment Ifemelu—and Adichie—levels on Kelsey, the extent to which each character sees herself as more authentically “at home in the world” is ambiguous. Moreover, the women who work at the salon, a claustrophobic, decidedly gendered place, are variously from Senegal and Mali. They, too, by Hannerz’s standard, are not cosmopolitans; they are exiles. Their concerns, apart from struggling to make a living in the United States, are largely centered on their previous lives in Africa or the lives being lived at home in their absence. For ordinary labor migrants, Hannerz argues, “going away may be, ideally, home plus a higher income; often the involvement with another culture is not a fringe benefit but a necessary cost, to be kept as low as possible.”³⁵ This scene from *Americanah* demonstrates Adichie’s deployment of literary and cultural debates into a series of quotidian events. In another, more nimble mode, the highly fraught gradations of affiliation, detachment, and faith in “The Headstrong Historian”—in particular the transformations of Michael and Grace—resonate with *Things Fall Apart*, disproving Kelsey’s opinion that nothing can be learned from older narratives about modern Africa.

My Name Will Not Be Lost

In the final paragraphs of “The Headstrong Historian,” Adichie introduces an insistent rhythm: nearly every sentence begins with “It was Grace,” as a way to cover several decades in the life of Nwamgba’s granddaughter. Little over two pages in length, this sequence alone is a finely etched character study set against a backdrop with the reach of a novel. It was Grace who, through a precocious resistance to mission teachers, university professors, and George Chikadibia, her Cambridge-educated husband, becomes the enlightened, pragmatic historian. It was Grace who questions the “sanctimonies, the dour certainties” of her father and of men such

as the “eminent” scholar Mr. Gboyega, a “chocolate-skinned Nigerian” and expert on the British Empire, who, in 1950, resigns from teaching at the University College in Ibadan when West African history is added to the curriculum, “because he was appalled that African history would even be considered a subject.”³⁶ Ringing out with calm assurance, this invocation enfolds Grace into the ambivalent, often turbulent, years on either side of Nigerian independence. Here, the past is reactivated and reviewed for its absurdities and tragedies, for its potential lessons, and for its regenerative possibilities.

The complex layering of historical and personal time, together with the rhetorical ascension of the closing lines, evinces what Homi Bhabha refers to as “a time of gathering.” For Bhabha, such time is defined by “gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other words lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present.”³⁷ The action of “gathering the present” is the work of cosmopolitan temporality, and the vocation of Grace, who writes both a revised history of Nigeria, as well as “reports for international organizations about commonplace things.”³⁸ Grace, the Janus-faced historian, looks forward by looking backward. To arrive at the amalgam of the present, however, it’s necessary to review the signs—the discourses, the other worlds—enlivened by the unexpected tonal shift in Adichie’s otherwise contemplative, highly descriptive narrative. In these lists, brought forth in a reportorial but suspenseful style, time is restless and briefly unhinged.

At Grace’s birth, convinced that she is the spirit of Obierika returned, Nwamgba renames her granddaughter Afamefuna, meaning “My Name Will Not Be Lost.” Nwamgba takes great pleasure in Grace’s interest in learning poetry and stories, but she is concerned that school will diminish her “fighting spirit.”³⁹ With Grace’s departure, Nwamgba soon feels as if “a lamp had been blown out,” and before dying, “before she joined the ancestors,” she desires only to see Grace once more.⁴⁰ Nwamgba’s story comes to an end when Grace, as a teenager, leaves for boarding school. The concurrence of Grace’s return to visit Nwamgba on her deathbed, and the reference to “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria” in her schoolbag, eases the narrative into the conditional tense:

It was Grace who would read about these savages, titillated by their curious and meaningless customs, not connecting them to herself until her teacher, Sister Maureen, told her she could not refer to the call-and-response her grandmother had taught her as poetry because primitive tribes did not have poetry. It was Grace who would laugh loudly until Sister Maureen took her to detention and then summoned her father, who slapped Grace in front of the teachers to show them how well he disciplined his children.⁴¹

But Sister Maureen’s remedial instruction has the opposite effect on Grace, whose early distrust of imposed history shows a nascent impulse to believe in her own cultural integrity.

Remembering the oddities of her early education, the mischaracterization of Nigerians, the incomprehensible textbook terms such as “wallpaper” and “dandelions,” Grace draws critical insight from reflecting, with a measure of distance and detachment, on the world in which she was raised.

In a similar way, the distortions of pre-independence university life in Nigeria, where African history is seen as an irrelevant subject, instill in Grace a determination to define who she is on her own terms. “It was Grace who would begin to rethink her own schooling—how

lustily she had sung, on Empire Day, ‘God bless our Gracious King. Send him victorious, happy and glorious. Long to reign over us.’”⁴² To recall the unquestioned repetition of this hymn, a memory subjected to scrutiny in adulthood, is not simply to reconsider an anodyne, youthful habit with the shame or insight provided by age. The song speaks of a political superstructure. Searching her past, Grace finds that the lustily sung songs, the odes to Empire, sound dissonant. The revelation is striking: what was learned by heart has to be unlearned by the mind; what was taken for granted has to be taken apart. It is only within these reemerging memories, which also represent the collision of colonial and Nigerian frames of reference, that a new history can be imagined.

For a woman who is naturally curious, who spends her life among books and academics, Grace is pragmatic: her righteousness finds a voice in history texts and clearheaded policy recommendations. Throughout her career, Grace’s connection to Nwamgba, who represents a rooted, perhaps idealized vision of the past, is an enduring and inspiring presence. Driving back from a visit to her aging father, “Grace would be haunted by the image of a destroyed village and would go to London and to Paris and to Onicha, sifting through moldy files in archives, reimagining the lives and smells of her grandmother’s world, for the book she would write called *Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria*.”⁴³

With her strident title, Grace takes possession of Nigerian history, and reinstates Nwamgba, who would otherwise have been dismissed, together with her call-and-response poetry, as “primitive.” The words “rethink,” “reimagine,” and “realize” connote a cosmopolitan engagement with time. Even as *Pacifying with Bullets* implies violence, with the momentum of Adichie’s sentences and within the context of reconfiguring social identity—including on behalf of such figures as Nwamgba, who were left behind—the reclaimed history is also a triumphant corrective.

To utilize a term from Homi Bhabha, Grace is a “vernacular cosmopolitan,” one who “makes a tryst with cultural translation as an act of survival,” and whose specific and local histories, often threatened and repressed, are inserted “between the lines of dominant cultural practices.”⁴⁴ Daria Tunca perceptively notes that the indefinite article in *A Reclaimed History* “suggests that her vision is only one among others”—and Grace’s humble, but assertive, work leads the way for these other texts to be written.⁴⁵ Whether or not *Pacifying with Bullets* would offer to all readers a coherent vision of national culture, the text is nonetheless informed by cosmopolitan temporality, by and between the multiple archives of Europe and Nigeria, by remembered and reimagined stories, by the Janus-faced worldview of a determined historian working in a moment of emergent nationalism.

In his discussion of comparative cosmopolitanisms, Robbins argues that instead of defining cosmopolitanism through its falsely universalist aspirations, “one can embrace it as an impulse to knowledge that is shared with others, a striving to transcend partiality that is itself partial, but no more so than the similar cognitive strivings of many diverse peoples.”⁴⁶ Grace has that “impulse to knowledge” and the tenacity to educate others. She speaks to “solemn-faced people at conferences about the Ijaw and Ibibio and Igbo and Efik peoples of Southern Nigeria,” imagining Nwamgba “looking on and chuckling with great amusement”—amusement because Grace is not offering abstract political solutions, but drawing upon what Nwamgba would consider obvious knowledge. Grace, who grows old in Lagos, is not so much an elite citizen of

the world as a cosmopolitan intermediary. Nonetheless, Adichie describes Grace's research into Nigerian history, and her subsequent position in society, as worldly. The privileged status conferred upon Grace, as a prize-winning academic, is a consequence not wholly of her travels, but her culturally introspective work: her writing.

Tunca, Heather Hewitt, and Eve Eisenberg, among others, have each closely analyzed the intertextual relations, and shared literary heritage, between Adichie and Achebe. Adichie's fictional and nonfictional meditations on Achebe, as much as they honor the elder writer and the worlds he imagined, also represent the fallibilism Appiah describes—the sense that knowledge is imperfect. In her discussion on Grace's rewriting of history, Eisenberg considers "The Headstrong Historian" to be

a kind of literary thought experiment, a venue within which to consider the roles and effects of reading, writing, and recuperative rewriting; to think not only about Afemefuna/Grace's project of remembering, but also about Achebe's project in *Things Fall Apart*; and also, self-reflexively, to consider Adichie's own place as a writer who takes up a pen in a literary world profoundly imprinted by Achebe—his oeuvre and his extra-fictional statements about why he wrote his most famous work.⁴⁷

The effect of working across historical distance—and the open-minded insight gained from redefining the past and reinvigorating the present—is distinctly the work of cosmopolitan temporality: this is the work of Grace, the fictional historian, and also of Adichie herself, who looks backward to look ahead. But the territory cleared and defined by Achebe for the modern African novel is not immune from criticism. Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* to confront both the literary stereotypes of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* and *Mister Johnson* as well as, in Tunca's view, the "historiographical blanks" of Africa in world literature. Tunca identifies Adichie's preoccupation with Achebe as a form of appropriation, but one with a gendered angle. In positioning "The Headstrong Historian" from Nwamgba's, and later Grace's, perspective, "Adichie erases some of the blind spots of Achebe's narrative, empowering women in the process."⁴⁸

A multi-generational story, "The Headstrong Historian" elaborates upon the idea of one's home, and homeland, in personal, cultural, and historical modes. Home is the place from which one leaves to gain knowledge, and the place to which one returns—physically and in memory—with changed and challenged perspectives. By looking homeward, that is, backward into her grandmother's time, toward a place of perceived certainty, Grace is able to distance herself from her parents, whose stultifying appeasement of colonial missionaries would seek to efface the rich traditions and systems of value held firmly in belief by Nwamgba. Although Grace doesn't separate herself entirely from Michael, in the way Nwoye must sever ties with Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Adichie offers no recuperative vision between father and daughter, other than a kiss goodbye when in old age his health fails.

The lineage, the mythological homeland, to which Grace seeks connection is Nwamgba's, hence her desire to "reimagine" the "lives and smells" of that world. Hewitt considers Adichie, as a black woman writer, part of a broader transnational literary tradition, which "enables us to see the intricacy of its intertextual connections." In Hewitt's view, complementing Tunca's sense that Adichie seeks to redress historiographical blanks, the act of writing allows the author "to

transcend the boundaries of others' making, to create connections where none existed before."⁴⁹ Intertextuality, in Adichie's fiction, is not a pattern of reference for its own, purely aesthetic performance, but an active process of reconnection—of reclaiming a home and a heritage. At her grandmother's home, Grace is at home in the world.

In the later years of her life, Grace, feeling "an old rootlessness," goes to the courthouse in Lagos and changes her name to Afamefuna—"My Name Will Not Be Lost." With this decisive act of personal reclamation, Grace seeks to resolve the tension of living in and through epochs of change and distortion, settling affirmatively on a name from the past, and bringing that very name into the future. But, this future is an intellectual one: Grace hasn't had any children; instead, her books, her "reports for international organizations" are her procreation. Inspired by her grandmother's poetry, but troubled by the lacunae in Nigeria history, she has found success in the academy. Still, as "Grace," she is unsettled. In this, the final action of "The Headstrong Historian," Eisenberg sees a contemplative melancholy:

None of the headstrong historian's writing can bring back what has been lost in the colonial encounter—the 'roots' that have been severed. Remembering history may be a worthy enterprise, but it cannot restore lost lives, lost generations—it cannot 're-member' the body, cannot put the strong 'head' back together with lost 'roots.' There are limits, in this story, to what corrective rewriting can be expected to do; and, because the story is itself a metonym of *Things Fall Apart*, there is also an implicit critique of Achebe's canonical novel and its political efficacy—or, more precisely, a critique of the metanarrative that has sprung up around that novel and Achebe himself, the metanarrative of the literary text as the restorer of lost worlds.⁵⁰

But how can the "political efficacy" of a literary text possibly be measured? To judge by Adichie's international celebrity, by the embrace and promotion of her fiction at the highest levels of the publishing establishment, it's possible to see, in "The Headstrong Historian," a world restored. Or if not one world, Adichie offers a text for making worlds anew. Such a text is the product of a cosmopolitan worldview, a consciousness that is drawn to the archives, reaches across generations, and, critically, transforms memories of one time into the literature of another.

Heralded by the incantatory rhythm of the penultimate paragraph, "The Headstrong Historian," having traversed virtually the whole of Grace's life, returns to Nwambga. On that day, when Grace visits from school, she "was not contemplating her future. She simply held her grandmother's hand, the palm thickened from years of making pottery."⁵¹ In this disarming conclusion, Adichie proposes a vision of Grace and Nwambga as old women at the same time. Connected by the threads of memory, and following the long recital of Grace's awakening, it's impossible not to imagine this sentence delivering two dimensions of time simultaneously: first, the physical action of Grace's visit as a teenager; and second, in her older years, Grace's indelible image of Nwambga and herself. Such an image doesn't recede into history; it is the material of history. Cosmopolitan temporality inhabits that space between lived realities and remembered visions, between the impulses of contemporary life and the guidance of the ancestors. "The Headstrong Historian," therefore, illustrates how, at the confluence of multiple

generations in a country where contested versions of the national story are told and retold, a name is not lost, and a new but somehow recognizable voice can be heard.

Notes

- 1 Adichie 2009, p. 217.
- 2 Achebe 1994, p. 209.
- 3 Adichie 2009, p. 216.
- 4 Achebe 2009, p. 78.
- 5 Adichie 2009, p. 218.
- 6 Achebe 2009, p. 89.
- 7 Ibid., pp. 61, 66.
- 8 Dharwadker 2001, p. 2.
- 9 Robbins 1992, p. 171.
- 10 Robbins 1998, p. 4.
- 11 Ibid., p. 2.
- 12 Clifford 1998, p. 34.
- 13 Appiah 2006.
- 14 Adichie 2009, p. 198.
- 15 Ibid., p. 201.
- 16 Hannerz 1990, p. 239.
- 17 Adichie, 2009, pp. 204-05.
- 18 Ibid., p. 206.
- 19 Ibid., p. 207.
- 20 Ibid., p. 211.
- 21 Ibid., p. 212.
- 22 Tunca 2012.
- 23 Achebe 1994, pp. 5, 51.
- 24 Achebe and Brooks 1994.
- 25 Achebe 1994, p. 182.
- 26 Ibid., p. 147.
- 27 Ibid., p. 181.
- 28 Adichie, 2009, p. 209.
- 29 Ibid., p. 212.
- 30 Achebe, 1994, p. 151.
- 31 Achebe 1995, pp. 144, 152.
- 32 Anderson 1998, p. 267.
- 33 Adichie 2013, p. 233.
- 34 Hannerz 1990, p. 242.
- 35 Ibid., p. 243.
- 36 Adichie 2009, p. 216.
- 37 Bhabha 1994, p. 199.

- 38 Adichie 2009, p. 218.
- 39 Ibid., p. 215.
- 40 Ibid., p. 215.
- 41 Ibid., p. 216.
- 42 Ibid., p. 217.
- 43 Ibid., p. 217.
- 44 Bhabha 2000, p. 139.
- 45 Tunca 2012, p. 245.
- 46 Robbins 1992, p. 181.
- 47 Eisenberg 2013, p. 20.
- 48 Tunca 2012, p. 239.
- 49 Hewett 2005, p. 87.
- 50 Eisenberg 2013, p. 21.
- 51 Adichie, 2009, p. 217.

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[Pagination in footnotes here refers to the reproduction of this essay at https://www.academia.edu/2109288/Appropriating_Achebe_Chimamanda_Ngozi_Adichies_Purple_Hibiscus_and_The_Headstrong_Historian_; accessed 18 September 2015]