

“The Trauma of a Diminished Existence”: Chinua Achebe Revisited¹

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“Today, things have changed a lot, but it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe.”
—Chinua Achebe

At the Crossroads of Cultures

In *Home and Exile*, Chinua Achebe defines his writings as part of a “process of re-storying peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession” (79), his social and political role amounting to a relentless effort “to help [his] society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement” (*Morning* 71-72).² For his critics, Achebe’s chief importance as an African writer resides precisely in this capacity to produce a counter-narrative to the colonial epistemology and to reinvent African cultures, ultimately contributing to the reeducation of African peoples.³ Simon Gikandi, for example, affirms

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² Throughout this work, the term “trauma” should be understood in its basic psychoanalytic meaning. As Cathy Carath points out, “the returning traumatic dream startles Freud because it cannot be understood in terms of any wish or unconscious meaning, but is, purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits. Indeed, modern analysts as well have remarked on the surprising *literality* and nonsymbolic nature of traumatic dreams and flashbacks, which resist cure to the extent that they remain, precisely, literal. It is this *literality* and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points toward its enigmatic core: the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence, that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event ... The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, 231.

³ See for instance, Bernth Lindfors’ introduction to *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, ed. Bernth Lindfors, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1977. For Lindfors, Achebe “is Africa’s most important novelist”: “He often has been called the inventor of the African novel, and though he modestly denies the title, it is true that modern African literature would not have flowered so rapidly and spectacularly had he not led the way by telling Africa’s story from a distinctively African point of view” (x). See also Umelo Ojinmah’s *Chinua Achebe: New Perspectives*, Ibadan, Spectrum Books Limited, 1991, and *Research in African Literatures: Nationalism*, 32, 3 (Fall 2001).

that “Achebe’s seminal status in the history of African literatures lies precisely in his ability to have realized that the novel provided a new way of reorganizing African cultures . . . and his fundamental belief that narrative can indeed propose an alternative world beyond the realities imprisoned in colonial and postcolonial relations of power” (*Reading 3*). Likewise, Chinwe Okechukwu says that the relevance and weight of Achebe’s works stem from their power to produce a new epistemological framework from which to understand African cultures. Okechukwu focuses specifically on the epistemic and persuasive “power of oratory” that remains constant through Achebe’s fiction and whose ultimate purpose is the education of African peoples (141). In short, Achebe’s appropriation of the language of the colonizer seems to have opened a path of new possibilities for the production of African literatures, one which was supposedly able to transform the “Western” imaginary about Africa and to offer a necessary alternative to the colonial library. One might ask, however, the extent to which a text that is written in the English language, whose official use in Africa’s former British colonies has turned out to be a force of social, political and linguistic exclusion, is able to produce the social and psychological effects often attributed to Achebe’s literary achievements. The question has been tirelessly posed, of course, but is still far from being answered in a satisfactory way.

In this paper I will argue that Achebe’s justifications for his use of English can only be sustained on the grounds that fundamental issues involving the language question in sub-Saharan Africa remain traumatically and ideologically unspoken. Ideology must be understood here from a Marxist perspective as long as its possible opposite (the critique of ideology) is not taken for granted as an ultimate truth, but rather, in Peter Hulme’s words, as “a small and relative and provisional truth, one that eschews the naivety of any supposedly *direct* access to reality but claims an explanatory superiority over its rival versions, particularly since it includes within its analysis an explanation of why those rival claims might appear plausible” (8). As Hulme explains, “one of the ways in which ideologies work is by passing off partial accounts as the whole story,” accounts which are taken as “common sense, the natural, and even reality itself.” In the process, history is repressed either through denial or through a “historical alibi” (15).

It is not my intention, therefore, to take sides in any kind of identity politics debate on whether “authentic” African literature has to be written in African languages. Nor am I concerned with the fortification of a national culture—let alone the constitution of a sense of Africanness—through the production of African literatures in indigenous languages. Building on Hulme’s definition, this paper proposes a critique of ideology of Achebe’s discussions on the language question so as to disclose a few aspects of his uneasy relationship with the language and the culture of the colonizer. As critics have pointed out, the overriding concern with Anglo-American racism towards Africa as well as the excessive valorization of the English language characterize a problem typical of a conflicted and

traumatized African intellectual elite, which, in its struggle to affirm an African identity, needs to be the object of constant approval from the metropolitan culture. In this respect, Moradewun Adejunmobi rightly asserts that “the concern with Africanness . . . almost always involves implicit acknowledgement of the non-African gaze” (590). In Achebe’s discussions on colonialism, this conflicting relationship with the metropolis is clearly identified through his repetitive pleas for being seen, recognized, and respected by the “West.” This vexed expectation as well as the author’s relationship with the English language, it will be argued, seem less the result of a genuine concern with the empowerment of African peoples than the expression of a condition that could be best described in terms of what Gregory Castle called “the deracinated native intellectual,” that is, the intellectual who became alienated from his/her local culture and nurtures ambiguous feelings of resentment, contempt, and admiration for the metropolis, from which he/she also expects recognition (534). This problematic aspect in Achebe’s works can be better understood through a careful analysis of the place of enunciation from which he speaks, namely, from the “crossroads of cultures” the writer claimed to have partially overcome through an act of “reconciliation” and “atonement” with his past (*Morning* 123). As I hope this discussion will show, despite his claims, Achebe is still very much imprisoned in the crossroads of two cultures, not so much as a victim of the colonial and post-colonial predicament, but as a representative of what Kwame Appiah has called a “comprador intelligentsia,” that is, “a relatively small, ‘Western’-style, ‘Western’-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery” (62): “in the ‘West’ they are known through the Africa they offer, their compatriots know them both through the ‘West’ they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa” (63). At this crossroads of cultures Achebe assumes then a double role: he is at the same time a prey to the postcolonial market, of which he is also a profiteer, and a resented son who cannot find the means to disengage himself from the imperial eye. His defense of the use of English for the production of African literatures springs, it seems to me, from this often denied problematic relationship with Anglo-American cultures, which is ultimately what allows him to overlook, in his numerous discussions on the language question, the social and political implications of the hegemony of English in African countries and elsewhere in the world.

Negotiating Guilt or The Trauma Reconsidered

In an interview with Bill Moyers, after being asked about how he would like America to see Africa, Achebe remarked that he would like the “West”

to see Africa as a continent of people—just people, not some strange beings that demand a special kind of treatment. If you accept Africans as people, then you listen to them . . . If you took Africa seriously as a continent of people, you would listen . . . That’s what I want to see changed. The traditional attitude of Europe and the West is that Africa is a continent of children. A man as powerful and

enlightened as Albert Schweitzer was still able to say, “The black people are my brothers—but my junior brothers.” We’re not anybody’s junior brothers. (335)

Moyers finally questions the writer about what Africa has to say to the world. Achebe’s response comprises a sequence of repetitive assertions on African’s positive identity: “First of all, we are people. We are not funny beings . . . I would simply say: Look at Africa as a continent of people. They are not devils, they are not angels, they’re just people. And listen to them. We have done a lot of listening ourselves” (343). The emphasis on African’s ability to speak for themselves is in fact a recurrent narrative strategy in many of Achebe’s essays. In “Impediments to Dialogue Between North and South,” he contends that “because of the myths created by the white man to dehumanize the Negro in the course of the last four hundred years . . . the white man has been talking and talking and never listening because he imagines he has been talking to a dumb beast” (*Hopes* 15). Also, as he questioned Wole Soyinka’s criticism on the negritude movement—Soyinka’s claim that a tiger does not talk “tigritude”—Achebe affirmed “The Negro talks! And talking is a measure of his humanity” (*Hopes* 16).

It is undeniable that the “Western” look and the colonial encounter have shaped, transformed, and domesticated African cultures. Indeed, they have created a problematic and essentialist idea of Africa that is only reinforced, today, by the power of financial capital.⁴ In this context, Africa has many times been seen and represented as a continent of miserable, homogeneous people whose exotic cultural artifacts serve merely as interesting pieces to be exhibited in museums and expositions in Europe and North America. Achebe’s fixation about changing the Anglo-American look turns out to be, however, an unproductive strategy in face of the complexities involved in the processes of linguistic, cultural, political, and economic domination that still prevail on the African continent. In a sense, it only reveals the writer’s ambiguous relationship with the “West,” that is, his need to be acknowledged by the very culture that he confronts and criticizes throughout his works. This means to say that, in trying to assert his dignity and significance to the metropolis, Achebe ends up, paradoxically, honoring and worshipping the “West,” whose opinion about Africa seems to count for him as constitutive of his own identity: “we are people,” “listen to them,” “we are not funny beings,” “see Africa as a continent of people,” “we’re not anybody’s junior

⁴ I borrow from Peter Rigby’s definition of Africa in terms of “the most *general* conditions of African history: the history in which Africa has seen the transformation that occurred before imperialist penetration, the depredations of the period immediately preceding a colonial penetration, and the colonial period itself; and the postcolonial recent past, as well as the more specific and localized historicities, forms of thought and practice related to one or more African peoples. *None* of the latter can be conceived of as ‘closed systems,’ since they have never, at any period, been truly isolated from one another” (259). See “Practical Ideology and Ideological Practice: On African Episteme and Marxian Problematic—Iparakuyo Maasai Transformations.” Ed. V.Y. Mudimbe. *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness, 1947-1987*. London: The University of Chicago, 1992. 257-300.

brothers,” “listen to them” “we are not children,” “they are not devils.” The constant shift from “we” to “them/they” is in itself a symptom of Achebe’s position at the crossroads of two cultures. As part of the collective “we,” Achebe is the target of discrimination and racism. From this perspective he would be seen, to use his own words, not as a person, but as a funny being, a devil, or at best, as one of Americans’ or Europeans’ junior brothers. On the other hand, by identifying himself with the Americans, and by speaking their language, Achebe becomes a counselor who paternalistically instructs them how to see and represent Africans. This paradox discloses not only the deracinated intellectual’s relationship of love and hatred with Anglo-American cultures, but also, and most importantly, a sense of guilt caused by the tension between his alleged social responsibility and his longing to be intimately close to the metropolis. One of the means to negotiate this guilt is to define the ultimate cause of his writing career in English as a generalized social trauma caused by colonialism.

Roberto Schwarz’s analysis on Brazilian society might be useful here as it deals with the dilemmas haunting the XIX century Brazilian intellectual. In *Misplaced Ideas*, Schwarz questions the notion, widely disseminated among Brazilian intellectuals and politicians in the XIX century, according to which Brazilian culture was essentially imitative and inauthentic. For Schwarz, the idea of an imitative culture sprang, in fact, from a discomfort of the dominant class with the clash between the liberal ideas it imported from the metropolis and the country’s material reality, with growing poverty, slavery, and high levels of illiteracy. The discomfort was caused by the fact that only the elite copied from the metropolis, which evinced the separation between the dominant classes and the masses of people. By creating a sense of a generalized copied culture, the dominant class could ultimately project its uneasiness onto the entire nation, as if all Brazilians suffered from the same anxiety, thus obviating the separation (11). Schwarz’s analysis uncovers a dilemma that is not strange to Achebe’s fractured locus of enunciation, a problem that was explained by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o with respect to the African intellectual who writes in European languages. According to Ngũgĩ, African literatures written in European languages helped the elite in African countries at a certain point in history to negotiate their identity vis-à-vis the metropolitan and the local cultures. As he points out, the need to shape and affirm an African identity belonged to a certain political and intellectual class, which was not only concerned with creating an African literature but also with safeguarding an image of Africa capable of countervailing Europe’s racism and the depreciatory ways in which Africans had been represented by the colonialist narratives (20-21).⁵ As Ngũgĩ puts it,

⁵ In “The Problem with English Literature: Canonicity, Citizenship, and the Idea of Africa,” A. O. Amoko claims that the abolition of the English department in what came to be known as the Nairobi revolution, and in which Ngũgĩ played an important part, was both a “revolutionary and retrogressive” movement: on the one hand it represented a successful attempt to disengage the notion of aesthetics from “Englishness;” on the other, it fostered the creation of a discourse on “African-ness,” which became the new principle guiding the study of literature. As Amoko explains, the abolition of the department involved the construction of a sense of national unity

Achebe's remarks in "The Novelist as Teacher" perfectly epitomize this petty-bourgeois mentality behind the promotion of the idea of Africanness. Achebe's text reads: "If I were God I would regard as the very worst our acceptance . . . of racial inferiority. It is too late in the day to get worked up about it or to blame others, much as they may deserve such blame and condemnation. What we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us" (qtd. in Ngũgĩ 33). Ngũgĩ's response locates Achebe's obsession with the question of racial inferiority within the problematic that involves, as in Schwarz, the class separation between the people and the educated bourgeois intellectual: "Since the peasant and the worker had never really had any doubts about their Africanness, the reference could only have been to the 'educated' or the petty-bourgeois African" (33).

Caught in a conflicting relationship with the "Western" imaginary, and having to deal with feelings of rancor and resentment on the one hand, and a desire for recognition on the other, Achebe defines "the trauma of a diminished existence" (*Home* 70) as a social problem for which his literature is, in part, the cure: "here [that is, in his attempts to appease the traumas of colonialism] I think my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking Africans can escape the pain of the wound in our soul" (*Morning* 71-72). But both the persisting trauma and its antidote (the ability to talk back to the colonizer) ultimately expose the Anglophone writer's fear of being inferior and capable only of copying. One of the means employed to, at least apparently, overcome this problem is to produce a literature in English, whose target audience is mostly outside Africa. A literature, in other words, which is produced in order to help a certain class of writers to negotiate their past and construct a sense of identity capable somehow of placating the traumas of colonization.⁶ In short, a comprador literature, which has not only invented Africa for the "West" but, as Gikandi pointed out somewhere, has produced a sense

through the promotion of a legitimate African and black aesthetics. In this sense, students were "interpellated" as "ethnic subjects, then citizens of an actually existing postcolonial nation-state, then citizens of an imaginary pan-African nation, and finally, full-fledged citizens of a utopic black nation" (33). From this perspective, one could argue that Ngũgĩ has, to a certain extent, also been part of a "petty-bourgeoisie," which was very much preoccupied in creating a "literary frame of references" that could add confidence to African writers. Ngũgĩ's position at the Nairobi revolution reveals, in a sense, his own desire to "confront the racist bigotry of Europe" by creating a space for the production of a "truly" national, pan-African, and black literature that could counteract the Englishness which had prevailed in African universities for so long. This was also a desire to create a sense of Africanness, as Amoko points out, which was based on the very principles guiding the formation of a colonial, anthropological library. See *Research in African Literatures* 32, 4 (2001): 19-43.

⁶ The term class should be understood here in two basic senses as proposed by Raymond Williams. When referring to 'class of intellectuals/writers,' the term should be understood as "a relative social position, by birth or mobility" and as "an economic category, including all who are objectively in that economic situation." But the term will also be applied to indicate a social formation, implying the existence of "social, political, and cultural organization." See *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Revised Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. 69.

of the “African culture as it is now circulated within the institutions of interpretation” (“Chinua Achebe” 7).

The Language Question and the Place of Education: Contrasting Views

Achebe’s politics of language can be better understood in the context of the many political positions on the language question in Africa. As is well known, Achebe is not alone in his defense of English. The hegemonic status of European languages is endorsed by numerous African writers, critics and politicians who consider their use in African countries, official or otherwise, as an inevitable and necessary pathway leading to the modernization of the continent and its urgent integration into the contemporary/globalized world. There are also those who ponder on the need to acknowledge the cultural and personal gains of the contact with modern languages. This is the case, for example, of Abiola Irele’s famous “In Praise of Alienation,” whose main arguments I would like to recall. In his view, Africans are profoundly ambivalent in relation to Europe, being simultaneously resentful of the alienation caused by colonialism—and therefore willing to recover a lost African identity—and incurably affected by European modernity and by what is usually called “Western” culture. For Irele, it is crucial that Africans overcome this ambivalence by replacing that pathological alienation with a positive one. In other words, the negative alienation provoked by colonialism should be transcended not through a return to tradition, but through a total capitulation to European modernity: “In the historical context of present African development, we may now ask, Alienation for what, and in what direction? I will answer that question unequivocally: as a matter of practical necessity, we have no choice but in the direction of Western culture and civilization” (215).

Irele sees Africa’s belatedness as the result of “the inability of our [Africans] traditional world concept to break free from the prison of the mythopoetic imagination” (216-217). Therefore, “while we [Africans] have been content to celebrate the universe, Western man has been engaged in analyzing it as well” (217). This leads Irele to conclude that “the terrible truth of our [African] colonial experience . . . is that we were victims of the European’s developed sense of method. We were overwhelmed, in fact, by the objective force of the deductive people” (217-218). Africa’s belatedness, then, would be transcended by what he calls a “revolution of the [African] mind,” a revolution that “can be brought about by an assiduous cultivation and internalization of those values enshrined in the scientific method—organization, discipline, order, and, not least, imagination” (218). He concludes his argument with a brief justification of his involvement with modern language studies, which he sees as arising from his “conviction [in] the universality of human experience”:

To study another language is to assume that you will get to understand it, and in the perspective of modern language studies that the culture it reflects can speak to your mind and imagination in ways which may be different from those of your original culture but which can still be meaningful to you. In fact, all human

history confirms this assumption: language and culture know no boundary, at least not significantly, and the reality of the contemporary world, the “global village” in the expression sent into circulation by Marshall McLuhan and now become current, has tended to reinforce our awareness of a common humanity. (223)

Irele’s affirmation of modernity as a value capable of redeeming Africa from its backwardness is problematic because it ignores what one might call the dark side of modernity. His Hegelian notion of positive alienation, that is, “a movement out of the self” that propitiates an encounter with new and evolutionary possibilities, leads him to conceptualize modernity as a stage of the universal *geist*, of which colonialism and enslavement are unavoidable phases (Irele reminds us that Europe was once enslaved and culturally dispossessed by the Romans just as Africans were later to be colonized by Europeans). Two questions should be asked at this point. First, is it possible to attribute a single definition to the notion of European modernity? In other words, was European modernity a unified and unproblematic phenomenon? Second, what aspects of modernity are left unsaid when it is taken as an evolutionary stage to which anyone should aspire? Are there any ideological implications in keeping hold of such a definition? I will answer these questions by turning to two emblematic texts which address the crisis of modernity.

In “The End of What Modernity?” Immanuel Wallerstein argues that the last five centuries were marked by the existence of not one but two conflicting modernities: the modernity of liberation and the modernity of technology. The former appeared as a reaction to medieval dogmatism and aimed at a true democracy, which would set men free from the constraints of medieval authority. The second modernity, on the other hand, was characterized by a permanent search for technological and scientific development. As he points out, the two modernities were seen as interrelated processes until the end of the XVIII century or, more precisely, until the French Revolution. From that moment on, the modernity of liberation began to be considered as a dangerous movement that had to be stopped at all costs, insofar as its main purpose was to give sovereignty to the masses of men. Wallerstein calls attention to the fact that the conflict between the two modernities has never ceased to exist and was in fact intensified after 1968. In response to his central question (“the end of what modernity?”) he argues that we should all fight for the end of the technological modernity and join the struggle for the liberation of men despite all obstacles.

In Wallerstein’s view, then, modernity can hardly be understood as a unified event. He seems to lose track of the problem, however, by affirming that the movement known today as post-modernity rejects the technological modernity in favor of the emancipatory one.⁷ A more

⁷ For a critical perspective on postmodernism and the condition of post-modernity see, for instance, Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2001; and David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1999.

complex and careful approach to the subject comes from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*. In the chapter entitled “Two Europes, Two Modernities,” the authors disclose three moments in the constitution of modernity, namely, the discovery of the revolutionary plane of immanence, which opposed the transcendental authority of power in the middle ages; the movement that represented a reaction to that discovery; and the foundation of the modern state, whose objective was to eradicate the crisis generated by the collision of those two views and finally contain the emergent forces (70). Hardt and Negri’s argument differs from Wallerstein’s insofar as it defines the second movement (or the second modernity) as a consequence of the first, or rather, as a social, political, and cultural reaction to the discovery of the plane of immanence and its revolutionary potential.⁸ The second modernity was then a movement that tried to control the insubordinate forces within Europe. But as it coincided with the discoveries of the Americas, it also stood for the subordination of peoples outside the European domains. As the authors put it, at that particular moment Eurocentrism began: “Eurocentrism was born as a reaction to the potentiality of a newfound human equality; it was the counterrevolution on a global scale” (77). Most of all, the second modernity was a clear attempt to domesticate the plane of immanence and replace the medieval transcendental authority by a new form of transcendence. According to the authors, if the plane of immanence represented a return to men’s inherent capacity to handle worldly affairs without the mediation of any transcendental or divine power, and if it culminated in the realization of a democratic order, the modern state signified, on the other hand, the restoration of transcendence and the taking away of power from the hands of the multitude “by playing on the anxiety and fear of the masses, their desire to reduce the uncertainty of life and increase security” (75). Therefore, “in politics, as in metaphysics, the dominant theme was thus to eliminate the medieval form of transcendence, which only inhibits production and consumption, while maintaining transcendence’s effects of domination in a form adequate to the modes of association and production of the new humanity” (83). This new mode of production was, of course, capitalism, and the sovereignty of the modern state was inseparable from its development and growth. Throughout the book, Hardt and Negri give a detailed account of the repressive forces of the state and its intimate relationship with capitalism. But what should be emphasized at this point is that both Wallerstein and the authors of *Empire* see modernity in a permanent state of crisis, which means to say that the battle between the plane of immanence and the forces acting against it has not yet come to an end, it only acquired a new form, one that is compatible with the present times (*Empire* 90).

There is, then, a dark ambiguity in the core of the concept of modernity that is occluded in Irele’s argument. In defending the

⁸ For an account of the philosophy of immanence see Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. Edwin Curley, vol. 1, Princeton University Press, 1985.

teleological notion of modernity, Irele ignores the material conditions of production of the second European modernity and the existence, in XV century Europe, of the modernity of liberation that has been constantly repressed. In “In Praise of Alienation,” Irele then rejects the negative alienation produced by colonialism only to reaffirm its problematic presence, in a process of sublation, as he resorts to Hegelian idealism. He is therefore trapped by the illusion of a positive alienation capable of replacing the first, which ultimately confirms his affiliation to the premises of Eurocentrism and to the colonialist mentality.

On the other hand, Irele’s resort to humanism in regard to the language question loses sight of some important points raised by postcolonial criticism and by most of the critical theories that have appeared since 1965. What is more, the idea of a “common humanity” falls short of responding to the cultural, political, social, and economic dilemmas and conflicts that inevitably haunt the “global village” and ignores the very question of which ideal of humanity would prevail in a highly asymmetrical and unequal world society such as ours. It also overlooks the positions designated for the world languages within the international division of labor. To argue that “language and culture know no boundary” without recognizing the power relations established through the linguistic divide that determines which languages are dominant and which ones are marginal, the ideological implications of producing a global language, and the role of languages within the cultural market is a highly problematic theoretical position.

In an interview with Abdul-Rasheed Na’Allah, Irele contended that literature “confronts those problems that we face in the real world in an imaginative register. [And] as critics and scholars we must remind ourselves that social commitment is not incompatible with aesthetic value (36).” Yet, when asked about Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s politics of language, Irele blatantly separates one’s language choice from “social commitment”:

You raise a number of issues there. That fundamental one is the relationship of the African writer to the local audience. How does the writer reach this audience if he or she writes in a language foreign to them? Because few Africans can read English or French or Portuguese. That is what Ngugi means when he advocates the use of African languages for our literature. He is thinking primarily of the revolutionary potential of literature and the urgency of getting the message across, making it accessible in the language of the people. I think one can concede the point, but the problem is more complicated than it seems at first. The assumption that literature in African languages is necessarily progressive is false. You can have a literature that is conservative, obscurantist in our languages, in any language. There are great and beautiful works that can have a harmful effect. (36-37)

Here, Irele resorts to a view of language as a vehicle of communication, again isolating it from economic and political constraints. A similar criticism appears in Joseph Mbele, who contends that Ngũgĩ pursues “a non-dialectical view of English” —which is not only the language of the colonizer but the language of the “working masses in England,” as Gĩkũyũ is also the language of “landlords and capitalists,” not mention its capability of bringing differences together

in a post-modern, globalized world (149-150). Any language can be used as an instrument of power and oppression by the dominant classes in society and simultaneously function as an instrument of mass mobilization and interaction. It would be unwise, I believe, to assume that Ngũgĩ is not aware of these issues. However, it is no longer possible to ignore the linguistic divide that configures our world order, and African countries in particular, as well as the economic and political interests involved in such division. There is an economic agenda that determines which languages must be promoted and which ones are to be neglected. As a consequence, the visibility acquired by certain languages is not the natural result of their intrinsic qualities and of their capacity to adjust to the modern world; rather, it is conditioned by the pressures and expansionist necessities of capital. In this respect, by deciding to use and help in the promotion of a certain language one makes a choice that is by no means neutral. Nor does this choice express, as appears to be the case in Irele's text, an uncompromised belief in the commonality of the humankind. Irele's return to humanism is possible, in fact, only insofar as the logic of circulation of contemporary post-industrial capital is occluded. This is particularly problematic in regard to the English language, which, as Fredric Jameson observed, is seen by many today as "the lingua franca of money and power" (59). Also enlightening is Gayatri Spivak's comment on the "contemporary translation industry" that has sustained a linguistic divide, a "bilingualism," between English as a cosmopolitan and all-encompassing language, "the semiotic as such" as she puts it, and, on the other hand, the local "idioms" of Aborigines and subaltern peoples (23).

The problem becomes especially relevant when one considers the language question in sub-Saharan Africa. A legacy of colonialism, the massive use of English as the official language in Africa's former British colonies is largely supported by the neo-colonial policies that still prevail on the continent. As critics have pointed out, the relationship of complicity established between Africa's ruling elite and major financial corporations such as the IMF and the World Bank, an alliance that constitutes the basis of a new regime of oppression and exploitation, not only affects the economic and political sectors in African countries but determines to a great extent their cultural agenda as well as the future of their educational systems. For Ali and Alamin Mazrui, in order to fully understand the present state of affairs in Africa one must take cognizance of the impact caused by the Structural Adjustment Plans (SAPs) imposed on African countries by the IMF and the World Bank. In Africa, the SAPs have had an enormous impact on the countries' educational systems by calling for the privatization of universities, a measure that restricts the number of students to a few who belong to the higher classes in society and who are, not by chance, the most proficient in the European languages. As the authors explain, such a policy strengthens the use of those languages to the detriment of indigenous ones, whose speakers are precisely the lower-class students that have their access to the third level of education hampered (204). The authors also discuss the

intrinsic relationship between the spread of English and the advancement of financial capitalism, showing how this combination determines to a large extent the fortune of African languages:

These effects of the SAPs imposed by the World Bank and the IMF fit perfectly well with the expanding role of the English language as a medium of global capitalism—whether or not there is an explicit reference to this connection as part of a broader agenda of the two Bretton Woods institutions. If the forces of capitalism once provided the unparalleled stimulus for the globalization of English, the language has now become critical for the consolidation of capitalism on a global scale. Within the international capitalist context, the centre has virtually been serving as the ‘proprietor’ while the periphery can be likened more to the labour and consumer dimension of the capitalist equation. And it is the English language which allows the ‘proprietor nations’ of the centre to have contact with each and every ‘consumer nation’ of the periphery in a way that leads only to the increasing consolidation of the global capitalist market. As leading representatives of international capitalism, the World Bank and the IMF can be expected to have a vested interest in this interplay between linguistics and economics, to the detriment of African languages. (204)

These pressures exerted by neo-colonialism on the future of African languages have been dismissed on the basis that Africa cannot dispense with European languages if it is ever to overcome underdevelopment and finally cope with the scientific-technological and communicational boom prompted by modernity and more recently by the phenomenon of globalization. Because there are too many African languages and dialects and since many of them do not exist in written form, it is also common for politicians to claim that Africa’s indigenous languages cannot be efficiently managed or integrated into the countries’ judicial and educational systems; hence, the importance, for example, of adopting a far-reaching and neutral (because not originally associated with any ethnic group) language such as English as the official language in former British colonies.

Such arguments usually ignore, however, the fact that the use of European languages in education and in official domains in Africa is in great part responsible for “high rates of illiteracy . . . large drop-out rates at schools. . . hindrance of mass mobilization” and for “the creation of a language-based elitist class” (Adegbija 97). Access to European languages in Africa is a privilege of the dominant classes, which control the means of production and work in compliance with foreign economic demands. The cultural policies defined by this power elite pose a great threat to the survival of African languages and engender brutal processes of linguistic and social exclusion. It is not surprising, thus, that during the last decades, the language question has become a source of contention among African political parties, non-governmental organizations, publishing houses, churches, intellectuals, and numerous ethnic groups. The debate revolves particularly around the question of whether African languages should be used as the medium of instruction in African schools. Although some countries adopt African languages in the early primary level of education, few extend their use to the full primary or to the secondary levels. According to Ayo Bamgbose, the main arguments opposing the implementation of a policy that would favor the use of African

languages in education are grounded on the persistent idea that African countries need to catch up with modernity, a process that is supposed to be accelerated by the use of European languages; on the high costs involved in the training of teachers, as well as in the development of indigenous languages (which often lack technical terminologies and useful expressions for the representation of the contemporary world) and in the elaboration of adequate materials for a satisfactory learning process; on the proliferation of African languages, many of which have a relatively small number of speakers and do not exist in written form; on the stigmatization of African languages, caused by their long association with backwardness and primitiveness during the colonial period; and, finally, on the social and economic status acquired by European languages in African societies (e.g. competence in European languages is a requirement for certain jobs and positions) (88).

Bamgbose refutes these claims by pointing, first of all, to the inconveniences of educating a child in a foreign language, namely, high drop-out rates (occasioned by the fact that most students are not proficient in European languages, in which the courses are taught), lack of teachers with reasonable competence in European languages, and the fact that primary education is terminal for most children in Africa and not a simple stage to the secondary level as it is intended to be (88). Regarding the question of stigmatization, the author rightly asserts that a socially positive action towards African languages (such as incentive politics that required the knowledge of at least one African language for the occupation of certain jobs) would increase the prestige of African languages among the people.⁹ He sees the eradication of illiteracy as necessarily linked to the use of African languages as the medium of instruction in primary and secondary levels of education and claims that language planning in Africa should pass through a process of democratization. This would involve, of course, the direct participation of the people whose interests it contemplates. It would also include the contribution of intellectuals, writers, non-governmental agencies, as well as social and commercial institutions (112). Policy-making is, however, still very much influenced by colonial policies and restricted to governmental agencies. It remains, therefore, an elite affair:

Closely related to bureaucratic emphasis on language planning is elite domination of policy-making. In a way, it could be said that this is to be expected, since those in power are likely to be members of the educated elite who have attained their positions of power and influence by virtue of their education in the official exoglossic language. The result of this situation is the dominance that this privileged position entails. The elite policy-makers are empowered to the disadvantage of the masses . . . An even insidious aspect of elite dominance is the way members of the elite maintain their hold on power and perpetuate inequality

⁹ Among Bamgbose's proposals for the reformulation of language planning in Africa are the following: that children and adults be instructed in their mother tongues or in the language of their immediate community, already spoken by them as a second language; that children and adults be instructed in an African lingua franca (a national language spoken by a great number of people); that literacy in a European language be part of a post-literacy program (60-66); and that language policy includes implementation strategies (47).

through deliberate policies. Thus, they may pursue policies that seek to limit access to privilege and power by means of a language bar or boundary, preferring a minority official language to a more widely spoken indigenous language. This phenomenon, which has been labeled “elite closure” (Scotton 1990:27), is in evidence in several African countries. (Bangbose 115)

The elite closure phenomenon can be observed not only with respect to politicians but intellectuals as well. As Efurosibina Adegbija reminds us, the fact that mass communication, politics, education and the judicial systems in Africa are still “Western” oriented is, among other factors, a result of creative writers choosing to write in European languages (98). In this particular context, one could argue about the extent to which African writers can/should contribute to the development and enrichment of African indigenous languages and to the promotion of a more democratic and inclusive system of education in their countries. After all, it is not difficult to envisage how, for example, one’s literary production could be included as part of a new curriculum for the primary and secondary levels of education in, say, Kenyan schools, in case a multilingual system of education would ever thrive.¹⁰ Unfortunately, however, as long as the problematic involving “the language of African literatures” continues to be discussed primarily in terms of identity politics, ideologically overlooking the (potentially) social and political functions of African literatures in indigenous languages, the debate, I agree with Adejunmobi, “will probably continue to be voiced and heard primarily in European languages, and in the form of a discourse about Africanness that necessarily fosters the object of its own remonstrations” (594).

What About the Deaf? Achebe and the English Language
Achebe has defined the African novel in terms of three main characteristics: first, “it has to be about Africa,” understood here as a geographical and metaphysical landscape: “a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position”; secondly, it has to be written by a writer, African or not, who shares that view of the world and who speaks from that particular position which we might call African; finally, it has to be written in an African language, which means to say, in any language which is “spoken [and written] by Africans on African soil” (*Hopes* 63). Achebe’s definition of the African novel led him to contest Eldred Jones’ comments, in *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*, on the importance of Wole Soyinka’s novels as he writes about universal dilemmas and addresses a universal audience. This means to say that he (Achebe) should “renounce [his] vision, which . . . is necessarily *local* and *particular*” (*Hopes* 65, italics mine). Implied in Achebe’s contention is the idea that he writes for and about a local audience. This is also one of his main arguments in “The Novelist as Teacher,” in which he claims there is no need for the African writer to have a foreign audience in

¹⁰ I am thinking of literature in Terry Eagleton’s sense, as a discursive practice that has specific functions and is able to produce effects that might corroborate, but also subvert the dominant forces in society. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, London, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 210.

mind. In order to “help [his] society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement,” his novels must be addressed to a local population, who “look[s] at [him] as a teacher” (*Morning* 68). It seems rather contradictory, therefore, that this same novel should be written in a world language, spoken in Nigeria by a minority group that belongs, not surprisingly, to the country’s intellectual, political, and economic elite. Achebe’s writings on the language question in Africa are thus worth examining in detail.

In a 1989 interview with Charles Rowell, Achebe discusses the “special privilege” of English in Nigeria:

The English language has never been close to Igbo, Hausa, or Yoruba anywhere else in the world. So it has to be different, because these other languages and their environment are not inert. They are active, and they are acting on this language which has invaded their territory. And the result of all this complex series of actions and reactions is the language we use. The language I write in. And, therefore, it comes empowered by its experience of the encounter with me. One advantage it has is this: Although it is thus different, it is not so different that you would have to go to school to learn it in America or in India or Kenya or anywhere English is already spoken. So it definitely has certain advantages which we can only ignore to our own disadvantage. It is a world language in a way that Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo are not. There is no way we can change that. Now that is not to say that we should therefore send these other languages to sleep. That’s not what I’m saying. I am saying that we have a very, very complex and dynamic multilingual situation, which we cannot run away from but contain and control. (176-177)

According to Achebe, in the contact with a different language and an alien culture, English “comes empowered by its experience of the encounter with me,” that is, in the process of appropriation, the appropriated language is changed and therefore enriched. The question that should be posed here is, perhaps, why English has to be or should be continuously enriched with words and expressions from other languages. One of the explanations resides in the fact that, being the language of the global market and financial capitalism, not to mention its filiations to England and the US, English has lately assumed a flexible character that allows it to absorb other languages’ vocabulary, accents, rhythms, syntaxes, and expressions—as in the case of Achebe’s novels—while maintaining its identity and autonomy insofar as its legibility is not compromised. This hegemonic character has been, in fact, surprisingly accepted and nurtured in the domains of literary and cultural theory. Karen Barber’s insightful ideas on the literary production in Africa have soundly touched on this problem. In “African-Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism,” Barber contends that the postcolonial criticism of the 1980s and 1990s relegated African-language literature to the background, emphasizing written literature in English as the only available form of expression for the colonized. As she points out, postcolonial criticism has created a world of binarisms that “blocks a properly historical, localized understanding of any scene of colonial and post-Independence literary production in Africa” (3). Barber questions this stereotypical model by analyzing the literary production in Western Nigeria, showing how Yorùbá literature has become an important vehicle for expressing and

representing the people's social and imaginary relations. As she points out, contemporary popular culture in Africa embodies a variety of genres and constitutes a space of "metamorphoses and mutations, in which written texts are performed, performed texts can be given a written recension, and a network of allusions and cross-references enables audiences in whatever state of literacy to access texts in one way or another" (12). She also emphasizes that these works are not aimed at the "West," but address interests, problems, and conflicts of their immediate communities, without having as their main target the so-called post-colonial condition. In this context, she writes, "the model proposed by postcolonial criticism—the model in which colonial glottophagia silences the native until he or she masters and subverts the colonizer's language—is based on a fundamental misconception, almost a will to ignorance" (11).

In this work I want to both acknowledge and expand Barber's criticism. The problem she raises, it seems to me, was nurtured by postcolonial theory as much as it has been sustained and reproduced by African writers who promote the supremacy of English over indigenous African languages, thus reinforcing the linguistic divide between dominant and marginalized tongues. As they believe themselves to be the carriers of a new possibility for the future of Africa and the teachers who will be able to rescue Africans from the damages of the colonial legacy, these writers become complicit with the construction of the "postcolonial Other," whose only choice for cultural resistance, as Barber explains, is the appropriation of the colonizer's language:

To address present-day experience in colonial/post-independence Africa is to write; and to write is to write in English. This was the assumption made by both Commonwealth criticism and its heir, the buoyant type of post-colonial criticism. Its effect was to relegate expression in indigenous languages into a shadowy domain of "oral traditions" belonging properly to the pre-colonial past. The role of oral traditions/indigenous-language repertoires in this model is as a precursor, and more importantly as a pool of linguistic and thematic resources from which the Anglophone writer can draw in order to refashion the English he or she is in the process of appropriating. Indigenous-language expression is consigned to the background, paradoxically by an inflation of its role as a source and resource to the anglophone written tradition. (7)

The strategy of transforming indigenous languages into sources or resources from which the Anglophone African writer borrows elements to enrich the appropriated language obviously aims at never compromising English's intelligibility. As Achebe explains in the passage quoted above, one of the advantages of appropriating a world language is that "[a]lthough it is thus different, *it is not so different* that you would have to go to school to learn it in America or in India or Kenya or anywhere English is already spoken" (italics mine). He is then quick to remark that writers who choose to write in a local language are doing this to their "own disadvantage." After all, the appropriated language is different, "*but not so different*" as to make impossible its commercialization. In other words, the writer, to his own advantage, should modify and subvert the language of the colonizer to

the extent that it is still recognizable to the foreign reader. An important distinction must then be made between the appropriation of English by the diasporic intellectual and those accomplished by the masses of people (mainly in West Africa), which results in Pidgin English. A pidgin can eventually develop into a Creole and later be decreolized, acquiring the features and complexities of a new language (Mazrui 166-167). Pidgin languages are thus important steps for the creation of new indigenous languages and for the promotion of cultural diversity. On the other hand, the kind of appropriation which is espoused by post-colonial writers aims at a permanent reproduction of English, which is only slightly and conveniently modified. This second form of appropriation must then be understood as a reproduction of 'the same,' disguised by means of harmless alterations. The difference between the two kinds of appropriation is thus germane to the functions proper to each appropriated language: one connected to the daily life of the people and the other directed to a foreign, globalized audience and to an internal African intellectual elite. In this context, while African writers are acclaimed in "Western" academies for their idiosyncratic use of English, the use of Pidgin English is usually associated with lack of education, illiteracy, and class inferiority. Because it is only partially altered, the English that is appropriated by celebrated, post-colonial writers is thus easily absorbed by the cultural industry outside Africa. On the contrary, Pidgin English continues to be a grassroots language, which remains unknown to the world and is constantly devalued in the countries in which it is spoken. Finally, these two forms of appropriation could be understood in terms of the so-called phenomenon of cultural hybridity. In simple terms, as long as it meets hegemonic interests, migrant hybridity is celebrated in the cultural centers. On the other hand, the kind of local hybridity that favors, and is actually produced by, subaltern peoples, is continuously marginalized and neglected by those in power.

The usefulness of the appropriation of English by the diasporic intellectual is also powerfully defended by Achebe in his now canonical book *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. In "Colonialist Criticism," he explains that until he was questioned by A. D. Hope about the importance of writing in one's own language, he "had always assumed . . . that the English-speaking union was a desirable fraternity" (*Morning* 10). However disquieting, Hope's argument seemed insufficient to change Achebe's point of view, whose response (addressed not to Hope, who "would not have understood," but to the reader) was remarkably vague: "you ain't seen nothing yet!" The elusiveness of the statement matches the even more slippery moment in the text in which he advises the reader not to be "fooled by the fact that we [African writers] may write in English, for we intend to do unheard of things with it" (*Morning* 10). No less problematic are Achebe's comments on the importance of the use of English in the literary production of peripheral countries outside Africa. I am referring to his observations on Brazilian literature in "The African Writer and the English Language." After recognizing that he did not know much about the subject in question (at the time he had read only

one novel by Jorge Amado!), Achebe claimed that Amado was Brazil's leading novelist (sic) and that most Brazilian writers would remain unknown to the world if they chose to write in Portuguese. This quick tour through Brazilian literature led Achebe to conclude that, insofar as audience is concerned, "there is certainly a great advantage to writing in a world language" (97).

Two main problems stand out here. First, the belief in Amado's "greatness" results from the fact that what he writes, whether that is a true rendering of Brazilian reality or not, is very much what certain foreign cultures want to hear about Brazilian identity. I mean, for example, the stereotypes of a tropical, sensual and exotic culture, which is eagerly consumed as truth in certain quarters. This seems to pass unnoticed for Achebe, who also explains that "from that one novel, *Gabriela*, [he] was able to "glimpse something of the exciting Afro-Latin culture which is the pride of Brazil" (italics mine). Here is the second problem with his argument, namely, an essentialist and even naïve idea of Brazilian culture, surprisingly supported by a writer who comes from an ex-colony. But again this must be understood in terms of the place of enunciation from which Achebe speaks, in this case, from a position that insists on identifying with a reductionist and essentialist view of non-European cultures. What then gives support to Achebe's evaluation of Brazilian society is a Eurocentric cliché that has been sold abroad in the form of the image of an exotic, exuberant, sensual and exciting place. However poor and unsupported Achebe's judgment may be, the fact that he employs it to validate the use of a world language is even more problematic. Had all Brazilian writers decided to write in English, what would have happened to most Brazilian readers but to be deprived of their national literatures? The empowerment of English and the increase in audience defended by Achebe could only happen in Brazil to the detriment of Brazilian Portuguese and to the disadvantage of the majority of the country's population, which does not have access to English. It is true that the official use of Portuguese has marginalized Brazil's indigenous languages, but this is a far less significant exercise of power when compared to the fact that English has been supported as a hegemonic world language on the verge of absorbing and incorporating whatever is "non-English." Moreover, one way to enrich (and democratize) Brazil's educational system would probably consist in working on the promotion of its indigenous languages, despite their insignificance to the global market, instead of privileging a foreign language spoken in the country by an elite minority.¹¹

In face of the many difficult issues underlying his arguments, Achebe's usual justification for his use of English revolves around the idea that it has never really involved a decision or a choice from his part insofar as English "was the language available" to him. In an interview with Emmanuel Dongala, Achebe replied that since his education was in English, if he "had to write in Igbo . . . that would

¹¹ Brazil is known to have approximately 219 indigenous living languages. See http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=Brazil.

have required a decision—the decision that I'm not going to write in English.” He adds:

Even today I'm not sure that I want to write a novel in Igbo. I would write poetry, which I do, in that language. In other words, I have two hands, and so I give them different things to do. Some of my friends don't agree. They think you should cut off one of your hands because it's somehow more loyal to be one-handed. But I don't think so.

It is obviously futile to prevent a writer from expressing himself in a second or foreign language. It seems indispensable, however, to think critically about one's language choices. Achebe once explained that he considers himself “perfectly bilingual” (*Morning* 119). This means to say that writing in English is as much of a choice as writing in Igbo. It is, in fact, a political choice, not without consequences. Achebe has written a few poems in Igbo and it could be said that he has contributed to the development of Igbo writing by participating in the foundation and publication, since 1982, of the journal *Uwa Ndi Igbo: A Bilingual Journal of Igbo Life and Arts*. But the equality he attributes for his two hands can hardly be supported given the disproportion and the unbalance in the productivity of each one of them. In view of his small literary production in Igbo language, Achebe's privileging of English can hardly be denied. His contention that he has two equally valued and productive hands serves thus to disclose, in a different level, the inconsistencies embedded in his discussion on the language question. For, in reality, one hand has, not fortuitously, disempowered the other. This has in fact become a source of ambiguities in the writer's attempts to justify his choice for English. After his vague response to Hope about the usefulness of appropriation, a moment of uncertainty and hesitation follows that makes his argument problematic. Achebe writes: “there was an important sense in which he [Hope] was right—that every literature must seek the things that belong unto its place, must, in other words, speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current, and the aspirations and destiny of its people” (*Morning* 11). A similar sense of estrangement and hesitation appears in the end of “The African Writer and the English Language” when he raises the question of whether African authors “ought to” write in English: “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling” (102). At this point Achebe is, again, coming to grips with a traumatic experience. This is the moment, I believe, where the text deconstructs itself and ultimately reveals a contradiction between Achebe's positive evaluation of the global spreading of English and a repressed discomfort with his decision to write in that language. As he points out in “The Writer and his Community”: “If I write novels in a country in which most citizens are illiterate, who then is my community? If I write in English in a country in which English may still be called a foreign language, or in any case is spoken only by a minority, what use is my writing?” (40). Here, Achebe touches once more on the core of the language dilemma that haunts his career. Yet, he seems to find a detour from the problem

by responding to the questions not in a direct mode, but through a parable:

A master singer arrives to perform in a large auditorium and finds at the last moment that three-quarters of his audience are totally deaf. His sponsors then put the proposition to him that he should dance instead because even the deaf can *see* a dancer. Now, although our performer may have the voice of an angel his feet are as heavy as concrete. So what should he do? Should he proceed to sing beautifully to only a quarter or less of the auditorium or dance atrociously to a full house?

I guess it is clear where my stand would be! The singer should sing well even if it is merely to himself, rather than dance badly for the whole world. (41)

As Hillis Miller reminds us in his study on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the function of a parable is to unveil an "evasive and elusive 'truth' underlying both historical and personal experience" (214). The parable is thus, from the beginning, doomed to failure: the ones who are able to understand its meaning do not need the parable in the first place, but for those who "cannot see" the parable will not serve as a means of revelation. The parable expresses "the denial of the possibility of making the reader see" (215). It is thus a device to say things that cannot be said, things, in other words, that must remain hidden. It unveils in order to veil all over again; it only reveals a mystery to make it even more mysterious. In the passage quoted above, we have a situation of an extraordinary singer surprised by the fact that the majority of his audience in a given concert is deaf. The message to be conveyed from the passage is that it is better to "sing well even if it is merely to [one]self . . . than dance badly for the whole world," in other words, those who have command of a certain language should use it even if few people will understand what it means. The use of the parable is awkward, to say the least, given the fact that Achebe is "perfectly bilingual." Were it suitable, however, why resort to a parable in the first place? Why then, following Miller's explanation, perpetuate the mystery and hide the truth? A possible answer might be that the truth in question is, in Hulme's words, a "partial" account of "the whole story," an account which, by means of a parable, appears to be "common sense, the natural, and even reality itself." What is left out from this supposed "truth" is, of course, who the deaf are, what will happen to them during the concert, and what the social role of the singer is, if any. Will the deaf be simply deprived of the show? If so, is it right for an artist to allow this kind of situation? Isn't there any concern or political responsibility from the part of the singer? Will he simply ignore three-quarters of the audience and feel comfortable with his decision? And who are the deaf? Aren't they the socially excluded? Aren't they being marginalized in the concert? Will the artist perpetuate this condition of inequality? More to the point, isn't the use of English by an elite an exercise of power that produces exclusions of many sorts? Hasn't its use in Africa's former British colonies engendered massive linguistic exclusion? At one point Achebe asserts that African writers who write in European languages "derive their sense of community from a . . . unarticulated feeling of a shared destiny, a journey toward a future" (*Morning* 109). But who is going to

be part of this journey? If writers continue to ignore the deaf, will they ever be part of the community? Is it fair for the deaf to be permanently excluded? If not, who is thus responsible for their inclusion in a community that “share[s] a destiny, and move[s] towards the future?” These are problematic questions that complicate Achebe’s statement to the point of challenging its quality of general “truth” and this is probably the reason why Achebe’s partial account of reality has to be conveyed indirectly. What is thus veiled in Achebe’s parable is the complexity of the problem of dismissing the relevance of writing in local languages. Because his “truth” is only partially valid and leaves aside questions that would jeopardize its authority, it must be spoken indirectly, ultimately appealing to common sense.

The contradiction which was identified before, that is, the fact that Achebe writes for and about a local community but does this in a global language, is thus apparently resolved through a synthesis, however flawed, between the local and the global, in the mixing of content and medium. That is to say, the writer writes about a local culture in a world language, which is, in turn, strategically transformed in a way that protects its legibility and secures the writer’s success in the “Western” book market. The perfect justification for such a contradictory attitude, which has its origins in the traumatized writer’s desire to be recognized by the “West,” is simply to say that “English is a world language,” a reality that cannot be challenged. Such discourse about a condition of paralyzing impotence with respect to the hegemony of English works ultimately as a “historical alibi,” in Hulme’s sense, which hides the fact that writing in English is advantageous for the African writer as a comprador, both in personal and financial terms. If that is the case, then, why care to take pains to learn how to dance if outside the auditorium the singer is heard and understood by a great audience of foreigners? This is of course what Achebe has to repress in his discussions on the language question. It is a problem that returns uncontrollably in his critical writings, nonetheless, in the form of a contradiction that can hardly be resolved. Achebe’s discomfort with his use of English arises, it seems to me, from the impossibility to forget the repressed histories embedded in the discourse that so eloquently promotes English as a world language, in this case, the history of the marginalization of African languages and of the social, economic, and political deprivation that devastates the African continent. This is a history which is grounded in the colonial past, but which belongs to the present. In one word, a history of violence to which linguistic exclusion is in great part responsible.

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