

Literary Setting and the Postcolonial City in *No Longer at Ease*

LIAM KRUGER
University of Wisconsin-Madison
lkruger2@wisc.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper considers Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* in terms of its modest canonical fortunes and its peculiar formal construction. The paper argues that the novel's urban setting is produced through an emergent and local noir style, that this setting indexes the increasing centrality of the city in late colonial African life, and that it formally responds to the success of Achebe's rural *Things Fall Apart* and its problematic status as a paradigmatic African text. The paper suggests that *No Longer at Ease's* foreign and local horizons of interpretation, as symptoms of an ongoing imperial world-system, are internalized and symbolically resolved by the novel's instantiation of Lagos as chronotope. The paper's methodological intervention offers a hermeneutics of literary setting through which to elaborate the relationships between form, literary institutions, and material conditions in the postcolony.

N*o Longer at Ease* (1960) is not the first Lagos novel. That precedent belongs to Cyprian Ekwensi's 1954 *People of the City*, which Chinua Achebe would republish in 1963 as the advisory editor to the Heinemann African Writers Series. It was, however, Achebe's first Lagos novel, a sequel to the already-famous *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and the first Lagos novel to be published by Heinemann.¹ It is therefore surprising that *No Longer at Ease*, with its ambivalent vision of Lagos, urban capital of newly independent Nigeria, should be a relatively neglected text in Achebe's body of work, far less discussed than his visions of rural colonial contact in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* (1964), which together with *No Longer at Ease* constitute what has come to be known as Achebe's *African Trilogy*.² Indeed, Achebe himself does not seem to have anticipated this outcome; in his 1964 essay, "The Novelist as Teacher," he observes that "last year the pattern of sales of *Things Fall Apart* in the cheap paperback edition was as follows: About 800 copies in Britain, 20,000 in Nigeria, and about 2,500 in all other places. The same pattern was true

also of *No Longer at Ease*" (*Hopes and Impediments* 41). These patterns would change twice. First, as Heinemann positioned itself as the purveyor of assigned texts for schools and universities in Africa, pursuing this marketing strategy in earnest from the mid-1960s, Achebe's first two novels would circulate far more widely in the rest of the African book market—by 1970, *No Longer at Ease* was a set university text in Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland (Ndebele 210). Second, Achebe's first novel would enjoy more commercial success, not just outside of Nigeria, but outside of Africa, such that by the early 1990s *Things Fall Apart* had become the single most widely read work of African fiction; by the end of that decade it would sell over ten million copies and be translated into nearly fifty languages. *Things Fall Apart*'s tremendous financial and critical success perhaps inevitably cast a shadow over its more modestly performing sequel; *No Longer at Ease*'s marginal status in Achebe's body of work would have hardened into enough of a critical orthodoxy by 1991 for Simon Gikandi to remark in his comprehensive study of Achebe that *No Longer at Ease* was Achebe's one novel saddled with "mixed reviews and critical commentaries," his critics finding the book "wanting in 'depth,' 'coherence,' or 'vision'" (78–79).

If it took Joyce's *Ulysses* forty years for its local and ambivalent reception in 1922 to transform into universal acclaim in the 1960s (McCourt, "Joyce's Irish Post Mortem," "Mapping the Holy Ground"; Cleary 140–52), Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* took at most thirty years for its local acclaim in 1960 to transform into universal ambivalence by 1991. *Things Fall Apart* would go from local acclaim to universal acclaim within that same period.³ This would suggest, first, that the process by which the local and global receptions of postcolonial texts merge accelerates over the course of the twentieth century and second that this process is not straightforwardly ameliorative for the postcolonial texts in question. Achebe is subject to sociocultural factors comparable to those that have produced Joyce's canonicity. As explicated by Pascale Casanova as the "structural ethnocentrism of the literary world" (155), peripheral writers operate under the burden of writing books that are primarily published, consecrated, and explicated in the metropole; both Joyce's *Dubliners* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* had to be published in London first. This material relationship asserts itself at the level of literary signification, as the local interpretations or evaluations of a literary text merge with a global-hegemonic evaluation of that text, as postcolonial texts enter into the world market and the cultural sphere of world literature. However, the differential reception of Achebe's country novels and city novels demonstrates that these factors produce canonicity unevenly.

To the extent that both *Ulysses* and *Things Fall Apart* are postcolonial canonical novels—more precisely, late colonial novels assimilated into the postcolonial canon—they offer models for the process by which postcolonial texts are consecrated and enshrined within the world literary market. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is the African *Ulysses*; even less unreasonable to suggest that *Ulysses* is the Irish *Things Fall Apart*. In terms of sales figures, contemporary canonical fortunes, and representative force both within and without the culture being represented, these texts very nearly mirror one another. But why is the African *Ulysses* a rural text? And why is the Irish *Things Fall Apart* an urban text? To ask this question is not only to reflect on the content and emphasis of different postcolonial canons, but to enquire into the impact of

the burdens of postcolonial representation on the principles of inclusion and exclusion in postcolonial canon-formation. This is a line of questioning prompted by the ambivalent reception of *No Longer at Ease*, an urban Nigerian text, but also one incorporated into *No Longer at Ease* as a problem to be solved. That is, in addition to taking up the general problem of representing the late colonial city as a site from which the postcolonial state will emerge, Achebe addresses the particular problem of representing an African city in a cultural field where that representation will necessarily be taken up as an image of Africa, and where the only images of Africa that seem to circulate are Joseph Conrad's, or Graham Greene's, or *Things Fall Apart*.⁴

Achebe is intervening in a discursive field where racist and imperialist depictions of Africa have predominated—a field in which Achebe includes Conrad, in his “An Image of Africa.” He is intervening at the same time in a literary market where the replacement of Conrad's image of Africa with Achebe's “fictional Igbo village with a vague nomination” (Tanoukhi 457) does not solve the problem of a continent being represented by a paradigmatic image or text. Achebe signals this preoccupation early on in *No Longer at Ease*, when his protagonist stands in a Lagos slum and recalls an African image of his own making:

Here was Lagos, thought Obi, the real Lagos he hadn't imagined existed until now. During his first winter in England he had written a callow, nostalgic poem about Nigeria. It wasn't about Lagos in particular, but Lagos was part of the Nigeria he had in mind.

“How sweet it is to lie beneath a tree
At eventime and share the ecstasy
Of jocund birds and flimsy butterflies;
...”

He recalled this poem and then turned and looked at the rotting dog in the storm drain and smiled. “I have tasted putrid flesh in the spoon,” he said through clenched teeth. “Far more apt.” (17)

Achebe stages here the consequences of projecting an image onto Nigeria from England. Whether that projection is motivated by imperialist condescension, as in Joyce Cary (Achebe's major object of derision in *Arrow of God*), or by an unreflective Eurocentrism, as in Achebe's reading of Conrad, or by nationalist nostalgia, as in the above, the results are equally inapt in their representation of Nigeria. Moreover, the solution that Obi Okonkwo offers as a revision to his naive doggerel is no more satisfying, its language of viscera and decay owing much to European modernism, its choice of culinary instruments perhaps owing a little to Eliot's coffee spoons in “Prufrock,” and its representative aptness asserted rather than demonstrated. That is, to replace a flattened, pastoral image of Nigeria—which is not “about Lagos in particular,” but of which Lagos is somehow a part—with a particular and pessimistic image of Lagos that must somehow stand in for Nigeria, simply renegotiates the terms of representative exclusion, from a pastoral naivety to an urban cynicism, rather than transcending those terms. In its depiction of Lagos, and of the Nigeria of which it is a part, *No Longer at Ease* attempts to articulate a response to the image of Nigeria (indeed, of Africa) that the tremendous success of *Things Fall Apart* helped disseminate, without simply replacing that image with another.

NO LONGER AT EASE AND LATE COLONIAL NOIR

The plot of *No Longer at Ease* is fairly straightforward, though its presentation is not. The novel opens at the trial of Obi Okonkwo, grandson of the Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*, now charged with having solicited and accepted bribes through his position in the Nigerian Senior Civil Service in Lagos. The novel flashes back almost immediately after a guilty verdict is indirectly delivered, presenting the reader with episodes from earlier in Obi's life; among others, his departure from Umuofia via Lagos to England for his university education, his return to Nigeria, his romantic entanglements, his squabbles with his elders, his ambivalent navigation of (and eventual capitulation to) a corrupt late colonial bureaucracy.

These vignettes are presented with less respect for chronological sequence than for mnemonic or thematic resonance. The novel's first chapter is illustrative. Its framing courtroom sequence is followed by a scene at a recently desegregated club, where Obi's former boss, Mr. Green, gossips about the trial while offering theories about corruption and "the African" (4). This is followed by the description of a meeting, "[s]omewhere on the Lagos mainland," of the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU), convened in response to the loss of Obi's case that morning—which meeting leads the narrator to recall the prayer meeting held several years previously, in honor of Obi's receiving an eight-hundred-pound loan-scholarship from the UPU to study in England. The chapter concludes with this account of the long-ago prayer meeting, at the end of which Obi is presented with various small gifts from his fellow villagers: "a shilling there and a penny there—substantial presents in a village where money was so rare, where men and women toiled from year to year to wrest a meagre living from an unwilling and exhausted soil" (13). The transitions between these scenes are often haphazard, but there is clearly a spatial logic at work here, in which every step takes the narrative further away from the center of power. First the High Court on the affluent Lagos Island, to the colonial club, also on Lagos Island but beginning to anticipate its obsolescence ("although the club was open to them technically, few Africans went to it" [3]), to some unspecified point on the Lagos mainland, the city's peripheral holding cell for surplus labor, to rural Umuofia, which we'll eventually learn is five hundred miles away in the Eastern Region (48). The effect of this spatial logic is to underscore the pathos of Obi's doomed present tense in affluent Lagos, which the reader now knows has been paid for by the generosity of an impoverished Umuofia, a relative relationship made visible by this narrative movement. This pathos is recruited in turn in *No Longer at Ease's* mapping of late colonial Nigeria's country-city dialectic, allowing the novel to register a spatial relationship of economic domination in affective terms. The reader is made to feel the weight of the city on the country.

What's surprising about this departure from temporal sequence as structuring principle, and toward spatial association, is that *No Longer at Ease's* beginning with a courtroom trial followed by a flashback ought to announce itself as operating within the most temporally structured novelistic genre of all: the novel of detection. Indeed, the novel appears at first to be embarking on this haphazard itinerary by way of answering the question asked of Obi by his judge while "summing up" his verdict; the question of "how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this" (2). This tragic aetiology will be familiar to readers of *Things Fall Apart*, which tells the story of Obi's grandfather, similarly

a (relatively) young man full of brilliant promise, and of how he came to succumb to his ultimate doom. What's structurally different in *No Longer at Ease* is that we begin at the end, with the ultimate outcome of Obi Okonkwo's fate already revealed to the reader, with everything that follows motivated by the ostensible project of figuring out how that fate was arrived at. However, as each vignette in turn defers resolving that question, it grows clear that this novel is less concerned with the origins of late colonial corruption than it is with using the trope of that corruption to propel an exploration of the dialectic between country and city in the late colony.

A fair amount of scholarship has, rightly, turned its attention to the operation of tragedy in Achebe's first two novels, given how profoundly doomed both Obi Okonkwo and Okonkwo père are. Perhaps because of the straightforwardness of its effect, the role of *No Longer at Ease's* structure in the production of that tragedy has not been much remarked-on; a structure in which suspense is collapsed, and the reader, having already accepted how things turn out, experiences the text as a fatalistic exercise of finding out why things turn out the way they do. This flashback gimmick is not much deployed in the tradition of modernism that Achebe invokes with his novels' titles—*Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* borrow from Yeats and Eliot, respectively—but there is a robust and contemporary literary tradition in which this structure is practically a species indicator; as Tom Schatz describes it, this “dual time structure, in which the detective (in the present) describes the events of the past, enhances the mood of futility and fatalism. This is a world of victims, entrapped by social circumstances or by their own greed and lust in an ongoing tale of violence and deceit” (131). Schatz is describing here the protocols of American film noir, though the description applies with equal validity to Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. This insight produces the surprising conclusion that Achebe's sequel to his rural, realist inauguration of African literature can properly be understood, not as a classical novel of detection, but as its historical successor: as noir fiction. The appropriate intertext here is not so much Joseph Conrad's Charles Marlow, seaman, as Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, private eye.

To describe Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* as noir fiction is not an attempt at splitting hairs over generic taxonomy. Rather, genre is operating here as a heuristic, something that assists in our interpretation of *No Longer at Ease*, both in terms of its internal conventions and in terms of how it would have entered into the local literary market and its local horizons of readerly expectation. This latter branch is the more important one, in that it rests on a peculiarity of postcolonial literary interpretation that is attentive to the sociologies of publishing and reading: local and foreign reader expectations are often wholly divergent, and so the task of the postcolonial writer has often been to compose a text that adequately satisfies foreign horizons of interpretation to secure publication in London or New York or Paris so that the book could eventually be sold to local readers and be subject to their local horizons of interpretation.⁵

The suggestion here is that the features of *No Longer at Ease* that correspond to mid-century film noir and its complement in noir fiction would, counterintuitively, have been more immediately legible as noir to its local audience than it would to those in the Global North. Such noir features include the young masculine protagonist, able to move through multiple social spheres, the apparently passive but narratively compromising female love interest, the seedy descriptions of graft

and what it pays for, the seemingly unmotivated transitions from one scene to another, the closure of a plot with a foregone conclusion, and above all the fatalistic mood produced by these last two formal features in addition to a knowing and lightly skeptical narrative voice. In spite of the ostensible foreignness of the noir tradition, *No Longer at Ease's* publication in Nigeria emerged in a local interpretive context where most of the popular literature was crime fiction, and the cinemas were packed with American war stories, Westerns, and hard-boiled gangster films (Amber 357–60; Griswold 120–21). One such film in fact makes a brief appearance in *No Longer at Ease*, during an argument between Obi and Clara, his aforementioned apparently passive and narratively compromising love interest:

Only three days before they had gone to see “a very good film” which infuriated Obi so much that he stopped looking at the screen altogether, except when Clara whispered one explanation or another for his benefit. “That man is going to be killed,” she would prophesy, and sure as death, the doomed man would be shot almost immediately.... It never ceased to amaze Obi that Clara should take so much delight in these orgies of killing on the screen. Actually it rather amused him when he thought of it outside the cinema. (21)

No Longer at Ease does not reproduce an orgy of killing, or any other kind, but it is, like the “very good film,” guilty of prophesying its outcome at the very outset. Moreover, it emerges in a cultural field replete with texts influenced by American cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, which period saw “the successful marriage of the film noir style and the widely popular hardboiled detective story” (Schatz 112). Cape Town’s Alex La Guma with *A Walk in the Night* in 1962, Johannesburg’s Drum writers across the 1950s and 1960s, and Lagos’s Cyprian Ekwensi with *People of the City* in 1954 and *Jagua Nana* in 1961 would all feature hard-boiled content and various experimentations in the noir style.⁶ Thus, a foreign readership might look for a sequel to *Things Fall Apart* that reproduces or refines Achebe’s earlier achievement—summarized by one critic as the depiction of “a society’s matter-of-fact existence, a genuine lack of geographic self-consciousness that was possible only before the advent of colonization” (Tanoukhi 456)—but would find only a late colonial text that seemed to share with its predecessor only a few proper nouns. By contrast, a local readership would have had available to it a horizon of interpretation that would receive this text within the context of an emerging noir genre in African literature.

The point, of course, is that *No Longer at Ease* is both a sequel to *Things Fall Apart* that reproduces or refines his earlier achievement and at the same time an early entry in the development of Lagos noir. This is true not simply in the trivial sense that things can be more than one thing, but in the specific production context in which Achebe was operating, in which postcolonial texts are compelled to be more than one thing by virtue of their distinct local and global audiences. How then, do we read Achebe’s stylistic adoption of noir as an aesthetic choice among others, which advances or rewrites the accomplishments of his earlier historical novel?

In *No Longer at Ease's* fifth chapter, Obi Okonkwo is undertaking the long bus journey from Lagos to Umuofia and reflects on the question of corruption after witnessing a driver paying off a policeman, inadvertently increasing the cost of the bribe by making the police nervous with his watching:

“What an Augean stable,” he muttered to himself... “[b]ut what kind of democracy can exist side by side with so much corruption and ignorance? Perhaps a halfway house—a sort of compromise.” When Obi’s reasoning reached this point he reminded himself that England had been as corrupt not so very long ago. He was not really in the room for more consecutive reasoning. His mind was impatient to roam in a more pleasant landscape. (50–51)

To describe a text as noir in its style—as opposed to hard-boiled in its content—is to claim that it is attempting to solicit in its reader a mood of rather grim fatalism. A moment like this one achieves that mood triply; first, the bribery itself reinscribes the formal closure of the novel’s plot; second, as another scene in which bribery is established as a normal feature of doing business in late colonial Nigeria, the injustice of Obi’s being singled out for punishment is made increasingly apparent; and third, Obi’s reflections on the problem of corruption go absolutely nowhere, which means the reader has been taken into Obi’s confidences by the close third-person narration for the sole purpose of demonstrating the intractability of this situation as understood by Obi. This is, again, a perfectly coherent narrative strategy within the noir tradition, which is basically a moody picaresque, but is a remarkable departure from the narrative strategies around which Achebe organized *Things Fall Apart*. That earlier historical novel is marked by its regularly pausing the narrative to embark on sustained elaborations of Umuofian scenes and Igbo customs; these elaborations are smoothed into the narrative by remaining relatively germane to the episodes from which they digress and have the effect of positing a coherent enough community in which these digressions have explanatory force. By contrast, Achebe here offers a digression that is precisely the failure to explain, a failure that is explicitly tethered to the question of postcolonial democracy, and that is formally signaled by the abrupt termination of this line of thought. That this particular impasse takes place somewhere on the road between the city and the country tethers the impasse to the relationship between these sites, which is affectively one of estrangement and materially one of domination. For theorists of the novel, the road is the chronotope for the depiction of encounters “by representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages” (Bakhtin 243). For Obi, the road is the site of non-consecutive thinking, verbal abuse (153), disassociation (141), and brushes with death (18).

Having indicated where *No Longer at Ease* appears to fail where *Things Fall Apart* appears to succeed—or, rather, having indicated a critical failure that *No Longer at Ease* represents where *Things Fall Apart* represents a success—it’s worth indicating what *No Longer at Ease* gains by its adoption of noir’s stylistics. To describe that genre as moody picaresque is less dismissive than it may initially seem—because what it lacks in the capacity to explain, it gains in its freedom of movement.⁷ *Things Fall Apart* is spatially concentrated on Umuofia and Mbanta, such that greater emphasis is placed on how these spaces are transformed by the novel’s end. By contrast, *No Longer at Ease* is far more spatially diffuse, moving from Umuofia to Lagos suburbs to Lagos slums to England, to Madeira, and back to Lagos, while being temporally more concentrated; the narrative is bracketed by Obi’s courtroom appearance and placed in the historical context of the interregnum between the Federation of Nigeria in 1954 and the departure of the British with “independence” in 1960. This is consistent with how noir tends to work, as

a genre that self-consciously uses its central mystery to motivate excursions to different kinds of setting, the excursions being what the genre is actually after.

By its spatial boundedness, *Things Fall Apart* narrates a collective history that comes to an end, or at least to a catastrophic and unwilling transformation, with the arrival of the British. This collective history is substituted for the personal history of Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease*, through whose movements, ostensibly narrated for the purpose of solving the mystery of why he might have solicited a bribe, the reader is treated to a montage of scenes from late colonial Nigeria, the formal juxtaposition of which produces some understanding of their material relationships—chiefly the domination of the country by the city. What this moody picaresque allows Achebe to do is respond to his previous novel, which replaced the paradigmatic literary image of Africa as disseminated by Conrad or Cary with his own, by generating a novel in which the object of representation is not any one African setting but the set of relationships between city, slum, and village in late colonial Nigeria.

Literary noir, in both its traditional and Achebean manifestations, offers an illustrative instance of convergence between sociological explanation and literary interpretation. The fragmented or picaresque nature of much noir fiction developed as a consequence of its conditions of production and distribution. Authors would make a name for themselves writing stories or serialized narratives for pulp magazines before publishers would be willing to take a risk on publishing their novels. As a result, noir writers would frequently repurpose episodes and set-pieces from their short stories in later novels, generating fairly fragmented and often uneven works. This episodic form, however materially determined, was particularly well-suited for the depiction of a fairly alienated society, in which the detective or journalist protagonist might meet aristocrats in their mansions and gangsters in their casinos, but never both at once (Jameson 10). Thus the fragmented form has a material explanation that does not exhaust its meaning. This holds for Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, which does not exactly have repurposed episodes in the manner of Chandler or Hammett, but certainly recycles plot points and thematic concerns from Achebe's earlier short stories. In keeping with its noir designation *No Longer at Ease* bears the formal trace of its conditions of production in the recycling of older episodes, with that fragmented form serving to depict the alienation of late colonial Lagos.

While Achebe's late colonial noir ought to be understood as much in the context of Nigerian crime fiction and urban fiction as it ought to be understood in the context of the modernist writers he alludes to within that work, the fact that his novel ends with its protagonist convicted and any moral lesson deferred does distinguish it sharply from the more spectacular and more strongly didactic tendencies of Ekwensi and the Onitsha market writers. This is not to say that the novel has nothing to say about late colonial Nigerian society; on the contrary. But noir, as a genre of social critique, tends to operate in the negative, rather than the positive mode; on the impossibility of a Philip Marlowe or a Sam Spade's adhering to their moral principles and integrating with a corrupt society at the same time. The genre is, in this respect, essentially quixotic. Achebe clearly understands this convention or disposition quite well, given that it is the rigidity of Okonkwo's principled adherence to a fixed image of Igbo masculinity that in large part motivates the tragedy of *Things Fall Apart*. The reader is encouraged to expect a

comparable tragedy for Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* when Obi is described by a village elder, relatively early in the novel, as “Ogbuefi Okonkwo come back. He is Okonkwo *kpom-kwem*, exact, perfect” (53). Determining what exactly Obi Okonkwo’s principles and fixed images are, however, proves to be difficult; he is reluctant to be in debt to Umuofia (84); he is disgusted by squalor, both in the city and the country; he is opposed to the corruption of the comprador-bourgeoisie of the previous generation, and believes that their replacement, his own foreign-educated generation, will solve the problem (21); he is impatient with the remains of the British colonial administration (107); he is impatient, too, with those Igbo customs that get in his way (76). What this adds up to, however, is never made clear, because these are not principles that ever spur Obi into action. His various resolutions to pay off his debt to Umuofia, to help pay Clara for her abortion, to secure his parents’ permission to marry, to avoid succumbing to corruption, all fail; indeed they are barely attempted. What’s more, Obi knows this about himself. Reflecting on his first half-hearted argument with his father, the narrative observes:

His mind was troubled not only by what had happened but also by the discovery that there was nothing in him with which to challenge it honestly. All day he had striven to rouse his anger and his conviction, but he was honest enough with himself to realise that the response he got, no matter how violent it sometimes appeared, was not genuine. It came from the periphery, and not the centre, like the jerk in the leg of a dead frog when a current is applied to it. (138)

Where Obi’s predecessors—both Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and the grim detectives of the Philip Marlowe stamp—are marked out and doomed by long-outmoded and inflexible standards of conduct, Obi’s own moral judgements, when he makes them, are so far ahead of their time as to be impossible to implement. To be clear: this is not a compliment, nor does Achebe intend for it to be. Rather, if Okonkwo is an object lesson in improper attachment to an imagined past, Obi is his mirror image, an object lesson in improper attachment to an imagined future, where the material problems that incentivize corruption, the legacy of the local caste system, and the legacy of British imperialism, have all already been resolved. It is precisely in his failure to imagine how to get from his present predicaments to the wishful future in which they are predicaments no longer that Obi finds himself without any argument to honestly challenge his father’s adherence to contemporary mores. It is also this quixotic futurity that makes this late colonial novel at one and the same time postcolonial, in that the post- in postcolonial is, so far, only ever aspirational.

It is that contemporaneity, finally, that distinguishes *No Longer at Ease* both from its rural forebear and its noir milieu. Where *Things Fall Apart* is effectively a historical novel, describing a coherent precolonial Igbo community from the perspective of late colonial Nigeria, and where Ekwensi’s *People of the City* is a heavily didactic urban novel, counterbalancing its frenetic city scenes with the narrative resolution of all the crimes being solved and the protagonist getting married, *No Longer at Ease* eschews both historical and narrative resolution in its narration of a contemporary Lagos from which itself emerges. To be clear: what is distinct about *No Longer at Ease* is the simultaneous facts of its narrating its contemporary moment and of that contemporary moment being one of an emergent postcolonial

state. Very many books narrate action contemporary with their composition and publication. Fewer do so in the context of and participating in an emerging and uncertain national or collective frame. The action of *No Longer at Ease* is more or less contemporary with its composition and publication, such that it is a part of the scene that it describes, and its narration of the conditions under which a Nigerian identity is being forged is itself involved in that forgery, which names both the necessarily active and necessarily synthetic processes of “invent[ing] a Nigerian nation and a Nigerian national consciousness from amorphous and unstable entities arbitrarily yoked together by the colonizer” (Gikandi 80). What’s more, this is a self-consciously synthetic process, which does not merely oppose the post-coloniality of the “developing world ... against residual metropolitan colonialist preferences and predilections,” but “take[s] into account the same totalizing, exclusionary and reifying representational logic within the cultural and signifying ensembles of the colonized” (Jeyifo 57). Thus the openness of this noir novel in which the central mystery is ceaselessly deferred and then finally rejected is at the same time a rejection of any facile certainties in the formation of a post-independence state and culture. To describe *No Longer at Ease* as a work of political commitment, then, engaged in the narration of a national consciousness is not to accuse it of simplicity or naivety, but the opposite: to illustrate the complexity, difficulty, and self-awareness that entails the formation of a national consciousness in the postcolony. Thus, while the novel is largely tragi-comic and while its movements through late colonial Lagos might give the impression of a picaresque, the alienation that rigorously pursues Obi from the Lagos mainland to Umuofia to Ikoyi is a formal consequence of a novel that is attempting to name that which does not yet exist. What’s more, by implicating itself in the emergent nation that it describes, *No Longer at Ease* attunes the reader to the political stakes of its aesthetic project. It is attempting to name that which might not come to be.

THE POSTCOLONIAL SEQUEL AND LITERARY SELF-REFERENCE

Much of the foregoing analysis has been motivated by direct comparison between *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, which might now appear to be a questionable operation, given the evidently distinct representational strategies of Achebe’s first two novels. Indeed, those writers who have stepped in over the years to defend *No Longer at Ease* from its critics, or simply from neglect, have tended to do so on the basis of the unlikeness of, and therefore the unfairness of, a comparison between *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*.⁸ However, *No Longer at Ease* cannot avoid inviting this comparison, because while it might not be the first Lagos novel, it has a strong claim to being African literature’s first sequel.⁹ What this has to mean for a novel that entertains an unstable (because postcolonial) and self-implicating (because contemporary) relationship with its referent, late colonial Lagos, is that it discursively contextualizes itself as that which follows on *Things Fall Apart*. The stakes of that shared context are to be found not so much in the difference between urbane Obi Okonkwo and his epic grandfather, as between the two different Umuofias that they inhabit. And it is by attending to the sequel—a necessarily commercial aesthetic form—that we can understand how the world market shapes literary form, and how literary form attempts to stipulate the conditions of its reception in that world market in turn.

To distinguish between the self-implicating representational strategy of *No Longer at Ease* and that of *Things Fall Apart* is not to say that *Things Fall Apart* is a straightforwardly realist or unselfconscious text. On the contrary, both of Achebe's first two novels are self-referential texts, albeit in different registers. Attending to the effect of that self-reference in *Things Fall Apart* makes it apparent why the Umuofia of *No Longer at Ease* has to be set the way that it is, and why Lagos has to be set the way that it is in turn.

The most transparent and most-discussed instance of self-reference in *Things Fall Apart* is that novel's closing paragraph, in which the Commissioner, representative of colonial power and colonial knowledge, reflects on the suicide of Okonkwo and decides that the episode could make "a reasonable paragraph" (191) in *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, the book he plans to write. This a scathing critique of the limits of colonial knowledge, which distills a reasonable paragraph's worth of information out of a narrative situation that has taken a book the length of *Things Fall Apart* to disclose. Doubtless there is some satisfaction in being able to accomplish that critique in the space of a reasonable paragraph. However, it is a critique that depends on the same print culture and English hegemony for its production and dissemination as would books like the Commissioner's fictional study. While there's a case to be made for *Things Fall Apart* to be understood as a strong rewriting of G. T. Basden's 1921 *Niger Ibos: A Description of the Primitive Life, Customs, and Animistic Beliefs, &c., of the Ibo People of Nigeria*, even such a case would understand the locus of Achebe's struggle to be literary-discursive rather than material, and thus a struggle in which Umuofia has already lost. By elevating that discursive concession, latent in any historical novel, to the level of form, Achebe accomplishes the easier-said-than-done work of making his historical contents speak to his contemporary moment. That is, any historical novel might be trivially elegiac by virtue of being about battles that are already lost, but in foregrounding the way in which that loss continues into and structures the present moment, in which a Nigerian nationalist is obliged to write in English for a London publisher, Achebe gives that trivial convention a meaningful form.¹⁰

Not only does this form have meaning for literary scholars, it also has consequences for literary practitioners. *No Longer at Ease* was meant to be the third installment of a trilogy that began with *Things Fall Apart*, the middle sequence being concerned with Isaac Okonkwo, born Nwoye Okonkwo, first son of the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, and father to the protagonist of *No Longer at Ease*. Describing the relationship between his father and his father's uncle, who belong more or less to the generations that Okonkwo and Isaac respectively represent, Achebe would write in 1973,

When my father joined the missionaries the old man does not seem to have raised any serious objections.... [t]here was something between those two that I find deep, moving, and perplexing. And of those two generations—defectors and loyalists alike—there was something I have not been able to fathom. That was why the middle story of the Okonkwo trilogy as I originally projected it never got written. I had suddenly become aware that in my gallery of ancestral heroes there is an empty place from which an unknown personage seems to have departed. (*Hopes & Impediments* 33)

Achebe is not clear on when this sudden awareness of the difficulty or impossibility of narrating the generation between precolonial and late colonial Nigeria arrives; but perhaps without having noticed it, he formally signals as much in his concluding paragraph to *Things Fall Apart*. In abstractly drawing a connection between the Commissioner's imagined published narrative of colonial conquest and the actual published narrative of colonial conquest in the hands of its reader, *Things Fall Apart* formally closes off consideration of the intervening years within that same narrative frame. It is for this reason that Achebe can return to the Umuofia of the contextual present in *No Longer at Ease* but has to move the action to Umuaro for his narration of the colonial interregnum in *Arrow of God*. This peculiarity produces an "African Trilogy" that not only cuts back and forth temporally—precolonial *Things Fall Apart* to late colonial *No Longer at Ease* to mid-colonial *Arrow of God*—but that is constituted by uneven relationships between its parts. *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* are conjoined by the same world and the same characters, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* are conjoined by similar rural settings and similar universal praise, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* by contiguity and not much more.

It is striking that Isaac Okonkwo, Achebe's "unknown personage," is the bridge between his first two novels and that his transformation from Nwoye in *Things Fall Apart* to Isaac in *No Longer at Ease* correlates to the transformation of Umuofia from a famous and self-sustaining series of villages in the former to a starving and underdeveloped enclave dependent on the largesse of Umuofians in Lagos in the latter. This bridging function is made explicit in the second novel's fourteenth chapter. Obi has traveled to Umuofia to argue with his parents about his relationship with Clara Okeke, an *osu*—one, in traditional Igbo society, dedicated to the service of a god and thus prohibited from marriage to freeborn Igbos. Rather than responding to Obi's lukewarm arguments, Isaac closes out the chapter and his last appearance in the novel by recapitulating the events of *Things Fall Apart*, starting with his father's suicide, in his own reasonable paragraph:

"When they brought me word that he had hanged himself I told them that those who live by the sword must perish by the sword. Mr Braddeley, the white man who was our teacher, said it was not the right thing to say and told me to go home for the burial. I refused to go. Mr Braddeley thought I spoke about the white man's messenger whom my father killed. He did not know I spoke about Ikemefuna with whom I grew up in my mother's hut until the day came when my father killed him with his own hands." He paused to collect his thoughts, turned in his chair and faced the bed on which Obi lay. "I tell you all this so that you may know what it was in those days to become a Christian. I left my father's house, and he placed a curse on me. I went through fire to become a Christian. Because I suffered I understand Christianity—more than you will ever do." He stopped rather abruptly. Obi thought it was a pause, but he had finished.

Obi knew the sad story of Ikemefuna who was given to Umuofia by her neighbours in appeasement. Obi's father and Ikemefuna became inseparable. But one day the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves decreed that the boy should be killed. Obi's grandfather loved the boy. But when the moment came it was his machet that cut him down. Even in those days some elders said it was a great wrong that a man should raise his hands against a child that called him father. (157–58)

After this chapter, which seems to mark the central narrative crisis of the novel, the plot unspools in fairly short order. Unwilling and unable to resolve the tension between an obligation to tradition and aspirations toward “modernity,” Obi finds that he can’t marry Clara. He finds that this means he has to help pay for her abortion, which, he finds, means he has to start taking bribes, which he continues to do with increasing clumsiness even after Clara leaves him, and which leads swiftly to Obi’s arrest. Scholarship on tragedy in Achebe’s novels tends to discuss what theory of tragedy they operate within. Achebe’s readers have attempted to determine whether a given text conforms to a classical, Western model tragedy, or an Igbo model of the same, or to the theory of tragedy Obi describes in the novel’s beginning, in which “[r]eal tragedy is never resolved,” but “goes on hopelessly for ever” (39). That question doesn’t need to be resolved for it to be clear that the retelling of Okonkwo’s story from *Things Fall Apart* at a pivotal moment in Obi’s narrative signals that the latter has to be understood in light of the former, whether that understanding takes the form of hamartia, of a doomed *chi*, or of hopelessly going on forever.

Obi’s attempt to deploy the discourse of Christian egalitarianism as an argument against observing the taboo on freeborn Igbos marrying *osu* backfires strangely when Isaac deflects the argument by narrating in response his own flight from Igbo tradition into Christianity and dismissing Obi’s criticism on the grounds of the difficulty of that flight. This analogizing between Obi’s and Isaac’s adolescent negotiations between local and foreign ideologies is strange in a novel that is elsewhere insistent on the likeness of Obi to his grandfather, Okonkwo. And when Obi begins the next chapter driving back to Lagos in a daze, the reader is left wondering which part of Isaac’s retelling it is that moves Obi on his return: identification with his father, or with his grandfather? This is not a matter of guessing at a fictional protagonist’s nonexistent psychology. In this novel that so rigorously avoids explanation, the uncertainty about whether Obi’s downwards spiral ought to be understood as standing in metaphoric relationship to Okonkwo’s tragedy, or in metonymic relationship to Isaac’s, or both, is the formal expression of the novel’s thematic preoccupation with the postcolonial generation that is coming into being at the time of its composition. That is, it is formally apposite for a novel concerned with intergenerational transition to foreground its own sequelness, its status not merely as a literary text but as a sequel to a literary text, and thus in literary-historical terms its own generational standing.

Thus, by retelling the story of Okonkwo from Isaac’s perspective, and in so doing reproducing the deflation of *Things Fall Apart* into a reasonable paragraph that was projected in that first novel onto the colonial Commissioner, Achebe forces, obliquely, the following questions: first, what does *No Longer at Ease*’s Umuofia achieve as a setting that *Things Fall Apart*’s Umuofia could not? An account of Umuofia’s uneven integration into a world economy, chained to the metropole via Lagos. Second, what does setting *No Longer at Ease*’s rural episodes in Umuofia, rather than in Umuaro or some other fictional Igbo village, achieve for Achebe? It makes the forgetting of Okonkwo’s tragedy part of the account of Umuofia’s integration into that world economy. Neither Isaac nor Obi nor the village elders remember Okonkwo as the narrator of *Things Fall Apart* does. Sequelness is at once a problem to be solved for an urban late colonial novel laboring under the shadow of a more famous rural predecessor and the mechanism by which the

novel formally registers the more general problem of the emergent postcolonial Nigeria, of which predecessors—literary, political, and generational—is a subset.¹¹ Marx writes in the 18th Brumaire, “men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” The postcolonial state, the postcolonial sequel, and the pariah are the figures par excellence for these unchosen circumstances.

But if *Things Fall Apart* is a problematic predecessor to *No Longer at Ease* in Achebe’s oeuvre, that same body of work provides some more congruent precursors. Faithful—however inadvertently—to the noir genre, a number of *No Longer at Ease*’s core plot points and thematics find themselves rehearsed in Achebe’s shorter fictions.¹² The earliest of these, 1952’s “Marriage Is a Private Affair,” is generally understood to be *No Longer at Ease*’s ur-text, rehearsing as it does the interview between Obi and Isaac on the topic of a frowned-on engagement (Echeruo 3). *No Longer at Ease* departs from that earlier story in two significant respects. First, in “Marriage Is a Private Affair,” the marriage actually takes place, though it leads to a decades-long severing of ties between father and son, with the possibility of reconciliation opened up by the birth of Nnaemeka’s own children. Second, the conflict over Nnaemeka’s engagement is motivated not by his fiancée’s caste, as in *No Longer at Ease*, but by her vocation: Nene, an early version of Clara, is a schoolteacher, in addition to not being Igbo, which offends Nnaemeka’s father’s conservative, patriarchal Christianity.¹³

In these early stories, the conflict is as often, and as much, spatial as it is generational—in “Dead Men’s Path” and “The Sacrificial Egg,” the crisis seems to be triggered by modern young men from the city inappropriately exporting their “modernity” to the country, or underestimating the force of tradition even in the city. By contrast, “Marriage Is a Private Affair’s” generational conflict manifests spatially not in the country-city dialectic, but in the negotiation between public and private, as the story’s eventual title would suggest. The private affair, not of marriage but of employment, admits of resolution in Achebe’s 1952 short story. This is transformed in *No Longer at Ease* into the public affair of caste, which that 1962 novel would designate as intractable, in both the country and the city. Rather than understanding this transformation as Achebe’s compiler Michael Echeruo does, as the “intensification of Achebe’s tragic disposition” (4), this revision seems to suggest that Achebe is focusing on the site of postcolonial and late colonial intractability: public life in a transitional state. Where such ostensibly private decisions as what career to embark on might, in some readings, offer individual autonomy, those affairs that cannot be private, such as caste and such as inheritance, are forced into the public and made inescapable. In the absence of a coherent public sphere, these affairs fall prey either to tradition, as does Clara’s taboo engagement to Obi, or to capital, as does Obi’s career. In this way, both the internal form and the textual history of *No Longer at Ease* disclose a concern with the intractability of predecessors and inheritances—be they literary, ethnic, or historical.

Here is not the place to sketch a theory of the literary sequel. Suffice to say, however, that the relationship between *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and *The Sign of the Four* (1890) does not seem to be like the relationship between *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913) and *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (1919); and to add that neither is the relationship between Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses*

(1922) at all like that between *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. Like Achebe, however, both of Joyce's novels share a setting and multiple characters. Also like Achebe, the shift from a literary naturalism in *Portrait* to the modernism of *Ulysses* resembles somewhat the shift from a coherent, explanatory realism in *Things Fall Apart*, to an alienated, subjective modernism in *No Longer at Ease*.¹⁴ Without subscribing fully to the evaluation of European modernism that motivates György Lukács's analyses in his "Ideology of Modernism," we can understand the movement in Joyce and in Achebe in Lukács's terms. For Lukács, modernism's mistake is that it depicts alienation as some sort of objective human condition as opposed to an experience contingent on a specific historical period and social formation. By contrast, realism is good to the extent that it depicts the mutually informing relationship, however embattled, between the individual, their society, and their environment. In this instance, whether we understand *No Longer at Ease* in terms of its local horizon of interpretation, noir, or in terms of its foreign horizon of interpretation, modernism, the critique of its depiction of alienation is the same. A version of this distinction between realist and modernist representation has already been laid out in the above readings of *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, with the qualification now that Achebe builds in across his two novels precisely the historical context that Lukács finds lacking in European modernism. By referring back, obliquely, to the coherent realism of *Things Fall Apart* in the midst of the alienated modernism of *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe communicates the historical contingency of the latter narrative's apparent ideology. The movement from realism to modernism is reinscribed as the movement from precolonial political autonomy to late colonial modernity. No comparable historical movement seems to mark Joyce's aesthetic movement from naturalism to modernism. This is not to say that one cannot be found, but that the reappearance of Phoenix Park in *Ulysses* seems principally to function to illustrate the aesthetic developments that Joyce has pursued in the years between publishing *Dubliners* and 1922. By contrast, the reappearance of Umuofia in *No Longer at Ease* seems to function to illustrate the political changes that have been worked on Nigeria in the years between *Things Fall Apart* and the late 1950s.

No Longer at Ease, this paper has been suggesting, is an aesthetic object with a political project. This is borne out of its being produced in a genuinely revolutionary moment, in which an alternative to capitalist imperialism was briefly countenanced. The establishment of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in 1960 followed on from the successive revisions of the constitution of the colony and Protectorate of Nigeria in 1947, 1952, and 1954, the last of which established the Federation of Nigeria and paved the way for independence from British rule six years later, steered by mounting internal political insistence on self-rule and within the context of a global wave of decolonization steered in large part by a Marxist political leadership. With the closure of that horizon of possibility, in Nigeria as elsewhere, the "other" to aesthetic autonomy has ceased to be political commitment and has come to be commodity status. In "Africa and Her Writers" (1973), Achebe would go on to dismiss the antinomy between committed and autonomous work as a foreign imposition on African cultural production. Achebe is correct to assert that it is a foreign imposition, but it is not the kind that can be dismissed—any more than the world market can be dismissed once one is absorbed into that. Less than a decade after the publication of *No Longer at Ease*, not only would "the indigenous," as Richard Began describes locality in *Ulysses*, become "a rare and valued commodity" (203),

but so too would any other generic tag ascribable to a literary work, including the tag “political.” This is emphatically not to claim that Achebe’s novels are apolitical; it is to claim that they are not mere commodities but also self-legislating artworks, and that while this aesthetic immanent purposiveness is not a substitute for politics, it does have a politics. Setting, in this case the setting of Lagos, introduced as the dialectical counterpart to the rural Umuofia, is the terrain on which the negotiation between autonomy and its others takes place in *No Longer at Ease*. Setting is also and at the same time the terrain on which the possibility of the public sphere is explored in the postcolonial novel. The apparent contradiction here is resolved by reflection on the Kantian position on aesthetic judgement: such judgements necessarily take place within a public. If these texts are negotiating between aesthetic autonomy and commodity status, they are also negotiating between two sets of a priori claims, the existence of a public sphere as against the mere existence of a market.

“WE ARE STRANGERS IN THIS LAND”: AMBIVALENCE, SETTING, AND POSTCOLONIAL CITIZENSHIP

We are shown two views of Lagos when we are finally introduced to it in *No Longer at Ease*; Lagos as imagined and finally encountered by a young Obi en route to England and Lagos as compared to that imagined by an older Obi lately returned from England. The order in which these visions of Lagos are presented to the reader is initially somewhat confusing, shifting several times between flashback and flash-forward over the course of the opening paragraphs of the novel’s second chapter; it delays its own decoding for several lines. More ambiguous, although for different reasons, is the order in which these visions stand in relation to one another within the logic of the novel, the “real” sequence into which these visions ought to resolve. It should be easy enough to track which visions of Lagos succeed which, but the novel’s free indirect discourse makes it difficult to know when the reader is being presented with a present narration of a past narrative and when with a present narration of a present narrative that involves the recollection of the past; to know whether the story is what Obi did when he was younger, or what Obi is remembering now about his youth. The chapter opens:

Obi was away in England for a little under four years. He sometimes found it difficult to believe that it was as short as that. It seemed more like a decade than four years, what with the miseries of winter when his longing to return home took on the sharpness of physical pain. It was in England that Nigeria first became more than just a name to him. That was the first great thing that England did for him.

But the Nigeria he returned to was in many ways different from the picture he had carried in his mind during those four years. There were many things he could no longer recognise, and others—like the slums of Lagos—which he was seeing for the first time. (14)

Leaving to one side for the moment this articulation between Nigeria (the imagined national community) and Lagos (the materially bifurcated city that threatens what is imagined), it is worth tracking the fairly compact temporal movement here. The first sentence points us to England, a red herring that only reveals itself as such by the second or third sentence, where it becomes clear

that this is only a recollection of England and that within that recollection of England there was a recollection and invention of Nigeria, England's "great thing," and that that latter recollection was challenged on Obi's returning to Nigeria from England. It takes the reader a couple of sentences to know where and when they are, a pattern that repeats itself as the novel proceeds.

Unlike the "Wandering Rocks" episode in *Ulysses*, which similarly delays the decoding of its temporalities, it does not seem to be the case that Achebe's early ambiguities are ones that need to be resolved in order to understand the novel. That is, unlike Joyce's experiment in parallel montage, which depends on the reader's reconstruction of its spatial and temporal itineraries, or at least on the reader's acquiescence that such a reconstruction is possible, *No Longer at Ease* takes almost no interest in precise sequencing. In the first chapter, Obi's trial is succeeded by scenes in which Obi is discussed but that are unclear in their temporal relationship to the trial just depicted, and in the final chapter, the lead-up to Obi's arrest is an accelerated montage of short untethered paragraphs in which a grieving Obi succumbs to every variety of corruption he has hitherto critiqued. Between this blurry opening and montage conclusion, the reader is treated to repeated flashbacks embedded within flashbacks, some extending over multiple chapters, so that Obi's return to Umuofia as a civil servant is twinned with his return to Umuofia after studying in England, and his arrivals in Lagos are overlaid with one another:

For many years afterwards, Lagos was always associated with electric lights and motor-cars in Obi's mind. Even after he had at last visited the city and spent a few days there before flying to the United Kingdom his views did not change very much. Of course, he did not really see much of Lagos then. His mind was, as it were, on higher things....

Some years later as Obi, newly returned from England, stood beside his car at night in one of the less formidable of Lagos slum areas waiting for Clara to take yards of material to her seamstress, his mind went over his earlier impressions of the city. He had not thought places like this stood side by side with the cars, electric lights and brightly dressed girls. (17)

We see here the perdurance in a late colonial context of Fanon's description of the colonial city in *Wretched of the Earth*, in which the "European sector" and the "the Negro village, the medina, the reservation" are understood to operate within a relationship of mutual exclusion, in which the two regions "confront each other, but not in the service of a higher unity" (4). The European sector in Lagos, the affluent neighborhood of Ikoyi, has by the time of *No Longer at Ease* relaxed its strictures sufficiently to admit some Africans in "European posts" as residents, including Obi Okonkwo, though in spite of the changed contents, the uneven structure Fanon describes remains much the same: "as he drove from Lagos to his flat he was struck again by these two cities in one. It always reminded him of twin kernels separated by a thin wall in a palm-nut shell. Sometimes one kernel was shiny-black and alive, the other powdery-white and dead" (19). But this Manichean divide is as much a structure of feeling as a matter of real infrastructure. Obi's image of the palm-nut shell is in no way disturbed by the insight, two pages earlier, that contra the presumed relationship of mutual exclusion, the slums are now populated with "electric lights and brightly dressed girls." This marks a development from the narration of Lagos in earlier novels, like Ekwensi's *People of the City*, in which the

rigid compartmentalization of the city's districts, and of the city from the country, is rigorously upheld by its episodic form. *No Longer at Ease* is similarly episodic in its plot, but the manner in which that plot is narrated has the occasional effect of interpenetrating these episodes and interpenetrating these spaces. The abstract division of Lagos is given an affective history in Achebe's narrating of it such that Obi's childhood visions of bright-lit Lagos, forged in rural Umuofia, confront the hard-earned cynicism of an adult Obi's evaluation of Lagos's slums, often in the same paragraph, without it being obvious that the reader is expected to join Obi in his ostensible disillusionment.

When Clara returns from her errand with the seamstress, after Obi revises his "callow, nostalgic poem about Nigeria" to include reference to the putrefying flesh he encounters in the city gutters, he complains to her about where her errands take them: "I can't understand why you should choose your dressmaker from the slums." Clara did not reply. Instead she started humming "Che sarà sarà" (18). Obi's youthful poem, about "jocund birds and flimsy butterflies," is obviously bad, but as this moment of parvenu class consciousness and clumsiness demonstrates, it is not clear that Obi's new episteme is any more reliable a guide to Lagos, or to the Nigeria of which it is ostensibly a part. The narrative, elsewhere fairly content to deploy free indirect discourse, is particular here about who this epiphany about Lagos belongs to: "[h]ere was Lagos, thought Obi, the real Lagos he hadn't imagined existed until now" (17). The narrative itself, as with the decidedly ambiguous temporal relationships between the novel's various parts, is at best agnostic about the real relationships between the city's constituent spaces. Neither Obi nor Achebe go so far as to explicitly tell us which of the palm-nut kernels—the shiny-black and alive, and the powdery-white and dead—designates the medina and which the European reserve. This might be because it is obvious that the powdery-white and dead half is the affluent but enervated Ikoyi, but that's never stated, and Obi's profound clumsiness in navigating the medina suggest that his identification of that space with "the real Lagos" is questionable.

What this formally produces is if not the inauguration, then certainly the canonization of Lagos as a chronotope—a chronotope determined above all by the literary and semantic work being put into making coherent a setting fractured by the affective weight of its history and the material division of its geography.¹⁵ That is, while Obi's impulsive designation of the Lagos slums as the real Lagos is a questionable designation, the impulse is not—and in fact aligns Obi with various other characters attempting to name the city, just this impulse places *No Longer at Ease* at or near the beginning of Lagos's literary history, which is partially constituted by the tradition of Lagos noir, but is not exhausted by it, particularly in that history's more contemporary and more generically hybrid entries.¹⁶ The upshot of the ambivalence produced by Achebe's novel representing the attempt to produce an organic representative whole out of fractured parts is that if Joyce's narrator constructs the reader as if both were natives of Dublin, Achebe's narrator constructs the reader as if they were strangers alike to Lagos. This needs a little unpacking.

The point is not that Achebe's vision of Lagos is one of faux-naivety, as in the autoethnography of the Victorian English novel that brings a rural youth into London so as to depict and explain that city as if for the first time. Instead, Achebe deploys the noir genre to present us with a narrator and a protagonist for whom even familiarity with Lagos takes the form of estrangement. Obi does

not understand why a person might take their tailoring to the slums, though he understands those slums to be in some way the real Lagos. When Obi, half-asleep on a bus, overhears traders singing about “the paddle [that] speaks English” (47) he only arrives at its “real meaning” after trying to translate the song into English. As Tejumola Olaniyan notes, the fact that the translation is only attempted casts doubts on both the translation and the exegesis that depends on it (55). The novel itself closes with a litany of negations, in which the narrator points to the various bodies who, in spite of everything the novel has revealed about Obi, still do not know why he might have taken a bribe. Thus, rather than merely being a novel about some ambiguously Western ennui alienating a British-educated African youth from his national identity—which is how this novel is sometimes misread, and is how Achebe would go on to misread Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (“Africa and Her Writers” 624–26)—this is a novel in which estrangement from the city and the people in it by everybody who encounters it becomes a constitutive part of African modernity. And while this estrangement from the city is historically contingent, as the novel’s sequelness insists, that same form makes clear that this is not an estrangement that can be overcome by a return to precolonial realism, but must be taken as a starting point. This is the problem that *No Longer at Ease* is attempting to solve, or the question to which it is attempting to pose a formal answer; how to clearly perceive the postcolonial condition of estrangement and to proceed from there in the construction of a postcolonial public and cultural sphere. That this project has not yet succeeded is nowhere more abundantly in evidence than in Achebe’s 2012 memoir *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, which reproduces in reportage the collapse of collective history into personal history that he fictionalized in the case of Obi Okonkwo fifty years previously and does so in precisely the sectarian terms that *No Longer at Ease* was attempting to transcend in its negotiation of Igbo tradition and Nigerian modernity through Clara’s *osu* love plot.

The estrangement from place that Achebe is diagnosing in *No Longer at Ease* takes on different modalities for different postcolonial subjects. For Obi it takes the form of ceaseless abstraction and aestheticization of everyday experiences, such that very little can happen to him without him citing T. S. Eliot, or Graham Greene, or W. H. Auden. Indeed, this citational practice would suggest that while Achebe’s choice of title for *Things Fall Apart* might be best understood as Achebe’s Bourdieuvian position-taking, an attempt at articulating his position within the field of cultural production as an inheritor of this modernist tradition, by the time of *No Longer at Ease* the language of modernism has itself become an object of representation and critique, with Obi’s questionable epiphanies registering as the limits of the modernist imagination in apprehending postcolonial modernity. However, this registration is less a critique of the language of modernism as somehow inappropriate to the African context than it is an articulation of the limits of any attempt at apprehending the postcolonial city. The Lagos branch of the Umuofia Progressive Union finds its own modality of estrangement at the novel’s opening: “We are strangers in this land. If good comes to it may we have our share.’ *Amen*. ‘But if bad comes let it go to the owners of the land who know what gods should be appeased. *Amen*” (7). If Lagos is a foreign land for rural Umuofia, then clearly the issue is not only that of a foreign modernist sensibility. Rather, what Achebe is depicting here is the recognition of the postcolonial city as a site and engine of

historical change, and therefore desirable, but also beyond comfortable apprehension. "Cities are not new in Africa," writes Olaniyan in his reading of *No Longer at Ease*, "but it is also the case that the city in Africa since the twentieth-century has been of a different order." He goes on:

In the novel, the distinctive marker of Lagos is as a colonial city, the city ruled by the wondrous Europeans with their wonderful technology such as cars and ships and their imponderable bureaucracy. The radiating center of that racialized greatness is the city.... The closer you are to the colonial order spatially, socially, economically, linguistically, the more powerful you are. (49–50)

This arrangement has not ceased to be the case since the arrival of postcolonial independence and has in fact been redoubled, in Lagos as in Dublin as in Johannesburg. What this means is that it is not enough simply to rail at Lagos as a strange land, because for all that it is inescapable. This is true for Obi Okonkwo and other members of the comprador-bourgeoisie who have aspirations of upward mobility and for rural progressive unions who cannot not interact with the postcolonial state and that disproportionately occupies the postcolonial city. Obi's words take on a more literal meaning than he intends when he tells his father, "Lagos is a very big place. You can travel the distance from here to Abame and still be in Lagos" (132).

The foregoing, which has proceeded as a comparison between *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, operating along that paradigm of sequence rather than mere juxtaposition in keeping with the latter being a sequel of sorts to the former, should tell us a few things. First, an image of Africa that forgets the city is guilty of a profound myopia with respect to the material organization of social life in the postcolony. Second, the contemporary African writer is faced with the challenge of responding to such a unitary "image of Africa" without merely replacing it with another. Third, this challenge is the product of a literary market that primarily marks African literature for export, but it is a material challenge responded to, when it is, by formal innovation on the part of the African writer—in this case by the deployment of the noir style and the instantiation of Lagos as chronotope. Fourth, the literary market is a subset of the larger world system that produces local centers and local peripheries even within the global periphery and that *No Longer at Ease* rigorously depicts an estrangement from one such local center, Lagos, simultaneous with that city's inescapability. Fifth, and finally, it is precisely this that is *No Longer at Ease's* representative object: that neither this historical estrangement nor this historical inescapability can be readily dismissed, overcome, or accepted.

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NOTES

1. By 1959, *Things Fall Apart* would have received attention abroad in *The Atlantic* and locally in a review in *Black Orpheus*, the Ibadan-based literary journal edited by Ulli Beier, in which the Ghanaian poet Geombeeyi Adali-Mortty would report that “many of the book’s readers consider it the best which has come out of West Africa” (49). This is important to observe in the transnational history of Achebe’s canonization: *Things Fall Apart* emerged as if already canonical.

2. The “African Trilogy” seems to be a marketing invention of Picador’s, which released a collected edition of *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God* bearing the title “The African Trilogy” in 1988. While this language draws on Achebe’s stated ambition to produce a family trilogy that would begin with the precolonial generation in *Things Fall Apart*, cover the colonial interregnum in the second volume, and conclude with the end of the colonial period in *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe clearly abandoned this project by the time he finished *Arrow of God*, which has a cast and setting largely unrelated to those of *Things Fall Apart* or *No Longer at Ease*. Nonetheless, the language the “African Trilogy” has persisted in subsequent printings. As a result, it is difficult to get hold of meaningful sales figures and citational data comparing the three novels after 1988. Even so, Goodreads counts 210 editions of *Things Fall Apart*, 64 of *No Longer at Ease*, and 50 of *Arrow of God*. Turning from sales to citation, searching for “Chinua Achebe” plus “Things Fall Apart” in the MLA International Bibliography between 1960 and 2020 yields 566 results (1960–69: 7; 1970–79: 32; 1980–89: 52; 1990–99: 126; 2000–09: 176; 2010–19: 173); “Chinua Achebe” plus “No Longer at Ease” yields 101 results (1960–69: 2; 1970–79: 9; 1980–89: 19; 1990–99: 18; 2000–09: 24; 2010–19: 29), and “Chinua Achebe” plus “Arrow of God” yields 185 results (1960–69: 2; 1970–79: 27; 1980–89: 31; 1990–99: 36; 2000–09: 41; 2010–19: 48). Striking here are two facts: first, the defunding of Africa’s universities under structural adjustment from the 1970s onward in no way slowed down the rate at which Achebe’s novels have been cited; second, the urban *No Longer at Ease* is cited half as often as the rural *Arrow of God* and a little over one sixth as often as the rural *Things Fall Apart*. *A Man of the People*, Achebe’s other city novel, is cited even less often than *No Longer at Ease*, yielding seventy-two results between 1960 and 2019 (1960–69: 1; 1970–79: 10; 1980–89: 11; 1990–99: 19; 2000–09: 9; 2010–19: 18).

3. A conservative estimate; as early as 1965, Abiola Irele, whose later influence on Nigerian and indeed African letters is difficult to overstate, would announce in *Black Orpheus* that *No Longer at Ease* falls far short of both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. *No Longer at Ease*’s “potentially tragic” theme “is not given an adequately tragic treatment,” its protagonist is “a pathetic figure without any grain of nobility,” and Achebe’s “treatment of the situation ... tends towards a perfunctoriness.” Though Irele concedes that “[f]or all that, *No Longer at Ease* remains an excellent novel,” its diminished stature relative to Achebe’s other works would be more or less an orthodoxy from this point onward. Achebe, for his part, would still insist in 1973 that *No Longer at Ease* was the technically superior novel (*African Writers Talking* 4).

4. The fact that Achebe, as advisory editor at Heinemann, oversaw in 1963 the republication of *No Longer at Ease*, of Cyprian Ekwensi’s neglected 1954 Lagos novel *People of the City*, and of Peter Abrahams’s neglected 1946 Johannesburg novel *Mine Boy* offers anecdotal support for his preoccupation during this time with the problem of the African urban novel.

5. This is a historical claim, which describes the global infrastructure of literary publishing in Africa from roughly the period of decolonization up to the end of the Cold War; this infrastructure has shifted more recently as a result of a growing number of small presses on the African continent, a growing number of boutique presses in the United States that republish some texts from those small African presses, and the consolidation of larger presses situated in the Global North into a near monopoly. Coeval

with this shift, there has seemed to be an increasing non-correspondence between the “postcolonial” in “postcolonial literature,” an academic discipline and marketing category, and the postcolonial as a political project and aspiration. See Huggan; Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace, Underdevelopment and African Literature*; Krishnan.

6. For a history of the genre as it develops in Nigeria after the 1970s, see Ezeigbo. For a complementary discussion of the use of noir in Black Cinema, see Diawara. For a sample of Lagos noir’s contemporary practitioners, see Abani. Note that this latter text is produced by a publisher with a whole series of regional noir collections—from Addis Ababa to Zagreb. Interestingly the scale of this collection seems to range from the hyper-local (*Wall Street Noir*, *Queens Noir*) to the regional (*Midwest Noir*) to the national (*Haiti Noir*).

7. This emphasis on geography over history is consonant with Gikandi’s reading of Achebe’s second novel, which argues that “in *No Longer at Ease*, history and transformation are not as important as their consequences ... the dispersal of the people of Umuofia in what we have already referred to as the marginal spaces symbolized by the nation and the city.” Gikandi suggests here that the action of *Things Fall Apart* transpires within a bounded territory to “focus more on the temporal process, the tragic transformation of history at the beginning of the colonial period” (85).

8. See Ebeogu; Okeke-Ezigbo; Babalola; Gikandi; Olaniyan; Morrison.

9. Naghuib Mahfouz’s *Cairo Trilogy*, constituting *Palace Walk* (1956), *Palace of Desire* (1957), and *Sugar Street* (1957), is a liminal case—as the adjacency of the three publication dates indicate, these books were initially meant to be published as one multi-generational novel, before Mahfouz’s publisher convinced him to break the novel down into three units, so the “sequelness” of the books seems more of an artifact of market demands than a formal quality of the books themselves. The trilogy was only translated—first into Hebrew, then French—in the 1980s so it was in any case somewhat belated in its arrival on the world literary stage.

10. In this concession, Achebe also claims the field of English literature for the African writer. Achebe’s initial optimism about the utility of English for the African writer would cool in the decade between “The African Writer and the English Language” and his preface to *Morning Yet on Creation Day* in 1975; even so, it remains the case that his repurposing of lines from European modernism for his first two novels has the mutual effect of placing his work in conversation with that vein of modernism and revising the meaning of those modernist texts. Through Achebe, the abstract millenarianism of Yeats is given a concrete referent in the colonial arrival of Christianity in Nigeria, the general epochal change in Eliot turned into a poetics of uneven development (see Brown 107–08).

11. In a distinct postcolonial context, that of post-independence Indonesian theater and literature, Jacquelyn Gaik Ing Teoh has argued that transmediation—of which Achebe’s sequelness seems here a plausible subset—“afforded post-1945 authors a symbolic solution for managing the legacies of their nation’s imperialistic encounters in their pursuit of an emancipatory cultural project” (Teoh). That argument is consonant with the purely symbolic solution that the sequel form offers Achebe, with respect to his own emancipatory cultural project and Nigeria’s own colonial history.

12. The stories would be collected by Heinemann in 1972 in the collection *Girls at War and Other Stories*. Three of these collected stories feature early drafts of the character who would eventually become *No Longer at Ease*’s Michael Obiajulu Okonkwo—Michael Obi in 1953’s “Dead Men’s Path,” Julius Obi in 1959’s “The Sacrificial Egg,” and John Chike Obiajulu in 1960’s “Chike’s School Days,” the latter featuring a short episode from the protagonist’s youth that would be reproduced whole cloth as a recollection of Obi’s in *No Longer at Ease*. This same collection contains two stories set in

Umuofia, "Akueke," which was first published in *Reflections: Nigerian Prose & Verse* in 1962, and "The Voter," first published in *Black Orpheus* in 1965. Strikingly, the first story takes place in a precolonial Umuofia and the latter in a postcolonial Umuofia, as the democratic referent of the title would indicate. This reinforces the above claim about the closure Achebe creates for himself at the conclusion of *Things Fall Apart*, which prevents him from narrating Umuofia's colonial interregnum.

13. "Marriage Is a Private Affair's" textual history is itself fairly illustrative. Initially published in the *Ibadan University Herald* in 1952 under the title "The Old Order in Conflict with the New," the story was slightly expanded for M. J. C. Echeruo's 1962 collection of Achebe's stories, *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories* and published as "The Beginning of the End," before being edited and retitled again for the 1972 Heinemann collection, this time as "Marriage Is a Private Affair." The title appears to be drawn from a 1944 war comedy that bears little resemblance to Achebe's story until the very end, in which the narrative conflict is decided by the protagonist being visited by apparitions—Nnaemeka's father by visions of his grandchildren in Achebe's story, the war comedy's film protagonist by visions of men she might have married. The movement from 1952 to 1972, in which the title progresses from a bald statement of the principal theme, to a less bald but more decisive statement (since one gathers that the beginning of the end describes the new order overcoming the old), to an oblique reference to an American film in which the nuclear family prevails over war and profit only through withdrawal from public life suggests ambivalence over whether Achebe's original ending to "Marriage Is a Private Affair" was indeed a happier one than his retelling of it in *No Longer at Ease*.

14. Note that *No Longer at Ease's* modernism does not in the least undermine its noir stylistics—within that same decade, both Vladimir Nabokov and Alain Robbe-Grillet would release their experimental murder-mysteries-in-reverse, *Pale Fire* (1962) and *Les Gommes* (1952), respectively—but rather describes the foreign horizon of interpretation, modernism, to which the local horizon of interpretation, noir, is complement and completion. More generally, noir's naturalism—in which characters grapple with an overmastering environment and lose—is as susceptible to Lukács's critique as modernism is and on the same grounds. From Lukács's polemical perspective, *No Longer at Ease's* modernism and *No Longer at Ease's* noir-ness are indistinguishable.

15. Bakhtin's chronotope, the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84), moves in my analysis from the general, as in "the road," to the specific, as in "Lagos." I understand this increased specificity as a material consequence of uneven global development that produces wholly distinct experiences of the road and the city in the global metropole and in the periphery and as a discursive consequence of a greater imperative toward specificity in postcolonial writing. It seems likely that as, in Achille Mbembe's terms, "capitalism sets about recolonizing its own center" (179), cities in the metropole will increasingly be understood to have caught up with cities on the periphery; as Joshua Clover writes, "the United States and Europe, the early-industrializing nations, capital's home counties, are overdeveloping toward coloniality, toward a weaponized mode of inclusion/exclusion" (43). A trivial consequence of this generalized coloniality is that the more general chronotope of the (colonial) city may again become an operant category for world-literary criticism.

16. For an overview of contemporary Lagosian writers attempting precisely this ambivalent work of symbolically restoring representative coherence to a materially fractured postcolonial city through the Lagos chronotope, see Ribic.

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