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*The Form of Maturation: James Joyce's Dislocating
Stories of Childhood in Chinua Achebe's
Chike and the River*

Both the time of its publication and its realism situate the first work Chinua Achebe wrote for children closer to his acclaimed tetralogy than to his subsequent offerings for young readers. In contrast to *How the Leopard Got Its Claws* (1973), *The Flute* (1976), and *The Drum* (1977), which take the form of reimagined folktales and have been taken to be “etiological and ethical, set in a world without time,” *Chike and the River* (1966) is insistently timely.¹ Chike’s modest goal—to cross the River Niger by ferry before the Niger Bridge between Onitsha and Asaba is built—not only temporally positions the work in the lead-up to the bridge’s opening in 1965, giving Chike’s efforts a sense of urgency, but also makes infrastructural change, a connective next stage in post-Independence Nigeria’s modernization, its backdrop.

Finally achieving his dream in the midst of and in anticipation of the continued growth that makes the imminent opening of the bridge across the river necessary, Chike thinks, “*So this is me [...] Chike Anene, alias Chiks the Boy, of Umuofia, Mbaino District, Onitsha Province, Eastern Nigeria, Nigeria, West Africa, Africa, World, Universe.*”² Arising out of Chike’s attempt to reassure himself that his crossing of the river is “actually happening” (69), this self-locating thought is a profound moment of conscious positioning on the precipice of both individual and communal change. While Chike is about to enter Midwestern Nigeria for the first time, with an awareness that Lagos is not far away, the communities linked by the

¹ Miriam Dow, “A Postcolonial Child: Achebe’s *Chike* at the Crossroads,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1997): 161.

² Chinua Achebe, *Chike and the River* (Penguin Books, 2011), 69–70 (italics original). Subsequent references to this edition are made parenthetically. For the history of the Niger at this time, see Daniel Olisa, *A History of Transport Systems across the River Niger: Between Asaba and Onitsha from 1954 to 1991* (VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2011), 153–54.

“first modern high speed motor way” are poised to become “gateways to the East and West as well as other parts of Nigeria.”³ Within these contexts, the connective implications of the words that come to Chike’s mind, which move from the local to the global and extend even to the universal, are unmistakeable. These words are also, however, a provocative dislocation of those of Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), bringing into focus the conduit that Achebe opens between *Chike and the River* and *A Portrait* as well as Joyce’s stories of childhood in *Dubliners* (1914), most notably “Araby.” That Chike has learned this way of naming himself from a school friend makes clear European modernism’s manifestation as colonial inheritance. Yet Chike’s mapping of himself onto the globe while in motion between Onitsha and Asaba by means of ferry, rather than by the “efficient, convenient, quicker” route that Daniel Olisa notes the bridge would come to offer, also intimates that Achebe’s evocation of Joyce is continuous with the engagement with European modernism Emily Hyde identifies in his tetralogy, which is part of its decolonizing politics.⁴ While Chike preserves the scaffolding of Dedalus’s self-positioning, he replaces its contents and the model of relationality it suggests: in this moment of change, he declares himself to be of somewhere. The fact that the place he is of is Umuofia, the imagined community in transition in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), is especially significant given recent critics’ revaluations of the realism of Achebe’s works for adults published between 1958 and 1966, finding them to be modernist in their “moods” and “modes.”⁵ Achebe’s pronounced evocation of Joyce at this juncture not only pushes readers to position *Chike and the River* more firmly in the constellation of the tetralogy, then, but also and perhaps more unexpectedly asks them to reconsider the specific form Achebe’s story of childhood takes.

That the Joycean aspects of *Chike and the River* have remained unexamined likely stems from a general reluctance to take “conventional offering[s] for children” seriously, particularly when they seem less “subversively revolutionary” than an

³ Olisa, *A History of Transport Systems across the River Niger*, 154, 157.

⁴ Olisa, *A History of Transport Systems across the River Niger*, 155; Emily Hyde, “Flat Style: *Things Fall Apart* and Its Illustrations,” *PMLA* 131, no. 1 (2016): 21.

⁵ Brian May, “Modernism in Chinua Achebe’s African Tetralogy,” in *Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism: Anglophone Literature, 1950 to the Present*, ed. Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Oxford University Press, 2018), 34.

author's other works.⁶ Achebe's own remarks on the pressing need for African writers to write children's books have also likely played a role in shaping critical reception.⁷ Though Achebe attaches import to writing for children, characterizing it as "a kind of national service," his suggestion that those who take up this call are likely to contribute "something readable" or at least "something which is not worse than what is available" seems to privilege content over form.⁸ Perhaps taking their cue from Achebe himself, then, critics have predominantly tended to focus on the purpose *Chike and the River* serves. Ernest N. Emenyonu and James S. Etim, for example, focus on how the "simple adventure story" Achebe has created contributes to the socialization of its young readers, as they witness its protagonist, Chike, internalize norms and values within the postcolonial society in which he lives, seeing themselves in him as he moves from Umuofia to Onitsha and seeks to follow in the footsteps of his peers by making the river crossing.⁹ Though Emenyonu briefly touches on Achebe's literary techniques, he does so to emphasize the role they play in reinforcing the work's verisimilitude and Achebe's commitment to his vision.¹⁰ Miriam Dow similarly notes *Chike and the River's*

⁶ Suzanne Manizza Roszak, *They Also Write for Kids: Cross-Writing, Activism, and Children's Literature* (University Press of Mississippi, 2023), 37.

⁷ Chinua Achebe, "Chinua Achebe Speaks on the Role of the African Author," interview by Colleen Lowe Morna, *New African*, November 1987, 47.

⁸ Achebe, "Chinua Achebe Speaks on the Role of the African Author," 47.

⁹ Ernest N. Emenyonu, "Selection and Validation of Oral Materials for Children's Literature: Artistic Resources in Chinua Achebe's Fiction for Children," in *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, ed. Ernest N. Emenyonu, vol. 1, *Omenka the Master Artist: Critical Perspectives on Achebe's Fiction* (Africa World, 2004), 431. For Emenyonu, *Chike and the River* serves as a "laboratory of life for the young readers. The hero of the book moves from naivette [*sic*] and ignorance to self knowledge and self discovery" (432). Etim analyzes four of Achebe's children's stories, focusing on Achebe's sense that children's literature is directed toward "social development"; his works, Etim argues, explore "greed, parental influence [...]" and the nature of power and leadership." James S. Etim, "The Writer as Teacher: Chinua Achebe's Children's Books," in Emenyonu, *Omenka the Master Artist*, 449.

¹⁰ Emenyonu notes that "Achebe's literary techniques in the book make it worthwhile for children. There are familiar folksongs, 'native' idioms, and code mixing, humorous anecdotes, games that children play for entertainment and amusement, children's pranks and slangs, children's fantasies and day-dreaming, children's nicknames for each other, and children's perceptions of the adult world which they discuss among themselves in their peculiar types of dialogue. All these reinforce the authenticity of the story, the reality

relatively straightforward plot but focuses instead on Achebe's portrayal of Chike, who is placed "at a dangerous and horizon-expanding crossroads" in a moment of self-making.¹¹ For Dow, "The fictional world that Achebe creates for Chike is the world that Achebe himself seeks to inhabit: a process-oriented world forever in mediating flux between the African and the European" that looks to "aesthetics to explain how such an integration might work."¹² It is therefore surprising to some extent that Dow does not account for the work's Joycean intertexts. Suzanne Manizza Roszak is also interested in the postcolonial dimensions of Chike's socialization, remarking on Achebe's repurposing of the adventure story form.¹³ Importantly, Roszak argues that there are "recognizable activist links to his other works."¹⁴ Noting that *Chike and the River*'s critiques of British colonialism and its role in the class struggle find similar expression in his short fiction and memoir, *There Was a Country*, Roszak does not, however, put Achebe's story for children in conversation with its near contemporaries: the works that make up Achebe's tetralogy.

Attending to Achebe's subtle nods and overt allusions to Joyce produces a reading of *Chike and the River* that to some extent reinforces even as it refocuses these interpretive lenses; this is because these intertextual echoes most obviously suggest that Achebe takes a *Bildung* approach to representing Chike's maturation. The third-person point of view Achebe adopts is marked by its focalization, a tactic Joyce also uses in *A Portrait*, enabling readers to "perceive the text through the eyes of the protagonist" and in so doing become embroiled in the "formative process" on display.¹⁵ Just as language is an "instrument of [...] self-making" for Stephen in Joyce's *Portrait*, Chike's engagement with Igbo and English is the

of the children's world created in the book and the author's artistic integrity" (Emenyonu, "Selection and Validation of Oral Materials for Children's Literature," 433).

¹¹ Dow, "A Postcolonial Child," 165.

¹² Dow, "A Postcolonial Child," 164.

¹³ Roszak, *They Also Write for Kids*, 38.

¹⁴ Roszak, *They Also Write for Kids*, 63.

¹⁵ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (Verso, 1987), 56. If he eschews the first-person perspective typical for classical *Bildung*, evident even in Joyce's stories of childhood in *Dubliners*, Achebe seems to do so in a bid to let child readers see better, perhaps accounting for the more limited access to his protagonist's interiority he provides, compared to Joyce in *A Portrait*.

basis for the complex process of socialization he undergoes in a post-Independence context that continues to work through colonialism's implications.¹⁶ Like Stephen's, Chike's engagement with language is part of his aesthetic development, revealing Achebe's participation in a modernist "recapture" of the classic spirit of *Bildung*.¹⁷ Both authors portray their respective protagonists' "aesthetic education[s] and [their] self-sufficiency" even as they call into question the possibility of "harmonious integration with the social world."¹⁸ If Joyce's protagonists construct an "ethics of the self that regards identity as a radically conflicted site," however, Achebe's Chike constructs an ethics of the self that is less unsettled and unsettling even as it is shown to be in a perpetual state of becoming.¹⁹

To some extent, then, the ethics of the self that Chike develops is predictably positioned as an ostensible alternative to the modernizing subtext of the story of maturation embedded in the *Bildungsroman* form. In the age of accelerating public development that Achebe portrays, individual maturation occurs alongside the advancement of economic and social structures and the prioritization of public interests; this comes with the assumption that successful maturation will see the individual take up a social role defined by its utility, though the adoption of this role is complicated by the fact that the post-Independent nation is itself evolving.²⁰ It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the development of the artist who takes on the characteristics of wilful individualism in a modernizing context, tends to be marked either by incomplete maturation or purposeful exile, as is the case in

¹⁶ Langdon Hammer, introduction to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, by James Joyce (Signet Classics, 2006), xi.

¹⁷ Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (University Press of Florida, 2006), 251.

¹⁸ Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, 250, 251.

¹⁹ Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, 251.

²⁰ Michael Rubenstein, *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 13. Rubenstein makes the point that "for the underdeveloped identity, and for the postcolonial writer, the teleological arc of personal development culminates in taking on—in metaphorical as well as more literal ways—the role of the developer" (13). This argument comes as part of his interest in mapping the "postcolonial writer-developer's commitment, through and to her literary craft, to the development of the common good" (13).

Joyce's *Portrait*.²¹ Against these possibilities, in *Chike and the River*, Chike's understanding of the capacity for story to facilitate the intersection of individual and communal interests becomes the precondition for a theoretical next stage of development for both individual and community.

While Stephen is the "target of Joyce's irony," as Jed Esty points out, "throw[ing] into relief [...] the persistently adolescent features of Stephen's thinking," Chike is treated more gently by Achebe, more closely resembling the ideal subject of classical *Bildung*.²² As measurable markers of Chike's maturation come into view at the end of the work, he seems to reinforce the *Bildungsroman*'s didactic modelling. Reading *Chike and the River* alongside Joyce, however, suggests that Achebe's playful engagement with Joyce's iteration of the modernist *Bildungsroman*-mood and mode, which recognizes similarities between their colonial histories and their legacies but takes the different political needs and possibilities of post-independence Nigeria into account, not only is part of Achebe's attempt to construct what Achebe calls a new "grammar of values" but also looks toward the future of the *Bildungsroman* form that Gregory Castle contemplates.²³ It becomes clear that the work's "symbolic legitimations" might "have more to do with some *future* or otherworldly dispensation [...] than with the world as it exists in the present" as Achebe's treatment of Chike insistently defines him as becoming, positioning him in sympathetic alignment with a community about to experience the effects of profound infrastructural change.²⁴ The potential Achebe locates in Chike's anticipated trajectory is to some extent sited in his ability to bridge tradition and modernity, recalling his earlier works. Published the same year as *A Man of the People* (1966), his "cynical indictment of politics in the modern sphere," *Chike and the River* is also proffered as a work that models a mode of being that offers tacit remedy for the social and political realities Achebe

²¹ Rubenstein, *Public Works*, 13. For Rubenstein, "*A Portrait* is a classic *Kunstlerroman* exactly insofar as it is not a *Bildungsroman*, because in the end Stephen chooses art and aesthetics, not in combination with the acceptance of a social position, but rather as an alternative to social and political participation: the artist as exile" (13).

²² Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 148.

²³ Chinua Achebe, "Africa and Her Writers," *Massachusetts Review* 14, no. 3 (1973): 628.

²⁴ Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, 252 (*italics original*).

portrays and takes issue with, though no guarantees about individual or political futures are made.²⁵

Importantly, Chike's movement from Umuofia to Onitsha enacts a more complex positioning in terms of space and time, a more complex bridging, than realist designation of the text suggests. Trusted to the guardianship of his Uncle by his mother, who warns him against "wander[ing] about the city" and "go[ing] near the River Niger" (4–5), Chike moves from the "knowable" space of the village into the recognizable but "unknowable" space of Onitsha, an actual city in Nigeria, which is defined at least initially by its "strange[ness]" (7) and the opaqueness of its social fabric: "He could not say who was a thief or kidnapper and who was not. In Umuofia every thief was known, but here even people who lived under the same roof were strangers to one another" (7). The issue of Umuofia's knowability is to some extent unquestionable given that it is Achebe's fictional creation. Though Umuofia is set in ostensible opposition to the metropolitan counterparts Chike enters—first, Onitsha and, later, Asaba—Achebe's earlier portrayal of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* complicates this dynamic, based on how he has shown that even this nonmetropolitan space has not been untouched by modernity, noting colonialism's role in its development. Umuofia itself gains the status of a "modernist surface" embedded in the realism of Achebe's book for children.²⁶ This is to some extent another iteration of Achebe's engagement with the flat realism that Hyde finds in *Things Fall Apart*, as Achebe brings into the foreground what would be background in another author's work.²⁷ Not only aligned with Chike as a figurative background that is brought forward again and again as he moves through the novel, Achebe's evocation of his earlier creation reiterates the challenge to "colonial modes of literary representation" and to "the myth of modernist primitivism" that he poses in *Things Fall Apart*.²⁸ Umuofia is represented as a changeable and changing communal space, though rooted in

²⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 349.

²⁶ Hyde, "Flat Style," 20. Hyde notes that "the modernist surface can be made to serve realist imperatives" (20).

²⁷ Hyde, "Flat Style," 22.

²⁸ Hyde, "Flat Style," 22.

tradition, that unquestionably remains formative for Chike even as both he and it continue to be formed.

Onitsha functions as a more straightforward iteration of Dublin in Joyce's *Portrait*, which provokes in Stephen "a new and complex sensation" and leads to an "unrest" rooted in "The vastness and strangeness of the life suggested to him by the bales of merchandise stocked along the walls or swung aloft out of the holds of steamers."²⁹ Indeed, as Sara Spanghero notes, "in Dublin, [Stephen] experiences the manifold sides of a city whose identity inevitably depends on its port."³⁰ Unlike Stephen, Chike is not "cast down" by Onitsha, which Emmanuel N. Obiechina notes was the "educational and commercial centre of the Eastern Region of Nigeria," despite the fact Chike discovers unsavoury aspects that lead him to conclude that "a big town was not always better than a village" (14).³¹ Undoubtedly, this is in part because Onitsha is still peripheral to the larger cosmopolitan centres that lie beyond it and toward which Chike's gaze and interest in the river are oriented. In contrast with his friends, he has not travelled to the Midwest, more specifically to Asaba, which his peers tell him leads to Lagos, which, according to his most formative influence, Samuel, is "Second-to-London" (10). For now, young Chike sets his gaze on Asaba, described by Samuel as "poor-man's Lagos" (10); crucially, Chike broaches but does not yet encounter the larger metropolises that remain at the margins of the text, though his entry into Onitsha puts them in reach precisely because of the navigability of the Niger River.³²

Chike's friendship with Samuel, whom he encounters when he enters Onitsha's education system with its obvious vestiges of colonialism, facilitates Chike's

²⁹ Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 63–64.

³⁰ Sara Spanghero, "Ships and Boats in James Joyce: Representing Arrested Development in the Modernist Bildungsroman," *TRANS-: Revue de littérature générale et comparée* 21 (2017): 6, <https://doi.org/10.4000/trans.1462>.

³¹ Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 76; Emmanuel N. Obiechina, introduction to *Onitsha Market Literature* (Heinemann, 1972), 4.

³² Obiechina notes that Onitsha's "importance depended very much on its favourable natural location. Situated on the left bank of the River Niger, Onitsha is a gateway to the densely populated eastern hinterland, as well as a point of contact between this hinterland and the rich Mid-western and Western Nigeria. It is thus well suited for trade between the areas lying to the east and the west and, because the Niger is navigable north and south, with places up and down the river" (Obiechina, introduction, 4).

maturation. Although his interest in the River Niger is rooted in stories he heard in Umuofia from his mother's friend, Sarah, and to some extent in his mother's warnings to stay away from it, the narrator explains it is "from Samuel that Chike first heard how easy it was to cross the River Niger and come back again" (8). Framed in terms of return, the ease with which the journey can be made is vouched for by Samuel, whose experience of the crossing is consistent with the mode of self-fashioning he models, predicated on his ostensibly more metropolitan sensibilities.³³ The nickname that Samuel confers on himself, "S.M.O.G.," unsurprisingly in this respect reveals him to be of Onitsha in the same way that Chike is "*of Umuofia*" (69): "In Onitsha," readers are told, "the letters S.M.O.G. were said to bring good luck because they stood for Save Me O God" (8). The strategic code-switching associated with Samuel also brings into focus the mixture of Igbo and English that underwrites Chike's experiences in Onitsha. Not only Chike's teachers but also Samuel add to Chike's repertoire, introducing him to English expressions. In fact, it is Achebe's portrayal of Samuel that makes clear to readers that they are imaginatively encountering Igbo, as he switches to English to make use of their teacher's "favorite saying" to impress upon Chike that action is required: "Time and tide wait for no man," he says (9). Samuel's emphasis on the haste with which Chike needs to complete the literal and metaphorical rite of passage introduces a periodizing marker into the text that announces that, as with Joyce's *Dubliners*, "it is in the givenness of the real, in time and place, that psychological, social, cultural and moral realities will reveal themselves."³⁴ However, Achebe's "place[ment]" of the work "in historical time" goes beyond simply portraying Chike's navigation of postindependence Onitsha, as Dow suggests.³⁵ The expected change in infrastructure that Samuel describes, saying that "they are building a bridge across the river" and "will finish it soon" (9), will change the nature of the relationship between Onitsha and Asaba from distal and provisional to proximal and permanent. This emblem of accelerated modernity,

³³ In "Africa and Her Writers," Achebe describes the "predicament of the African writer in search of universality," explaining that "He has been misled into thinking that the metropolis belongs to him. Well, not yet. For him there is still the inescapable grammar of values to straighten out, the confused vocabulary of fledgling polities" (628).

³⁴ Terence Brown, introduction to *Dubliners*, by James Joyce (Penguin Books, 2014), xli.

³⁵ Dow, "A Postcolonial Child," 161.

then, makes it necessary for Chike to prepare for what this entry into a next stage of modernization will mean, even as he attempts to catch up to his peers.

Chike's ability to complete this rite of passage is dependent on obtaining a shilling, marking Achebe's more direct venture into the issues of materialism and progress; notably, these issues were also being considered at the time through the market pamphlets that flourished in Onitsha and attempted to deal "with the problems of a new society in which the introduction of new cultural elements [...] stimulated new desires, new attitudes, and new values."³⁶ At the same time, both the material considerations necessary for the journey to be completed and Chike's romanticization of his goal evoke Joyce's "Araby." While the boy in Joyce's story is able to obtain the necessary funds to travel to Araby from his uncle—though his journey is marred by the uncle's belated arrival—Chike is unable to convince his own uncle to provide him with the means to obtain his goal, for he is a "strict man" who believes "children should spend their time reading and doing sums" (11). In contrast, Chike believes in his teacher's opposing view: "*All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy*" (11). Chike adds the English-language proverb to his repertoire of Igbo proverbs in an intersectional move of self-fashioning reminiscent of Samuel's. His adoption of it speaks to the complex make-up of the postcolonial world in which Chike lives, even while it moves western influences to the periphery. This particular proverb, of course, is the saying with which the uncle in "Araby" sanctifies the protagonist's trip: "My uncle said he was very sorry he had forgotten. He said he believed in the old saying: *All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy*."³⁷ In *Chike and the River*, the fact that the saying originates with his schoolteacher, combined with the added detail that Chike "lack[s] the courage" (11) to share this sentiment with his uncle, is an ironic inversion. That is, Chike's own valuation of this proverb raises the possibility that he will not be derided by the same vanities as Joyce's protagonist, whose seriousness of intent is undermined by these same words in "Araby." Critically, however, Chike's attachment to this proverb is made known as he begins to try to achieve his aim, well before it becomes clear that he will in fact need to work to obtain his objective. While Chike is not held in quite the same thrall by what is portrayed as being a relatively parochial goal, the achievement of which will make him part of

³⁶ Obiechina, introduction, 13.

³⁷ James Joyce, "Araby," in *Dubliners* (2014), 23 (italics original).

a community of peers, rather than affirm his distance from them, his persistent hope that he will find the means to go to Asaba nonetheless suggests that it is a similarly idealized locus of desire for him. If it is the “syllables of the word *Araby*” that come to “cast an Eastern enchantment over” Joyce’s protagonist, it is the words “Midwestern Nigeria,” which evoke similarly “flowing” and notably English “phrases” such as “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” and “*The Isle of Man*,” that capture Chike’s imagination (10).³⁸

Although the boy in “*Araby*” more zealously guards the image of his beloved in the market, Chike similarly separates himself from those partaking in what Onitsha’s commercial hub has to offer, setting his gaze on the River Niger instead: “While Michael bargained with the traders Chike stood aside watching the great river as it flowed peacefully down to the sea [...] what Chike liked most was to watch the big ferryboats” (14–15). Notably, Chike’s interest in the River Niger tacitly evokes the symbolism of the Liffeside quays and docks in Joyce’s *Portrait*, signifying “a durable symbolic connection between an inchoate adolescent selfhood, an uncertain and unsanctioned form of desire, and the quays and rivers that connote Stephen’s own marginal or provincial place in a vast system of economic modernization.”³⁹ As in “*Araby*,” Chike’s gaze moves away from Onitsha itself, characterized by its “post-war expansion in educational, commercial, and technological activities,” by “the rapid growth of literacy and semi-literacy,” and by the market, taken to be “one of the most splendid of its kind in West Africa.”⁴⁰ However, Chike’s attempts to gain the funds to cross the river, in contravention of his mother’s advice and despite his uncle’s refusal to supply him with the shilling he needs, necessitates his immersion in Onitsha, giving Achebe the means to provide a broader view of its society.

To some extent, Joyce’s desire to offer the “Irish people [...] one good look at themselves” through the stories that make up *Dubliners* finds tacit expression through Achebe’s aim to let the children of Nigeria see themselves in his story, with the likely side-effect that those who facilitate children’s access to the text

³⁸ Joyce, “*Araby*,” 21–22 (*italics original*).

³⁹ Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 143.

⁴⁰ Obiechina, introduction, 8.

might catch a glimpse of themselves as well.⁴¹ So that his child readers and perhaps even their guardians might navigate the society in which they find themselves, Achebe does not shy away from confronting the effects of colonialism and of accelerating progress, particularly as they manifest in the behavior and values of adults who populate the text. Roszak observes that “Readers who are not careful might mistake *Chike* for a book that fulfills the stereotype of children’s literature as shielding younger people from more troubling realities.”⁴² Those who are more observant, Roszak affirms, will note that the work “prob[es] unjust and unequal class structures by locating the site of corruption [...] at the feet of the wealthy.”⁴³ Indeed, Chike narrowly avoids falling into “bad ways”, because he is “so anxious to find the money for his trip across the river” that he almost follows the lead of Ezekiel, a “spoilt child” whose dishonest actions stem from the influence of his mother, a “well-to-do trader” who makes “much profit” but is “not a wise mother” (17). When Ezekiel asks English boys to send him money in exchange for a leopard skin and actually receives a ten-shilling postal order, the other boys follow suit, except for Chike, who does not do so only because he lacks the funds. The narrative gaze makes clear the effect the boys’ punishment has on Chike, who “shivered to think that if he had had sixpence he would have stood there on the platform with the rest,” as the headmaster berates them for the role they have played in spoiling the students’ names in England, where some of them “will go to study” (21). The episode itself closes not with Chike’s reaction or the boys’ punishments, however; instead, Achebe tacitly brings the background into focus in a move reminiscent of the work that Hyde argues he accomplishes in *Things Fall Apart*. After they are punished, Ezekiel’s mother takes issue with the headmaster’s rather than her child’s actions, “rain[ing] abuses on him” (22). Like Joyce’s stories of childhood, then, which reveal how modernism “exposes and disrupts the inherited conventions of the bildungsroman in order to criticize bourgeois values,” Achebe’s “flattened” realism places Chike’s development in context, making him proximal to the social structures shaping him.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Brown, introduction, xxiv.

⁴² Roszak, *They Also Write for Kids*, 60.

⁴³ Roszak, *They Also Write for Kids*, 63.

⁴⁴ Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 3.

It is Chike's aesthetic education that to some extent paradoxically reasserts the relationship between ideal protagonist and nation that is at the heart of traditional *Bildung*. Achebe focuses on Chike's ability to position himself through language by applying proverbs and stories to his own circumstances and, more importantly, by generating orienting proverbs of his own—to "mak[e] things" rather than consume things in a "society of consumers."⁴⁵ Prior to encountering the River Niger, Chike is tested by the River Nkisa when seven boys are selected to transport a missionary's luggage across it, because the "bridge had been washed away by heavy rains" (25). Though "afraid" because he does "not know how to swim" (26), Chike pushes himself forward through the river with "defiance" (27). Chike's newfound "confidence in himself" (27) finds expression through his construction of a "proverb of his own" (28). He replaces one of his uncle's favorite proverbs—"It is bad that a man who has swum in the great River Niger should be drowned in its small tributary," which "means that a man who has passed a big test should not fail a small one"—with one that more accurately reflects his experience: "A man who can walk through the Nkisa with his bare feet should not be afraid to sail the Niger in a boat" (27–28).

Achebe's use of proverbs to mark Chike's progress is not surprising, given Bernth Lindfors's oft-quoted argument that they

serve as keys to an understanding of his novels because he uses them not merely to add touches of local color but to sound and reiterate themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict, and to focus on the values of the society he is portraying.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Chinua Achebe, quoted in Emenyonu, "Selection and Validation of Oral Materials for Children's Literature," 436. It is worth noting that Achebe extolls the virtue of "making things," particularly in what has become "a society of consumers," in his self-assessment of *The Flute*, which Emenyonu notes is Achebe's reimagining of "a simple folktale well known in many African cultures." This is consistent with Achebe's view of what is at stake in acts of aesthetic creation: "Art was intended to be useful" (Emenyonu, "Selection and Validation of Oral Materials for Children's Literature," 436).

⁴⁶ Bernth Lindfors, "The Palm-Oil with Which Achebe's Words Are Eaten," in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, ed. C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (Three Continents, 1978), 50.

Indeed, for Lindfors, the proverbs “provide a ‘grammar of values’ by which the deeds of a hero can be measured and evaluated.”⁴⁷ It is their use which is of paramount importance, however—a point Gareth Griffiths indirectly makes when he notes that “Proverbial language is not a static repository of wisdom” for Achebe, though his argument that Achebe’s “novels explore the growing inadequacy of [...] proverbial language” is less convincing.⁴⁸ Here, this self-making act sees Chike symbolically rewarded, as he finds sixpence on the road and reaffirms his intent “to spend it in fulfilling his ambition,” reflecting not only on the words of his teacher—“little drops of water make the mighty ocean”—but also on a story that his mother’s friend Sarah told him about a “quarrel between a little bird and the River,” in which the River’s contempt for the bird vanishes when the bird brings the River’s limitations into focus (35). This story is also subject to Chike’s invention: he liked it so much “he added bits to improve it” (35)—specifically the parts about “the length of the river, the five countries, and the name of the mountains”—because he “liked to study his atlas” (36). For Dow, this story is representative of an “irresistible hybrid”: “the basic story that he recalls and its values are old and African; the geographical elements are new, part of his horizon-stretching Western schooling.”⁴⁹ Chike’s additions notably emphasize the reach of the River Niger, intimating that his desire goes beyond simply gaining acceptance from his peers, a notion that is reinforced by Achebe’s re-siting of his interest in the river in “the day he heard that story” (36).

Not in full possession of the means to cross the river at this point in the work, however, Chike approaches his friend Samuel with his desire to make “the sixpence grow into a shilling” (36) in large part because Chike takes him to be someone who knows “how to act like a grown-up” (37). Samuel’s method of convincing Chike to join him in spending the money he has found on eggs and suya before doubling what remains—repeatedly saying that Chike “talk[s] like a small boy” (37)—reinforces his role as formative authority. Strategic use of a proverb enables Samuel to hold sway. When he asks “Why should we live by the

⁴⁷ Lindfors, “The Palm-Oil with Which Achebe’s Words Are Eaten,” 50–51.

⁴⁸ Gareth Griffiths, “Language and Action in the Novels of Chinua Achebe,” in *The Novel in Africa*, ed. Eldred Durosini Jones, *African Literature Today*, no. 5 (Heinemann, 1971), 98.

⁴⁹ Dow, “A Postcolonial Child,” 164.

River Niger and then wash our hands with spittle?”, Chike is convinced, notably because he has “heard” the proverb “used before about Peter Nwaba, the miserly trader,” and he does “not care to be likened to [him]” (38). The conflict that occurs between the boys at this mid-point in the work, as they play a game with the eggs, calls Samuel’s maturation into question, however. Samuel reacts with anger upon losing and tricks Chike into being stung by a bee, foreshadowing the reduction but not elimination of Samuel’s influence on Chike as he begins to come into his own. Importantly, Samuel’s movement into English as he yells “Get out!” and “Mind yourself” (42) is a defamiliarizing move that shows his use of the language to be strategic. In this context, it is aligned with affective force. This moment in the work also estranges readers from the text’s ostensible language—English. Achebe calls on readers to remember they are imaginatively encountering Igbo even as he crucially reminds readers of Chike’s beginnings: Samuel taunts Chike, calling him “Bush boy” (43), and this paves the way for the re-siting of metropolitan values that occurs at the conclusion of *Chike and the River*.

From this point on, there are subtle signs that Chike is beginning to separate from Samuel, though the boys reconcile and his influence continues. In the wake of losing his money to yet another of the disreputable adults who populate the text—namely, the money-doubler whom Samuel advises him to visit—Chike sees Samuel through different eyes. While reporting the matter to Samuel, Chike notices that “his shirt [is] covered with [...] soup” (49); Chike’s own shirt, in comparison, is “hardly soiled” (51). More importantly, Chike remains unimpressed by Samuel’s defense of the advice he has offered: “I get everything I need from my mother. So I don’t need to have my money doubled” (51). Samuel’s words gain significance in light of how Chike’s eventual movement to Asaba comes about through honest labour as he forsakes other shortcuts after this point. In this way, *Chike and the River* seems to diverge from tendencies in his other works that mirror those, more widely observed, of “intellectual novelists and dramatists of West Africa, who are deeply sceptical of the contemporary society and its changing values and who use their works to express their scepticism of change”; here, the work takes a turn that tacitly speaks to the approach that some of the pamphlet authors of Onitsha’s market take to “educating the reader so as to help him make the best of the changing situations.”⁵⁰ Although Chike does not

⁵⁰ Obiechina, introduction, 13.

abandon his goal, further encounters with the inhabitants of Onitsha reinforce to readers that while he is developing, Chike is still on the cusp of maturation. Following the boys' unsuccessful attempt to reclaim Chike's money from the money lender, the pride Chike takes in learning to ride a bicycle for adults is dashed when he crashes and the mechanic attempts to hold the boys accountable for the costs of repairing the bicycle. Though able to evade this responsibility, Chike is aware that attaining his goal "seem[s] more unlikely than ever" (59). When he ceases to dream, seizing onto his mother's words—"A poor man should not dream of rice" (59)—Mr. Nwaba comes into view, filtered through Chike's gaze. For Chike, Mr. Nwaba is a potential but unlikely source of money; the focus shifts instead to his contemplation of why the miser Nwaba lives "miserably" (59) and is "cruel" (61), even though he pays attention to religion. While Chike views Mr. Nwaba critically, the extent of Nwaba's avarice, which distorts his social values, remains outside Chike's understanding at this stage in the work.

Coming to a point where, lacking money, he no longer "think[s] of crossing the river" but instead goes there to "watch the boats" (63), Chike takes inspiration from three boys he sees washing cars. Offering to clean a man's car, noting that the man's trip to Lagos requires that it be clean, and being granted permission to do so, Chike obtains the shilling he needs. While Chike twice thanks the man who has given him the money, the background once again comes into the foreground as the reader's view moves from Chike's joy to the man who does not reply in an act of reframing that undercuts this ostensible moment of triumph.⁵¹ Still, in this moment, "economic prosperity" functions as an "index of progress."⁵² Chike is rewarded for honest toil, yet the form Chike's reward takes does not result in the straightforward reinforcement of this lesson that seems to come straight out of a market pamphlet.

Though readers are told that "Chike's dream had come true" (67), his movement toward Asaba via the ferry is itself "like a dream" (69). While waiting to take the ferry, Chike sings "One More River to Cross," which is "one of the songs he had

⁵¹ Roszak also notes this moment in the text, observing that, "With enough wealth to own at least a small car, the driver who offers Chike one of the coins from his pocket can barely be bothered to look at or speak to him, his attitude spotlighting the social consequences of this economic inequality" (Roszak, *They Also Write for Kids*, 62).

⁵² Obiechina, introduction, 15.

learnt at the C.M.S. Central School, Umuofia” (67). This imaginative return to Umuofia is not a straightforward return to an idealized space; rather, it enacts a return that speaks to Achebe’s complex treatment of the village signifier. Already anticipating that he will be able to say “I too have been to Asaba. There only remains Lagos” (67), Chike begins to register signs that the metropolis may not be what it seems; as cars deboard, he is surprised, thinking that the “great road” leading to Lagos “should be free from dust” (68). When the ferry sets in motion, Chike’s reading of his experience as dream-like crucially anticipates Achebe’s embedding of another iteration of a modernist surface into his text—the literal flat surface of the note Stephen makes in Joyce’s *Portrait*. “*So this is me,*” Chike thinks, “*Chike Anene, alias Chiks the Boy, of Umuofia, Mbaino District, Onitsha Province, Eastern Nigeria, Nigeria, West Africa, Africa, World, Universe*” (69–70). Chike’s words here, of course, evoke what Stephen has written on the flyleaf of his geography textbook:

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
*The Universe.*⁵³

In his reading of Joyce’s *Portrait*, Esty argues that “This signal moment of Ptolemaic self-assertion both reinterprets and, in a sense, travesties the soulmaking apparatus of the Goethean hero who builds a nascent intellect out of a kind of cultural global-positioning system always set to the cardinal point of the cosmopolitan self.”⁵⁴ If, for Esty, this is one of several “devices” which are “torqued” by Joyce so that “they lay bare their own status as conventions,” it enters Achebe’s text in similar fashion.⁵⁵ Chike comes to the words not through his

⁵³ Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 10.

⁵⁴ Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 145.

⁵⁵ Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 145.

encounter with Joyce's text but through his friend Samuel's endorsement of the mode of being in the world they represent. That is, Chike's evocation of these words at this particular moment is a self-conscious self-styling act that renders this version of the cosmopolitan self—even an Afro rather than Eurocentric one—an affectation. By severing them from their context, Achebe instead brings focus to Chike's affective attachment to these words, which appear here as dejected—or at least dislocated—traces of Joyce's novel. Rather than political abnegation, the formulation Chike provides insistently draws attention not to the universe but to his immediate contexts. While Stephen “read[s] the flyleaf from the bottom to the top” and then “read[s] down the page again,” wondering “What was after the universe?”, Chike's act of self-positioning is more straightforward.⁵⁶ He roots himself in his school community, claiming the nickname conferred upon him by the peers whose ranks he seeks to join by completing this rite of passage and following the way of being in the metropolis that Samuel has modelled. More significantly, however, Chike declares himself to be “*of Umuofia*” (69) even in this moment of crossing, foreshadowing how his movement into Asaba will in fact take him back to his roots, which is reinforced by the songs that come to him. To some extent, then, one modernist text is inscribed on another, as Chike's insistence that he is “*of Umuofia*” evokes Achebe's seminal *Things Fall Apart*.

Achebe's portrayal of Chike in this moment is further complicated by the guise of “Great African Traveler” that he assumes.⁵⁷ The narrator observes that in this moment of crossing Chike “felt as proud as Mungo Park when he finally reached the Niger” (70). This reference to Mungo Park is a throwback to an age of exploration that predates the time period in which *Things Fall Apart* is set. The comparison is fitting given Chike's fascination with the river and his interest in geography; indeed, Park is taken to be “the first European to reach the Niger” and he was later tasked with “extend[ing] commerce and geographical knowledge.”⁵⁸ Achebe's use of a simile in this moment is key, however. He mocks Chike's

⁵⁶ Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 10–11.

⁵⁷ John Delaney, “Mungo Park, 1771–1806,” To the Mountains of the Moon: Mapping African Exploration, 1541–1880, Princeton University Library, 2007, https://static-prod.lib.princeton.edu/visual_materials/maps/websites/africa/park/park.html. As Delaney observes, “In England [Mungo Park] was proclaimed the ‘Great African Traveler.’”

⁵⁸ Delaney, “Mungo Park, 1771–1806.”

pretensions even as his portrayal of Chike re-sites the narrative of discovery. A simile is again used to convey the pride Chike takes in the Great River; he enjoys the experience, feeling, the narrator explains, “as though he owned the river” (70). The “as though” formulation obviously draws the legitimacy of the claim into question. In fact, the song Chike remembers and sings in this moment is another one he learned in Umuofia—“*Row, row, row your boat*” (70)—intimating that there is continuity between Achebe’s interrogation of present-day Nigeria’s colonial inheritance in *Things Fall Apart* and that in *Chike and the River*. As Chike sings the lines predictably ending with “*Life is but a dream*” (70), he imaginatively reaches toward Lagos rather than to Asaba, which is more imminently accessible. This dream-like episode, which breaks with the realism of Achebe’s work even as it remains continuous with it, plays a key role in critically framing Chike’s idealism, anticipating his own confrontation of the limitations of progress.

In a repetition of the disappointment that attends the crossing of the Liffey in “An Encounter,” where the young protagonists’ clear sense of adventure dissipates, leaving them to their “jaded thoughts,” and in “Araby,” where the boy’s belated arrival means “Nearly all the stalls [are] closed and the greater part of the hall [is] in darkness,” Asaba contains only a “few miserable-looking houses,” causing Chike to feel “really disappointed” (73).⁵⁹ Though his assessment is to some extent undercut—he parodically takes on the appearance of a “European inspector of schools” (73) in a move that simultaneously repeats his self-styling during the voyage and seems iterative of Stephen’s aping in Joyce’s *Portrait*—Chike’s movement into Asaba is characterized by disenchantment:

From the stories his friends told Chike expected Asaba to be better than any place he had seen. And he expected the Midwestern region to be very different from the East. But now the air felt the same, the soil had the same look, and the people went about their business in the same manner. (74)

While the ferry crossing serves its purpose as a literal rite of passage, causing Chike to avoid disillusionment by taking comfort in the fact he “could now talk like the rest of his companions” (74), the work does not close at this point. Instead,

⁵⁹ James Joyce, “An Encounter,” in Joyce, *Dubliners* (2014), 14; Joyce, “Araby,” 24.

he is brought into contact with the nets that have ensnared others in post-Independence Nigeria.

Missing the last boat, Chike reckons with a riverside that again seems threatening as he is forced to fend for himself and regrets disobeying his mother's warning. However, readers are reminded of the fact that "the child hero [has been] exposed to the values of the village before embracing the city and all its unknowns," since, newly valuing his mother's words, Chike takes action to mitigate his situation in line with her view that "crying does not solve any problem" (75).⁶⁰ Indeed, this aspect of *Chike and the River* echoes Achebe's "village sentimentalizing" in *A Man of the People*, in which Achebe seemingly "deems [...] the village a social unit far preferable to that of the nation."⁶¹ He offers a "muted utopian" vision of the village that carries with it a sense of "wistful[ness]" in what Brian May argues is an iteration of T. S. Eliot's relationship to tradition in his *Four Quartets* (1936–1942).⁶² As Pheng Cheah notes, this turn is to be expected in colonial space "where the entropy of modernity is experienced as the shattering of traditional forms of community by colonialism."⁶³ When the refuge Chike finds proves to be no refuge at all, he witnesses the machinations of thieves, one of whom is already known to him. The next morning, Chike is present when the night-watchman who has colluded with the men is freed and Chike listens as the man explains how he was "overpowered" by a "band of armed robbers" (86). "Thinking very hard" (85)—in fact, "thinking as hard as he could" (86)—Chike works through his confusion. This epiphanic moment is signalled by a narrative break, as the third-person narrator temporarily stops focalizing through Chike and readers suddenly are made to occupy an outside viewpoint as the policemen who have taken the man's statement are prevented from leaving when "a small boy suddenly shouted from the crowd. 'The man is telling lies [...] I saw them'" (86). It is only after these words are uttered that the narrator reveals that "It was Chike" (86). Achebe's disruption of the text reinforces this revelatory moment but also differentiates Chike from Stephen. If Stephen "embodies the displacement of action by thought,"

⁶⁰ Emenyonu, "Selection and Validation of Oral Materials for Children's Literature," 432.

⁶¹ May, "Modernism in Chinua Achebe's African Tetralogy," 45, 42.

⁶² May, "Modernism in Chinua Achebe's African Tetralogy," 34.

⁶³ Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 243.

Chike anticipates Odili in Achebe's *A Man of the People* as he steps into action.⁶⁴ In style, this moment is also an iteration of the narrative turn at the end of *Things Fall Apart*; the reader's field of vision is changed—flattened in preparation for reframing.

Most obviously, Chike's identification of the thieves is a marker of maturation; he is now able to "say who [is] a thief or kidnapper and who [is] not" (7), even though there are signs that he is still a child: the story he tells to the police and gathered community is not told "well" since he is "so excited" (87). Nonetheless, his "bravery" (87) is celebrated as word of his adventures enters the public life of the community: "His photograph appeared in the local newspaper and his name was mentioned on the radio" (88). This revelatory moment conjures the tendency for the "'meaning' of events" in the classical *Bildungsroman* to be "intimately linked to the solution of a mystery."⁶⁵ Here, Chike's act of exposing Mr. Nwaba is corrective, facilitated by the desirable traits he possesses, namely "hard work, honesty and integrity," that have been "inculcated" in him but are not obviously in wider circulation.⁶⁶

The reward Chike receives from the shopkeeper, a scholarship that will "take him right through secondary school" (88), is, according to Emenyonu, fitting, since it reinforces Chike's movement away from being "attracted" to "the good life" and to "wealth and material acquisitions."⁶⁷ However, Chike's future is less assured than it might seem, given that education is a "means of class mobility in the colonial and postindependence situation," a point that Achebe makes in both *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *A Man of the People*.⁶⁸ Achebe's structural deployment late in his text of Joyce's rendering of Stephen's act of self-positioning intimates that Chike is at the beginning of his educational trajectory at the end of the work. Read in this light, Chike's story can be interpreted as one of truncation rather than

⁶⁴ Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 144.

⁶⁵ Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 70.

⁶⁶ Etim, "The Writer as Teacher," 445.

⁶⁷ Emenyonu, "Selection and Validation of Oral Materials for Children's Literature," 433.

⁶⁸ Dow, "A Postcolonial Child," 162.

maturation; he is in effect an example of arrested youth.⁶⁹ It is by no means certain that he will not become an iteration of Stephen in Joyce's *Portrait* or his nearer contemporary Odili in *Man of the People*, characters with similar educational trajectories and sensibilities who are caught by nets of avarice and self-interest cast by the ideals of materialism and progress that are in fact represented in *Chike and the River* through the adult society that the boy navigates.

Chike's trajectory up until this point, however, intimates that there is a distinct possibility that he will find a "home that is an antidote to colonialism," a home that "has to be conjured up or created anew."⁷⁰ Though references to Joyce's stories of childhood enter the text as disjecta—fragments in circulation outside of Joyce's works themselves to which Chike lays affective claim—they function as locators. Peripheralizing but nonetheless putting the source texts in reach, these iconic passages serve a structural role in Achebe's texts, complicating the possibility of reading Chike simply as a manifestation of the ideal subject of *Bildung*. Though Chike's time, like Odili's, may be "more hospitable" to "utopian intimation" than that of some of Achebe's other protagonists and of Joyce's protagonists, Achebe seems to make clear that Chike's fate and the fate of his nation moving forward are left in a state of becoming.⁷¹

Though there is no question that Achebe's works have received considerable critical attention, May insists that there is more work to be done in terms of addressing how modernism "figure[s]" in Achebe's oeuvre, and *Chike and the River* shows this to be true.⁷² Part of "the most important arc of [Achebe's] career," *Chike and the River* not only takes as its subject what it means to live in an accelerating time of progress in a context in which modernity's form has profoundly been shaped by colonialism but also takes on modernist attributes, eschewing straightforward realism.⁷³ If Chike's maturation at the end of the story is incomplete, Achebe reveals the process of modernization to be incomplete as

⁶⁹ To some extent, then, Achebe's portrayal of Chike seems to evoke the "Stalled development" Esty finds in Joyce's *A Portrait* (Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 129).

⁷⁰ Cheah, *Spectral Nationality*, 243.

⁷¹ May, "Modernism in Chinua Achebe's African Tetralogy," 49.

⁷² May, "Modernism in Chinua Achebe's African Tetralogy," 34.

⁷³ May, "Modernism in Chinua Achebe's African Tetralogy," 49.

well, and to some extent that is the point. Though the *Bildung* elements of the story are compatible with socialization, Achebe's work seems to be most interested in the ostensibly utopic reimagining that becomes possible in the modernist extrapolations of those elements. Achebe's approach to realism coincides with this interest; couched in verisimilitude, *Chike and the River* is marked by Achebe's preoccupation with the representational framing of his young protagonist, which is facilitated in part by the literal incorporation of the flat textual surfaces not only of Joyce's modernism but also of his own. Achebe's work to some extent serves the same purpose as Onitsha's market pamphlets, then, in this case providing children with the means to navigate a modernizing society in a postcolonial context. His approach to representation, however, simultaneously makes visible the contending values that modernity brings into focus, paving the way for conceiving of, if not enacting, alternative conceptions of development.