

“The Killer That Doesn’t Pay Back”: Chinua Achebe’s Critique of Cosmopolitics

Laura Chrisman

“Cosmopolitics” is a neologism of recent invention. A response to the proliferation of ethnic based nationalisms, and to the post-Fordist restructuring of global capitalism, cosmopolitics is what a number of liberal thinkers now advocate: a freely created, cosmopolitan cultural identity based on notions of “global” citizenship.¹ This worldly sensibility may express itself through voluntary exile from one’s homeland; it may construe the act of travel itself as a socially emancipatory project: good for the worldly soul, good for the soul of the world. Perhaps one of cosmopolitics’ best known proponents is Ghanaian born, Harvard philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, whose essay “Cosmopolitan Patriots” quotes Gertrude Stein most approvingly: “I am an American and Paris is my hometown.”² This reinforces Appiah’s celebration of global mobility as a freedom to “elect the local forms of human life within which [you] will live.”³ This freedom of self-creation, for Appiah, lies at the heart of cosmopolitanism. And quite tellingly, Appiah suggests that it is the “modern market economy that has provided the material conditions that have enabled this exploration for a larger and larger proportion of people.”⁴

Chinua Achebe also uses this same quotation of Gertrude Stein, but for precisely the opposite end. Discussing the contrasting meanings of travel for first and third world peoples, he suggests that first world people of colour are no less globally privileged than white Westerners:

Even James Baldwin returning to America from France in a casket and W.E.B. Du Bois finding a resting place in Ghana Diverse as their individual situations or predicaments were, these children of the West roamed the world with the confidence of the authority of their homeland behind them. The purchasing power of even very little real money in their pocket set against the funny money all around them might often be enough to validate their authority without any effort on their part.

The experience of a traveller from the world’s poor places is very different, whether he is travelling as a tourist or struggling

to settle down as an exile in a wealthy country Let me just say of such a traveller that he will not be able to claim a double citizenship like Gertrude Stein when she said: "I am an American and Paris is my hometown."⁵

The market economy that makes freedom possible for Appiah's cosmopolitan subject does not empower Achebe's third world subject.⁶ Indeed, Achebe suggests, hemispheres follow different standards both financially and figuratively. The same market economy that "frees" Appiah works to "unfree" non-metropolitan peoples.⁷ I want to suggest that Achebe's *Home and Exile* subtly and powerfully implicates contemporary cosmopolitical thought in the historical violence practised by European colonialism in Africa. Cosmopolitan perspectives, for Achebe, are ultimately present-day expressions of the old "Pax Britannica": the liberal story that Empire likes to tell about itself. That story Achebe began to explode with *Things Fall Apart*, in which the colonial "pacification" of the "tribes" is exposed as a deadly euphemism; likewise, the "peace" of Britannica's "Pax" is revealed as its opposite, war; while the "justice," "order" and "stability" of this new colonial administration are unmasked as mere "anarchy" which has been "loosed upon the world." But if *Things Fall Apart* focused largely on the social consequences of the emergent imperial "order," *Home and Exile*, as we have already seen, suggests that economics must also be factored in to the analysis of dominatory "order." Economic theft, social chaos and physical violence are beautifully condensed in the phrase "The Killer That Doesn't Pay Back," which Achebe's youthful villagers used to describe the colonial British Post Office. A seemingly benign medium for the creation and furtherment of a global culture, whose "beneficiaries" saw it instead as a "killer who will not be called to account; in other words, a representative of anarchy in the world."⁸ Ultimately Achebe suggests contemporary cosmopolitics currently to perform a similar work of political, economic and cultural violence. This short paper focuses on unpacking that postal metaphor, and explaining why it resonates today.

It is no surprise that Achebe should select the institution of the Post Office to launch his attack on imperialism. From *Things Fall Apart* onwards, Achebe has evinced a strong concern with media—in both a broad sense, as a term for the different technologies and agents through which power is channelled—and in a narrow sense of verbal communications. Without the African court messengers in *Things Fall Apart*, the British imperial project could not proceed. As translators, the messengers have extraordinary power over both colonised and coloniser. And as agents of the colonial ju-

diciary—itself, obviously, an imperial *medium*—they have even more power. Achebe's choice of the Post Office as a crucial medium both of letters and of imperial power then is hardly an arbitrary one.

Neither is his description of the two bodies that physically house the postal service. These bodies reek of offensive colonial odour, for those who are careful readers of Achebian metaphor. The fatal Post Office sets up shop in a small, one-room house [that] “had been put up in the Native Court premises on the great highway that cut our village in two.”⁹ Thus the Post Office ominously occupies the same space as the Native Court that worked such harm in *Things Fall Apart*. And this Post Office is situated on a road that literally divides the village in two. And we know the knife metaphor from that same novel: the “knife” wielded by colonialism there is said to be placed on “the things that hold us together” and that knife has “split us apart.”¹⁰ Spatial location is an index of social meaning here: the post office is another aggressive colonial imposition, as integral to its infrastructure as the “law” and the highway that respectively judge and divide the local community.

If the countertop P.O. is quietly disruptive of precolonial social space and organisation, the truck version is loudly so. The “killer” sobriquet initially arose from the daily “majestic arrival of the six-wheeled, blue-painted lorry with the name Royal Mail emblazoned in big, yellow letters on its brow and on each flank.”¹¹ Vehicles are a regular part of Achebe's symbolic repertoire (and for many African writers: recall, for instance, the lorry named “Progres” with one “s” that Sozaboy learns to drive in Ken Saro-Wiwa's eponymous novel.) The thing about Achebe's truck here is that its message is utterly regal, from the majesty of its arrival through to the royalty it advertises on its body. And the early pages of *Home and Exile* pointedly inform us that to Achebe, Igbo culture is and always has been constitutionally republican, profoundly anti-monarchic in every sense.¹² To describe the truck's demeanour as regal then is to criticise, not to praise it. To emphasise the connection of the postal service to an alien system of undemocratic government is, likewise, to condemn it.

Whether in its stationary or vehicular expression, postal imperial power is essentially destructive of local community, autonomy and culture, a “killer that doesn't pay back.” As a fixture of the village, it is a visible reminder of autarchic colonial settlement and emblem of African disenfranchisement. And at the same time, as a truck, it expresses the anarchic freedom of a hit and run driver, one that doesn't even recognise that a corpse exists to be accounted for. Achebe's account mentions no benefits to local people

of their involuntary insertion into a global communication network. As long as the power that controls that global circulation is imposed, alien, and unaccountable to local populations, then the circulation itself is unwelcome. People's letters cannot be safe when their courier serves someone else's king (well, any king). Global communication, ultimately, is only liberatory for those sovereigns or states that own the communication structures. For those who do not own them, these international structures simply amplify the depth and range of their unfreedom.

So far I have focused on Achebe's historical account of imperialism through the Royal Mail, his suggestion that its promise of global citizenship is not only false but also fatal. As long as there is an imperial centre to write back to, then there can be no global freedom of exchange. And that metropolitan centre cannot be transformed through physical occupation by third world peoples: it is they alone who are transformed by it. It is no accident that the writers who for Achebe do the dirty work of promoting speciously "global" values all do so while resident in the metropolis. There is most definitely a spatial determinism in Achebe's vision: the Nigerian students who in the 1950s attack the radical literary work of their compatriot Amos Tutuola, or Buchi Emecheta who thirty years later promotes only African writing that can "pass" as English—they all issue these metropolitan sentiments literally from within the streets and offices of London.

For Achebe, London now fulfils a neo-imperial function that is inseparable from its historical role as imperial throne. Third world peoples who relocate to it are faced only with different slaveries: ideological or economic. Their mutual entanglement is suggested by Ama Ata Aidoo, whose provocative novel *Our Sister Killjoy* Achebe quotes with approval. Describing African students sent to London to study in the 1970s, she writes (and Achebe quotes):

They work hard for the
 Doctorates—
 They work too hard,
 Giving away
 Not only themselves, but
 All of us—
 The price is high,
 My brother,
 Otherwise the story is as old as empires.

Oppressed multitudes from the provinces rush to the imperial seat because that is where they know all salvation comes from. But as other imperial subjects in other times and other places have discovered, for the slave there is nothing at the centre but worse slavery.¹³

All of this might suggest that Achebe sees global power and ideology in strictly Manichean terms. And this is, I think, correct: he follows a Fanonian conception of anti-colonial struggle, one which is not diminished by Achebe's decision to make words rather than arms his weapon of choice. And like Fanon his goal is, ultimately, the creation of the conditions for a new and properly global humanity. Cosmopolitics inhibits that creation by masking the inequality that structures contemporary globalisation. Worse, like the original colonial Post Office, cosmopolitics perpetuates irresponsibility of the neo-imperial metropole, a refusal to be accountable for its destructive actions. This refusal stems from the denial that there is indeed anything to account for: the difficulties experienced by formerly colonised countries are entirely of their making. As Achebe observes:

After a short period of dormancy and a little self-doubt about its erstwhile imperial mission, the West may be ready to resume its old domineering monologue in the world. Certainly there is no lack of zealots urging it to do so. They call it "taking a hard look" at such issues as the African slave trade and the European colonization of Africa, with the result, generally, of absolving Europe from much of the blame and placing it squarely on African shoulders.¹⁴

We need only look at the recent advertisement of David Horowitz for corroboration of this phenomenon.¹⁵ What Achebe does through the historical metaphor of the colonial Post Office is to connect even the most ostensibly "liberal" cosmopolitanism with this reactionary racist hegemony. They all share the refusal to "pay back"; they are all, in effect, "killers."

Achebe's militance is uncompromising. But it is worth recalling that throughout this book he talks in terms of dialogue; even the "killer" sobriquet is, he explains, part of "the dialogue of dispossession and its rebuttal."¹⁶ His paradoxical insistence on engaging an adversary that can only monologue in a dialogue, to "balance" the score of stories, suggests that Achebe is not about to give up on the possibility of real global communication. The prerequisite for such communication, however, is physical rootedness and autonomy—no cult of diasporic freedom and metropolitan self-reinvention,

but a reclamation of the very space once physically occupied by the colonial Post Office. As Achebe pleads to postcolonial writers who want to “write back”: “Don’t trouble to bring your message in person. Write it where you are, take it down that little dusty road to the village post office and send it!”¹⁷ The road is for Achebe “my link to all the other destinations” and to “every villager, living and dead, who has ever walked on it.”¹⁸ This reclaimed road is now for pedestrians, not for the Royal Mail lorry that hits and runs.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolitics. Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), and Bruce Robbins, *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). For a magisterial discussion of cosmopolitanism, see Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World. Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

2. Quoted in Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Cosmopolitan Patriots”, in Cheah and Robbins, *Cosmopolitics*, 91.

3. *Ibid.*, 95.

4. *Ibid.*, 98.

5. Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 92-93.

6. See Aihwa Ong, “Flexible Citizenship among Chinese Cosmopolitans”, in Cheah and Robbins, *Cosmopolitics*, 134-62, for a discussion of the economic advantages that accrue to “the emigration of Chinese corporate elites out of Asia.”

7. For critical Africanist perspectives on globalisation see Manthia Diawara, “Toward a Regional Imaginary in Africa,” in Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *The Cultures of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 103-24; Ali A. Mazrui, “A Tale of Two Continents: Africa, Asia and the Dialectic of Globalization,” *Cooperation South*, 2 (1998), 118-33; Nadine Gordimer, “Cultural Globalization: Living on a Frontierless Land,” *Cooperation South*, 2 (1998), 16-21. The literature on globalisation and globalism is vast and expanding. A useful critical discussion is the special issue of *Race and Class. A Journal for Black and Third World Liberation*, 40, 2-3 (1999) on “The Threat of Globalism.”

8. Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 78. See James Morris, *Pax Britannica. The Climax of an Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 51-64, for an account of the British imperial postal service.

9. Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 76.

10. Chinua Achebe, chapter 20, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1996).

11. Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 77.

12. See 16, for example: The Igbo did not wish to [live under the rule of kings], and made

no secret of their disinclination. Sometimes one of them would, believe it or not, actually name his son Ezebuilo: A king is an enemy.

13. Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 94-95.

14. *Ibid.*, 83.

15. Horowitz's controversial and offensive advertisement, "Ten Reasons Why Reparations for Slavery is a Bad Idea—and Racist Too" was placed in student newspapers across US campuses in spring of 2001. Among its "reasons" against reparations: "while white Europeans conducted the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Arabs and black Africans were responsible for enslaving the ancestors of African Americans"; the claim that African Americans economically benefitted from slavery; the claim that "there was never an anti-slavery movement until white Anglo-Saxon Christians created one," leading to the conclusion that black Americans "owe a debt to America" for liberation from oppression. The advertisement and a point-by-point rebuttal by the Department of African American and African Studies, Robert Chrisman and Ernest Allen appear in *The Ohio State Lantern*, April 18, 2001, 6-7. Horowitz's advertisement is reprinted in *The Black Scholar. Journal of Black Studies and Research*, 31, 2 (2001), 48. Ernest Allen and Robert Chrisman, "Ten Reasons: A Response to David Horowitz," appears in *The Black Scholar. Journal of Black Studies and Research*, 31, 2 (2001), 49-55.

16. Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 77.

17. *Ibid.*, 97.

18. *Ibid.*, 91.