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A PICTURE OF AFRICA: FRENZY, COUNTERNARRATIVE, MIMESIS

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> The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy.
>
> —Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*
>
> Drums beat violently, and men leaped up and down in a frenzy.
>
> —Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

What is the difference between a picture of Africa and an image of Africa? Are the two the same, as their referent implies, or not quite, as their medium suggests? These are tricky questions when asked in the context of modernist and postcolonial studies. They immediately conjure two figures who have written two of the most influential and exemplary narratives about Africa; two untimely artists who always tend to be considered as opponents, perhaps even rivals, certainly as antipodes: Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe. Given the amount of controversy these figures have generated over the decades it would be difficult to find a more polarized, loaded and, above all, explosive relation on the question of narrative representations of Africa than the one emerging from the confrontation between Conrad's late-nineteenth-century image of Africa in *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe's mid-twentieth-century picture of Africa in *Things Fall Apart*. This essay will attempt to move beyond this all-too-human polarization to offer a clearer image of the impersonal but no less human mimetic forces that gave form to Achebe's picture of Africa.[1]

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In order to do so, I begin with the mirror-like dimension of the two epigraphs that preface this essay. The uncanny mimetic redoubling of images of "frenzy" in colonial and postcolonial narratives in these quotations indicates that even with respect to the notion at the very heart of the race quarrel, the opposition between Conrad's and Achebe's literary pictures of Africa may not always be as clear-cut as it initially appears to be. This continuity has been recognized before, most notably by Edward Said, who, in his last interview on Conrad, suggested that "*Things Fall Apart* is unintelligible without *Heart of Darkness*" ("Interview" 288). In this essay, I explore this suggestion and show that underneath the first layer of straightforward opposition and narrative inversion we find an underlying mimetic continuity between Conrad's colonial image of Africa and Achebe's postcolonial representation.

Given the loaded terms of the race debate, a focus on Achebe's novelistic reproduction of the Conradian notion of frenzy in *Things Fall Apart* may initially appear as a provocation meant to generate even more animosity, polemics, and accusations across the postcolonial fence. I thus want to make clear that in what follows my aim is not to add more fire to what is already an incendiary debate. Nor do I intend to utter battle cries for either side, perpetuating what Edward Said calls a "rhetoric and politics of blame" (*Culture* 19). Instead, I suggest that in our globalized, hybrid, and plural world, taking sides may no longer be the most productive way to approach such burning issues. I thus propose a more nuanced and, hopefully, more balanced approach to the race quarrel that considers both the inversions and continuities between Conrad's and Achebe's pictures of Africa. The goal, then, is not to mimetically reproduce ad hominem accusations but, rather, to better understand the complex textual, contextual, and theoretical logic that informs such virulent accusations in the first place. Above all, my hope is that such an approach will help unmask the theoretical implications of this exemplary mimetic quarrel for our contemporary, postcolonial, and transnational times.

In what follows, then, I suggest that Achebe may not only be considered as Conrad's fierce rival and opponent, but also as Conrad's postcolonial counterpart, perhaps even as his anthropological and theoretical supplement. As Said recognizes in *Culture and Imperialism*, "in some of his novels [Achebe] rewrites—painstakingly and with originality—Conrad" (91). This rewriting, as we shall see, is especially visible when it comes to the notion that triggered the race debate in the first place. In fact, a specific focus on Achebe's narrative use of images of frenzy in *Things Fall Apart* reveals that the Nigerian novelist offers us precious anthropological insights into the social functions of those rituals that had already caught Conrad's attention in *Heart of*

Darkness, mimetic rituals that Conrad's European perspective could not fully account for. In the first part of the essay I will show that Achebe is not only a critic who directly challenges the racist implications of Conrad's colonial image of Africa, but also a writer who indirectly pursues and refines Conrad's anthropological investigation into African rituals that generate a notorious state of frenzy.

In the second part, I shift from an anthropological focus on communal rituals that affect, by mimetic contagion, as René Girard would say, the precolonial body politic (anthropological mimesis) to more general formal considerations about the narrative meaning of such rituals as they are reproduced in the general economy of Achebe's postcolonial counternarrative (narrative mimesis). As we will see, images of Africa that depict African people dancing enthusiastically to the rhythm of the drums circulate freely from colonial narratives to postcolonial counternarratives, and the meaning of these images, as well as their narrative evaluations, changes radically in the process of circulation. If recent critics have argued that Conrad's horror of mimesis is predicated on disruptive forms of social frenzy (bad mimesis), I shall hereby demonstrate that the the "darkness" and the "horror" at the "heart" (74) of *Things Fall Apart* are not generated by mimetic frenzy as such. On the contrary, the horror, for Achebe, stems from the dissolution of forms of communal mimesis that are at the center of precolonial African rituals and are responsible for holding the Igbo community together (good mimesis).

In the concluding part of the essay, I move beyond "good" and "bad" representations of mimesis in order to unmask the paradoxical logic that is responsible for the emergence of images of frenzy at the heart of a narrative that explicitly sets forth to counter such images. Drawing on Edward Said's insights into the "crossing over" (34) between colonial and postcolonial narratives in *Culture and Imperialism*, as well as on Michel Foucault's account of "subjection" (97) in *Power/Knowledge*, I will show that Achebe's narrative relation to Conrad—while not being one of "colonial mimicry" (Bhabha 86)—is nonetheless based on a paradoxical form of mimetic repetition with a difference that is both subversive of and complicit with, colonial power. I shall call this discursive form of mimesis "postcolonial mimesis."[2] If similarities exist between colonial mimicry and postcolonial mimesis in terms of the ambivalences and menaces they entail, important differences remain, if only because postcolonial mimesis is rooted in the perspective of the postcolonial author who, far from submitting to colonial power, uses the language of the dominant to actively reframe colonial narratives in a mimetic way. Whether Achebe's counternarratives are really the opposite, or not quite, is what we now turn to find out.

The Quarrel Revisited

Since the publication of his influential lecture on Conrad in 1977, Achebe has been routinely considered Conrad's most formidable critic in matters of race, and Conrad scholars, while often disagreeing with Achebe's evaluation of *Heart of Darkness*, have tended to accept the Nigerian novelist as Conrad's antipode par excellence, and quite rightly so. In fact, in "An Image of Africa," Achebe points out with passion and insight what had escaped Western critics before: namely, that *Heart of Darkness* is a fundamentally racist text, not only because it deprives African people of a narrative perspective, but also because it represents them as irrational, backward creatures, jumping up and down the shore, in a delirious state of frenzy that strips them of reason, self-control, and of their humanity as such.

It is important to stress that, for Achebe, the Conradian notion of frenzy is not a signifier among others, but functions as one of the main targets and leitmotifs of his critique. Using this notion as leverage for his debunking critical operation, he considers that, for Conrad, it functions as a marker of a radical difference between Europeans and Africans that deprives the latter of essential human attributes, such as reason, language, and culture, ultimately relegating the subaltern subject to madness, bodily instincts, and the bush. Consequently, Achebe insists on Conrad's "fake-ritualistic repetition" of images of "frenzy" ("Image" 338). Placing what he calls, mimicking Conrad, "the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings" (338) at the center of his argument, he shows that Conrad's masterpiece functions as a self-reflecting mirror that reveals more about European "myths," disavowals, and projections than about Africa itself. In short, Achebe operates a dialectical inversion of perspective that denounces the racist implications inherent in Conrad's image of African subjects "clapping their hands and stamping their feet" (340), "too busy with their frenzy" (341). This, at least, is the official story that emerges if we limit ourselves to Achebe's critical evaluation of *Heart of Darkness*.

If we now briefly recall Conrad's side of the story that deals with enthusiastic outbreaks of ritual frenzy we notice that his narrative perspective is more ambivalent than Achebe suggests. While clearly problematic and diminishing, what is at stake in subjects dancing collectively to the sound of drums clapping their hands, stamping their feet, and rolling their eyes (35) is not only an expression of barbarism and savagery; nor can it be only dismissed as a ritual phenomenon characteristic of "prehistoric" (35) people (though this image invokes both these things). As I have argued in "A Picture of Europe," Conrad's account of frenzy in *Heart of Darkness* is also one of the first novelistic attempts to represent a mysterious anthropological phenomenon that is found across different cultures, is widespread

in sub-Saharan Africa, and is known in the anthropological literature under the rubric of "possession trance."[3] For our purpose here, let us recall that from the very beginning of his tale, Marlow suggests that the musical rituals responsible for generating collective states of frenzy are part of a religious, cultural phenomenon. Reflecting back on his Congo experience, he says: "Perhaps on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild" (20). And then, in a more relativist mood, he specifies: "and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country" (20). Rather than automatically relegating this ritual phenomenon to the sphere of savagery, Marlow runs against reflex racist reactions in order to establish a direct cultural continuity between the religion of the self and the religion of the other, the sound of Christian "bells" and the sound of African "drums."

Marlow's anthropological insights into the function of African rituals based on the hypnotic rhythm of drums remain very limited indeed and are of the order of an intuition that is not further explored. Conrad is, in fact, perfectly aware of Marlow's anthropological limitations when it comes to religious rituals that generate an enthusiastic state of frenzy, limitations that do not allow his narrator to fully grasp the cultural significance of such enthusiastic outbreaks of mimetic frenzy. If the narrative gestures toward the possibility of an anthropological understanding of the other, it ultimately fails to fully take hold of it, leaving this narrative possibility open for others to explore. In fact, by insisting on the fact that the religious meaning of these rituals is "profound" (20), Conrad indirectly invites a more informed, interior perspective to supplement Marlow's distanced and ethnographically limited account of African rituals in general and of religious "frenzy" (35) in particular.

If we now want to pursue this anthropological line of inquiry, we need to shift our perspective from what is ultimately still a picture of Europe, to a picture of Africa Conrad was not in position to fully sketch. And as we now turn to see, this is precisely the kind of picture Achebe sets forth to represent in *Things Fall Apart*, a narrative picture meant to reframe dominant images of Africa in a more positive and informed light.[4]

Anthropological Mimesis: Frenzy Reloaded

Things Fall Apart is Achebe's first and most influential novel; it occupies an exemplary position in African literature that can hardly be underestimated. Hailed as the "archetypal modern African novel in English" (Appiah ix), this text is exemplary both in terms of its

opposition to colonial representations of Africa and as an alternative, postcolonial picture of precolonial African culture. Given that this is the explicit driving telos of *Things Fall Apart* it is thus understandable that critics, following the author, routinely define it as the postcolonial "counter-narrative" par excellence (Pandurang 344), whose goal is to "negate the prior European negation of indigenous society" (Jan Mohamed 571) and advocate an "oppositional discourse to *Heart of Darkness*" (Nwosu 37). It is neither my intention to dispute the validity of these claims, nor to challenge the status of *Things Fall Apart* as a foundational counternarrative that inaugurates "the institution of African literature" (Gikandi, Forward vii). Achebe's first narrative picture of Africa remains the foundational masterpiece that it is and deserves to be. What I would like to suggest is that the relation between colonial narrative and postcolonial counternarrative is much more complex than previously realized and that striking *continuities* exist between the two pictures of Africa—continuities that are particularly visible when it comes to the much-disputed notion of frenzy.[5]

One of the ambitions of Achebe's novel is to provide those anonymous subjects dancing on the shore in a state of incomprehensible frenzy with a culturally informed narrative perspective that had been denied by European counterparts.[6] The narrative, as we shall soon see, does much to clarify the meaning of those rituals. Yet we must begin by recognizing that among the variety of ritual practices that pervade Achebe's picture of Igbo culture, a number of them are strikingly reminiscent of the rituals that had already caught Conrad's attention—namely, collective, musical rituals that generate states of emotional effervescence, bodily motion, and psychic (dis)possession that spread contagiously among the crowd of participants. These rituals are thus mimetic in the fundamental anthropological sense that they are contagious, trouble the distinction between self and other, transgress individual and social boundaries, and generate violent outbreaks of affect that spread across the entire social body.[7]

Given Achebe's authorial intention to both counter and rectify what he perceives to be Conrad's ethnocentric representation of Africans as irrational creatures who are easily swept away by the contagious power of emotions, we should expect that his own representation of Igbo rituals would be antithetical to dominant images of Africa. Or, at least, that they would not reproduce what Achebe calls, mimicking Conrad, "the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings" ("Image" 338). We are thus surprised to find out that the Conradian notion of frenzy, which horrified Achebe the critic, is central to Achebe the novelist. Equally striking is the fact that Conrad's representation of Africans as irrational beings who are possessed, body and soul, by the intoxicating rhythm of drums drumming, resonates throughout the

entirety of *Things Fall Apart*. Here is a close-up of Achebe's picture of Africa: "Three men beat [the drums] with sticks, working feverishly from one drum to another. They were possessed by the spirit of the drums . . . the crowd roared and clapped. The drums rose to a frenzy. The people surged forwards. . . . The crowd roared and clapped and for a while drowned the frenzied drums" (29). This is by no means an isolated or unusual passage in Achebe's counternarrative. The presence of the drums is a pervasive motif in the text—Abiola Irele even describes it as a "leitmotif" (459)—and so is its disconcerting psychosomatic effect on the masses of Igbos. For instance, we read that "The drums went mad and the crowds also" (31). At another moment, we are informed that the "Drums beat violently, and men leaped up and down in a frenzy" (73). And during a funeral ceremony, we find the following image of Africa: "The ancient drums of death beat . . . men dashed about in a frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they saw, jumping over walls and dancing on the roof" (72). Roaring crowds, clapping hands, jumping feet, rhythmic tom-toms, collective madness, contagious violence, and yes, ritual frenzy. Not only the same mimetic phenomenon Achebe violently objects to in "An Image of Africa" is fully at work in his own representation of Igbo rituals, but his account of frenzy also seems to mimetically reproduce, ad verbum, Conrad's denigrating terminology.

In the wake of Achebe's critique of *Heart of Darkness*, the output of criticism that addresses the problem of race in Conrad and Achebe studies has been impressive, yet this striking mimetic paradox at the heart of the race quarrel has not received the critical attention it deserves.[8] Consequently, the terms of the racism/anti-racism debate have tended to remain polarized around a dichotomy that considers Achebe's take on race and ritual as antithetical to Conrad's. Now, since images of frenzy are the hinge on which this mimetic quarrel turns, we need to carefully reconsider the anthropological and narrative implications of this disputed image of Africa first, before proceeding to offer a more nuanced critical evaluation of what, exactly, is at stake in such (mimetic) reproductions of (mimetic) rituals at the heart of a celebrated (mimetic) counternarrative.

Taken out of context, it would be difficult, even for an experienced reader, to discriminate between Conrad's and Achebe's respective images of ritual frenzy. The same hysterical states of dispossession seem to be in place, the same musical tom-toms are in the background, even the same terminology (from madness to frenzy via hands clapping, bodies jumping, crowds roaring, and so forth) is used in order to account for this (post)colonial image of Africa. But, of course, it would be a gross misreading to place the two accounts of rituals on the same anthropological and narrative level, treating

the latter as mere repetition of the former. Contrary to Conrad's image of Africa, Achebe's narrative picture illustrates these scenes of mimetic frenzy within the wider cultural context of Igbo traditions and does not fail to frame outbreaks of mimetic madness within a sympathetic narrative perspective that gives these actions a specific cultural, religious, and sociohistorical meaning. The images of frenzy might be similar, but the narrative context in which they are set radically reframes their meaning.

If we restitute some of the passages quoted above in their proper context, we learn that it is always during sacred festivals and "communal ceremonies" (53) that punctuate the rhythm of Igbo communal life that outbreaks of frenzy emerge in *Things Fall Apart*. For instance, in the context of a description of a wrestling match, the narrative shifts from the individual wrestlers in the center to the enthusiastic crowd of spectators and musicians that surround them. And it is only afterward that we read: "The drums went mad and the crowds also. They surged forward as the two young men danced into the circle" (31). An intoxicating, contagious, and mimetic madness is thus part of Achebe's picture of Africa. Yet, this madness does not spin out of control, affecting the irrational part of the soul and threatening the social order, as Plato suggests in the *Republic*;[9] rather, it is framed by a carefully organized musical ritual with a unifying social function, as Emile Durkheim suggests in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.[10] Furthermore, in Achebe's narrative reevaluation of mimetic contagion the function of such a ritual frenzy is clearly revealed. The narrative continues: "The crowd had surrounded and swallowed up the drummers, whose frantic rhythm was no longer a mere disembodied sound but the very heart-beat of the people" (31). This passage confirms that frenzy, as it operates in Achebe's narrative economy, has a fundamentally positive, vitalizing social function, if only because the very heart of the Igbo community lies in those musical rituals whose throbbing fluxes of frenzy irrigate the entire social body. If Achebe's critique of Conrad's image of Africa may still be in line with a Platonic denunciation of mimesis,[11] then, his novelistic practice reveals a positive, and thus anti-Platonic, re-evaluation of mimetic behavior as the centralizing social force that keeps people together.

It is true that already in *Heart of Darkness*, the drum beating among the ritual crowd in the background is confounded with what Conrad calls "the heart" (64) of the protagonist in the foreground. Yet it is equally true that in Achebe's mimetic re-presentation—in the double sense that it is a picture that presents again a mimetic ritual—it is not the figure of the European colonist that is affected by the ritual frenzy, but the entire African community instead. Moreover,

in this narrative context, the mimetic frenzy and the effervescence that ensues does not lead to the horror of Kurtz's sacrificial rituals. Rather, it is at the origins of a revitalization, unification, and solidification of what Durkheim calls the "moral unity" (175) of the communal organism. From this alternative anthropological perspective, then, the notion of frenzy can no longer be read as an expression of natural savagery or an evolutionary remnant of prehistoric times. Rather, this narrative representation of frenzy illustrates the beneficial anthropological role of mimetic rituals in the formation of the "bonds of kinship" (96) at the heart of the African precolonial community itself. In sum, mimetic rituals are responsible for generating those enigmatic, invisible forces that have intrigued critics for a while and that bind single individuals (intersubjective bond), the individuals and the community (communal bonds), as well as the world of men and the world of spirits (spiritual bonds).

Despite the striking structural similarity between the colonial text and its postcolonial counterpart, a clear and deft inversion of perspectives becomes visible as we move from Conrad's image of Africa to Achebe's postcolonial picture. The focus has shifted from the heart of a European subject in Africa (Europe as subject) to what happens at the heart of African people (Africa as subject); the "bad mimesis" that threatens the stability of the social bond in Conrad's picture of Europe turns into a "good mimesis" that strengthens communal bonds in Achebe's picture of Africa; the mimetic frenzy is no longer identified with the "heart of darkness" (Conrad 35) but with the "heart-beat of the people" instead (Achebe 31). If Achebe apparently mimes the Conradian language of frenzy, then, he does so not in order to repeat it, but in order to represent it in a new, positive light, emphasizing the vitalizing role of mimetic rituals of possession trance in the imaginative formation of the organic unity of the Igbo community.[12]

And yet, despite this fundamental mimetic *différend* between colonial and postcolonial texts, at times Achebe's counternarrative continues to come very close to the image of Africa he denounces in Conrad. The clearest and most striking example of possession trance in *Things Fall Apart* takes place during a ritual context that is, indeed, extremely violent and is characterized by dangerous forms of collective frenzy that seem to threaten, rather than sustain, the Igbo social order. The chapter in question starts with a ritual summons that has the function to bring people together: "Go-di-di-go-go-di-go. Di-go-go-di-go" (71). And then, we find this striking passage:

> The ancient drums of death beat, guns and cannon were fired, and men dashed about in frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they saw, jumping over walls and dancing on

> the roof. . . . Now and again an ancestral spirit or *egwugwu* appeared from the underworld, speaking in a tremulous, unearthly voice and completely covered in raffia. Some of them were very violent, and there had been a mad rush for shelter earlier in the day when one appeared with a sharp matchete and was only prevented from doing serious harm by two men who restrained him with the help of a strong rope tied around his waist. Sometimes he turned round and chased those men, and they ran for their lives . . . He sang, in a terrifying voice that Ekwensu, or Evil Spirit, had entered his eye. (72)

That this is a case of possession trance is clear. The account recapitulates trance's most prominent ritual characteristics: rhythmic music, collective movement, emotional contagion and, above all, possession by the ancestral "spirits" (72) of the clan that dispossess the subject of control over its body, actions, and proper identity.[13] But if Achebe provides readers with the anthropological reasons behind this outbreak of collective madness and violence (that is, the possession of men by the *egwugwu*), it is still unclear why he should risk anachronism and reproduce some of the narrative stereotypes he so vehemently denounces in dominant images of Africa, from irrationality to madness, violence to unearthly voices.

In order to account for this counterintuitive narrative move it is, once again, crucial to place Achebe's representation of possession trance in its proper narrative and anthropological context. No matter how violent, irrational and disruptive, this mimetic outbreak of frenzy is not a random expression of savagery, but takes place, once again, in the context of a highly organized religious ritual: that is, the funeral organized for the death of one of the oldest man in the village (Ezeudu) who had once been a noble warrior and had won many titles. The chaos and violence generated by the ritual of possession—and the mimetic contagion that ensues—comes close to what René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* calls "crisis of difference" (175) and his account of "ritual possession" casts light on the "hysterical trance" at work in such a collective outbreak. And yet, Achebe's anthropological account does not fully conform to Girard's theoretical scheme. Such a violent mimetic crisis does not lead to sacrificial violence, but continues to be framed within the Igbo order of things. Moreover, the narrator explains that the transgression of boundaries generated by that disruptive event that is death, entails a wider, cosmological transgression of boundaries. As he puts it, "the land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was

very close to the ancestors" (73). We can thus better understand why the ritual of possession trance—whereby the *egwugwu* transgress the frontier between the land of the dead and the land of the living—takes place precisely during a funeral rite. The function of the rites of possession trance is, in fact, to help regain—via an organized, collective ritual—the equilibrium that has been momentarily lost in view of recomposing the disrupted social order. How? By engendering a collective state of violent mimesis that reenacts the violent transgression of the frontiers that divide life and death, the human and the divine, the world of men and the underworld. Hence, for Achebe, this mimetic reproduction of the phenomenon of possession trance—and the frenzy that ensues—functions as the ritualized (violent) solution to the (violent) problem of the momentary disruption of the communal social order. Or, better, it entails a ritualized reenactment of the violence and transgression death introduces in the Igbo order of things—a mimetic reenactment with a cathartic social function, as it were. This insight into the cathartic role of rituals of possession trance is one that external visitors like Conrad were not in a position to sketch. It also anticipates recent anthropological accounts of possession trance that emphasize the cathartic social function of chaotic, mimetic rituals.[14] If Achebe's novel continues to remain important, then, it is perhaps also because it helps new generations of African subjects—in postindependence, "neocolonial" nation states who are engaged in an ongoing process of decolonization (Udumukwu 472)[15]—to imagine communities that rely on the positive, unifying functions of mimetic rituals. These collective rites of passage are, of course, religious in origin, yet their revolutionary potential, as Émile Durkheim also sensed, should not be underestimated.[16]

This explains the anthropological meaning of mimetic rituals. But what about the literary and narrative implications of Achebe's mimetic representation of Africa? After all, Achebe himself has cautioned readers not to read his text solely through anthropological lenses. And quite rightly so, since the rituals he dramatizes in his novel are framed by a carefully crafted narrative structure, a structure that, in turn, adds an additional layer of meaning and complexity to the (mimetic) phenomenon of possession trance and the (mimetic) narrative inversions that are at the heart of Achebe's picture of Africa.

Narrative Mimesis: The Horror of Frenzy Redux

Rituals of possession trance are rarely discussed in postcolonial studies but are, quite literally, at the center of Achebe's narrative project. This is confirmed if we do not let go of the mimetic undercurrent that runs through the entire texture of *Things Fall Apart.* Following

the in-depth account of the intoxicating effects of the drum on the dancers during the funeral ritual, there occurs what is perhaps the culminating narrative point of the whole novel. And once again, images of frenzy are at the center of Achebe's picture of Africa:

> Drums beat violently and men leaped up and down in frenzy . . . . The drums and the dancing began again and reached fever-heat. Darkness was around the corner, and the burial was near. Guns fired the last salute and the cannon rent the sky. And then from the centre of the delirious fury came a cry of agony and shouts of horror. It was as if a spell had been cast. All was silent. In the center of the crowd a boy lay in a pool of blood. . . . Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart. (73–74)

This scene dramatizes Okonkwo's accidental killing of Ezeudu's son (a structural repetition of his voluntary killing of Ikemefuna), which causes his exclusion from Umuofia and prefigures his subsequent, tragic downfall. But as the narrative structure suggests, this is not only a personal tragedy; it also marks a decisive turning point in the narrative as a whole. In fact, this dramatic scene occurs at the end of the chapter that concludes Part I, the section devoted to precolonial Igbo life, during one of those moments in which not only the destiny of the tragic hero, but also of Igbo culture and, by metonymic extension, of African culture at large, turns—and things begin to fall apart.

Now, what is perhaps most surprising here is not that Achebe situates the culminating point of the hero's experience in a direct relation to rituals of possession trance; indeed, Conrad had already done so.[17] What is surprising is that Achebe condenses most of the terms that were already central in *Heart of Darkness* in order to account for the narrative turning point of *Things Fall Apart*, terms like "drums," "spell," and "frenzy," but also "darkness," "horror," and "heart." Perhaps, then, in order to continue to take hold of the underlying implications of Achebe's mimetic counternarrative we should start asking ourselves Conradian questions after all. For instance, what kind of "darkness" is at the "heart" of Achebe's counternarrative? What, exactly, is the "horror" in *Things Fall Apart*? And if this horror is tied to the notion of frenzy, what is Achebe's mimetic *différend*?

The chapter in which Achebe's version of the horror appears marks a transition from precolonial Igbo society characterized by traditional communal values whereby the mimetic bond is identified with the heart of the people (Part I) to a colonized Igbo society where this mimetic bond gives way, and things begin to fall apart (Part II and III). It is thus significant that the "shouts of horror" stem from what the narrator calls the "centre of the delirious fury," that

is, a fury generated by the mimetic frenzy whose ritual function, as we have seen, is to guarantee the social cohesion and moral unity of the community. If we situate this outbreak of mimetic violence within the general narrative economy of *Things Fall Apart* it is clear that the source of the horror does not stem from the "fury" of the mimetic crowd, nor from the frenzy generated by the rituals of possession trance. Rather, the "shouts of horror" and the "spell" that ensues stem from the realization that at the "centre of the delirious fury" (74) is the dead body of an innocent, sacrificial victim, as Girard would call it, albeit one that does not bring about social cohesion but social dissolution. Figuratively put, at the center of the dancing, mimetic crowd, are no longer the beating drums that constituted the "the very heart-beat of the people" (31) but is now a "pierced . . . heart" instead. Clearly, Achebe's deft rearticulation of Conradian tropes conveys a revelation that is central to the narrative as a whole. Namely, that the blood spilled at the center of the crowd is, by metonymic association, the blood of the heartbeat of the African people itself. That is, the living blood, or vital energy, generated by the rituals of mimetic trance whose function was to keep the precolonial Igbo community together—as a living, palpitating organism.[18]

The subsequent development of narrative events in Part II and III, with its progressive fragmentation of Umuofia at the hands of missionaries and colonists (that is, the Bible and the sword), dramatizes the historical consequence of what is already implicit in this dramatic scene. Namely, that the shift from a precolonial to a colonial society entails not only the external subjugation of Igbo people to colonialism and Christianity, but also a much more insidious manifestation of colonial power that operates from within the community itself and spreads contagiously, like a poison, across the communal body politic. In fact, such an infiltration of the imperial other into the colonial self has the effect of dissolving the ritual frenzy responsible for the "bond of kinship" that allows the community to speak with "one voice" (96) and guarantees the organic cohesion of Umuofia.

It is, thus, no accident that at the end of the novel, Okonkwo's last, tragic attempt to stand up against the colonial invasion does not stem from the center of the mimetic crowd, where the narrative initially positions him, but from its margins instead, where the narrative finally relegates him. In one of the final scenes of the book, we are told that during a communal gathering, whose function is to attempt, one last time, to bring the community back together to counter the colonial invader, "Okonkwo was sitting at the edge [of the crowd]" (115). Such a displacement of the hero from the center of things to its edge is indicative of the dramatic turn of events the book traces as a whole. It prefigures not only the fall of the tragic hero,

but also the falling apart of a communal form of precolonial society. Furthermore, it indicates that heroic forms of individual action can only succeed if they nourish themselves from the collective energy emanating from the center of the community—a mimetic center that, as we have seen, generates a vitalizing, collective frenzy that functions as "the very heart-beat of the people" (31). In short, as we move from Conrad's picture of Europe to Achebe's picture of Africa, the horror is no longer the horror of mimesis. Rather, the horror stems from the death of the living heart that held the organic community together. The heart of darkness is no longer identified with massive sacrificial atrocities. Instead, the heart of darkness is the moment when the center no longer holds—and things fall apart. This, at least, is the literary picture of Africa that emerges if we consider both the anthropological and narrative implications of mimetic representations at work in these complementary, mirroring texts.

And yet, in a postcolonial narrative that is so inextricably intertwined with the colonial narrative it sets forth to counter, we now need to pay closer attention to the larger, discursive logic that ties the subaltern African text to the dominant European text—in a mimetic way. In fact, if we turn to critically reevaluate Achebe's aggressive take on the Conradian notion of frenzy once we have realized that Achebe himself heavily relies on this notion, his critique of *Heart of Darkness*, while providing a badly needed anthropological supplement and narrative correction, begins to sound not only excessive but also strangely paradoxical. This paradox, as we now turn to see, is the paradox of postcolonial mimesis.

Postcolonial Mimesis: The Power of Subjection

It is crucial to remember that Achebe delivered his influential lecture on *Heart of Darkness* in 1975, seventeen years after the publication of his own representation of African frenzied rituals in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Nearly two decades separate these two texts and, during this lapse of time, the author radically shifted subject positions. If Achebe the novelist is an unknown writer in his late twenties, freshly subjected to colonial education, still living in Africa, and progressively rediscovering his cultural roots, Achebe the critic is a mature and well-established postcolonial author in his mid-forties with an international reputation, occupying an honorific professorial position at the heart of the empire. The divergence in the evaluation of the notion of frenzy—generously used at first, violently rejected later—could thus be explained by saying that Achebe, the mature author and critic, is in a position to articulate a critical reflection on images of frenzy that was not yet fully in place at the time he was

writing his first novel. According to this authorial line of inquiry, Achebe's critique of Conrad's image of Africa would stem from a belated realization of the racist implications inherent in the notion of frenzy, a realization somewhat disconnected from his own youthful novelistic practice. The advantage of this line of inquiry is clear: no contradiction ensues between Achebe the novelist and Achebe the critic, and the distinction between narrative and counternarrative remains firmly in place.[19] And yet, as we had multiple occasions to see, one could extract from *Things Fall Apart* an entire zone throughout which accounts of rituals remain informed by Conradian images, metaphors, and narrative structures. If we take seriously the realization that Achebe the novelist is himself quite busy with the images of frenzy he will later violently reject as a critic, a clear-cut distinction between dominant and subaltern narrative, the center and the periphery, begins, if not to fall apart, at least to sound less stable than it had initially appeared to be.

This second, less reassuring realization is in line with influential theoretical developments in postcolonial studies that urge critics to move beyond binary distinctions between colonizer and colonized, narratives and counternarratives, in order to explore the underlying complicities and ambivalences that tie these structural polarities. Homi Bhabha, for instance, in *The Location of Culture* argues that "The place of difference and otherness, or the space of the adversarial . . . is never entirely on the outside or implacably oppositional" (109). Along similar lines, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* Gayatri Spivak writes: "I repeatedly attempt to undo the often unexamined opposition between colonizer and colonized implicit in much colonial and postcolonial discourse study" (46). Within the field of Conrad studies, Edward Said is probably the theorist who saw this ambivalence and structural complicity most clearly. Thus, in *Culture and Imperialism* he states: "Between classical nineteenth-century imperialism and what it gave rise to in resistant native cultures, there is . . . *both* a stubborn confrontation *and* a crossing over in discussion, borrowing back and forth, debate" (34; emphasis added). And then, in a flash of critical insight, he adds: "Many of the most interesting postcolonial writers bear their past within them—as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions tending towards a new future" (34). These remarks appear in the context of a discussion of *Heart of Darkness*, and since the name Achebe surfaces as a representative of such "interesting postcolonial writers," we can see how they pave the way for Said's late affirmation that "*Things Fall Apart* is unintelligible without *Heart of Darkness*" ("Interview" 288). And, indeed, as we had multiple occasions to confirm, *Things Fall Apart* is not only a text that advocates a "revision of the past"

contra Conrad, but also a text that, with Conrad's, bears the traces of the colonial language of frenzy and the wounding stereotypical representations it entails.

If we now want to further Said's innovative line of inquiry and continue to move beyond the authorial disciplinary dichotomies that inform the race quarrel, I suggest that we must not let go of the intrinsic, impersonal discursive logic that motivates the (mimetic) representation of a (mimetic) conception of the subaltern subject at the heart of a celebrated counternarrative. It is, in fact, my contention that a consideration of the "crossing over" between Conrad's and Achebe's ambivalent take on the scarring issue of mimetic frenzy, opens up a productive, intermediate space to interrogate the more general, discursive economy that ties, in a mimetic double-bind, the subaltern counternarrative to the dominant narrative. In the process, the question of mimesis can no longer be restricted to the cultural meaning and social function of ritual frenzy (anthropological mimesis), nor to the narrative implications of this mimetic representation (narrative mimesis), but needs to be supplemented by an approach that considers mimesis from a postcolonial perspective (postcolonial mimesis).

The most influential starting point to think about questions of mimesis in postcolonial studies is probably still Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture.* Let us recall that Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as a "strategy of colonial power and knowledge" (85) that has its origin in the colonizer's "desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite*" (86). His paradigmatic example of "colonial mimicry" is "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (87), subjects, in other words, who embody, via mimicry a "repetition of a *partial presence*" (88).[20] And as Bhabha famously suggests, at work in this repetition with a difference is an "ambivalence" and a "menace" (86) insofar as this uncanny mimetic redoubling is not simply generative of passive subaltern copies, but also threatens the sense of identity of the dominant subject who sees itself reflected in a copy that is not one.

Now, Achebe's narrative and critical practice equally renders visible the ambivalence and menace of mimesis, yet it does so from a different, if not opposed perspective. In fact, despite the similarities between Bhabha's and Achebe's postcolonial take on mimesis, *Things Fall Apart* does not simply repeat stereotypical images of Africa in order to conform to the discourse of the colonizer, but rather re-presents them with a difference; and what emerges from this representation is not a "partial [European] presence," but a full African presence instead. Hence, insofar as Achebe's narrative is far

from complying with colonial representations of the colonized as "almost the same but not quite" (86), we cannot directly rely on Homi Bhabha's influential account of colonial repetition that considers the colonized from the perspective of the colonizer (colonial mimicry). Instead we need to develop an alternative perspective that takes into consideration the point of view of the postcolonial subject itself. I shall thus call this form of mimicry, which is not in fact mimicry at all, postcolonial mimesis.

In order to articulate the logic that informs postcolonial mimesis, I extend a Foucauldian line of inquiry in postcolonial studies inaugurated by Edward Said and treat this exemplary debate as a microexample to conduct what Michel Foucault calls "an *ascending* analysis of power" (*Power* 99)—that is, a microanalysis on a specific narrative paradox that brings to the fore a thus far neglected, yet no less fundamental mimetic logic that informs narrative subjection in both its disciplining and productive dimension. More precisely, as Foucault's searching analysis of the insidious and often paradoxical dynamic of power has taught us, "subjection" (97) is not only disruptive but also potentially productive; it is not only repressive, but it is also constitutive.[21] And since there is no reason to believe that this is not true for narrative forms of subjection, we could perhaps say that counternarratives are at least partially initiated through an initial submission to the power at work in the dominant narratives they set forth to counter.

The case of Achebe's ambivalent take on frenzy suggests that subjection to power operates according to a paradoxical logic that is both potentially regressive as it is empowering. We have seen that Achebe's novelistic reproductions of Conrad's images of Africa bring him close to what Abiola Irele calls "the kind of unmediated stereotyping of the African by Western writers to which he himself has vehemently objected to" (459). And yet, we have equally seen that Achebe's mimetic *différend* not only denounces the power of colonial subjection, but also makes us see, via a subversive counternarrative, how the language of the colonizer can effectively be used against itself and set to productive narrative and theoretical use. Thus, Achebe the novelist reveals how the dissolution of rituals of mimetic frenzy at the heart of a precolonial African community is associated with the horror of colonialism; the horror in *Things Fall Apart* is the horror of the loss of a mimetic community. Postcolonial mimesis, then, cuts both ways. On one side, it cuts against Achebe (with Conrad) insofar as it partially implicates Achebe in the images of Africa he critiques. In this regressive, past-oriented sense, postcolonial mimesis reveals what Said calls the "scars of humiliating wounds" inflicted by the colonial past (*Culture* 34). On the other side, it cuts against Conrad

(with Achebe) insofar as it is one of the conditions for the emergence of an original and exemplary counternarrative that reframes dominant images of Africa in a non-racist light. In this second, more empowering and future-oriented sense, postcolonial mimesis is an effective medium to articulate what Said calls "revised visions of the past tending towards a new future" (34).

If we now return to Achebe the critic with this fundamental mimetic ambivalence in mind, we should be in a position to resolve a fundamental problem that continues to be the source of much controversy and to detect the underlying mimetic logic that informs the quarrel between these two exemplary authors. Having granted the recognition that Achebe's critique of Conrad deserves, critics have continued to wonder at the stridency of his tone, his one-sided rejection of a narrative that is, after all, critical of colonialism, his baffling comparison between Conrad's racism and Nazism and, we may add, his acute sensitivity to the notion of frenzy.[22] And yet, some of the rhetorical excesses, tendentiousness, and interpretative violence Achebe mobilizes in order to launch his attack on Conrad acquires a new meaning if we take into consideration the complicities, ambivalences, and crossings over that tie, in a mimetic double-bind, Achebe's picture of Africa to Conrad's image of Africa. For instance, we are all familiar with Achebe's mature dislike of Conrad, but we should not forget that Conrad is one of the authors the young Achebe, as he himself puts it, "liked particularly" (*Conversations* 6).[23] Given the lack of national African authors that could have served as models to develop his counternarrative, it is perhaps not unlikely that the young novelist, writing in the language of the colonizer, turned to the authors he admired most for inspiration. Further, we all know that as a critic, Achebe violently rejects the notion of frenzy in *Heart of Darkness*. And, following the author, we have become quite accustomed to this image of Achebe. Hence, Achebe's multiple references to the notion of frenzy in *Things Fall Apart*, which reproduce some of the stereotypes present in dominant images of Africa have largely gone unnoticed. This uncanny lack of critical awareness concerning such a loud and much-discussed controversy is perhaps not without connections with the way Achebe himself framed the debate in the first place. In his essays on Conrad, in fact, Achebe never mentions his own novelistic usages of images frenzy, not even to address how they differ from colonial images of Africa, while at the same time, he continues to be very outspoken about what he calls Conrad's "images of gyrating and babbling savages" ("Tarnished" 216). Conversely, and somewhat revealingly, in his subsequent novels, Achebe is very careful not to reproduce such stereotypes, relegating them to the side of Conrad's narrative instead.[24]

If we consider postcolonial power not in simplistic oppositional terms, but rather in its complex process of oppositions and connection (the dash that was once visible in "post-colonial" both opposes and connects the two terms), these paradoxical loops seem to lead to the following critical interrogations: Could it be that the interpretative violence and intolerance that informs Achebe's mature postcolonial critique of Conrad in general and the notion of frenzy in particular is at least partially motivated by the belated realization that he himself, in his youth, had uncritically succumbed to such colonial images, reproducing them in his postcolonial counternarrative? More positively framed, what if the diagnostic sharpness of Achebe's postcolonial insights into the racist implications of images of frenzy stems partly from the belated realization that he himself had unwittingly been caught in the network of colonial discourses and their wounding representations? In short, what if Achebe's postcolonial critique of power stems, at least partially, from his mimetic implication in colonial power?

To be sure, such an avowal would not necessarily have been strategically productive for Achebe to make at the time he was writing "An Image of Africa," if only because it complicates the distinctions between dominant and subordinate, colonizer and colonized, that he was working to set up. And given the foundational dimension of this theoretical distinction, we can understand why Terry Eagleton cautions critics that there is a risk in recent postcolonial developments that stress the "mutual implications" between colonizer and colonized (205). Yet the point of an analysis that unmasks, at the micro-level, how power circulates freely from narratives to counternarratives is not necessarily meant to "blunt the political cutting-edge of an anti-colonialist critique" (205–06). On the contrary, making visible this mimetic entanglement between the dominant and the subordinate allows us to sharpen our understanding of both the oppressive and productive dimensions of postcolonial mimesis for a series of theoretical reasons that I now flesh out as concisely as possible in order to conclude.

First, Achebe's youthful assimilation of the dominant language of frenzy in his narrative practice illustrates what theorists of power have been arguing for a while now. Namely, that there is no safe position outside of power in order to launch a critique of power; no simple antagonistic oppositional strategy to critique the network of power relations in which we operate. Informed, *volens nolens*, by dominant forms of discourse, the postcolonial novelist who turns the language of the oppressor against itself is always confronted to the risk of reproducing some of the images he sets forth to counter. As Said reminds us, "the power of discourse is that it is at once the

object of struggle and the tool by which the struggle is conducted" ("Textuality" 705). The case of Achebe the novelist suggests that the risk is, of course, worth taking: mimetic reproductions like *Things Fall Apart* have the power to counter oppressive images of Africa, inverse some of their racist presuppositions and, more generally, open up new fields of studies that allow for new pictures of Africa to emerge.

Second, Achebe's narrative reproduction of the language of frenzy in the context of his counternarrative indicates that discursive power is more insidious than initially realized. It transgresses the frontiers of dominant and subordinate, affects and infects its most outspoken critics, and continues to be operative in the interstices where the "post" in "postcolonial" both opposes and connects its "colonial" counterpart. Unmasking operations, then, require a higher degree of critical vigilance that has been exercised so far. That is, a vigilance that does not hesitate to make visible the mechanisms whereby power, and the racist images it conveys, can continue to partially speak through the pen of the most astute and insightful critics of colonial power, rendering counternarratives both subversive of and complicit with dominant representations of the other.

Third, the realization that power crosses disciplinary and political boundaries should alert critics not to polarize debates on the basis of given disciplinary and authorial intentions. Rather, if we take our clue from Foucault's affirmation that power "must be analyzed as something that circulates" (*Power* 98), we should turn our critical lenses to the impersonal movement of power in its process of dynamic circulation from dominant to subaltern narratives and vice versa. This should allow us to continue exposing and critiquing the less visible, but not less damaging, operations of racist discourse in a postcolonial period where the barrier between the dominant and the subordinate is not always easy to locate—which does not mean that it fails to operate in covert and no less oppressive ways.

Finally, this exemplary debate teaches us that forms of narrative subjection to dominant images of Africa can be productive of sharp critical discourses that effectively counter power through the very realization that one has been subjected to power. If Said was quick to recognize that the "most interesting postcolonial writers bear their [colonial] past with them" both in the form of "humiliating wounds" and "revised visions of the past tending towards a new future" (*Culture* 34), we can further this insight by articulating a logical connection between these apparently competing claims. Namely, that subjection and internalization to humiliating forms of wounding can potentially serve as a catalyst for the emergence of powerful critiques of the narratives that have inflicted such wounds in the first place. In fact, it is not unlikely that Achebe's assimilation

and reproduction of some of the images of frenzy in his fiction enabled him, in due time, to think through the full implications of such images of Africa and to effectively turn this realization to productive critical use in order to make visible what exactly is wounding in such images. Critical lenses and analytical insights can thus be sharpened by the belated realization that the speaking subject whose intention is to write back to the empire can, at the same time, be subjected to the power he denounces. After all, if we inverse an old Christian saying we could say that after receiving a speck of sawdust in our eye, we can better see the beam in our brother's eye. Or, to use an Igbo proverbial counterpart Achebe is fond of quoting, "when one thing falls, another stands in its place."

My point is not, of course, that Achebe would not have been in a position to write *Things Fall Apart* had he not been subjected to dominant colonial narratives such as *Heart of Darkness*—though we probably would have had a quite different counternarrative. Nor that he would have failed to see the potentially racist implications of Conrad's image of Africa had he not himself reproduced similar images of mimetic frenzy—though we probably would have had a less tendentious and virulent critique. Rather, my point is that the specific case of Achebe's mimetic quarrel with Conrad offers us a productive case study to rethink a fierce personal and disciplinary debate from a more impersonal, transdisciplinary and, hopefully, less quarrelsome perspective. This new mimetic perspective sets forth to unmask and critique the workings of power—rather than of authors—for a globalized age that can no longer rely on neat conceptual distinctions between colonizer and colonized, dominant and subordinate, mimetic and antimimetic positions, yet continues to generate insidious and damaging forms of oppression nonetheless. In sum, if the critical side of postcolonial mimesis is not without echoes of an old Platonic suspicion of mimetic images of reality, its novelistic side is part of a paradoxical form of discursive subjection that should be critiqued for its power of subordination, but should above all be considered in its productive role in the formation of counternarratives that, while formed by power, run against power.

The case of Achebe's narrative and critical relation with Conrad is encouraging and forward oriented. It demonstrates that postcolonial mimesis is not only the site of disciplinary rivalries and vicious quarrels, but can also be the site of potential narrative reconciliations that can be set to productive critical and theoretical use. Mimetic reproductions of dominant racial stereotypes do not preclude innovative productions of new pictures of Africa; partial complicity with forms of colonial discourse does not preclude agency, least of all narrative agency. On the contrary, the different forms of mimesis we have been

tracking (anthropological, narrative, postcolonial) offer a starting point for the development of a critique of discursive stereotypes that goes beyond prepackaged distinctions between colonial and postcolonial texts, original and copy, bad and good mimesis, dominant pictures of Europe and subaltern pictures of Africa. It also looks forward to a mass-mediatized, hybrid, and globalized age in which neat distinctions between national, religious, cultural, and political boundaries no longer seem to hold, leaving the possibility open for liberating forms of revolutions to emerge—mimetic revolutions that critique totalitarian messages through the effective use of the very same mimetic mass-media that were used as an instrument of subjection.[25]

Achebe's multi-layered take on mimesis allows him not only to critically unveil the racist implications of Conrad's image of Africa but also to supplement Conrad's limited insight into the ambivalences of mimetic frenzy. Above all, I find Achebe's postcolonial mimesis an enabling device instrumental in sketching an admirably complex and illuminating representation of Africa, a pictorial re-presentation that, in its firm oppositions, deft inversions and covert reproductions of dominant images of Africa, turns out to be almost the opposite—but not quite.

Notes

1. The present essay follows up on a mimetic line of inquiry initiated in an essay titled "The Horror of Mimesis: Enthusiastic Outbreak[s] in *Heart of Darkness*" and continued in "A Picture of Europe: Possession Trance in *Heart of Darkness*." It completes a trilogy on Conrad, Achebe, and mimetic theory. The first article is part of a broader argument on mimesis and modernism. See Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego.* The last two articles are part of a work in progress provisionally titled *Interdisciplinary Conrad*.

2. I would like to belatedly recognize that Simon Gikandi, in an article that appeared after the submission of this paper, also uses the concept of "postcolonial mimesis" in order to counter anti-mimetic trends in postcolonial studies. Gikandi and I develop different sides of this concept: for Gikandi, "postcolonial mimesis" designates a representational aesthetics that reinscribes a concern for the "reality effects invoked in postcolonial texts" (173) under the signature of "irony" and "empty time" (176); for me, as it will become clear in the last section, "postcolonial mimesis" designates a form of non-realistic imitation that connects postcolonial counternarratives to colonial narratives and is responsible for the circulation of power in its repressive and productive forms. These two sides of postcolonial mimesis are not antagonistic but supplement each other. In fact, Gikandi and I share the same conviction that a focus on mimesis that is not naively

realistic leads to fundamental problems in postcolonial studies. For these problems to emerge "[p]ostcolonial criticism," as Gikandi puts it, "has to start reading its primary texts carefully and to understand the theoretical work that was embedded in the foundational novels of decolonization" (174). If Gikandi concludes by saying that "the work of theory after theory is to reconcile theories, texts and experiences under the sign of postcolonial mimesis" (176), the present article is intended as first step in the history of this reconciliation.

3. For an account of possession trance in *Heart of Darkness*, see Lawtoo "Picture of Europe."

4. For critics who suggest that "the Conrad of *Heart of Darkness* is the brother of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" (Watts 204), see Watts 199 and 204–206, and Robertson. For a critic who questions the "Manichean dualism" (Moses 110) that often still informs current approaches to Achebe, see Moses 110–112. Along similar lines, Caminero-Santangelo in *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad* calls for the necessity to go beyond the oppositional stance that still informs discussions of postcolonial literature. Focusing on the dialogic relation between Conrad and postcolonial authors (including Achebe), he argues that the latter "create their own voices through a process of parodic absorption and transformation of Western classics and the colonial discourse they represent" (11). What follows builds on these recent developments to offer a new approach to the race controversy.

5. Conrad scholars have stressed the instability of this distinction before (see Mongia 155 and Fleming 97), but the continuities in Conrad's and Achebe's representation of frenzy have remained unexplored so far.

6. In addition to *Heart of Darkness*, Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939) is also responsible for Achebe's desire to write a counternarrative. Interestingly, Cary also stresses the link between African subjectivity, "possession," and "frenzy" (see 29, 32, 40, 133, 159, 161).

7. Achebe confirms the mimetic dimension of such rituals as he says that during a traditional Igbo masquerade, "You must *imitate* its motion. The kinetic energy of the masquerade's art is thus instantly transmitted to a whole arena of spectators" (*Hopes* 44; emphasis added). For influential figures who have theorized the anthropological dimension of mimesis, see Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, chapters 4–5 and 8, and René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, chapters 4 and 6.

8. When confronted with Achebe's dramatization of ritual frenzy critics tend to praise Achebe's "artistic objectivity," see Taiwo 361. For an important exception that recognizes that Achebe's representation of ritual "seems at times on the verge of betraying him into the kind of unmediated stereotyping of the African by Western writers to which he himself has vehemently objected," see Irele 459. Irele, however, does not explain the logic informing this mimetic repetition, treating it as an embarrassing moment in Achebe's text. This essay attempts to go beyond this initial embarrassment in order to articulate its paradoxical, mimetic logic.

9. See *Republic* Book 3, 640–642, 396a–397d, and Book 10, 830, 604e

10. Émile Durkheim's account of the social bond is predicated on the example of Australian totemism. His account of religious force, while still couched within an evolutionary frame, casts light on the collective rituals in general, both among archaic and modern peoples. After a description of "the primitive's emotional and passionate faculties" that matches Achebe's account of frenzy, Durkheim specifies: "Once the individuals are assembled, their proximity generates a kind of electricity that quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation. . . . And as passions so strong and uncontrolled are bound to seek outward expression, there are violent gestures, shouts, even howls, deafening noises of all sorts from all sides" (162–163). And he adds: "It is not difficult to imagine that a man in such a state of exaltation no longer knows himself. Feeling possessed and led by some external power that makes him think and act differently from normal times he naturally feels he is no longer himself" (164). Durkheim's conclusion is that this "religious force is nothing but the collective and anonymous force of the clan" (166). On Achebe and Durkheim, see also Irele 460.

11. See Lawtoo, "A Picture of Europe" 429.

12. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* writes that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuiness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). The style of community Achebe imagines and represents in *Things Fall Apart* is one based on rituals of mimetic communion whereby the imagined social bond emerges from a collective, bodily experience.

13. For a dated account of an Igbo funeral that relies on the notion of frenzy in order to describe a collective effervescence that comes very close to Achebe's description, see Basden 132–133. For more recent anthropological accounts that also emphasize the role of music in the induction of trance, see Rouget 60–102. For a description of the "hysterical mimesis" at work in "ritual possession," see Girard 165–166.

14. On the cathartic function of possession trance, see Hell 333–337 and Girard 243–245.

15. For an article that focuses on "Achebe and the negation of independence" and identifies "the condition of existence in postindependent Nigeria as neo-colonial," see Udumukwu 472.

16. See Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms* especially 157–161.

17. See Lawtoo, "A Picture of Europe" 419–22.

18. In *Mr. Johnson*, Joyce Cary portrays a crudely limited picture of the functions of ritual frenzy; yet he also seems to glimpse at Achebe's organic insight. Thus, he writes that the members of a frenzied crowd

are "like parts of one being and now every part is mad with the same frenzy" (155).

19. Foucault states that the figure of the author "serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found in a series of texts" ("Author" 144). In order to go beyond this authorial fallacy, Foucault suggests that the figure of the author "must be stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse" (148). This is the spirit that animates this article.

20. See also *Location* 66–84.

21. See "Two Lectures" *Power/Knowledge*, especially 93–108. For a lucid Foucauldian account of the paradoxical logic of subjection, see Butler 1–18.

22. Some critics have hoped somewhat naïvely that a chat with Achebe, the author, could clarify, for once and for all, his personal problem with Conrad's text (see Phillips). I say naïvely because the mimetic logic I am tracing, as it is often the case in mimetic matters, is beyond the control of authorial intentions. See Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego,* especially chapter 1.

23. In an interview, Achebe explains: "I used to like Hemingway; and I used to like Conrad. I used to like Conrad particularly" (*Conversations* 6). The fact that Achebe's third novel is titled *Arrow of God* (1964)—a mimetic echo of Conrad's *Arrow of Gold* (1919)—is also telling in this respect.

24. See *No Longer at Ease* in *The African Trilogy*, 235.

25. The recent revolutionary movements in Northern Africa (or "Arab Spring") testify to the contemporary political relevance of mimesis understood both as visual representations and emotional contagion for the regeneration of the social order. What these movements teach us is that a complex, spiraling effect can emerge from these two forms of mimesis: on one hand, collective protests in the social sphere generate a "local" revolutionary effervescence that, in turn, serves as the message to be communicated globally, by different media (from the radio to the news, mobile phones to Facebook and other modes of virtual communication); on the other hand, the images of Africa they convey, have the power to retroact, via a back-looping effect, on the immanent social sphere, amplifying the effervescence it is supposed to merely represent across national barriers. Above all, these mimetic revolutions illustrate not only how inadequate distinctions such as copy and original, active and passive, reality and imitation of reality are to think about mimesis today, but also how urgent it is to think and rethink both the damaging and productive power of mimesis, for our contemporary, mass-mediatized times.

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