

“In This Way the Moons and the Seasons Passed”: Distantly Reading the Literary Criticism of
Things Fall Apart.

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“In this way the moons and the seasons passed. And then the locusts came. It had not happened for many a long year. The elders said locusts came once in a generation, reappeared every year for seven years and then disappeared for another lifetime. They went back to their caves in a distant land, where they were guarded by a race of stunted men. And then after another lifetime these men opened the caves again and the locusts came to Umuofia.”¹

What are we to make of Chinua Achebe’s iconic text, *Things Fall Apart*? Described as “one of the most famous books in the world,”² there is little doubt that Achebe’s most well-known novel is a cornerstone of postcolonial literature, written by a “founding father of African fiction,”³ an “African literary titan,”⁴ and one of “world literature’s great humane voices.”⁵ As Irele suggests in his introduction to the Norton Critical Edition, *Things Fall Apart* served to reorder global thinking and imagination about what a novel could be.⁶ In spite of this well-deserved praise, the status and trajectory of the criticism surrounding *Things Fall Apart* is a bit more unstable than one could imagine.

A cursory review of the terms “Chinua Achebe” and “Things Fall Apart” through Google’s Ngram database reveals that the popularity of both the author and the text itself waxed and waned over time (see Figure 1). Criticisms of Google’s approach to tracking publications notwithstanding, and there are certainly valid methodological and epistemological pitfalls in drawing inferences exclusively from this narrow approach to literary studies; it is clear that the popular trajectory of Achebe’s work has flowed and ebbed since its initial publication in 1958. While *Things Fall Apart* may have earned its place across a wide range of 10th grade world literature curricula and found a home in undergraduate and graduate studies of literature

¹ Achebe 33-34.

² Brooks.

³ “Chinua Achebe obituary.”

⁴ Kandell.

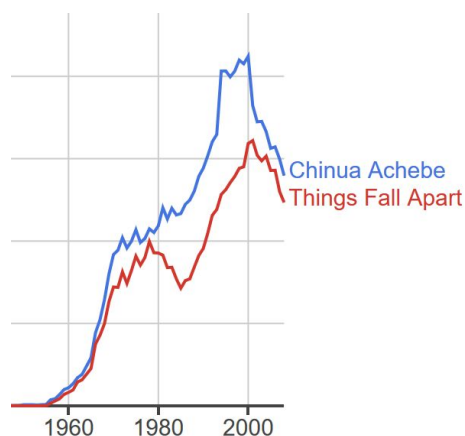
⁵ “Chinua Achebe and the TLS.”

⁶ Ibele, *ix*.

the world over, the peaks and valleys of the novel's frequency in contemporary production of printed works should give scholars of postcolonial literary studies pause about describing the stability of Achebe's premier work in the body of the genre.

Figure 1

Ngram of both "Chinua Achebe" and "Things Fall Apart", 1958-2008



Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer, 19 April 2017, <https://books.google.com/ngrams>

Rather than confront the thematic, narrative, or rhetorical elements of *Things Fall Apart* directly, my aim is to critically appraise the volume of literary criticism about the novel itself. This process, what Moretti⁷ describes as distantly reading large libraries of text, or what Jockers⁸ refers to as a macroanalytical approach to literary studies, has emerged as an innovative way to test old claims and explore new questions in and around literary studies. While such a blend of quantitative and qualitative, distant reading methods of literary studies are normally directed towards large corpora of text, such as Drouin's assessment of early-20th century periodicals for example,⁹ there are several reasons why this mode of distant reading could applied as a way of

⁷ Moretti 47-49, 2013.

⁸ Jockers 7.

⁹ Drouin.

critically reading literary scholarship. First, there is no reason to assume that the literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* is produced in an even, linear fashion. Literature comes in and out of print in cycles, a function of dominant modes of production, politics, and reflective of the consuming public's changing tastes.¹⁰ It then follows that literary criticism itself, particularly as a form of labor and productive capacities of academics in the latter half of the twentieth century, could also move in a similarly cyclical fashion. Second, as Jänicke and his colleagues argue, distant reading methods meet at the nexus of literary studies and digital humanities, informing both classic and contemporary epistemologies about the nature of understanding the complexities of text.¹¹ Therefore, distantly reading literary criticism invariably involves synthesizing more recent, interdisciplinary methods of literary analysis in pursuit of generating inferences and insights about the production and consumption of text. Finally, distantly reading the literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* is a reasonable opportunity for graduate students to learn and experiment with quantitative tools and methods of literary analysis within the confines of the seminar; an opportunity I plan to exploit in this essay fully.

What follows then is a discussion of the trajectory, central themes, and other attributes of the literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart*. To facilitate this analysis, I created a textbase of articles derived from the *MLA International Bibliography*. I queried this bibliographic database for the subject term “things fall apart”, focusing on publications in the form of books, book chapters, and peer-reviewed journal articles. Once I compiled this initial textbase, I downloaded the data into the bibliographic management tool *Zotero*. I then reviewed the textbase to eliminate duplicate entries and narrowed the metadata in the textbase to include each entry’s author, title,

¹⁰ Moretti “Graphs,” 2007.

¹¹ Jänicke, *et. al.*

year of publication, and subject-area tags. I then exported the textbase into CSV format so that I could analyze it through several different digital humanities tools and techniques to develop insights and make inferences about the trends, themes, and distribution of the literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* across time and space. Ultimately, this textbase includes four hundred thirty-five distinct publications across fifty-six years. While this volume of research and the accompanying metadata does offer a wealth of information about the literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* over the past half-century, there are also some potential shortcomings in this project.

One of the drawbacks in relying on a single bibliographic database to compile the totality of literature about any particular work invariably assumes complete, or at least comprehensive coverage by the publisher of the database. While the Modern Language Association arguably serves as a leading organization in the world of literary studies, and the *MLA International Bibliography* itself indexes over six thousand individual journals,¹² there are likely articles, book chapters, and books themselves which are not a part of this corpus of text. A principal benefit of a macroanalytical literary studies perspective is the capacity to read a large volume of text and metadata from the broadest range possible. One way to improve a future iteration of this project could be to develop a more inclusive textbase of publications through the polyanguation of bibliographic databases. A related improvement to this project would be to broaden the search parameters in and around these bibliographies; again, a possible revision for future work.

Equally, it's important to discuss aspects of the metadata which I will not address in this analysis. Moretti suggests that mapping the distribution literature at scale offers insights into the political and cultural economy of literary production.¹³ While it is possible to draw both the

¹² "Frequently Asked Questions."

¹³ See Moretti "Maps," 2007.

national origin of the publication, the language of publication of each article, and the national identity of each author from the metadata in the textbase, along with some additional research, I chose not to do so both in order to keep within the confines of this paper as well as to avoid the intellectual trap of attributing literary production to the contingencies and variabilities of the nation state.¹⁴ A similar, and perhaps more notable absence in my analysis is the identification of the gender distribution as an important component of critical literary studies. Women are underrepresented in leading literary and periodical publications, as work by the VIDA Project volunteers demonstrates on a consistent basis.¹⁵ I attempted to include binary gender identification of each other in the textbase, based on gendered assumptions of first names and some preliminary internet research. However, as I was unable to confirm the gender identity of nearly two hundred author's names, I decided to abandon this aspect of my research.

Understanding the extent to which the representation of intersectional identity in the production of literary criticism is especially important as the study of postcolonial literature, as the genre and academic field is predicated on the understanding notions of difference in social contexts. Addressing both of these themes would likely produce a valuable set of inferences about the nature of literary criticism about *Things Fall Apart*, and perhaps postcolonial literary criticism in general; something a more robust project could likely include in the future. Finally, the practical aspect of the seminar paper limits the extent to which the data visualizations and other representations of information in this essay are analyzed beyond an inferential perspective. One of the advantages of quantitative literary analysis and distant reading of large corpora of text is the textbase allows literary critics to employ statistical methods to bolster their claims beyond

¹⁴ See Moretti "Graphs," 2007.

¹⁵ "VIDA: Women in Literary Arts."

anecdotal or hermeneutic interpretations.¹⁶ At the risk of repeatedly disparaging of my project, I concede that I did not adopt a quantitative or mixed methods approach to reading the data in this essay, although doing so will be a valuable exercise in an extension or future iteration of this project.

With these limitations in mind, I now turn my attention to analyzing the variety of literary critiques on Achebe's cornerstone work of postcolonial literature. Specifically, I demonstrate that the volume literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* fluctuates across the latter half of the 20th century and during the first decade and a half of the 21st century, movement that works in tandem with the emergence of postcolonial literary studies as a distinct genre within the humanities. Additionally, this criticism coalesces around themes of relations and comparison between Achebe and *Things Fall Apart* and other colonial and postcolonial authors and texts, rather than in the form of a predominantly overt critique of Achebe's narrative style or other literary elements of the text. These findings suggest that distant reading and macroanalytical approaches to postcolonial literary analysis can provide insight into evolving trends and forms of criticism and thus are useful starting points of criticism for scholars of literary and cultural theory, print culture, and literary history.

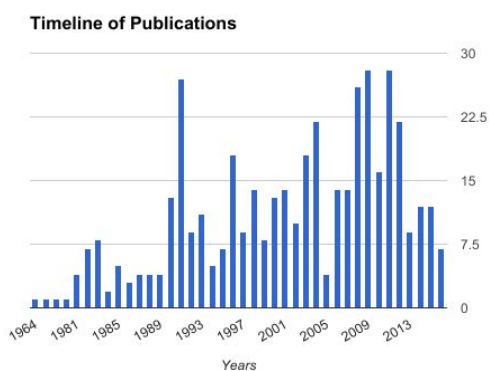
The first peer-reviewed literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* didn't emerge until nearly a decade after the novel's publication. Shelton's brief and somewhat scathing critique of Achebe's political motivations for character development in *Things Fall Apart* marks a rather muted point of departure for what will become a rather large and diverse range of literary

¹⁶ For example, see Jockers' discussion and application of statistical methods in literary analysis, 97-106.

criticism.¹⁷ Indeed *Things Fall Apart* does not receive multiple critiques in journals or books in a single calendar year until 1981, a full five years after Achebe ended his visiting professorship the University of Connecticut to take up a post at the University of Nigeria.¹⁸ While the publication of literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* starts to be more consistent during the 1980s, the volume of this work doesn't take off until 1991 (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2

Timeline of Literary Criticism of *Things Fall Apart*



On average, *Things Fall Apart* received roughly eleven peer-reviewed publications per year between 1964 and 2016. Annual publications ranged from none in multiple years to modal years of twenty-eight publications in 2009 and 2011. Over this time, the standard deviation of publications was slightly less than eight texts per year, meaning that years with three or less or nineteen or more fell outside what one would anticipate as a typical publication year of literary criticism on *Things Fall Apart*. Specifically, the peak years of critical publication --those years where the frequency of published work occurred outside the standard deviation --were 1991 (twenty-seven), 2004 (twenty-two), 2008 (twenty-six), 2009 (twenty-eight), 2009 (twenty-eight)

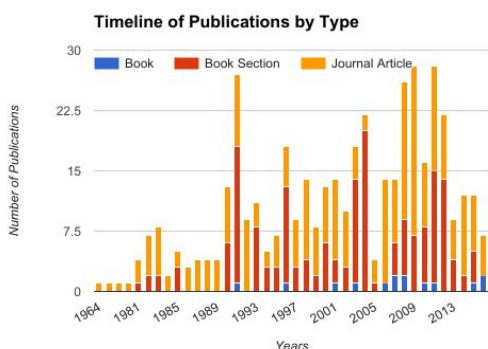
¹⁷ Shelton 37.

¹⁸ Achebe 589.

2011 (twenty-eight), and 2012 (twenty-two). Suffice it to say; it is only within the onset of the 21st century, more than four decades after *Things Fall Apart* was first published, did literary criticism of the text start to be produced in a consistent fashion.

Figure 3

Timeline of Literary Criticism of *Things Fall Apart* by Publication Type



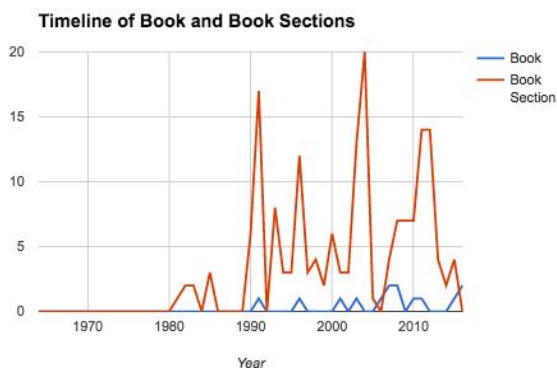
A second way to explore the publication of literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* over time is to consider the distribution of different varieties of this analysis (see Figure 3 above). Only fourteen books in the *MLA International Bibliography* directly addressed Achebe's most prominent work, the first of which wasn't published until 1991 during the first peak of critical literary production on *Things Fall Apart*.¹⁹ Indeed, only three times since 1958 were books on Achebe's text published in consecutive years: 2007-2008 (two books in each year), 2010-2011 (one book in each year), and 2015-2016 (one book in 2015, two books in 2016). While entire books dedicated towards a critical assessment of *Things Fall Apart* may have been sparse over the past six decades, the distribution of book chapters reflects a wider critical treatment of Achebe's novel. Slightly more than four book chapters, or sections, per year were dedicated to evaluating *Things Fall Apart*; 175 in total since 1958. The spread of these sections, as will all of

¹⁹ Lindfors 10-12.

the publications in this textbase have been unevenly distributed over time, with the vast majority of the book sections entering into publication in the last two decades. Interestingly, as illustrated in Figure 4 below, book sections were the driving force behind the first peak of published literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart*, accounting for seventeen of the twenty-seven (63%) of the publications that year. With a standard deviation of slightly more than five publications per year, the peak years for published book sections of criticism on *Things Fall Apart* are 1991 (seventeen), 1996 (twelve), 2003 (thirteen), 2004 (twenty), 2011 (fourteen), and 2012 (twelve). Taking both whole books and book chapters as a distinct form of publication, the peak year of literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* was 2004, where twenty book sections were published, and followed by 1991 (eighteen), 2011 (fifteen), 2003 (fourteen), 2012 (fourteen), and 1996 (thirteen). Were Chinua Achebe interested in reading books of literary criticism on *Things Fall Apart*, he would have had to wait some four decades after its publication to encounter the vast majority of this work.

Figure 4

Timeline of Literary Criticism of *Things Fall Apart* in Books and Book Sections

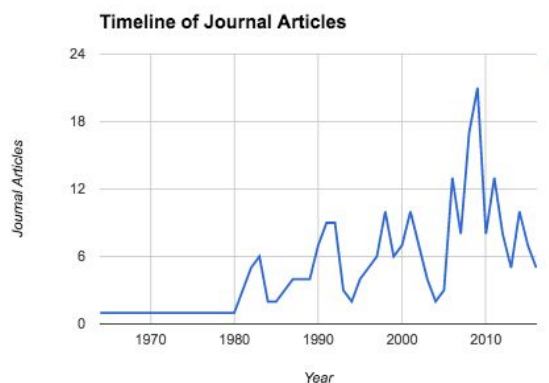


Peer-reviewed journal articles of literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* were published in fits and starts in much of the same way that peer-reviewed books and book sections were since

1964 (see Figure 5 below). Averaging roughly six articles on Achebe's work per year since 1964, it was not until 1980 that at least one article per year on *Things Fall Apart* appeared in a peer-reviewed journal, although this has continued uninterrupted since that time. The standard deviation of published journal articles over this time was slightly more than four, meaning that the peak years of publication did not emerge until 2006 (thirteen), and was then followed by 2008 (seventeen), 2009 (twenty-one), and then 2011 (seventeen), before falling back within the normal range of annual publications. When taken together with the publication figures of books and book chapters on *Things Fall Apart*, it appears that literary criticism of Achebe's signature work peaked at the tail end of the first decade of the 21st century, and now seems to be in decline. This finding not only mirrors the trends outlined in Figure 1, but as I will explain below, may be a part of larger trends within the publication of postcolonial literary criticism.

Figure 5

Timeline of Literary Criticism of *Things Fall Apart* in Journal Articles

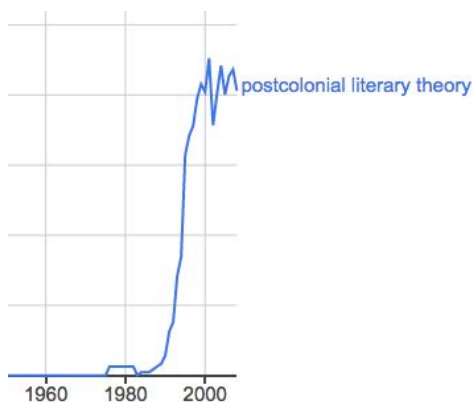


What could account for this punctuated production of literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart*? Perhaps the most elegant explanation begins from the standpoint that any criticism of Achebe's work corresponds to the onset and dramatic proliferation of postcolonial literary

studies. As both Eagleton and Tyson suggest, postcolonial literary studies emerges as a distinct theoretical field in the early-1990s.²⁰ Their points are affirmed by an exploration of books published on the subject (see Figure 6 below). Indeed, while not a perfectly-aligned measurement, the publication pattern of literary criticism on *Things Fall Apart* and books on postcolonial literary theory exhibit similar movement across time in the form of a small bump in the number of publications produced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, followed by a precipitous rise in the number of work in the last decade of the 20th century, and settling on a fluctuating, yet considerably more frequent, number of publications in the 21st century.

Figure 6

Ngram of “postcolonial literary theory,” 1960-2008



Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer, 19 April 2017, <https://books.google.com/ngrams>

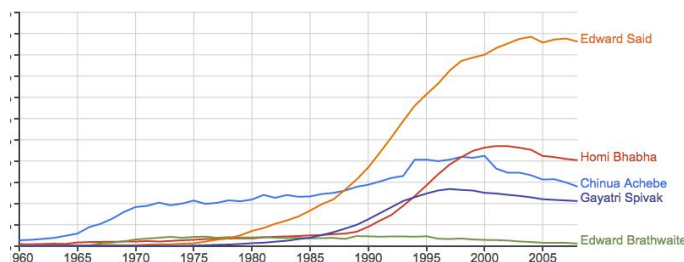
A similar point is made by exploring the publication of books by and about leading postcolonial theorists. Locating Achebe alongside the literary production of and related to Homi Bhabha, Edward Brathwaite, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak, we can see that writing about Achebe both anticipates and then is carried along with the rise in work about these respective

²⁰ See Eagleton 204-206; Tyson 418.

authors (Figure 7 below).²¹ Although Achebe was not a postcolonial theorist literature per se, books about Achebe’s work, including *Things Fall Apart*, are in the vanguard of publications alongside central thinkers in the development and proliferation of postcolonial literary studies. However, it’s not entirely clear that Achebe’s particular work had a direct influence on thinkers like Bhabha, Brathwaite, Said, or Spivak. For example, Said does not include a single reference to *Things Fall Apart* in his 1966 book on Joseph Conrad, a text ripe for including Achebe’s work as foil or critical reference to Conrad.²² Moreover, the timeline of published criticism on *Things Fall Apart* more closely follows, rather than precedes, the work of Bhabha, Brathwaite, Said, and Spivak. At the end of the day, it is likely safe to say that the literary criticism produced in response to *Things Fall Apart* was part of a larger trend in the emerging genre of postcolonial literary studies, rather than in direct response to the publication of Achebe’s work in isolation.

Figure 7

Ngram of “Chinua Achebe, Homi Bhabha, Edward Brathwaite, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak,” 1960-2008



Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer, 19 April 2017, <https://books.google.com/ngram>

My discussion about the waves of publication of literary criticism on *Things Fall Apart* may point towards a perhaps-obvious notion that such work falls within the temporal boundaries

²¹ See Bhabha; Brathwaite; Said 1979; Said 1994; Spivak.

²² Said 1966.

of postcolonial literary theory and criticism. While this is an important affirmation of the idea that literary criticism moves in intellectual and productive cycles, the plotting of the waxing and waning of the criticism of *Things Fall Apart* ignores the crucial topic of exploring what is written about Achebe's work itself; a subject to which I now turn. To address this topic, I extracted the tags, labeled as "subjects" in the metadata in the *MLA International Bibliography*, into a single text file with each tag separated in CSV format. Tags allow for thematic interpretation of large corpora of text, especially through the creation of word clusters and tag clouds.²³ I then loaded this file into *Voyant Tools*, a digital humanities tool designed to produce data visualization and other representations of large corpora of text.

Word clusters represent the frequency of specific terms within a corpus of text. The larger the word in the cluster, the more frequent this word appears in the volume of text under analysis. As shown in Figure 8 (below), several keywords emerge as dominant themes amongst the top one hundred five terms across the four hundred thirty-five articles of literary criticism on *Things Fall Apart* in the textbase for this project. Specifically, the word "relationship" appears most frequently, one hundred forty-three times across all of the subject tags for the journal articles, book sections, and books of literary criticism on *Things Fall Apart*.²⁴ The next most frequent themes in the corpora were "treatment" (one hundred thirty-six) and "compared" (eighty-four), followed by both "literature" (fifty-three) and "language" (forty). While one could write volumes unpacking the nuances of this representation, for example, the ways in which literary criticism has addressed teaching and pedagogy surrounding *Things Fall Apart*, the data presented in Figure 8 below suggests that the most common form of literary criticism Achebe's

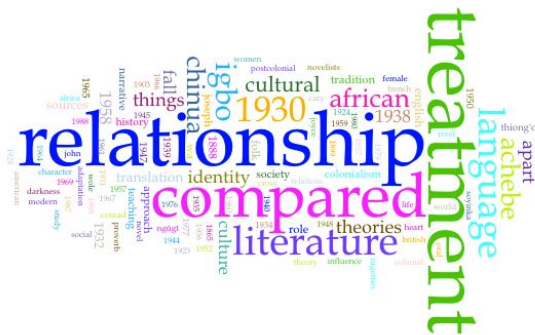
²³ See Jockers Chapter 8.

²⁴ "Summary."

novel appears to comparative in nature, reflecting a methodological premise which situates *Things Fall Apart* in broader literary and cultural contexts. This is not to say that the writers critiquing Achebe's work do not discuss literary elements such as narrative, style, or the reader --which some most certainly do. However, the subject tag "narrative" only appears twelve times across the four hundred thirty-five publications in the textbase, while "reader" (four) and "style" (three) are equally absent from the subject tags. It is my contention that the bulk of the literary criticism on *Things Fall Apart* focused on articulating cultural and political themes of the text at the expense of more conventional criticism which focuses on the use of literary devices and techniques.

Figure 8

Word cluster of subjects from literary criticism on *Things Fall Apart*



Source: Sinclair, Stefan and Geoffrey Rockwell. "Cirrus." *Voyant Tools*. 23 April 2017, <http://voyant-tools.org>

The authors of six books and eighty book sections, along with one hundred twenty-eight peer-reviewed journal articles from 1964 through 2016 situate their assessment of *Things Fall Apart* around the twin themes of African cultural identity and the legacy of colonialism (see Figure 9 below). The subjects of "Igbo" (twenty-three), "tradition" (fourteen), "African"

(twelve), “culture” (twelve), “cultural” (eleven), and “society” (ten) make up more than half of the ten most frequent subjects in this aspect of the textbase. This is unsurprising in a sense, as Achebe’s text is marketed as a work of African literature by both the publisher and major retail sellers of the text.²⁵ Although the text itself is about political and cultural events in and around the fictitious village of Umuofia, Achebe and his critics have been free to make connections between thematic elements in *Things Fall Apart* and African life in the 19th and 20th centuries. To this end, the other predominant theme of the literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* is focused on the thematic representations of colonization within the novel. Here, “colonialism” (seventeen), “postcolonialism” (twelve), and “British” (ten) make up three of the remaining four most frequent terms associated with the “relationship to” tag in the textbase; with “literature” (ten) as the remaining subject term.

Figure 9

Word cluster of “relationship to” from literary criticism on *Things Fall Apart*



Source: Sinclair, Stefan and Geoffrey Rockwell. “Cirrus.” *Voyant Tools*. 23 April 2017,

<http://voyant-tools.org>

²⁵ Both W.W. Norton and Amazon include *Things Fall Apart* in their

space in the form of a book chapter or book itself which would lead a writer to address these new themes, although such thinking is pure speculation on my part.

Figure 11

Word cluster of “relationship to” from Book Sections and Books on *Things Fall Apart*



Source: Sinclair, Stefan and Geoffrey Rockwell. “Cirrus.” *Voyant Tools*. 23 April 2017,

<http://voyant-tools.org>

The unpacking of these relational aspects of the literary criticism on *Things Fall Apart* does point towards a peculiar phenomenon; why is this criticism so especially focused on cultural and political themes? While one could expect such fascination with representations of African culture and the legacy of colonialism to feature more prominently directly after the initial release of *Things Fall Apart* or the formal end to colonialism in the middle part of the 20th century, it’s puzzling to think about the notion that the bulk of the thematic elements of literary criticism on Achebe’s novel occurred well after the text became popular. This criticism does seem particularly narrow in nature, perhaps reflecting a fetishization of the cultural and national elements of Achebe’s work. In other words, the literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* could

ironically read as an Orientalist project, explicitly othering both Achebe and his work within the broader context of literary studies. While I will return to this point in my next section, it's worth noting that while such a theory can likely only develop by reading the criticism of *Things Fall Apart* at a distance, such an argument must sustain itself through a close reading of the relevant literary criticism. In short, both approaches to reading criticism are complementary to each other as they open up new opportunities for lines of intellectual inquiry.

A second way of reading the narrow, relational focus of the criticism on *Things Fall Apart* points towards a new representation on the part of literary critics to participate and sustain the genre of postcolonial literary studies, and as a secondary consequence, engage in a sacrifice of more conventional approaches to literary criticism. Could it be that, especially with the rise of postcolonial literary studies and theory, that critics chose to overtly confront evangelize the experiential and cultural aspects of *Things Fall Apart* and ignore perhaps culturally-biased approaches to form, narrative, or style? Perhaps, although such a thesis is unsupported by any reading of the data I have presented so far and is best informed by a close reading of a large volume of this source material. What is more clear is that those critiquing *Things Fall Apart* have chosen to write about how Achebe's work is related to African cultural identity and colonialism more than they have about the architecture of the novel itself.

The literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* extends this relational assessment of Achebe's novel through the direct comparison to other authors and texts. Over the entire textbase, literary critics made comparisons between *Things Fall Apart* and works by other authors one hundred fifty-three times. Indeed the range of comparison between Achebe's notable work and other authors is staggering, with eighty-six distinct authors and even more individual works, serving as

points of juxtaposition and resemblance across nearly three hundred fifty years of literary production. Despite this breadth of literary comparison, the work of several authors and their texts are frequently compared to *Things Fall Apart* (see Figure 12 below). Comparisons between Achebe's text and Joseph Conrad's work, both *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, occur some fourteen times in the textbase. After Conrad, *Things Fall Apart* is most frequently compared to work by Wole Soyinka (nine), Buchi Emecheta (eight), and Amos Tutuola (eight); all writers from Nigeria like Achebe. Consequently, comparative literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* continues these twin themes of African cultural identity and the legacy of colonialism.

Figure 12

Word cluster of "compared to" authors in the literary criticism on *Things Fall Apart*



Source: Sinclair, Stefan and Geoffrey Rockwell. "Cirrus." *Voyant Tools*. 23 April 2017,

<http://voyant-tools.org>

In some sense, some sense of the intertextuality in the literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* is not surprising on its face. An entire section of the Norton Critical Edition of *Things Fall Apart*, including an essay by Achebe himself, is dedicated to the ways in which Achebe's signature work confronts, engages, or otherwise works via the thematic elements of Conrad's

Heart of Darkness.²⁶ What this comparison between both Achebe's and Conrad's signature texts does is set up and supports a binary that sustains an inside and outside dynamic, an Orientalist boundary, or a self-and-other dichotomy between their respective works. How do subaltern voices speak, even well-renowned ones, if *Things Fall Apart* is always critiqued in reference to an authorial-colonial other? A second but related point follows from the distribution of comparisons between Achebe's work and other Nigerian writers. While it may seem acceptable to attempt to characterize novels towards developing a scheme for depicting so-called national genres within world literature, such approaches naively misjudge the extent to which literature constructs, moves through, or otherwise problematizes the nation-state as an origin or even apt literary classification.²⁷ These are not merely semantic points, but also a material ones as well. Figure 13 (below) highlights the trajectory of the number of published works on Achebe and those authors he is most compared within the literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart*. Again, without delving into the mathematical comparisons, the trajectories of the relationship between Achebe and Conrad appear to move in inverse ways across time. Moreover, the production of work on all four Nigerian not only move in tandem together, but they also decline over the first decade in the study. While there are likely hosts of causal variables which could explain this movement, rises and falls of African literature and criticism, subject to market forces of production and consumption as well as trends within the genre of postcolonial literature itself, likely detract from the strengths and beauty of each author's peculiar work. In other words, a literary criticism which essentializes *Things Fall Apart* through comparison to both Conrad and the literary work of other Nigerian writers may come at the expense of seeing the unique

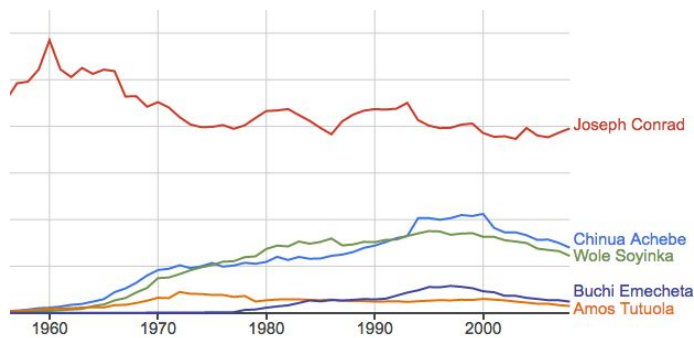
²⁶ "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*."

²⁷ See Moretti "Graphs," 2007; Apter, especially "Oneworldliness"

stylistics, form, and other aspects of Achebe's work. This is not to throw the idea of comparison out altogether of course, but it should give readers of and scholars of Achebe's work pause to think about new ways of assessing *Things Fall Apart*, given the dominant themes through which Achebe's novel is critiqued.

Figure 13

Ngram of the frequency of books on Chinua Achebe, Joseph Conrad, Buchi Emecheta, Wole Soyinka, and Amos Tutuola, 1960-2008



Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer, 19 April 2017, <https://books.google.com/ngrams>

Has the season for *Things Fall Apart* come to an end? Has this cycle of critique simply been allowed to fall fallow or will Achebe's text wait another lifetime to be engaged anew? After all, the popular and scholarly publications about the text, as well as of Achebe himself, have declined since their peak around the end of the first decade in the 21st century. While the expansion of postcolonial literary studies may on the one hand given Achebe's work a wider reading audience, perhaps a captive one within the enclosure of the secondary and university classroom, the proliferation of the genre and the discipline may also open up more space for alternative, competing novels and the resulting literary criticism to displace the discourse about *Things Fall Apart*. Moreover, if *Things Fall Apart* served both as a part of the initial wave of

African literature²⁸ as well as an “uneasy”²⁹ aspect of nation building in Nigeria and elsewhere in the *de jure* postcolonial world, to what extent does *Things Fall Apart* and the literary criticism produced in response to the text, still serve as a form of print capitalism for these communities in the 21st century?³⁰ In other words, will Achebe’s novel and the accompanying literary criticism continue to occupy space in the material and ideological production and consumption of postcolonial literature, or will the necessary breadth of the intellectual genre and the changing political economy of literary criticism move beyond Achebe’s most well-known work?

One way to think about the future of *Things Fall Apart*, the literary criticism which accompanies the text, and the genre of postcolonial literature in general is to explore the trajectories of literary production and consumption through a macroanalytical frame. As I have modestly demonstrated, distantly reading literary criticism through quantitative literary analysis and digital humanities tools provides a unique perspective on the ways in which a body of work is understood in context. Specifically, I have suggested that the scholarly literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* did not occur independently with the publication of Achebe’s work in 1958, but was a part of a larger trend in literary criticism and theory associated with the establishment of postcolonial studies. Moreover, distantly reading the literary criticism of *Things Fall Apart* points towards the ways in which critics have narrowly focused on framing Achebe’s text as a work of African culture and colonialism, in comparison with other texts in the genre. This

²⁸ See the separate discussions from Olney, Gikandi, Kortenaar, and Pandurang in Achebe 282-302, 323-358.

²⁹ See Achebe’s comments on building Nigerian nationalism in “Chinua Achebe, The Art of Fiction No. 139” as well as Snead’s reading of *Things Fall Apart* through the lens of nationalism in Achebe 278-282.

³⁰ See Anderson’s discussion of how print capitalism as an essential aspect of national identity building, especially in Chapters 2 and 3.

framing may have unintended consequences insofar as they produce an Orientalist rhetoric around Achebe's work, ignoring both the narrative and literary devices in the novel and to simultaneously locate *Things Fall Apart* in a narrow, nationalist frame.

By way of a conclusion, I will offer a yet-to-be-developed way of thinking about the future of reading *Things Fall Apart* and the production of associated literary criticism. Anderson suggests that communities are unstable conceptions of imaginary, shared affinity amongst similarly self-defined peoples and that print capitalism serves as the technological vector for circulating ideas across and through market spaces. Markets were once local and national enterprises, but the world economic system has extended beyond the boundaries of nationhood to foster both cosmopolitan and nativist realities. Instead of thinking of narrowly around the idea that common languages and political affinities which will produce ideologies of nationhood and therefore difference, what if we were to consider the ways in which the production and consumption of literature and *Things Fall Apart* specifically, reflects larger trends in historical economic systems and produces new forms of community? Instead of a work of African or Nigerian nationalism, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* could be read as a vector for historical literary legacies, while at the same point in time, a space for a variety of critical appraisals based on localized, contingent affinities; a synthesis of Hall's attempt to square ideology with materialism alongside Williams' genuine concern for the real and deep ways of reading culture.³¹ From here, the peculiarities and exceptionalities of *Things Fall Apart* could be, to borrow the phrase, "graphed, mapped, and or treed" in a way which does not essentialize or Orientalize Achebe's work outside of or against its historical context.³² Such an approach would sustain reading and

³¹ Hall 43; Williams 128-135.

³² Moretti 2007.

criticism of *Things Fall Apart*, always engaging the text in for its distinctiveness in context, rather than condemn the novel to a theoretical *a la mode*.

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