

## What Should We Do Now? Ruminations on the Future of Achebe Studies

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During his lifetime Chinua Achebe became an institution. His books were read and admired all over the world. His remarks on African literature, culture, and politics, frequently delivered as lectures or as keynote addresses at national and international conferences, or recorded in interviews on numerous campuses or on radio and television programs, circulated widely upon publication and became classic statements on the African condition, being quoted extensively thereafter. His ideas and his art attracted commentary of all sorts, not just intense scrutiny by scholars and students but also fascinated notices in the press and popular media. Soon books, articles, study guides, bibliographies, as well as biographical sketches began appearing in ever-increasing numbers. Proquest, an online source, reports that there have been 2395 doctoral dissertations and 345 MA theses completed that discuss works by Achebe, and these numbers include almost exclusively only those done so far in institutions in the United States and Canada. In short, Chinua Achebe is a remarkable phenomenon of our times, one whose lasting impact is likely to earn him a permanent place in the literary history of the world. He belongs with the immortals.

Now that he has passed away, the question becomes what should be done to facilitate this sustained and growing interest in him and his works? Are there any practical measures that can be taken now to ensure that future generations will have access to information that will help them understand and appreciate his achievements? Is there anything that those of us who knew him can do to help safeguard his legacy, preventing factual inaccuracies, gross misinterpretations, and idle speculations from distorting the

record of his life and career? Can we assist in any manner in protecting the integrity of his existence among us?

Perhaps the first matter that needs to be addressed by his family is what to do with his literary remains. Did he leave any instructions on how he wanted his surviving manuscripts, proofs, correspondence, documents, and personal papers to be secured against loss, or did he leave this decision to be made by his wife and children? Should such treasures be placed for safekeeping somewhere in Nigeria or somewhere else, perhaps in the United States or even Britain? He had had early connections with the University of Ibadan and the University of Nigeria at Nsukka and later had held teaching positions at a number of American institutions—most notably Bard College and Brown University but also briefer assignments at the University of Massachusetts, the University of Connecticut, and Dartmouth College.

In addition, he had already placed a small cache of his manuscripts at Harvard University, which had also acquired a dozen boxes of Wole Soyinka's papers. I'm sure Harvard would be delighted to add to this collection. But this is not the only archive in the U.S. that houses significant holdings of unpublished works by African and other non-Western writers. The Lilly Library at Indiana University took the initiative of acquiring the papers of Nadine Gordimer and Athol Fugard. The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas recently added a substantial collection of the papers of J.M. Coetzee to other smaller collections by Southern African, West African, and West Indian writers—e.g., Olive Schreiner, H.C. Bosman, Alan Paton, Bessie Head, Yvonne Vera, Amos Tutuola, Wilson Harris, Sam Selvon, Derek Walcott, to mention only some of the more famous names. The University of Tulsa not long ago acquired the manuscripts and letters of V.S. Naipaul, and Emory University did the same with the papers of Salman Rushdie. The School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London holds at least one manuscript by Ngugi wa

Thiong'o. So there are a number of well-established archives in the West that specialize in obtaining and conserving such materials, and any of them would no doubt welcome an opportunity to add Achebe's papers to their collections and pay a handsome price for doing so.

But such papers are not the only category of an author's collectables. What is to happen to Achebe's writing desks, his typewriter, his telephone, even his wheelchair? Isn't it time to begin thinking of establishing an Achebe Museum at Nsukka or Ogidi that would preserve the material culture relating to his career, especially the tools of his trade? This could be supplemented with photographs, old and new audio and video tapes, and records of the numerous awards and honors he received. Such a Museum could also be charged with the responsibility of collecting on tape fresh interviews with people who knew Achebe at certain stages of his career—his relatives, friends, classmates, teachers, students, writers, publishers, collaborators, and a full range of his professional associates, thereby creating a collective memory bank of personal reminiscences. A project of this kind was undertaken at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, and the miles of footage obtained have served as valuable resources for subsequent biographies, films, as well as radio and television programs. Couldn't the Nigerian Government be approached about establishing such a Museum to honor one of their nation's most famous citizens? This might also be an appropriate place to house and conserve his remaining papers for posterity.

Beyond such an indigenous venture, perhaps a number of institutions abroad, particularly those at which he worked, could be encouraged to establish research centers focusing on Achebe's works and the critical attention they have attracted. Not all the dissertations I enumerated have focused exclusively on his works. Some of them may have discussed him only briefly as an influential or inspirational figure in African literature, someone too important

to ignore even when dealing mainly with other writers who followed him. However, the many dissertations concerned entirely or primarily with his works ought to be collected and made available to scholars interested in exploring aspects of his creativity. This can easily be done by downloading the full texts of these dissertations, nearly all of which are now available online free of charge to institutions and individuals who wish to examine them.

Another project of this kind that would be worth pursuing at such a research center would be to collect the many books, articles, and interviews that have been published on Achebe. When I was doing research for six bibliographical volumes entitled *Black African Literature in English*, I recorded 1783 works devoted primarily to him and an even greater number relating tangentially to him. And this included only works published in the twentieth century. I had to give up my bibliographical mania when I retired in 2003 because I no longer had the resources or stamina to continue effectively such endeavors at record keeping, but I am certain that the fascination that scholars continue to display for Achebe's writings has not abated in more recent years. If anything, I suspect it has only increased. And I do not believe that it would be beyond the capability of an adequately funded research center to acquire copies of the great majority, if not nearly all, of these publications.

In a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books* Robert Darnton, the University Librarian at Harvard boldly speculated that 'A World Digital Library is Coming True!' That is, a day may be arriving soon when 'free access to all research, the data as well as the results,' will be available to the public. At least, that is his hope, but he recognizes that 'a great deal of access,' both in the United States and elsewhere, 'must be opened before the World Wide Web can accommodate a worldwide library.'<sup>1</sup>

However, we need not wait for such a sunny day to arrive. Much can already be achieved through conventional channels, not only via the internet but also via interlibrary loan as well as collaboration

with libraries in Africa. Perhaps a few well-placed research centers on both continents could combine efforts to accomplish the same mutual objective of documenting the full extent of published responses to his works.

It has been said that a portion of Achebe's output has been translated into sixty-five or more of the world's languages. Shouldn't these translations be collected too? The library of the Center for African Literary Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg already holds a good number of them. Perhaps this is another project that research centers dedicated to preserving Achebe's literary legacy could set as another of their priorities.

And let's not forget photos and other visual records. These could be retrieved not only from family, friends, and other individuals who own them but also from institutions and media outlets that covered his public appearances. Is there a retrievable record of where he gave lectures? I imagine all the campuses he visited would have photographs and possibly also films or videos documenting his local activities. A rich visual archive of this sort could be mined to illustrate his life in a variety of formats—books, articles, films, DVDs, etc. It would be wonderful, for example, if someone could compile and edit a comprehensive picture book covering his entire life, a well-illustrated volume of the kind that was published to celebrate Wole Soyinka's seventieth birthday, *W.S: A Life in Full* (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2004). Achebe is overdue for maximum exposure.

Given Achebe's celebrity and continuing popularity among readers, one expects that all these proposed ventures—a museum, an international group of dedicated research centers, and possibly libraries with unfettered digital access to much of the world's store of knowledge—will eventually materialize, making research on Achebe's life and career easier to navigate, but I think we are in a good position now to push for progress in building such

institutions for a creative artist who during his lifetime became an institution himself.

And while we are at it, let's not forget to collect his correspondence so future generations will have access to ideas he expressed in private communications to friends, colleagues, students, teachers, journalists, broadcasters, publishers, business associates, national and international governmental bodies, and even total strangers. Collections of letters can provide a mode of entry into the mind and mood of a writer at different stages of his career and can thereby have a bearing on understanding and interpreting the works he produced. Assembling an edition of a writer's correspondence can be a challenging task, requiring making contact with numerous individuals with whom he exchanged ideas and soliciting their cooperation in allowing such personal documents to be published. Those of us who have had messages from him could contribute to such an effort by donating copies of what he wrote to a central archive at a museum or research center entrusted with the responsibility of collecting, editing, and publishing a volume or multiple volumes of his correspondence. This would be one way of establishing another permanent record of his presence among us, a record that goes beyond the books and articles he wrote for publication.

And what about interviews? Some of the more famous of these are already available in books, journals, tapes, and videos and serve as useful sources of information on his life and opinions. But I am sure there are many others hidden away in fugitive publications or in untranscribed tapes on the many campuses he visited over the course of his career. Could an effort be made to retrieve these once public but underpublicized utterances so that they could supplement the store of statements already available? What we need is a fuller archive documenting the wit and wisdom of one of the world's great wordsmiths. We ought to try to preserve more of

what he said, not just more of what he wrote, or more of what was written or said by others about him.

These are just a few suggestions of what we can do to remember Chinua Achebe by striving to protect and perpetuate the legacy he left us. The future of Achebe studies depends on how we institutionalize him.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Robert Darnton, 'A World Digital Library is Coming True!' *New York Review of Books*, May 22, 2014, 8-11.