In the course of a public conversation at the Newark Museum in June 2006, Chinua Achebe and his fellow Nigerian, the artist Uche Okeke, commented on their first open collaboration in 1963 when Okeke illustrated the second edition of Things Fall Apart, Achebe’s inaugural and best-known novel. Okeke’s description of Achebe’s response upon seeing the drawings he had made for the book sets the ground for the problem I address in this essay. According to Okeke,

He came, and I showed him the drawings. He looked at the drawings and the only thing he said was – I quote him – “That is how it should be,” and left. That was it. “That is how it should be.” So what do I say to that? That is why when somebody asks me how many times I sat with Chinua and we discussed whatever, I tell them we didn’t meet. We already knew what we wanted. It is as simple as that.¹

As this essay will make obvious, Okeke’s recollection of his association with Achebe on this project is a bit more complicated than his 2006 statement suggests. Nevertheless, Achebe’s response to the drawings (“That is how it should be”) is crucial for the arguments I will be making. While there is no

doubt that it was his own way of expressing satisfaction with the illustrations, the “it” in his statement signified something more fundamental, beyond the specific formal qualities of the drawings; for if his comment was limited to the drawings’ function as illustration for his novel, a “they” would have more logically made this connection. My contention is that this was not an arbitrary word-choice. I suggest, and this is the crux of the argument in this essay, that in this brief statement Achebe declared his approval of Okeke’s emphatic position-taking in a discursive context where important voices of their generation of writers and artists competed for critical legitimacy. I want to propose that he saw the drawings as the work of a co-traveller, a kindred spirit who had successfully developed a potent and appropriate artistic form that would serve as a vehicle for what Appadurai has called the “work of imagination” in the postcolony.² The question, then, is: What might be the basis for this reading of Achebe’s statement? What, indeed, is the nature of Okeke’s achievement in the Things Fall Apart illustrations, and how might the formal conditions and ideological tenor of the drawings constitute equivalents of Achebe’s own seminal contribution to postcolonial literary modernism for which Things Fall Apart was the inaugural gesture?

One of the often-repeated anecdotes Achebe tells about his early encounter with the scope of the challenge facing the writer in late-colonial Nigeria is about the question of form. According to him, his English teacher at University College, Ibadan, declared, upon reading his work, that his writing lacked form. Yet, unable to explain what she meant by form, the teacher eventually disavowed her earlier assessment of Achebe’s work. That experience compelled Achebe to examine, on the level of technique and language, the relationship between form and politics. As he stated, “it became clear to me that I had to teach myself what I needed to learn in order to write the kind of novels I wanted to write.”³ This encounter demonstrates critical awareness on the part of Achebe that form was not only subjective but, more importantly, also ideological, and that to control the power inherent in language and writing one must necessarily claim the right to determine the conditions of this form and, ultimately, how it is deployed. It is clear that he came to the conclusion that form, usually an important element of style and aesthetics in the written text, constituted a space in which the contestation for meaning occurs – in

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³ Clarke, “Uche Okeke and Chinua Achebe,” 150.