The Nigerian Chinua Achebe is undoubtedly Africa’s best-known and most widely studied author. His publishers estimate that his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, has sold more than eight million copies. This official estimate obviously excludes the many pirate copies that have circulated in Africa (and probably elsewhere). *Time* magazine lists the novel among the top 100 best English-language novels of all time. Elaine Showalter, one of the judges of the Man Booker Prize, postulates that *Things Fall Apart* inaugurated the modern African novel, and showed “the path for writers around the world seeking new words and forms for new realities and societies.” Small wonder, then, that Achebe has been lauded as one of the “Makers of the Twentieth Century.” Certainly he illuminated the path forward for African writers. Without *Things Fall Apart*, African literature,
particularly West African literature, would probably not have achieved the quality and renown that it has today.

I want to consider here, in the fiftieth anniversary year of its publication, the history of the novel’s reception; and I shall do so initially by reference in particular to the entangled history of two academic disciplines, literary studies, on the one hand, and anthropology, on the other. In the 1970s, when there was still an object of study known as the ‘new literatures’, or otherwise in the case of anglophone cultures as ‘Commonwealth Literature’, the discourses of literary criticism and anthropology were sometimes mutually sustaining. The original terms of critical approval, for example, of Things Fall Apart often included the fact that it conveyed an accurate anthropological insight into a culture previously trivialized by British and European fictions of Africa. Anthropology, although like literature contributing substantially to the ‘worlding’ of Africa as ‘Other’, nonetheless then seemed capable of providing a counter-discourse to the colonialist perspective.

As Phyllis Taoua argues, the emergence of the experimental genre in francophone African fiction begins with the dialogue that African philosophers took up in the 1960s and 1970s in response to French theories of the dissolution of the ‘sovereign self’, a Western identity no longer centred or cohering in rationality; and it is no accident that this articulation occurs precisely at the time of France’s loss of empire. At the same time, anglophone critics found much to admire in Achebe’s fictional ethnographies of the Igbo peoples of Nigeria, his resurrecting of an African identity. Not surprisingly, in this context, anthropology’s relation to Africa has historically been ambiguous. Many African theorists, desiring to dismantle the logic of empire, inevitably turned their decolonizing gaze to the Western discourse that most of all had influenced perceptions of African identity, anthropology; but rather than seeking to refine or revise its primary methods or assumptions, they sought to dismantle the entire project of anthropology.

Eventually, of course, anthropology came under attack from almost all sides; and by the 1990s literary critics in the West prided themselves on performing a heuristic function across the multi-disciplines of cultural studies, using literature to reveal to anthropology the nature and origin of its own biases. Thus, in his 1994 book Masks of Difference David Richards examined anthropological discourse as it had been applied in the past to so-called

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