

Comparative Heritage Project  
mis-Reading Heritage Series

**Reading Africa 2025**

July 30 – Bi-Weekly Summer Discussion Group

[comparativeheritage.org/summer](http://comparativeheritage.org/summer)

SESSION SCHEDULE & THEMES

I. **July 30** — Satire, Memory, and African Futures

**Suggested Readings:**

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – *Americanah* (Part II)
- Wole Soyinka – *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* (2021, selected chapters)
- Valentin-Yves Mudimbe – *The Invention of Africa* (excerpt)
- **Chigozie Obioma**– *The Road to the Country*
- **Paul Theroux**– *Dark Star Safari*

**Discussion Prompts:**

- What is Soyinka satirizing in Nigeria’s modern state?
- How do these texts complicate ideas of progress?
- How do we “reclaim” Africa intellectually?
- How does Soyinka imagine religion the role of religion in contemporary society?

➤ **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie** – *Americanah* (Part II)

Part II of *Americanah* follows Ifemelu’s experiences in America as she starts a popular blog on race and negotiates her identity as a Nigerian immigrant. Her romantic, professional, and social interactions deepen the tension between race and belonging.

**Thesis**

Adichie argues that race in America is a lived, constructed experience unfamiliar to African immigrants, who must learn to navigate its codes while maintaining their cultural identity.

**Argument**

Through Ifemelu’s voice and blog, Adichie exposes how racism in the U.S. affects even privileged immigrants, forcing them into new roles of racial consciousness. She also critiques American liberalism, immigrant nostalgia, and the notion of a seamless transnational identity.

**Critical perspective:**

A diasporic-feminist lens sees *Americanah* as an interrogation of intersectionality: gender, race, and class overlap in shaping immigrant experience. The novel resists the “model minority” narrative and challenges the Western gaze on Africa by offering an insider-outsider critique of both America and Nigeria.

➤ **Wole Soyinka** – *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* (Selected Chapters)

Soyinka’s satirical novel exposes the grotesque underbelly of modern Nigeria—where corruption, ritual violence, and political manipulation intertwine. Through a cast of elite professionals and power players, the novel critiques postcolonial disillusionment.

**Thesis**

Soyinka posits that post-independence Nigeria has become a theatre of moral decay, where democracy is subverted by greed, spectacle, and the cult of power.

**Argument**

The narrative, laced with irony and absurdity, argues that the pursuit of power in Nigeria has become a violent performance, rooted in neocolonial legacies and internal complicity. Intellectuals and the educated elite are not exempt but deeply implicated.

Comparative Heritage Project  
mis-Reading Heritage Series

**Critical Perspective**

From a postcolonial-satirical perspective, the novel can be read as a tragicomic exposé of state failure. A neo-Gramscian lens might read Soyinka's work as a portrayal of elite hegemony in crisis, with civil society either co-opted or silenced. The text also extends Soyinka's long tradition of intellectual dissent against authoritarianism.

➤ **Chigozie Obioma** – *The Road to the Country*

Set during the Nigerian Civil War, Obioma's novel follows a young man's journey through personal loss and national chaos. The narrative fuses Igbo spiritual beliefs with the brutal reality of war.

**Thesis**

Obioma explores how war erodes personal morality, fractures identity, and ignites ancestral memory—suggesting that both history and myth shape the African experience of conflict.

**Argument**

The protagonist's descent mirrors Nigeria's collapse. Obioma argues that war is not just a political failure but a spiritual and existential rupture—forcing individuals to confront both personal demons and national betrayals.

**Critical Perspective**

A mythopoetic and psychoanalytic reading interprets the novel as a narrative of trauma, where the Biafran war functions as both historical event and archetypal journey. Obioma's use of Igbo cosmology offers an Afrocentric framework that resists Euro-Western war narratives.

➤ **Valentin-Yves Mudimbe** – *The Invention of Africa* (Excerpt)

Mudimbe critiques how Western knowledge systems—anthropology, philosophy, religion—have “invented” Africa as the Other. He examines how colonial discourse shaped African self-understanding through imposed epistemologies.

**Thesis**

Africa, as constructed in Western thought, is a conceptual invention—ordered by colonial logics that must be deconstructed to reclaim authentic African modes of knowing.

**Argument**

Mudimbe shows that both colonial and postcolonial discourses remain trapped in Eurocentric frameworks. He urges the need for epistemological rupture and the creation of African-centered knowledge systems.

**Critical Perspective**

A decolonial reading positions Mudimbe as foundational to African epistemology. His work is both structuralist and Foucauldian, exposing how language, power, and discourse intertwine in the colonial project. The text critiques even well-meaning anthropological knowledge as complicit in ontological violence.

➤ **Paul Theroux** – *Dark Star Safari*

Theroux travels overland from Cairo to Cape Town, reflecting on the Africa he knew as a Peace Corps volunteer decades earlier. He critiques foreign aid, romanticized development, and the failures of modernization.

**Thesis**

Theroux asserts that much of Western involvement in Africa—especially through aid and NGOs—has fostered dependency and disillusionment rather than empowerment.

**Argument**

The book critiques not only African governments but also the self-congratulatory attitude of Western humanitarianism. Theroux contends that genuine progress comes from within, not from

Comparative Heritage Project  
mis-Reading Heritage Series

foreign intervention. His observations suggest that Africa's strength lies in its resilience, not in being "saved."

**Critical Perspective**

A post-development critique reveals the text's skepticism toward neoliberal aid structures. However, some criticize Theroux for adopting a neocolonial gaze, often privileging his own narrative authority. From a travel writing lens, the book is part memoir, part political commentary—revealing the tensions between outsider observation and insider understanding.

**AUTHORS' BIOS**

- Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) is a Nigerian playwright, poet, novelist, and political activist. He became the first African laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986. His works, including *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth*, blend Yoruba mythology, satire, and political critique. A fierce critic of tyranny and corruption, Soyinka has spent his career defending human rights, artistic freedom, and democratic values in Africa.
- Paul Theroux (b. 1941) is an American travel writer and novelist known for his sharp, often critical observations of the places he visits. His notable works include *The Great Railway Bazaar* and *Dark Star Safari*, in which he journeys across Africa, revisiting it decades after his time as a Peace Corps volunteer. Theroux's writing often blurs the line between memoir and reportage, offering candid, sometimes controversial reflections on travel, development, and Western intervention.
- Valentin-Yves Mudimbe (b. 1941) is a Congolese philosopher, linguist, and literary theorist. Best known for *The Invention of Africa* (1988), Mudimbe challenges Eurocentric constructions of African knowledge and identity. Drawing on Foucault, structuralism, and African philosophy, he interrogates how colonial discourse has shaped African self-perception. His work is central to postcolonial theory, African studies, and decolonial epistemology, offering foundational insights into power, language, and representation.
- Chigozie Obioma (b. 1986) is a Nigerian novelist and professor of literature. He is acclaimed for his novels *The Fishermen* and *The Orchestra of Minorities*, both shortlisted for the Booker Prize. His 2024 novel *The Road to the Country* explores Nigeria's civil war through a mythic and psychological lens. Obioma's fiction blends Igbo cosmology, philosophical depth, and lyrical prose, situating him among the leading voices of contemporary African literature.