Reconsidering Coduction: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the Spanish Lay Reader in Intercultural Dialogue

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According to Wayne Booth, *coduction* involves an initial and private discovery of the text and the endeavour of proclaiming this interpretation to other readers. Through this reflexive methodology, Booth expects readers to intuitively reach ethically useful value judgements and redress former prejudices. However, there are no guarantees that conversations with others will do more than expand on a particular reader's miscellaneous interests or move in directions unrelated to the text's potentially 'exploitable' core message. In this article, I examine how a reviewed application of Booth's concept of coduction furnishes us with a potential model for a positive understanding of 'Otherness', as can be seen in the response of a group of Spanish lay readers to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* while operating within a three-phased project based on a revision of Booth's concept. I argue that evaluating readers' cultural background, probing their minds with a specially designed questionnaire that initiates an 'ethical conversation' without influencing the outcome of the coduction and encouraging a written presentation of their response can indeed facilitate the kind of intercultural dialogue that is conspicuously absent from Spanish renditions of the African image.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe; *Things Fall Apart*; Wayne Booth; coduction; ethical criticism; lay readers

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Reconsiderar la coducción: *Todo se derrumba*, de Chinua Achebe, y el lector lego español en el diálogo intercultural

Según Wayne Booth, la *coducción* conlleva el descubrimiento privado de un texto y el esfuerzo de proclamar esta interpretación preliminar a otros lectores. A través de esta metodología reflexiva, Booth espera que los lectores perciban valores éticos implícitos en el texto y enmienden antiguos prejuicios intuitivamente. Sin embargo, no se garantiza que las conversaciones con otros vayan a pasar de ampliar los intereses misceláneos del lector o tomen otros derroteros desvinculados del mensaje ético potencial de la obra. En este artículo analizo la forma en la que una aplicación revisada del concepto de coducción nos provee de un modelo potencial para el entendimiento

positivo de la 'Otredad' a través de la respuesta de un grupo de lectores legos españoles a la novela de Chinua Achebe *Todo se derrumba* mientras operaban dentro de un proyecto trifásico basado en el concepto de Booth. Expongo que la evaluación del bagaje cultural de los lectores, la estimulación mediante cuestionarios diseñados específicamente para iniciar una 'conversación ética' sin influir el resultado de su coducción y la narración por escrito (por parte de los lectores) de su respuesta facilita un diálogo intercultural actualmente ausente de las representaciones españolas de la imagen africana.

Palabras clave: Chinua Achebe; *Todo se derrumba*; Wayne Booth; coducción; crítica ética; lectores legos

1. Africa and the Spanish mindscape

The proliferation of black immigration and the negative coverage given to Black African countries in the media is responsible for the formation of a negative image of Africa and its inhabitants in the minds of a sector of the Spanish population. Not only are the 'miseries' of such countries given the meagre space allotted to the continent in the press, but it is rare to see portrayals of African history and culture, or any mode of positive attention. This, along with the socio-economic implications of the migratory influx, has led to a cultural clash of sorts, with an overwhelming augmentation of racism in the past years (Corkell 2005; Balfour and Quiroga 2007; Flesler 2008; Cornejo et al. 2009; Miampika and García de Vinuesa 2009).[1]

Beyond the media coverage and popular stereotypes disseminated within, what are the dominant societal perceptions of black Africans as literary subjects? The Equato-Guinean writer Donato Ndongo answers:

> I have lived in Spain for more than thirty years and no one has paid any attention [to my oeuvre]. In contrast, some Spanish writers go to Africa for three weeks, write a book and succeed commercially. The same thing happens in other fields: the intent [of the European] is to exclude the African from the issues that affect him. (qtd. in García Las Palmas: 2007)[2]

Ndongo's claims echo Chinua Achebe's contention that books written by European 'experts' and correspondents about Africa are one of the evasions used "to replace and simulate dialogue to [the European's] satisfaction" (1990a: 25) through the exclusion of the African voice from the narrative of the continent. This exclusion has historically resulted in a particular representation of the African in the cultural imagery of the West: the perfect canvas on which to project phobias or forbidden fantasies, a savage bereft of rationality and morality, fit only for subjection or charitable aid. Obviously, this image, proffered by colonial discourse, has undergone a series of 'positive' permutations, especially in countries more accustomed to receiving erstwhile colonial subjects into their midst. Spain has barely had that chance at integration and image restoration.

It is important here to establish the link between colonial discourse and the language employed in the articulation of immigrant 'Otherness'. This connection is particularly tenuous in Spain, because in contrast to Britain, for instance, the idea of Empire is mostly absent from the collective imagery of present-day Spaniards (Santaolalla 2002: 66-67). The same is not true of the historical struggle to remove Arabs from Spain, which shapes to some extent contemporary responses to Moroccan immigration. Spanish colonialism in its sole sub-Saharan colony, Equatorial Guinea, is all but forgotten, probably because in its heyday General Francisco Franco precluded the conceptualization of the relationship

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[1] I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge with gratitude the criticism and suggestions of Dr Asunción López Varela, who read early drafts of this article.

[2] All translations from Spanish are my own.

between both countries as colonial: "España no es ni ha sido nunca colonialista, sino civilizadora y creadora de pueblos, que es cosa bien distinta" ('Spain is not and has never been colonialist, but a civilizer of peoples, which is a very different thing') (qtd. in Lewis 2007: 2). The terms in which he framed the 'special' relationship with the African country, however, replicated the colonial manichean allegory: the superiority of the civilized (and implicit savagery of the Equato-Guinean population), and the paternalist role of creating something where there was 'none'. Sub-Saharan African immigrants in Spain are not primarily from Equatorial Guinea; therefore the postcolonial implication of their presence in the country is not registered in popular perception. However, the binary oppositions of colonial discourse amplify the verbalization of the incompatibility of a fixed national identity with the arrival of the African 'Other'. As Brian Jenkins and Spyros Sophos have led us to see, while immigration is not a straightforward reproduction of colonial structures, racism and xenophobia result from the collision between "the legacy of those [colonial] structures, and then on the other, the postcolonial migration of people and products" (2005: 42). While it would be a gross misstatement to say that the perception of Africans in Spain has remained constant from colonial times, it is not farfetched to note that many of the tropes and *topoi* recreated in media texts are inherited from colonial discourse.[3] Intercultural dialogue is conspicuously absent from Spanish renditions of Africans, and this absence is compounded by the fact that most African literary works and their translations systematically go out of print due to limited editorial promotion. These ancillary issues are some of the motivations of the present study.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is Africa's most famous novel (Lindfors 1991: ix; Gikandi 2006: ix; Nnomerele 2010: 39). Set in the early years of the twentieth century, it was the first Nigerian novel to present the disintegrating effects of the colonial incursion on traditional village life. The novel revolves around Okonkwo, a proud and brave warrior whose determination leads him to the highest echelons of his clan, Umuofia. Fiercely traditional and hot-tempered, Okonkwo loathes how the society he loves begins to crumble at the arrival of the Europeans. After his denigration at the hands of the District Officer, and in an attempt to defend the integrity of his village, he kills a court messenger and commits suicide rather than face the noose of the white man's rope. *Things Fall Apart* has been translated into more than thirty languages, and has sold over ten million copies. Notwithstanding the canonical status of Achebe's *opera prima*, Spain has not fallen under its charm. In the university, *Things Fall Apart* smolders in some of the few active Commonwealth literature courses (see Miampika and García de Vinuesa 2009: 39). To an overwhelming proportion of the country's lay readership, it is simply inexistent. This particular situation might be only transitory, as Random House-Mondadori published renewed translations of Achebe's five novels in the course of 2010. Anticipating this

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[3] For the purposes of this article, I define colonial as referring to the military, cultural and religious domination of South American, African, Asian and Caribbean territories by European powers for economic exploitation, justified by a discourse of African moral and intellectual inferiority.

increased availability, a question begs to be asked: how can a lay reader connect with the text and its function as counter-discourse to the many prejudiced images of Africans disseminated through literary and media texts?

My study of the responses of a group of Spanish lay readers operating within a three-phased project shows that certain reading practices can indeed *facilitate* intercultural dialogue through a triggered appreciation of the political nuances of texts like *Things Fall Apart*. The reading practice I propose is a potential model for a positive understanding of 'Otherness', based on a revised application of Wayne Booth's concept of coduction and its mode of impressing the ethical benefits of a literary work on readers. This project arose from my assessment of an isolated response to the text, which suggested that appraising readers' cultural background, probing their minds with detailed questions on the text and encouraging a written presentation of their response facilitated a personal reassessment of first impressions and a firmer grasp on the text's complexity and function as anti-colonial contestation.[4]

2. WHY *THINGS FALL APART*?

To answer this question correctly, it will be necessary to recall Chinua Achebe's authorial intentions. To put it succinctly, Achebe, like other Anglophone African writers of his generation, first encountered 'novels of the Empire', like Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, at secondary school. At this point, he did not take notice of the misrepresentations of Africans they purveyed and even "took sides with the white men against the savages" (Achebe 1991: 9). At university, Achebe came under further intellectual and political influences; his encounter with Joyce Cary's *Mr. Johnson* as an undergraduate was not as acquiescent. Like his classmates, he realized that "at the slightest chance, a contagion of distaste, hatred and mockery breaks through to poison his [Cary's] tale" (Achebe 2003: 24). Further encounters with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the 'African' novels of Graham Greene, and colonial ethnographic writings like G.T. Basden's *Niger Ibos* and C.K. Meek's *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* alerted him that Africa and its inhabitants were under attack and had to be defended against "the colonization of one people's story by another" (Achebe 2003: 43). Conrad's novel later became the subject of a highly controversial essay, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in *Heart of Darkness*', which partly theorizes Achebe's creative work. In the essay, Achebe complains about the textual and stylistic strategies through which Conrad portrays Africa as "the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are

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[4] The research on which this article is based is the first phase of a much larger project. This academic year, I have taken the step of adapting my neo-coductive method in the university as a means of introducing minority literatures in mainstream courses at both graduate and undergraduate levels. I am currently heading a project, funded by my institution's Institute of Educational Sciences and Pedagogy and involving scholars at the University of Alicante, Complutense University, Madrid, and the Autonomous University of Madrid for this purpose, and will continue to refine and expand my work with the neo-coductive methodology in the near future.

finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (1990b: 3). In Achebe's opinion, the racist views expressed in *Heart of Darkness* deprive it of the status of a work of art because it is "a book which parodies in the most vulgar fashion prejudices from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and places today . . . a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question" (1990b: 15), for Africans were "not angels, but not rudimentary souls either, just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society" (1990b: 18).

But Achebe's authorial intention in his novels and short stories on the colonial theme was not restricted to 'writing back' to flawed renditions of Africanness. At the heart of his narrative was the desire to redress the psychological effects that colonial education —as the vehicle of the colonial myth of 'darkest Africa'— had on the mind of the colonized, as he advocated in yet another essay:

> I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past —with all its implications— was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. (1990c: 45)

3. Coduction as composed representation of reader response

Wayne Booth first introduced coduction in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988) as a central concept to his theories on the ethical criticism of books, which he claims should be conducted, "not by a laying down of ethical axioms and a timeless deduction of consequences, but by a 'coduction' that tests our actual responses in conversation" (Booth 1988: x). The term is actually a neologism, coming from the fusion of *co* 'together' and *ducere* 'to lead, to draw out, bring out' and is defined as the act of proclaiming to the world or preparing ourselves to say

> of the works of this general kind I have experienced, *my comparing experience with other more or less qualified observers*, this one seems to me among the better (or weaker ones) or the best (or worst). Here are my reasons . . . every such statement calls for a continuing conversation: "How does my coduction compare with yours?" (1988: 73; emphasis in original)

Coduction as a reflexive reading methodology involves an initial and private discovery of the text, whereby the reader makes individual "inferences of quality" (Booth 1988: 71) and the endeavour of proclaiming this interpretation to other readers in a debate in which "neither side [offers] decisive logical proof" (Booth 1998: 373). It also involves a comparative dimension: the first reading of the text is realized against the backdrop of earlier life and literary experiences. The other readers with whom this reader will debate about that text will bring into the picture their own reading and life experiences as well. According to Booth, the exact way in which this process triggers the ethical response of

the reader cannot be determined: "No strictly speaking scientific study will ever prove that a given story has been the cause of a given change in any one reader" (1998: 368).

The moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum borrowed Booth's theoretical lens of coduction in her *Poetic Justice* (1995) as a necessary step in her own literary didactic project, based on Adam Smith's belief that "fellow feeling" is necessary for liberal-democratic society. Nussbaum is concerned with the dialectical impact of literature in imparting this brand of empathy, and promulgates novels that allow readers to put their 'privileged' Selves in the shoes of marginal Others by developing the capacity of "fancy" (1995: 36). For Nussbaum, coduction is the way that readers come to agree on the interpretation of a given novel. She defines it as "a nondeductive comparative type of practical reasoning that is carried on in cooperation with others. In the process of coduction, our intuitions about a literary work will be refined by the criticisms of ethical theory and of friendly advice, and thus may greatly alter the emotional experience that we are able to have as readers" (1995: 76). The difference with Booth's formulation is that for Nussbaum, the end of coduction is to reach an agreement on the proper interpretation of a given novel as opposed to a personal reassessment after hearing the responses of other readers to the text and to our claims. Nussbaum draws a linear correlation between a particular text and its outcome: in her book, she identifies novels (Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, Richard Wright's *Native Son* and E.M. Forster's *Maurice*) and their virtues, but remains tacit about the process whereby this occurs (1995: 45, 75).

On the other hand, Booth expects *any* reader to intuitively reach ethically useful value judgements. He sidesteps the fact that there are no guarantees that conversations with others will do more than expand on a particular reader's miscellaneous interests or move in directions unrelated to the text's potentially 'exploitable' core message. Booth himself admits that the process of ethical improvement is difficult to place because "our evidence will always consist mainly of anecdotes —most often memories or responses to stories in our early, more malleable years" (1998: 368).

My research shows that coduction offers a reflexive method that, with the necessary adjustments, can lead to a *demonstrable* ethical engagement with the ideological thrust of such texts as *Things Fall Apart*. In my reconsideration of the theoretical construct, I focus on a salient aspect of coduction. Booth emphasizes that "when we are working as we should, the very effort to describe accurately 'the facts' before us requires a closer look, which in turn modifies the evaluation, and that is further modified as we converse with others about the values we claim to have seen" (1988:74). Furthermore, when a reader "*takes seriously the task of explaining his initial appraisal, he enters a process that is not a mere argument for views already established but a conversation*, a kind of re-reading that is an essential part of what will be a continually shifting evaluation" (Booth 1988: 75; emphasis added). I propose the substitution of "the exchange among readers about their ethical responses in conversation" (1988: 372) with a solipsistic coduction: as in Booth's model, readers try to understand the text (through an initial, isolated reading) before situating themselves around its ethical centre. But rather than diving into a 'random' discussion of

the text with other readers, they indulge in a post-reading task which submerges them in the dialectical power of literature through a specially designed questionnaire that initiates the 'ethical conversation' by pointing out areas of attention in the text. In doing so, I am aware that my approach isolates the readers through the way they respond to questions. Nevertheless, there is a community of text and reader nurtured by the critic, and coduction still operates in the lay reader's reevaluation of the issues posed by the said critic. The effort of presenting their responses to someone else for inspection and possible assessment warrants a level of reflection that an arbitrary comment from another lay reader cannot possibly elicit, as we will see later in the paper. For now, we will focus on this renewed formulation of coduction with a focus on reading *Things Fall Apart* as counter-discourse to reductive narrations of Africanness.

4. Methodology

I used the questionnaire method to collect data from eight subjects in the early months of 2008. Questionnaire participants were recruited through advertisements posted in bookshops and civic centres, and the final sample comprised six males and two female participants whose ages ranged from thirty-one to eighty-two years. Participants came from both urban and rural backgrounds (Madrid and Villaseca de la Sagra, a small village near the ancient city of Toledo) and included a judge, a driver, a gardener, an I.T. technician, a factory worker, a retired accountant and three shop assistants. Apart from the judge, none of the participants had a degree; four were secondary school graduates, one of the men had attended a technical college, and the rest had stopped at elementary schooling. There was no ethnic variation —participants were required to be white Spaniards due to the scope of the project. I wish to stress the discovery-oriented nature of this inquiry, which anticipates further and more elaborate work in relation to these preliminary findings. For the present purposes, the small sample was sufficient to establish the viability of coduction as reflexive composition.[5] Moreover, as we will see, there was a 'control experiment' involving ten more participants.

At the inception of the project, participants were informed of the objectives and methodology to be followed: the first questionnaire was designed to gauge the general notions of Africa, its history, literature and the cultural representations and experiences

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[5] There are no set rules about the choice of sample size in qualitative research design. Eight participants fall within the minimum sample size recommendations compiled by A.J. Onwuegbuzie and K.M.T. Collins (2007) in their article 'A Typology of Mixed Methods Sampling Designs in Social Science Research', and echoed in such reference books as the *Sage Handbook of Mixed Research Methods* (2010). I started out with the ten participants, two of whom dropped out due to personal and work commitments. I tested my sample size with one of the principal standards used in qualitative analysis: saturation. This is achieved when questionnaire results become repetitive and no additional invariant themes are discovered (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Boyaltzis 1998; Patton 2002). Despite the reduced number of participants and the diversity in professional, social, and educational backgrounds, new themes did not emerge. This was somehow predictable, as themes were not only generated inductively from questionnaire responses but also generated deductively from the kind of questions posed.

that participants would bring to their reading. Moreover, the questionnaire was devised to detect negative preconceptions that might be redressed by the reading activity. The second phase involved a personal and isolated reading of the text. Participants were handed a copy of Fernando Santos' translation of *Things Fall Apart* —*Todo se derrumba*— and asked not to discuss the novel nor consult secondary sources until the project's conclusion.[6] However, they were encouraged to write down their doubts and observations as they progressed through the novel. The ultimate aim was to assess their unadulterated response to the text. In the third phase, participants had to respond to a second questionnaire designed to reach the core of the text's ethical thrust. Coduction here involved a reappraisal of a possibly curtailed first reading, the comparison with previous literary/cultural experiences and the composed presentation of the participants' meditated answers to the questions posed in the questionnaire. Participants had to answer the detailed questions independently and submit them afterwards.

I translated, coded and analyzed the data thematically through a manual procedure. It was particularly important to ensure that the data was translated in a way that did not compromise the original meaning expressed by each participant, so the translations were vetted by two external reviewers. I closely read and annotated the questionnaires, highlighted and labeled them. I did not test the main questionnaire, as most of the questions are based on those posed by eminent scholars of African literature in their classes (as featured in Lindfors 1991).

5. Results

Thematic analysis of participants' responses to the text yielded results concerning perceptions of the following three areas: (1) The definition of the European Self in relation to the African Other, (2) the makings of colonial discourse and (3) missionary intervention. As it is impossible in the space of this article to reproduce every individual

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6 None of the participants had the necessary proficiency in English to face the tasks proposed in this reading practice. Following Itamar Even-Zohar's article 'The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem' (1978), literature in translation is a literary system that facilitates the infiltration of literatures in peripheral positions (such as Nigerian literature in this case) into the national (Spanish) polysystem. This intercultural mediation perfectly fits the aims of my reading project. The very distinction between source text and translation is fundamental to understanding Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a novel with a marked bilingual base. The use of English in Achebe's novel conveys a different worldview, sensibility, and way of life that does not bear any direct relation to those of the colonizer. In the same way, and using Lawrence Venuti's phraseology, Fernando Santos' translation preserves the peculiar 'strangeness' of the text and does not 'domesticate' it, eschewing the use of footnotes and explanatory paraphrases and creating a unique hybridism with Igbo lexis, accomplishing, in concordance with the register analysis of Halliday, McIntosh and Stevens (1964), Achebe's notable linguistic feat: "a successful, hybrid accommodation between two sets of cultural assumptions, achieving maximum communicative force while respecting the intranslatability of certain local terms" (Punter 2000: 18). My understanding of the linguistic complexities of African literatures in translation is heavily indebted to conversations and e-mail communication with Dr Maya García de Vinuesa.

response to the second questionnaire, I will excerpt the most representative and significant answers as related to each of the thematic areas.

5.1. The definition of the European Self in relation to the African Other
The main motivation for involvement in the project —expressed in the pre-reading questionnaire and reaffirmed after the initial reading and reappraisal of the text— was participants' previous lack of exposure to African culture, history and literature. Sagrario, one of the most enthusiastic readers, considered this "unavailable knowledge" necessary to comprehend the continent's "present circumstances". Thus, involvement in the project reaffirmed the need of the Self to understand a hitherto 'mysterious' and 'incomprehensible' Other.

There were three tendencies in the participants' expressions on Igbo Otherness as depicted in the text. The first was to point out similarities between Spanish/European and Igbo/African cultures and worldviews, and to insist on the universality of some of the situations that occur in the book. The second was to emphasize cultural differences while pointing out that disparities are not necessarily negative and need not imply cultural superiority/inferiority. The third tendency, and the least common, was to define indigenous character and traditions as distinctly opposite and irreconcilable to those of the West. The reader does not seek to bridge the distance between cultures, but reiterates the need for colonial intervention.

For an example of the first tendency, let us consider the answer of Fernando, a factory worker, to the block of questions "What is the fundamental theme of *Things Fall Apart*? What is it exactly about? What did Achebe want to tell us in 1958 through a story about the disintegration of the Igbo society in Nigeria?": "I think that he wanted us to make a comparison with European civilization, and maybe to make us reflect on past eras and realize the similarities between both societies". Fernando's responses to the second questionnaire consistently highlighted the tenuousness of the opposition between Self and Other prevalent in popular perception. Elsewhere, he insisted that all the characters of the novel are "normal people", and that they had virtues and defects "like all of us". He traced links between Spanish rural spoken tradition and Igbo orature and considered the tales and proverbs of the villagers "very wise and very similar to those we have over here: a form of wisdom transmitted generationally when subsistence depends exclusively on nature". On the latter, David agreed: "The tales and proverbs are what I most liked. They are full of wisdom and easily adapted to any society. They are a very graphic example of these people's worldview". These participants' connection between indigenous orature and wisdom is important, as most participants viewed Igbo traditions and customs through a veil of exoticism that does not often facilitate the comprehension of the text's ethical thrust, as we will see. Abelardo's comments on Okonkwo's representative role in *Things Fall Apart* are notable considering some of his other answers to the questionnaire: "Okonkwo, despite his tragically flawed character, is the representative of pride in pertaining to a particular society; with all its implications, good and bad . . . you cannot respect or

value other cultures if you do not appreciate or defend yours". Abelardo considers this a universal theme and fully empathizes with Okonkwo's anti-colonial struggle: "I love my country, my village, my religion, our customs, and get upset at anything that disparages or undervalues them".

The second tendency is the most widespread and is exemplified in varying degrees by Carlos, Mario, Sagrario, César, Cristina, and in some instances by David, as we will see in succeeding sections. Most of Isidro's responses to both questionnaires typified the third tendency. For instance, in responding to the questions, "Do you identify with Okonkwo? Can you sympathize with him?", he stressed (emphasis added) "*I am a European and cannot identify with* Okonkwo, although in some cases, I sympathize with him". His persistence on Christian and Western cultural supremacy is further discussed in succeeding sections. Other participants, like Abelardo, dabbled intermittently in this tendency, but many of his responses tended to subvert sporadic shows of chauvinism. For example, he felt that "some of the customs of the peoples of Africa are incompatible with culture and Christian morals". While his answer might be understood to purport the superiority of Western Christian civilization, in responses to other questions he vindicated pride in tradition and the defense of one's own culture against foreign intervention.

5.2. The makings of colonial discourse

One of the most important questions of the second questionnaire revolved around the novel's memorable ending, in which the British District Commissioner ponders on his intended book: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. Participants were asked to evaluate the aptness of the title, the kind of discourse likely to appear in the book and the accuracy of its contents. With only one exception, participants agreed that the title of the District Commissioner's book was improper and that its rendition of events in the novel would look down on indigenous religion and culture. The sole participant to dissent was Abelardo, who misunderstood the import of the question and subordinated his reading to the authorial figure by claiming that it was impossible to "know what the author meant by that ending" or to "get into the District Commissioner's head". This was probably caused by the introduction of the figure of the author in the first question. After all, "it is the singular encounter between reader and text-as-other, soliciting a singularly just response on the reader's part that is at stake in 'ethics and literature'" (Eskin 2004: 560).

In their answers to the questions on *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, and without any previous reference to binary oppositions, participants were able to pinpoint the common tropes of African Otherness and the use of such in Western renditions of Africa. Carlos, for example, stated that "the title [of the District Commissioner's Book] suffices to perceive that the book's contents will not be an exact rendition of facts. Instead it will say that they [the villagers] have no culture, religion, or justice i.e. savages". Fernando's statement was very similar and also referred to the "manipulation" inherent in the depiction of villagers as "violent savages . . . unfeeling people dominated by useless

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beliefs". Cristina referred to the self-image of Europe as "saviour of lost and wayward souls in a primitive state, which should be educated and civilized". Mario insisted that "the vision given in Western culture in general and in European culture in particular is that African tribes are made up of uncivilised savages, with no morals and principles. As this book demonstrates, that vision of Africa is mistaken and that Europeans simply did not understand the philosophy of the tribes", an opinion shared by the rest of the participants, including Isidro, who referred to the fact that the villagers portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* were mostly content with their way of life, did not need to be 'pacified' and that the District Commissioner's judgement of their actions would be necessarily biased.

5.3. Missionary intervention

Although there were specific questions on the representation of missionary work in the text, comments on religion seemed to permeate most of the written coductions of the participants. The most relevant observations concerned the validity of Christianity and/or the traditional pieties. For example, when asked to differentiate between Christianity and indigenous religion in *Things Fall Apart* participants indicated the polytheistic nature of the religion of Umuofia (while most participants called the deities "gods", it is noteworthy that Isidro called them idols). César, Mario and Sagrario preferred traditional religion to Christianity. The latter praised the fact that: "[It] is based on their interpretation of nature. They believe in the earth goddess, the purveyor of life, whom they respect and venerate. Christianity is based on imposed beliefs with no real explanation". Despite this condemnation, she did admit that "at least" Reverend Brown attempted to be more understanding. For Fernando, a practising Catholic, both Christianity and indigenous religions form the foundation of African and European societies and are a valid option in the quest of peace and well-being. David's opinion was similar albeit more judgemental: "both religions are exactly the same, a series of beliefs and rituals transmitted to indoctrinate and subjugate people under the fear of God's wrath".

In their answers to the question "What weaknesses inherent in Umuofia allowed its society to 'fall apart' at the colonial attack?", four participants, Carlos, David, Mario and Cristina pointed out the stringent dimensions of the traditional pieties. Cristina used the word "superstition" to describe indigenous beliefs and referred to "a widespread lack of compassion". Most participants considered the arrival of Christianity the principal source of conflict and yet an escape from the more constrictive aspects of traditional religion and culture. In this sense, all participants supported voluntary conversion to Christianity.

6. A control experiment: the Villaseca de la Sagra book group

After the project, one of the most enthusiastic readers, Mario, proposed to include *Things Fall Apart* on his village's book group reading list. This unexpected development was a valuable opportunity to compare and contrast the efficacy of coduction as theorized by Booth and the revised notion of written coduction. After a meeting with the

coordinators of the group, they agreed to introduce the novel to their list on their terms (no questionnaires involved). A month later, the group held a session on Achebe's novel.

The book group was composed at the time of eleven women: an adult education officer (the moderator), a grocer, a librarian, a school teacher and seven housewives. The moderator asked each member to comment briefly on the book. Nine out of the eleven members found the book "interesting" and "informative", while two found it boring. Like most of the participants of the 'written' coduction project, all the members complained bitterly about cultural aspects such as human sacrifice, twin murder and sexism. They were brief in their appraisals and seemed uncomfortable with my presence. Taking note of their reticence and overall perception of the text as a repository of (negative) cultural trivia, I decided to talk about aesthetic features of *Things Fall Apart* such as orature, parody, intertextuality and the use of symbol. I also discussed the makings of colonial discourse and compared some of the 'horrors' of traditional religion to equally bloody biblical incidents, highlighting that while there is no question about the execrable nature of human sacrifice, it is essential to understand the cultural and religious milieu in which it takes place. At the end of the 'debate' —by now an impromptu presentation— the members of the club admitted to having reached a greater understanding of the novel and declared that they had not realized the novel's complexity for, as one of the members put it, they were "shocked" by its more "negative" events. At the end of the session, seven members of the club declared that they would like to read more African novels, bearing what they had learnt at the day's session in mind.

7. Implications and conclusion

The intention of the project was not to turn readers into devoted afrophiles, but rather to enable a serious deliberation on the makings of European discourse on African Otherness through their encounter with Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* so as to overturn some of the widespread commonplaces linked to racist attitudes. The preliminary findings suggest that the proto-project was a success. The interest aroused by the anthropological details of the text might be unpalatable to postcolonial critics, but we have to consider the fact that we are dealing with lay readers. According to James Procter, "we still need to take seriously the fact that for the book groups [and by extension other lay readers] reading *Things Fall Apart* what is important is 'it helped us see', where for professional readers, the novel obscures or denies perspective in ways that unsettle the vicarious pleasures of the text" (2009: 190). Furthermore, "reader assumptions about the book's locality, and the disconnected traditions of reading within and outside the academy means that the online readers do not carry the baggage of 'lit crit', and therefore cannot be accused of 'echoing' earlier institutional positions on African literature" (Procter 2009: 193). It is only natural that lay readers should be fascinated by distant realities. The problem lies in foregrounding them as evidence of cultural or racial inferiority. This occurred very rarely in this project.

Different readers will of course respond differently to a postcolonial text like *Things Fall Apart*. In this project, varying degrees of enthusiasm and comprehension among participants were not determined by educational level, religious affiliation, political leanings or geographical location. I wish to highlight that these readings are not representative of a Spanish readership (even though the cultural imperatives of the Spanish nation were the fulcrum on which the entire project was based), but I concur with Procter that to assume a particular kind of response as representative of a particular location, culture or ethnicity, there is a need for "a much more comprehensive, quantitative study (or realistically, series of studies) of audiences globally" (2009: 181). Expectedly, the three practising Christians that participated in the project did not openly criticize any aspect of missionary intervention, but were mostly predisposed to voluntary conversion rather than the enforced indoctrination practiced by Mr. Smith. Isidro —who had initially agreed that the African past "was one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" in the first questionnaire— maintained an inflexible stance on the need for evangelization. While he did become conscious of the reductionism inherent in colonial renditions of Africa as embodied in the short paragraph devoted to Okonkwo's story in *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, he insisted on the West's prerogative to eliminate customs like 'idol' worship, polygamy and human sacrifice. This particular participant, eighty-one years old at the time, had spent his youth under the right-wing and ultra-conservative dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, and this may in some ways account for the cultural imperialism that permeated most of his answers. Abelardo was thirty-six at the time of the project and sympathized with General Franco's regime. He adopted a reading that while consistent with Isidro's avowal of religious superiority also helped him empathise with the despondency a traditionalist feels when the cultural and social substratum is endangered. His compassion for Okonkwo's plight thereby led him to condemn colonial violence and reductionist discourse and to reconsider some of his views on Africans and their adherence to 'inscrutable' beliefs and customs. Three other participants (César, Sagrario and Cristina) were young adults during Spain's transition to democracy in the late seventies, a period when fully embracing other cultures and lifestyles became a liberating gesture. Both Sagrario and César identify strongly with left-wing political values. This idiosyncrasy pervades the first two participants' aversion to the instances of military, religious and discursive colonialism. Cristina already held firm views on the colonial enterprise and through the text discovered some of its other aspects. In her case, further knowledge did not subvert earlier points of view on the supposed sexist, superstitious, and even violent nature of pre-colonial societies, but rather reinforced them. Carlos, Mario, David, Fernando and Abelardo (all of whom had varied political ideologies) had not reflected previously on colonialism or image gestation, but through this reading activity attained and further explored fresh perspectives on colonialism and colonial discourse. A comparison of their first and second questionnaires shows that their reading evidences this process of ethical reassessment.

To put it succinctly, the reading praxis proposed by this proto-project had more effect on general perceptions and previously assimilated generalizations on Africans than on strongly held opinions based on intense or life-long reflection. The ethical power of literature does not consist in uprooting deeply seated ideological views on such political issues as colonialism or immigration. And while the extent of these modifications, as Booth observed in relation to his own theoretical construct, cannot be placed or quantified, the responses garnered through the present method did point to an indirect, and not for this reason less important, modification: participants questioned received images, indirectly subverting the prejudices resulting from received tropes and *topoi* in image creation. What is important here is that the novel and the reading methodology propounded elicited a deliberation on the makings of a discourse that is still being used to subjugate the Other in our midst. This was the one lesson that all the participants, irrespective of other factors, were able to appreciate through the reviewed application of Booth's coduction.

The book group session proved that a discussion among independent readers unused to the nuances of high literature is likely to focus on anthropological details and even replicate predominant discourse on an enigmatic African 'Otherness'. The inability of the moderator of the *Things Fall Apart* session at the Villaseca de la Sagra book group to guide the discussion towards the text's portrayal of the African experience and its usurpation in Western discourse would have failed to instigate any mode of intercultural engagement with the text. My intervention helped to explicate issues that Booth presupposes would have happened in the act of discussing the text, but this intrusion was unnecessarily leading and impractical as a part of an ethically-oriented reading praxis.

Responding to a questionnaire such as the one supplied in the project allows readers to revise previous conceptions prompted by critical inexperience. I do believe that recording a posterior conversation among readers in order to register possible changes in outlook following written coduction would have had further advantages. This was the project's main methodological flaw. It would be interesting to study the effects that setting up a website in which an 'ethical critic' as guide would synchronize the different phases of the activity and where participants, in anonymity, would be able to read each other's second coductions, and then debate among themselves in a forum habilitated for the purpose, a modified form of the transnational online chat hosted by the British Council's encompass culture website, with book groups in Scotland, England and Nigeria within the framework of The Developing Diasporas Project.[7] This would indeed spark off significant intercultural communication between the text as 'Other' and the reader, and

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[7] The Developing Diasporas is an AHRC-funded project (2006-2010) exploring the way in which readers in different places respond to postcolonial and diasporic fiction (<http://www.developingdiasporas.com/>). For more on this project, see Procter (2009). The earliest draft of this article was presented at the *Things Fall Apart at 50* Conference, celebrated at the Institute of English Studies, University of London in October 2008. Although my research was not inspired by the Developing Diasporas project, Dr Procter was chair of my panel and his own presentation alerted me to his project, which partly converges with my own research interests. I am indebted to Dr Procter for sending me this article and drawing my attention to the work of John Guillory. The reception area of

between readers as political citizens. The anonymity offered by the Internet also facilitates discussion on polemical subjects. While I have focused my own proto-experience on the first major novel to write back to the Empire, other texts that reflect social injustice or the experience of marginalised Others can also be read in the same way. Coduction is in no way dismissive of book groups, and could also be adapted for use in such associations. If efficiently organized, it would possibly prompt Spanish publishing houses to publish, promote and translate not just African literatures, but African-authored books on African history and culture. This would be further facilitated if the Eurocentric confines of most universities were broken down, and every literature instructor realized the ethical and artistic potential of 'Other' literatures.

Effective coduction involves more complexities than can be adequately discussed in the scope of this essay. And yet I would argue that through the process involved in writing responses to a set of questions designed to underscore the potential of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* for intercultural dialogue, a group of lay Spanish readers was able to query the image of Africa that promotes an attitude of patronizing paternalism at its best and incensed incomprehension and rejection at its worst. This is significant in a society where racism rears its ugly head with alarming frequency.

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