correspondents at large

Neocoductive Ruminations

TERRI OCHIAGHA

I WAS BORN IN SPAIN TO A SPANISH MOTHER AND A NIGERIAN FATHER. I MOVED TO NIGERIA ON THE DAY THAT I TURNED SEVEN AND remained in the country for nine years. The interplay between my cultural liminality and an early aestheticism has determined my experience of literature—first as a precocious reader and later as a teacher and scholar.

My first literary diet, like that of many children, consisted of fairy tales and abridged classics. At primary school in Nigeria, our English textbooks featured passages from African novels to teach reading comprehension. While I found the short storylines interesting, their pedagogical use meant that I did not perceive them as "literature"—a word that I associated with stories to wonder at, get lost in, and daydream about. At the age of nine I graduated to unabridged Dickens novels and Shakespeare plays alongside Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, supplementing my diet with Spanish chivalric romances such as Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo's *Amadís de Gaula* (1508) and Francisco Vázquez's *Palmerín de Oliva* (1511). Apart from a sense of intrigue, these two works gave me respite from an unrelenting sense of otherness. They provided vicarious adventure, and their settings reminded me of the Castilian castles that formed part of my early-childhood landscape.

I find it difficult to recall what Western authors we read in my first three years of secondary school. I more readily remember that many of the writers on the English syllabus were African, that literature was an integral part of the Igbo-language class, and that the school library seemed to own every single volume in the African Writers Series. Temporally and spatially, these "new" books were a far cry from *Amadís* and *Palmerín*. But they seemed to satiate a pressing need: to reintegrate my fragmented sense of self by learning about Nigerian history and cultures in ways that would give me a sense of belonging. The three first years of secondary school went by and so did my first attempts at formal literary interpretation. The literature

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syllabus of the West African Examinations Council Senior School Certificate Examination was divided into six sections: African poetry (J. P. Clark, Richard Ntiru, Kofi Awonoor, Wole Soyinka, and Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali), non-African poetry (T. S. Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Alfred Tennyson, D. H. Lawrence, Robert Browning, and William Wordsworth), African prose (Elechi Amadi, Chukwuemeka Ike, Zaynab Alkali, and Ken Saro-Wiwa), non-African prose (Hardy, Samuel Selvon, George Orwell, and Lawrence), African drama (Soyinka and Efua Sutherland), and non-African drama (Oliver Goldsmith and Shakespeare [*Senior School Certificate Examination* 32–35]). In class, none of these authors or sections were valued more highly than any others. Incidentally, the only Chinua Achebe work we read in school was assigned to us in our first year, the children's story *Chike and the River*. I first encountered the colonial theme through John Munonye's *The Only Son*, not through *Things Fall Apart*. Thus, critically imposed hierarchies and the politics of canonization did not get in the way of literary appreciation. Shakespeare's aura had more to do with his plays' linguistic unfamiliarity and—for my classmates—the difficulties of imagining their settings and plots, a challenge our literature master sought to alleviate by screening Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971).

In many respects, this is a chronological account of my literary development and its repercussions on my work. However, I will fast-forward briefly to my first book, *Achebe and Friends at Umuahia: The Making of a Literary Elite* (2015), the germ of which was sown in the aftermath of my secondary school reading of Ike's *The Bottled Leopard*, one of our set texts. The novel takes place in Umuahia and explores the struggles of the schoolboy protagonist, Amobi, to integrate his indigenous sense of self with his secondary school's English-public-school ethos. One of our textbooks indicated that its author had studied at Government College Umuahia. The biographical blurbs on the back covers of Achebe's and Amadi's novels also showed that they had studied in that school in the same period. As I have explained elsewhere, I felt that there could be a connection between the writers' literary awakening and the unsettling cultural and educational dynamics of the school.[1] I soon added further names to my list of Umuahian writers, and, years later, as a project parallel to my doctoral thesis, I set out to unravel this mystery of my youth. The resulting book examines the ways in which Government College Umuahia, an Eastern Nigerian elite colonial secondary school, triggered the literary-cum-political awakening of Achebe, Amadi, Chike Momah, Ike, and Christopher Okigbo, all of whom attended the school at the same time, when its principal was William Simpson, the man Achebe credited with "preparing the ground for the beginnings of African literature" (57). Another of the book's aims, also inspired by the curricular particularities of my secondary education, is to question the badges of inferiority "sons" and "followers," which were imposed on Achebe's contemporaries, by reasserting this group of writers' formal and thematic innovations and by arguing that the cultural and educational background, collegiality, and friendship they shared with Achebe, not an overpowering Bloomian influence, defined their relation to him.

Studying for a BA in English studies and an MA and PhD in anglophone literary and cultural studies in Spain brought its own literary joys and dramas, as well as a revalorization of my secondary school experiences. The bulk of our courses were on North American literature. Apart from the period and genre courses, we had offerings in African American literature, ethnic and minority American literature, and American minority autobiography. The texts in a mainstream course on American prose led by an eminent African American visiting professor dealt, to a large extent, with issues of race in America. No

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one batted an eyelid; no one exoticized these course offerings or questioned this unique educational experience. In stark contrast, African, Caribbean, and Indian texts were taught in a single, optional course on postcolonial literature that attracted fewer than ten students.[2] The only "preparation" for this course was a first-year class on twentieth-century literature in which Achebe's "An Image of Africa: Racism in *Heart of Darkness*" was dismissed as oversensitive. The postcolonial-literature course was not well publicized, occupied an unpopular time slot, and was taught by a creative writer linked to the department—which, incidentally, did not have a creative writing program. Unsurprisingly, I was the only member of my cohort to work on postcolonial writers at a doctoral level. A senior faculty member told me in no uncertain terms that the department was not interested in these literatures and that no one would be hired in the future to teach them. My MA thesis, "Expatriate Agents of Colonial Education," and my PhD dissertation, *The Image of the European in Nigerian Literature and Culture*, were supervised by a comparatist.

It is unfair, however, to place the responsibility for this indifference to world literatures squarely at the feet of my alma mater. As I have explained elsewhere, the socioeconomic implications of the migratory influx, the media coverage of black African countries, the legitimacy given to Western renditions of the African experience ("Reconsidering" 99; "Primeras apreciaciones" 99), and the absence of the idea of empire from the collective image of present-day Spaniards (Santaolalla 66–67) are potent factors in the curricular marginalization of African literatures in Spain. At this point in my education, I was compelled to redress this literary indifference by devising a reading methodology, based on a reviewed application of Wayne Booth's concept of coduction,[3] to enable lay readers to initiate an intercultural dialogue with African texts. The readers who participated in my experiment began by completing a prereading questionnaire, to gauge their past literary experiences and previous knowledge of African colonialism and to detect any prejudices they might have had about African culture and literature. After reading the work in question—in this case, *Things Fall Apart*—the lay readers received a second questionnaire, which redirected their attention to formal and discursive aspects of the text that they might have overlooked in their first, possibly anthropological, reading of the novel. The experiment proved that reading African literatures in this way might help readers question and move beyond their preconceptions.

Shortly afterward, I began teaching African and Caribbean literatures—mostly in mainstream courses such as Great Figures of Anglophone Literature, Contemporary English Literature, and The Use of Literature in the EFL classroom—and I found myself paying far more attention in class to these texts' counterdiscursive qualities than to their aesthetic excellence. I also chose texts that engaged, largely, with the colonial theme. This, in retrospect, was a flawed approach. But, at the time, I felt that the only way to counteract institutional apathy—and the occasional open expression of disdain for the literary value of African and Caribbean texts—was to contest the deeply ingrained biases against these works, just as their authors had contested colonial discourse. My experiments with the neocoductive method in some of these classes did not go according to plan, and it was impossible to deduce if there was a change in attitude or if students simply gave the answers they thought I wanted to hear in their questionnaires. In the contemporary-literature course, the sheer number of students, who were in their first year and still grappling with both the English language and the critical appreciation of literature, and the fact that the neocoductive sessions did not count toward their final grade were among the factors that led to the experiment's failure. Things were

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decidedly easier in the master-of-education seminar The Use of Literature in the EFL Classroom, but these were older students, many of whom had established teaching careers in the surrounding primary schools and were sensitive to the realities of multiculturalism and thus only too glad to appropriate new ways to make their classes more inclusive and tolerant of immigrant otherness.

I am based in the United Kingdom at the moment, and as I approach the final months of a British Academy Newton International Fellowship, I find myself reflecting on my past experiences as a teacher and the ways in which my current research might inform my teaching. The British cultural, political, and educational context is decidedly different from the Spanish, and, in my experience, scholars and teachers of world literatures here do not have to engage in the type of cultural wars that marred my early teaching experiences. I have concluded that in the Spanish context paying closer attention to the aesthetic complexity and experimentation of these literatures than to their thematic or counterdiscursive aspects would be a more effective way to project their value. While I do not plan to return to the Spanish educational system, aesthetic valorization and its projection in the classroom are matters to reflect on as I begin to prepare for my next teaching position.

Notes

1. For a more extended description of the ways in which I came to this conclusion, see Ochiagha, "Unbottling."

2. I did not even associate the label "postcolonial" with African writers until I heard a fellow student mention that one of the set texts was *Things Fall Apart*.

3. According to Booth, coduction involves an initial and private discovery of the text and then an endeavor to convey this interpretation to other readers. All readers discover and reflect on the text privately, subsequently sharing their views with other readers, whose own readings are further enriched in the course of this interaction. Through this reflexive methodology, Booth expects readers to intuitively reach ethically useful value judgments and redress former prejudices.

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