

# A Dangerous Single Story: Dispelling Stereotypes through African Literature

by

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## Abstract

Drawing on Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk titled "The Danger of a Single Story," this article explores how African women writers dispel stereotypes or dangerous single stories that have wrongly categorized the over one billion people that make up the continent of Africa. It argues that writers such as Adichie and Zimbabwean author NoViolet Bulawayo expose popular stereotypes about African people in their novels through controversial depictions and subject matters as a way to disrupt these stereotypes. It further contends the writers use stereotypes as a point of entry to relate the complex issues and experiences that people face within African societies. The article examines Bulawayo's debut novel *We Need New Names* and Adichie's third novel *Americanah*, highlighting ways the authors reclaim and honor the subjectivity of African people by disrupting simplistic ideas about extreme poverty in African nations and challenging beliefs concerning African immigrant experiences in the United States, respectively. Due to increased migration in our globalized world, it is becoming even more important for individuals to lay aside stereotypical ideas, and these writers reveal how stories can play a part as well as their potential to inspire and humanize. Ultimately, African women writers engaging commonplace stereotypes is significant to the overall enterprise of self-liberation and self-definition.

In 2009, the prize-winning Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie presented a TED Talk titled “The Danger of a Single Story” that has now garnered nearly fifteen million views.<sup>1</sup> During the talk, she explained how she began writing stories at a young age. These stories included characters with blond hair and blue eyes because she was imitating the American and British stories she read. It was not until she began reading books by African authors such as Chinua Achebe that she experienced “a mental shift in [her] perception of literature” and began to write characters—Black characters—with which she could identify. Thus, exposure to African writers saved her from the danger of “a single story” about what books could be (Adichie, “Danger”). Unsurprisingly, many people exhibit limited thinking when they have a lack of knowledge. In fact, we can all be guilty of stereotyping and wrongfully characterizing people and things with which we are unfamiliar. Adichie discusses the problematic nature of having partial and inadequate information or accessing solely a single story: “The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete; they make one story become the only story” (Adichie, “Danger”). People, in essence, should not make definitive claims based on insufficient data. I draw the title of this article from Adichie’s talk because of my focus on dispelling dangerous single stories that have wrongly categorized an ethnically and culturally diverse group of people.

The reality of the existence of stereotypes about the over one billion people that make up the continent of Africa is no secret. Recently, media outlets around the world engaged in debates over a January 2018 comment from a US leader that denigrated African nations, bringing a discussion of stereotypes about Africa to the fore globally.<sup>2</sup> Such vile comments continue to reverberate in many places around the globe due to the history of African enslavement by Europeans (and Eurasians) and colonialism as well as present-day imperialism and exploitation of African people and their descendants throughout the African diaspora. Boldly proclaiming their value and humanity, people of African descent on the continent and across the globe continue to fight against destructive portrayals of themselves and embrace positive ones no matter the venue of representation. When Marvel’s *Black Panther* film, for instance, based on the fictional African nation of Wakanda opened in theaters during February 2018, people of Africa and its diaspora overwhelmingly supported it.<sup>3</sup> The powerful roles of African women characters in the movie were also reasons it received praise, as they presented a refutation of stereotypes about the role of African women in the history and current-day affairs of Africa.<sup>4</sup> Still, many of the well-known figures in the African literary canon today are largely African male writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Ben Okri. There are also many notable African women writers whose fiction has made inroads in the canon, including Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba, Nawal El Saadawi, Buchi Emecheta, Yvonne Vera, and Tsitsi Dangarembga.

More recently, a new generation of writers such as Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Helen Oyeyemi, and Yaa Gyasi have created indelible impressions on the global literary scene. In this article, I engage the novels of African women writers across nations that explore stereotypical images. I argue that African women writers utilize the idea of a “single story” by exposing popular stereotypes about African people in their novels through controversial depictions and subject matters as a way to disrupt these stereotypes.

Building on Adichie’s interpretation of the danger of a single story, this article contributes to the field of African studies, specifically African literary studies, to explore methods for debunking stereotypes. While scholars such as Carole Boyce-Davies, Esi Sutherland-Addy, Irene Assiba D’Almeida, and Marie Umeh have produced exemplary scholarship on African women writers, room still exists for more attention to women writers.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on the genre of the novel, which is the “dominant literary genre on the continent” (Irele, *African Novel* 1), this article begins with scholarship on stereotypes of African people to provide a background for current-day mislabeling. Within this section, I highlight several common stereotypes and the origins of some of them. Next, I discuss the significance of African women writers choosing to engage the stereotypes within their novels. Following this discussion, I examine NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013), focusing on key scenes that display popular stereotypes about African people. I situate the scenes within the narratives and discuss their overall importance to the emancipatory project of eradicating destructive stereotypes. Ultimately, my intention is to contribute to the existing critical thought and research on African experiences to expand the scope of the field in general and to highlight ways African women writers reclaim and honor the subjectivity of African people specifically.

Stereotypes exist concerning various parts of African people’s livelihoods. In his satirical essay “How to Write about Africa,” Binyavanga Wainaina notes a plethora of stereotypical portrayals that appear in literature by non-African writers about the continent.<sup>6</sup> Besides political corruption, he describes portrayals of Africans either starving or eating peculiar foods such as “monkey-brain”; Africa being either overpopulated or depopulated due to war and diseases like AIDS; and people wandering aimlessly either without any clothes on or dressed in traditional Zulu or Dogon attire. His vexation at these portrayals is clear via the sarcastic tone he uses in his delivery. Still, Wainaina’s essay does not encompass other equally troubling yet common stereotypes such as African nations having a lack of modern technology, being covered with wild animal-filled jungles and mud houses to the exclusion of modern buildings, and consisting of people who do not do anything to help themselves while practicing vile religions (meaning traditional African religions). Despite being a continent encompassing over fifty nations, Africa is often referred to as one country, and the vastness of its geographical size is frequently underestimated. From where do these ideas and beliefs stem? The source of these inaccuracies and misinformation about African people must be a part of any discussion aimed at eliminating stereotypes.

Like many others, Adichie calls out the role of Western literature in promoting and perpetuating a single story of Africa in “The Danger of a Single Story.” She references Rudyard Kipling’s chronicling of Africans as “half-devil, half-child” as well as a London merchant, John Locke, who wrote in his journal of his voyage to Africa in 1561 that Africans are “beasts who have no houses” (Adichie, “Danger”). She declares that Locke’s writing “represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West, a tradition of sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness” (Adichie, “Danger”). Proving that Adichie is not alone in her assessment of the West’s role in the horrid portrayals of Africans, scholarship in several fields addresses this line of thought. For instance, Africana Studies scholars such as Maulana Karenga and historians like John Hope Franklin have spent decades producing a wealth of research about the negative impact of European imposition on the lives of Africans and their descendants.<sup>7</sup> Literary scholars, including F. Abiola Irele and Kwame Anthony Appiah, also discuss the lasting effects of European control over African populations.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the renowned anthropologist Elliott P. Skinner examined how many Western philosophers such as David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Voltaire believed Africans to be inferior and how their writing was evidence of such beliefs (30). Referring to what is called the curse of Ham, Skinner also noted the role of Christianity from a Western perspective, writing: “The image of Africa that emerged after the period of this initial contact was one of a ‘Dark Continent’ whose peoples were subhuman, heathen, and barbarous. The developing biblical Hamitic myth, said to be of Babylonian Talmudic origin, assigned Africans the role of servants to other peoples because of Canaan’s misdeeds” (29-30). Ultimately, the conclusion that many Westerners came to is that Africans’ differences from Westerners equated to inferiority.

Combatting the effects of such a negative mind frame, African women writers engaging commonplace stereotypes is significant to the enterprise of self-liberation and self-definition. The internalization of negative beliefs has worked to impede the progress and development of people of African descent the world over. Adichie states that a way to create a single story is to “show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again and that is what they become” (Adichie, “Danger”). I contend that they not only become that one thing to others; they can become that one thing in their own opinion as well. Self-rejection and self-hatred can be effects of constant degradation. In fact, the “destruction of human possibility—the destruction of life-chances and the grounds for human aspiration, freedom, dignity and human solidarity with others” (Karenga 109) is a result of the physical and cultural genocide stemming from European enslavement and colonialization of African people. While Adichie proclaims that “[S]tories matter” (Adichie, “Danger”), the stories that people tell themselves also matter.

I believe writers use stereotypes as a point of entry to relate the complex issues and experiences that people face within African societies. They allow writers to introduce these matters in a creative, yet authentic, manner. Thus, writers can provide deeper explanations and elaborate on matters that global media often leaves out. The power dynamics between the insiders and outsiders telling these stories—native writers and those looking at African societies via a narrow lens—change.

Calling on the Igbo word *nkali*, a noun loosely meaning “to be greater than another,” Adichie expresses that “[i]t is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power” as stories are “dependent on power” (Adichie, “Danger”). African women writers are accessing and exercising their power to tell stories the way they desire. They are telling their versions of narratives and providing “accounts that reshape the West’s familiar narrative of colonizers and abject victims” (Kroll 116). Hence, they are challenging other versions that do damage and cause harm. African women writers, in this manner, are utilizing power constructively. The writers here exhibit “power which recognizes responsibility in dignified freedom; power which positively promotes Life in all its forms; power to remove from our path anything, person, or structure which threatens to limit our potential for full human growth” (Ogundipe-Leslie 17).

The choice to engage stereotypes in African novels is significant for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it expands people’s worldviews. By offering other perspectives, the narrative depictions allow readers to challenge themselves—to challenge the perspectives they may have long held. These stories can cause people to confront their misguided beliefs. Such confrontations are needed in the globalized world in which we live. Shedding uninformed beliefs allows for stronger connections between African nations and other nations around the globe, which produce mutual benefits in areas from increased trade to improved cultural information exchanges. Additionally, Adichie contends, “[S]tories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity” (Adichie, “Danger”). No time is better than the present to continue to repair centuries of damage. Considering contextual criticism alongside the aesthetics of novels is critical, as “analyzing a text without some consideration of the world with which it has a material relationship is of little social value” (Boyce-Davies, “Feminist Consciousness,” 12).<sup>9</sup> Lastly, the novels allow African women writers to speak about the ills of stereotyping and be heard. Literary scholar Carole Boyce-Davies, in addressing how to ensure Black women’s voices are heard, affirms that it is “[B]y assertively and bold-facedly transgressing the imposed boundaries; by being insistent, supportive; by speaking constantly directly or indirectly, though in multiple forms but always demanding hearing; by challenging the pretended disabilities of hearing; [and] by constantly creating” (Boyce-Davies, “Hearing Black,” 9). The African women writers described here enact these behaviors via their narratives.

### **NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names***

Zimbabwean author NoViolet Bulawayo captured the attention of a global audience with her debut novel *We Need New Names*, which won the Pen/Hemingway Award and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. The novel is a coming-of-age tale that chronicles the adventures of the protagonist Darling from her home in an impoverished nation that resembles Zimbabwe to her immigration to the United States to live with her aunt.

Her place of birth, riddled with a host of problems stemming from its government, is a place that Darling is happy to escape. Readers first meet Darling when she is a ten-year-old girl roaming through the streets with her childhood friends. At the close of the novel, she is a teenager trying to adapt to the challenges of being an undocumented immigrant in the US and estranged from her homeland.

Due to its fairly recent publication, the critical scholarship on Bulawayo's novel is still developing. While some scholars such as Pier Paolo Frassinelli and Anna-Leena Toivanen concentrate on the portrayal of how characters navigate their immigrant experiences, others focus their attention on a range of subject matters associated with the novel.<sup>10</sup> With character names like Bastard, Godknows, and Mother of Bones, the naming in the novel is eye-catching to readers. Literary scholar Polo Belina Moji discusses the significance of naming and explains how the novel emphasizes how the ability to name is an expression of power (187).<sup>11</sup> Focused on power relations from another perspective, James Arnett argues how the novel uses photography and videography to demonstrate the problematic nature of charity and aid to those in the Global South from Northern subjects who expect to see performances of suffering.<sup>12</sup> The theme of suffering, specifically concerning food scarcity, is the focus of F. Fiona Moolla's critique of the narrative. She makes an argument about the portrayals of foodways and claims food can compel "a realization about identity, belonging, and ideas of home" (231). Recognizing Darling's resilience in the face of her nation's hardships, academic Anna Chitando explores *We Need New Names* in the context of Zimbabwean children's literature, and she contends that the young character maintains a level of zeal despite the adversities that she faces.<sup>13</sup> Contributing to this growing body of research on the novel, I explore Bulawayo's engagement with the idea of a single story.

In the opening scene, Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* disrupts simplistic stereotypes about extreme poverty in African nations like Zimbabwe. While the novel illuminates other stereotypes such as the presence of people infected with AIDS—which Bulawayo describes as being a part of her biological family's life—the choice to open with a depiction of poverty is a narrative choice that immediately seizes readers' attention and primes them for another perspective on the controversial subject.<sup>14</sup> In the scene, ten-year-old Darling and her friends are hungry and on the search for guavas, which they steal from Budapest—a nearby town consisting of people with a higher social standing than the children's community, Paradise. The audacity of the children is at once comical but also enlightening: "We have stolen from so many houses I cannot even count. It was Bastard who decided that we pick a street and stay on it until we have gone through all the houses . . . . It's like a pattern, and Bastard says this way we can be better thieves" (7). Instead of the widespread images of emaciated children with large stomachs, the novel delivers a portrayal of resilient, spirited children who are on an organized mission to alleviate their predicament of hunger that results from their poverty. They go about the task the way a child would—with no regard for nutritional value or balance.<sup>15</sup>

Darling expresses, “We just eat a lot of guavas because it’s the only way to kill our hunger, and when it comes to defecating, we get in so much pain it becomes an almost impossible task” (18). Still, the children portray a resistance to the scarcity in their lives. The novel, in essence, highlights the children’s agency in the midst of their poverty-stricken surroundings. With a child’s mentality, they are unaware of how their nation came to be in such dire straits, but they insist on taking an active role in satisfying their hunger.<sup>16</sup>

As the scene progresses, readers question the condition of the children’s nation, which opens the door to exploring the history of Zimbabwe. In her talk, Adichie reiterates a point that a way to dispossess people is to “[s]tart the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state. [As a result,] you [will] have an entirely different story” (Adichie, “Danger”). Thus, an examination of historical moments in Zimbabwe is a necessary point of inquiry if we are to make sense of the contemporary state of affairs as portrayed in the novel. Gaining their independence from Britain in 1980, Zimbabwe was under the rule of Robert Mugabe until the national demand for his removal in late 2017. Bulawayo was born during the earlier part of Mugabe’s presidency, and those African nationalistic and Pan Africanistic years contrast remarkably with his final years that are clouded by stories of torture practices, unemployment, and inflation.<sup>17</sup> Bulawayo explains, “In *We Need New Names*, I was writing about things that were going on at home, so it was my quiet way of saying, ‘we need new names, you can remove names, we need a new president, new ways of thinking of ourselves, new ways of being’” (Bulawayo, “Writing about Women”). Her indictment of the conditions in Zimbabwe are not muted. Many of Mugabe’s actions hindered the growth of the nation, and the reality that Zimbabwe is a nation only about thirty years removed from British colonialism (i.e., White supremacist settlerism in this context) is also noteworthy because it is a reminder that the nation was not on a solid foundation even before Mugabe took office. As opposed to the real-life Zimbabwe in former times, Darling’s Zimbabwe is “a country in crisis, [and] serves as a reminder that this ‘original’ Zimbabwe is no more” (Moji 185).

To clarify, I do not mean to suggest that the novel’s depiction of poverty in this fictive representation of Zimbabwe is minimal or not severe. Young children turning to the act of thievery just to have food to eat beyond the little they receive at home is serious indeed. Like other African novels, Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* “denounce[s] the domestic corruption” (Kroll 125) and provides an assessment of its effect, including widespread poverty. What the novel critiques, furthermore, is the single story of what poverty in Africa looks like. Adichie, in her talk, does not pretend real hardships are not present in Africa. In fact, she provides several examples, but she poses an important question: “What if we had an African television network that broadcast diverse African stories all over the world, what the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls a ‘balance of stories’” (Adichie, “Danger”)?. The worldwide media, unfortunately, often objectifies people of African nations, but the novel’s intimate portrayal of poverty is a part of the disruption to the story of African nations as utterly helpless.<sup>18</sup>

To aid in the narrative's disruption of the extreme poverty stereotype, the opening scene of the novel also uses an adult character who similarly objectifies the Zimbabwean children. Along their journey in Budapest, the children encounter a woman from London who has obvious privilege and is visiting her father's country for the first time (9). Peeking through her window, she sees the children and comes out of a house that has a "marble statue of the urinating naked boy with wings" (7) to ask them to pose for her as she takes pictures with her camera. Besides being curious about the woman, the children are intrigued by the unfamiliar food—pizza—she is eating when she exits the house, and Darling is even more alarmed when the lady throws the rest of it away, as she cannot comprehend wasting food. Wearing a shirt that reads "Save Darfur" and aiming her camera, the woman behaves like many in the media. The lady only knows the children's ages, not even their names; she has no cognizance of the stories behind the photographs—the stories of the children's lives.<sup>19</sup> Like the media, she is oblivious to what is really taking place in their lives and the complexity of it. While Arnett, in his article on *We Need New Names*, focuses on photography in the novel in relation to ideas about charity-giving in the Global South and the presumed superiority of those who provide it, I suggest the photography in this scene is linked to the media. Similar to this woman character, the media acts like tourists by visiting for a short time, taking pictures, and reporting its perceptions without really engaging the people and learning their stories. The media always leaves things out, and many are left believing stereotypes.<sup>20</sup> Adichie confirms, "If I had not grown up in Nigeria and if all I knew of Africa were of popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals and incomprehensible people fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS—unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner" (Adichie, "Danger"). The woman character is a foreigner to Zimbabwe, and she is more invested in capturing images of and taking from the poor children rather than being a 'help.'

Instead of focusing on the loss of childhood innocence due to impoverishment, I contend that the novel urges us to focus on the ingenuity and dreams of the Zimbabwean children in this opening scene. Such a focus is rare if existing at all in global media, and it offers a way to interrupt the stereotype. The children in this scene have and can articulate their dreams. Sbho, the youngest in the bunch, points to what she sees as her dream house and claims she will marry a man who will take her "away from the shacks" of Paradise to a house like it in Budapest (14). Though he expresses resistance to Sbho's plans, Bastard declares his own dream: "I'm blazing out of this kaka country myself. Then I'll make lots of money and come back and get a house in this very Budapest" (15). He plans to go to nearby Johannesburg, while Darling insists that she will go to America. The children are quite bright and, in the midst of this sharing of dreams, they reveal their knowledge of world affairs. Despite their poverty, they are able to dream beyond their current circumstances. Like many other children around the world, they envision a positive and hopeful future for themselves. They see terrorists attacking planes as a hindrance to Darling's plans and their closed schools—due to domestic political issues—as an impediment to Bastard's plan. Some of them, by the close of the narrative, achieve their goals of emigrating.

Furthermore, the children turn a tragedy into a triumph at the end of the scene when they see and are frightened by a woman's dead body hanging on a tree as a result of suicide. As the children are leaving the location where the dead body hangs, Bastard comes up with an idea: "Look, did you notice that woman's shoes were almost new? If we can get them then we can sell them and buy a loaf, or maybe even one and a half" (20). The children think it is a good idea and agree with the plan because their desire for survival supersedes their fear, which is evident when they "all turn around and follow Bastard back into the bush, the dizzying smell of Lobels bread all around" (20).<sup>21</sup> While it is a crude example, the kids are working within the confines in which they and the adults in their lives find themselves.

Although the novel is forthcoming about the brutally heart-breaking realities in the children's lives, the up-close and painstaking care with which the novel details their experiences is a part of the disruption to stereotypes about extreme poverty in this fictive Zimbabwe. In an interview, Bulawayo states, "I am always concerned about children, not just in Zimbabwe, but in society. Children are part of everything, and it means that they suffer the most" (Bulawayo, "Writing about Women"). Beginning the narrative with poor children who have dreams and goals as well as plans to alleviate their hunger serves the purpose of superseding global stereotypes about poverty.<sup>22</sup> When asked if she sees "writing as a form of activism," Bulawayo also asserts, "Yes, I do, because it is through writing that we speak the unspoken . . . . In writing, I can create an illusion that I am just talking to a page when, of course, I know that I am talking about issues" (Bulawayo, "Writing about Women"). Ultimately, Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* disrupts simple-minded stereotypes about extreme poverty in African nations like Zimbabwe and offers a perspective about which many people are less aware.

### **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah***

Similar to Bulawayo's novel, Adichie's *Americanah* has made a solid impression on global markets and is the winner of several awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. *Americanah* is not Adichie's first novel, so it has drawn the fans of her two previous novels, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus*, as well as a new, growing readership. As the novel boldly tackles issues of race and identity, it chronicles the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze and their relationship with one another that began when they were in secondary school. Born and reared in Nigeria, both characters end up living in other nations, the United States and Britain, before reuniting in Nigeria. Their lives abroad allow readers an up-close look into a variety of immigrant experiences. The novel concludes with Obinze announcing his love for Ifemelu once again (after leaving his household that includes his wife and daughter) and what looks like her full acceptance of it.

The amount of scholarship on Adichie's *Americanah* is not surprising given her growing popularity as a writer and speaker. The topics that scholars address concerning the novel vary widely, as the novel's substantive quality and breadth provide lots of fertile ground. A great deal of the scholarship on the book examines the topic of identity. For example, Nilanjan Chakraborty and H. Oby Okolocha both discuss the significance of racial identity in the narrative, as the main characters' relationships and personal decisions are influenced by it. Discussing identity as well but zeroing in on double-consciousness and national allegory, respectively, is the focus of essays on *Americanah* by literary scholars Rose A. Sackeyfio and Katherine Hallemeier. Sackeyfio considers how Du Bois' concept of double-consciousness applies to African immigrants, while Hallemeier argues that the novel "presents an alternative, utopic vision of global power in which the United States stands as a foil" to the growing Nigeria (232). Another common point of interest for scholars who have written about the novel is its narrative structure or narrative strategies. Caroline Levine and Mary Jane Androne take up this issue in their essays with Levine analyzing "specific defamiliarizing strategies of realist fiction" (588) and Androne envisioning the narrative as a migrant bildungsroman. Given the tense romance between the characters Ifemelu and Obinze, Jennifer Leetsch discusses love and its connections with textuality, spatiality and corporeality in the novel. Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez, also with a unique focus, studies the hair politics in *Americanah*, analyzing natural versus chemically relaxed hair.<sup>23</sup> Despite the growing interest of this novel among scholars, analysis of it has not been exhausted.

With focus on a significant scene, I add to this body of scholarship on *Americanah* by examining the ways it challenges stereotypes concerning African immigrant experiences in the United States in order to disrupt the idea of a single story. The novel illustrates the complexity of these experiences and how African people are subject to broad generalizations from Americans as well as other Africans. In other words, the narrative, through the controversial depiction of Africans stereotyping each other, also explores interethnic antagonism. Such antagonism is a reality within humanity, and the novel exhibits a boldness in addressing it. Scholar Candis Watts Smith, who has studied the history of interactions among Black immigrants to the US, writes "that because Black people in the United States do not compose a monolithic racial group but instead make up a diverse pan-ethnic group, we should expect similarities and unity as well as differences and discord" (16). By displaying disconcerting undercurrents among different African ethnic groups, the novel opens up a space for us to broaden conventional interpretations about interethnic dynamics. I think the portrayal of this uncomfortable issue in the novel, more specifically, serves a two-fold function: to challenge people to change and to show how humans are more alike than different.<sup>24</sup> In her TED talk, Adichie explains that "[t]he consequence of the single story is this: it robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar" (Adichie, "Danger"). An uncanny similarity that she exposes in *Americanah* is that many humans, even those sharing racial backgrounds, are susceptible to stereotyping.

During a scene that takes place in an African hair salon in the US, the novel offers a critique of Americans who simply categorize all Africans and serves as a casual warning to readers to be mindful of ill-bred beliefs and comments. When the protagonist Ifemelu comments on the hot temperature of the salon and begins to fan herself with a magazine, the novel reads: “At least, these women would not say to her ‘You’re hot? But you’re from Africa!’” (13). Ifemelu has been living in the US for many years and has become accustomed to such comments toward African immigrants. To question her body’s awareness of and reaction to heat purely because she is from Africa displays ignorance about the various weather conditions across the African continent and suggests that she has no right to make such an observation. Thus, she is unable to exercise her agency about something as minor as a room’s temperature. Ifemelu, later, becomes annoyed with her Senegalese hair stylist Aisha when Aisha says “Africa” instead of the specific country to which she is referring when speaking. When Ifemelu questions Aisha about it, Aisha responds: “You don’t know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, Where is that? My friend from Burkina Faso, they ask her, your country in Latin America” (18)? Aisha not only expresses vexation with this reality but also expresses impatience with Ifemelu for not already understanding the absurdity of some Americans. As a result, she questions Ifemelu about the length of time she has been living in the US. Aisha is no longer flabbergasted about such comments. Clearly, the novel is both providing commentary here about the ignorance of some Americans and offering a corrective.

Through the character of Aisha, the novel also interrogates interethnic stereotypes, reminding readers of people’s susceptibility to stereotyping even those who are within their racial group. In her TED talk, Adichie comments about her college roommate’s patronizing behavior toward her. She explains that her “roommate had a single story of Africa. . . .In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way” (Adichie, “Danger”). Ironically, the novel highlights the shared tendency of humans to judge others and the need for serious caution with such behavior. The novel foreshadows interethnic antagonism at the beginning of the scene when the salon owner Mariama asks Ifemelu if she is from Nigeria and reveals, upon Ifemelu’s affirmative response, that she and her sister are from Mali and Aisha is from Senegal. A Nollywood film is playing on the salon’s TV, and like most movie and theater productions, African movies are subject to scrutiny, including scrutiny by African and non-African populations. Aisha pegs Nigerian films as being subpar. She describes less recent Nollywood films as being “very bad” and captivated with “too much voodoo” (16). Concerning recent films, however, Aisha exclaims, “Now Nigeria film is very good. Big nice house!” (16). After Aisha essentially applauds Nigerian filmic depictions for featuring glamorous props and classifies their past endeavors as being too preoccupied with traditional African religions, she simplifies Yoruba and Igbo people on the basis of their skin tone. She indicates that Ifemelu, who is Igbo, does not fit Aisha’s ideas about Igbo people because she is dark-skinned rather than fair-skinned. Her boldness is blatant and, while she compliments Igbo men for “tak[ing] care of women real good,” she laments they will not marry her because “they say the family want Igbo woman. Because Igbo marry Igbo always” (18).

Knowing the seriousness of interethnic friction, Aisha thinks getting Ifemelu to meet her two Igbo boyfriends and intercede for her will convince them to marry her (48). While Ifemelu does not imply to Aisha that she understands the sometimes-fraught nuances of relationships between different ethnic groups, Ifemelu is well aware because her parents initially did not like the idea of her dating her Black American boyfriend Blaine (20). The scene overtly displays that Africans are not all the same and that biases can exist among them. Again, shedding light on the reality of such biases is a key step in dismantling the perpetuation of beliefs and ideas based on limited information.

Furthermore, the character Aisha represents an internalization of African stereotypes, which can be harmful to the point of causing self-rejection. Her repudiation of things associated with Africa and African people signifies her rejection of self. While I would not say Aisha is a complete counter-model, she does represent a cautionary tale. In fact, she is what happens when stereotypes are not disrupted. Adichie expresses in her talk that, of course, what you read in a novel is not “representative of all” people from that nation (Adichie, “Danger”). I would add that the variety of developed characters in Adichie’s novel impedes simple classifications any way and, hopefully, curtails touristic reading as well.<sup>25</sup> Aisha stands apart from the other characters in this hair salon scene, at any rate. She is perplexed and displays disdain for Ifemelu’s decision to move back to Nigeria. Acting as if no reason exists for anyone to ever want to live there, she ponders whether Ifemelu can happily live there now after having been in the US for over a decade (20). Ifemelu is hit with a litany of questions by Aisha about her plan to relocate back to Nigeria. Aisha also expresses hostility towards Ifemelu’s natural hair. When Ifemelu explains why she prefers her natural hair over a chemical relaxer that would straighten it, “Aisha snorted; she clearly could not understand why anybody would choose to suffer through combing natural hair, instead of simply relaxing it” (15).<sup>26</sup> Many African people and people of African descent across the globe recognize that embracing their natural hair demonstrates acceptance of self and a resistance to conforming to Western beauty ideals. Aisha appears not to accept herself, and she has other insecurities as well, evident in her discussion about her two boyfriends where she tells Ifemelu, “Any one is okay. I want marry” (21). She desperately wants one of her boyfriends to accept her as a wife and begs Ifemelu, a customer she just met, to convince them, causing readers to ponder the value she has for herself.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, Aisha represents how dangerous it is to be on the receiving end of negative stereotypes. Adichie contends that while there are some negative stories that are true about her personal life, “to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten [her] experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed [her]” (Adichie, “Danger”). Seemingly, Aisha has allowed people’s stereotypical ideas about Africans to shape her perception of herself, allowing the negative to outweigh the positive.

In this early scene, Adichie’s *Americanah* aims to immediately begin disrupting the idea of a single story, particularly concerning African immigrants in the US. I find it difficult to believe that it is a mere coincidence that the novel introduces this hair salon scene towards its beginning. The scene critiques misinformed beliefs of some Americans towards African immigrants as well as biases that some Africans have toward other Africans.

Highlighting both of these realities, the novel blatantly indicates how they are problematic and only serve to hinder the progress and livelihoods of Africans on the individual and collective levels. Similar to Kenyan poet and playwright Micere Mugo, whose work Boyce-Davies describes as demonstrating an African feminist consciousness and a “commit[ment] to total freedom of all people,” Adichie is not timid about the role of activism in her writing (Boyce-Davies, “Feminist Consciousness,” 11). She responds in an interview: “I, as a person who writes realist fiction set in Africa, almost automatically have a political role. In a place of scarce resources made scarcer by artificial means, life is always political. In writing about that life, you assume a political role” (Adichie, *The Chimamanda*). While some may say Adichie’s novel is airing dirty laundry, I think the novel is to be applauded for showing stereotypes within and “without” as problems that need to be rectified. “For Adichie, then, the work of cultural representation,” as Madhu Krishnan argues, “takes on a distinctly political edge, directly confronting decades of negative stereotyping as a much-needed counter-discourse” (22).

Due to increased migration in our globalized world, it is becoming even more important for individuals to lay aside stereotypical ideas as people are finding themselves coming into more contact with citizens from different nations, including those from African nations. Adichie concludes her TED talk with her revelation of what is gained when a single story is rejected. She asserts that “when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we gain a kind of paradise” (Adichie, “Danger”). While I do not believe in humans gaining a type of paradise on earth, I do believe we gain better understanding of African culture and traditions from an African perspective when we embrace the novels of African writers. Instead of “[s]tories [that] have been used to dispossess and to malign,” these writers reveal that “stories can also be used to empower and to humanize” (Adichie, “Danger”). Future research on the canon of African women writers as well as other women writers (and male writers) throughout the African diaspora can uncover other ways in which writers offer perspectives that expand single stories. Ultimately, those on the continent and throughout the diaspora must remain committed to self-liberation and having pride in ourselves despite attacks on our worth. As the actress Danai Gurira explains when discussing the powerful impact of Marvel’s *Black Panther*, “We have to encourage and edify as people are feeling the resonance in this film that’s telling them to be proud of who they are and not believe the lie that they’re deficient because they’re different” (McCarthy).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> As of March 2018, Adichie's TED Talk has nearly fifteen 15 million views. See [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).

<sup>2</sup> United States and, subsequently, world news media outlets began to report that Donald Trump referred to Haiti and African nations as “shithole countries” during a meeting with US senators in January 2018.

<sup>3</sup> In a *Huffington Post* article, “‘Black Panther’ Hits \$1 Billion Mark In Worldwide Box Office Numbers,” Doha Madani reports the wide appeal of the movie in overseas markets. See [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-panther-billion-dollars-top-domestic\\_us\\_5a9ef739e4b002df2c5e6fd7](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-panther-billion-dollars-top-domestic_us_5a9ef739e4b002df2c5e6fd7).

<sup>4</sup> Several people have critiqued the film for its oversimplification of life in Africa as well. For instance, see Maulana Karenga's “Wishing for Wakanda, Marooned in America: Movies and Matters of Reflection and Resistance” at <https://lasentinel.net/wishing-for-wakanda-marooned-in-america-movies-and-matters-of-reflection-and-resistance.html>.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, see the multi-volume *Women Writing Africa* Project; Boyce-Davies and Ogundipe-Leslie's two-volume *Moving Beyond Boundaries: International Dimensions of Black Women's Writing*; D'Almeida's *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence*; and Marie Umeh's *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emechta* and *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa*.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>. Also, he wrote about how his essay came about in a follow-up article titled “How to Write About Africa II: The revenge.” In the follow-up, he writes, “I spent a few hours one night at my graduate student flat in Norwich, England, writing to the editor of *Granta*. I was responding to its ‘Africa’ issue, which was populated by every literary bogeyman that any African has ever known, a sort of ‘Greatest Hits of Hearts of Fuckedness.’ It wasn't the grimness that got to me, it was the stupidity.”

<sup>7</sup> Karenga's many essays, articles, and books, especially his four editions of *Introduction to Black Studies*, have become staples in college curriculum. Hope's body of research, including the renowned *From Slavery to Freedom*, continues to be a valuable source. Also, historian Curtis A. Keim's *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind* is useful for outlining historical views of Africa by Westerners and enumerating stereotypes ascribed to African people.

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<sup>8</sup> See Appiah's *In My Father's House* and Irele's *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*, for instance.

<sup>9</sup> See Tejumola Olaniyan's discussion about literary analyses that ignore aesthetics in "Political Critique and Resistance in African Fiction." For a wider discussion of African literature and critical perspectives, see Olaniyan's *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, Simon Gikandi's *The Novel in Africa and the Caribbean since 1950*, and Mukoma Wa Ngugi's *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity, and Ownership*.

<sup>10</sup> See Frassinelli's "Living in translation: Borders, Language and Community in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*" and Toivanen's "Emailing/Skyping Africa: New Technologies and Communication Gaps in Contemporary African Women's Fiction."

<sup>11</sup> See Moji's "New Names, Translational Subjectivities: (Dis)Location and (Re)Naming in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*."

<sup>12</sup> See Arnett's "Taking Pictures: The Economy of Affect and Postcolonial Performativity in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*."

<sup>13</sup> See Chitando's "The Girl Child's Resilience and Agency in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*." Besides these articles, other scholarship on the novel includes: Musanga's "Perspectives of Zimbabwe-China relations in Wallace Chirumiko's 'Made in China' (2012) and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013)" and Ngoshi's "Carnivalising Postcolonial Zimbabwe: The Vulgar and Grotesque Logic of Postcolonial Protest in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013)".

<sup>14</sup> In an interview with Alice Driver, Bulawayo conveys that she has loss siblings to AIDS and knows at least twenty people who have died as a result of the disease. See also the film titled *Everyone's Child* (1996). Directed by Tsitsi Dangarembga and set in Zimbabwe, it is about children who lose their parents to AIDS.

<sup>15</sup> Later during this scene, the children are constipated and defecate in bushes because of eating so many guavas.

<sup>16</sup> Many could argue that this is also akin to Adichie's representation of Ifemelu and many of the characters in her novel *Americanah* concerning contemporary dynamics in the African diaspora and Nigeria.

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<sup>17</sup> For more on Zimbabwe's history, see Peter Godwin's *The Fear: Robert Mugabe and the Martyrdom of Zimbabwe*.

<sup>18</sup> Many would argue that *Africanews*, founded in 2016, is certainly an exception in its portrayals of African people, as its central focus is to empower African people by providing relevant news across the continent.

<sup>19</sup> When she asks Chipo's age, Godknows replies with everyone's ages. The woman is shocked at Chipo being pregnant at age eleven. Representing child sexual abuse in the novel, Chipo is raped and impregnated by her grandfather.

<sup>20</sup> Photo-taking of the local African population is present throughout the novel. The novel includes references to white people, as represented by an NGO in chapter 3 "Country-Game" and the BBC in chapter 9 "For Real", for example, taking pictures of the local population. In chapter 3, the novel reads: "They don't care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn't do it; they just take the pictures anyway, take and take" (54).

<sup>21</sup> According to Moolla, "Lobels was the major Zimbabwean bakery, whose demise in 2007 in some ways symbolized Zimbabwe as a 'failed state'" (224).

<sup>22</sup> Chapter 16 ("How They Lived") of *We Need New Names* highlights popular stereotypes concerning Africa forthrightly by listing them.

<sup>23</sup> For other essays on *Americanah*, see Kozieł, Berning, Ndigirigi, and Edozie.

<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein, Boyce-Davies discusses stereotypes and images of women in African literature and how the "woman as a victim" character is a common image that some African women writers use; its political function is to "stimulat[e] empathetic identification in the readers and in a sense challeng[e] them to change" (Ngambika 14-15).

<sup>25</sup> See Rosemary V. Hathaway, 172, where she discusses the theory of touristic reading, which is when readers of a different ethnic background from a writer assume that what they are reading is a completely accurate representation of the other ethnic or cultural group.

<sup>26</sup> Natural hair continues to figure into the narrative. For instance, chapter 20 chronicles the beginning of Ifemelu's natural hair journey, and there is a discussion about Michelle Obama and natural hair towards the end of chapter 31.

<sup>27</sup> Later, the narrative reveals Aisha has no papers, and Ifemelu agrees to go speak with one of the boyfriends about marrying Aisha. See chapter 41.

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