

Beyond the Single Story:

A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

By Karen Hua

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

with Honors

in the Department of English

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

March 2016

*For Ms. D'Alise,
who inspired me to follow my passions.
I can't thank you enough.*

Acknowledgements

This feminist thesis couldn't have been possible without the didactic guidance and emotional support of the strongest female mentors in my life.

First of all, I extend endless gratitude toward to my two advisors, Professors Madhumita Lahiri and Eileen Pollack, for exemplifying what it means to be unapologetically-intelligent and passionately-dedicated female scholars. I couldn't ask for better women to aspire to in academia.

Professor Lahiri: while your thesis direction proved invaluable, I'm most grateful for the hours in your office discussing what it means to be a woman of color in the humanities. You remain a significant part of my journey toward navigating my own identity as an Asian-American woman.

Professor Pollack: even from your sabbatical and book tour, your honest, continuous feedback was so appreciated. Your English 298 class was my very first class on my first day of college, and over just one freshman fall, it inspired me to switch from the School of Education to LS&A for English.

Thank you, Professor Valerie Traub, for running this incredible marathon with our cohort. You understood the anxiety and up-and-down emotions of this journey, so I'm forever grateful for your patience. That said, your honest feedback and productive workshops motivated a work ethic and maturity in myself that sustained over the course of a whole year.

I'd also like to thank Professor Melanie Yergeau, whose Digital Humanities course introduced me to Critical Discourse Analysis, the theory that changed the entire direction of my thesis. In addition, I must thank Professor Stephanie Bosch Santana, who, like Melanie, gave her time and allowed me to pick her brain.

I also owe so much to my freshman-year sisters, my dear 208 Fletch, who have been my support system through every professional, academic, and personal endeavor. Han and Syd, I love you both. And to my power-lady-clique at *The Michigan Daily*: my nights spent working alongside you gave my English major purpose. You've challenged me to assess what it means to be a modern woman, which is the very foundation from which I write this feminist thesis.

Now that I've thanked all the women, I can't forget Professor Sean Silver and my English honors cohort of 11 other brilliant individuals. Thank you for Mondays and Wednesdays, elevator-pitch mixers, 4 a.m. workshop feedback, and 12-hour Espresso Royale dates. Thank you for understanding, for laughing, for teaching, and for guiding.

Abstract

Between being sampled in Beyoncé's song *Flawless* and receiving a MacArthur Genius Grant, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie embodies a "celebrity author" – an identity when coupled with one as a woman of color, galvanizes her mission to promote feminism and racial equality.

This multidisciplinary thesis explores Adichie's activism across different mediums and platforms: written, aural, and visual. Among written texts – whether novels, online articles, speech transcripts, or interviews – Thomas Huckin's Critical Discourse Analysis serves as a linguistic tool to measure power dynamics, which determines how persuasive Adichie's voice can be. CDA can also extend beyond the written medium, using multimodal discourse and film theory to assess authority in visual imagery and video, respectively.

This thesis is primarily interested in outlining the authority exchange between Adichie and second parties, and Adichie with the mediums themselves. "Author" and "authority" etymologically trace back to paradoxical meanings: the typical definition to lead, create, and hold expertise – and the contradicting definition to relinquish power, as in "auction," from the same root. On each platform, Adichie must share some of her authority with a second party: editors, interviewers, and the mass media industry. However, if not for these second parties bringing recognition to her work – adding the "celebrity" part to her identity – she wouldn't have as wide a platform to broadcast her messages of social justice. Looking through a feminist lens, is compromising her authority and commoditizing her identity worth the publicity for her activism in exchange?

The first chapter examines Adichie's two TED Talks – first, as a neutral written speech, and second, as a video. While CDA can be used on the written script to assess authority dynamics with the audience, cinematography theory is employed with the video to assess how editors disrupt authority with camera angles. Chapter 2 focuses on interviews across different platforms: as audio on NPR, and as a multimedia magazine spread in *Vogue U.K.* The reporters here exemplify more-involved second parties than the audience and editors in Chapter 1. The third and final chapter circles back to print, comparing two versions of "Cell One," a short story published in *The Thing Around Your Neck* book and *The New Yorker* magazine.

Ultimately, it's evident that though Adichie sacrifices some authority among second party influences across all mediums, the massive platform she gains in the digital sphere and in popular culture is vital to spreading activism in the 21st century.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, multimodal discourse, Nigerian literature, celebrity theory, feminist theory, mass media, authority, activism

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Short Titles/Glossary:

NAB: Non-American Black, a native-born African individual who has resided in the States
Used interchangeably with American African

American African: used interchangeably with NAB

Authority: used interchangeably with power, control, agency

Effective activism: activism where quality – how persuasive a message is – balances with
quantity – how large a following the message amasses

Text: all mediums across all platforms including but not limited to: print articles, online articles,
radio interviews, live speeches, video-recorded speeches, etc.
(Unless specified as written text, visual text, etc.)
Used interchangeably with work

Medium: the form of a text, including but not limited to: written, audial, visual forms

Platform: what mediums are communicated, broadcast, and publicized through, including but not
limited to: print, digital, radio, new media, television

Second parties: any influence outside of Adichie, including but not limited to: publicists,
publishers, editors, interviewers, reporters, photographers, videographers, etc.

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis, Thomas Huckin's linguistic theory

NPR: National Public Radio

Talk: a TED Talk

“Single story”: “The Danger of a Single Story” TED Talk by Adichie

“Feminists”: “We Should All Be Feminists” TED Talk by Adichie

Beyond the Single Story:

A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

INTRODUCTION

*“We say to girls,
‘You can have ambition,
but not too much.
You should aim to be successful,
but not too successful.
Otherwise, you will threaten the man.’”*

— [“***Flawless feat. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,”](#) Beyoncé album

When Beyoncé dropped her album in December of 2013, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie soared to recognition when her viral “We Should All Be Feminists” TED Talk layered over Beyoncé’s voice. In the hit song, an excerpt of Adichie’s speech defines: “Feminist: the person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes.” Going forward, Adichie joined “Queen Bey” and the force of public figures promoting feminism to a mainstream audience.

Defining Adichie

Adichie, 38, was born to university-affiliated parents in Enugu, Nigeria, an ethnically-Igbo college town. After pursuing medicine at the University of Nigeria for slightly over one year, she transferred to the United States at 19 to study communications and political science at Drexel University in Philadelphia. Academia now regards Adichie as a venerable author who holds higher degrees from John’s Hopkins and Yale, as well as a MacArthur Fellowship, commonly known as the “genius grant.” Her most recent novel, *Americanah*, won the prestigious National Book Critics Circle Award in 2014. Around the same time, “Flawless” rose to the top of iTunes charts in 104 countries then won the Grammy Award for album of the year, launching Adichie’s words into “fame.” In amalgamating her scholastic and pop culture identities, this

thesis refers to Adichie as a “celebrity author.” Adichie’s celebrity status opens up many more identities: as a product of the media industry, as a woman of color, and as an activist.

First, theorist Richard Dyer describes a celebrity as a compilation of mass media voices in his book, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*: “a star’s image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs” (2). Celebrities aren’t just defined by their body of work, but as a composition of second-party voices. Going forward, the expression “second parties” encompasses any influence outside of Adichie, including but not limited to: publicists, publishers, editors, interviewers, reporters, photographers, videographers, and so forth.

Dyer also claims, “Celebrities are a case of appearance,” so the media’s spotlight draws certain expectations because Adichie embodies a woman of color. Throughout this essay, the descriptor “American African” refers to Adichie’s racial and ethnic identity. The popular term may be “African American,” but as differentiated in her third book, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, an American African (otherwise known as a NAB, Non-American Black) is a native-born African individual who has resided in the States, while an African American is someone born Black in the U.S. This thesis inquires how Adichie’s race and gender enable or hinder her goals as a celebrity author and activist.

Finally, as a celebrity who writes and speaks about her marginalized identity, Adichie assumes the responsibilities of a social activist, translating issues of feminism, race relations, and Nigeria from her novels for a wider audience. In fact, Adichie views her activism as almost an obligation as a celebrity and writer with a platform to do so. In her most recent novel, *Americanah*, the protagonist’s dear friend “used that word, ‘lazy,’ often, for...black celebrities who were not politically active” (Adichie, 312).

Defining Activism

To be an activist requires two elements: to be persuasive and to have a following. To fulfill both necessitates possessing authority, a term used interchangeably in this essay with power, control, and agency. This thesis defines “effective” activism as one where quality – how persuasive a message is – balances with quantity – how large a following the message amasses. Quality messages usually involve “pure” authority, or Adichie’s voice free from second-party influences, such as magazines that try to make feminism fashionable or interviewers who commit microaggressions when addressing race. Unfortunately, even the most pure, quality messages aren’t productive if they don’t reach enough people to make an impact on society. Viral platforms, like YouTube or social media, help increase circulation counts.

Adichie stands as only one of many authors in history who doubles as an activist, so while she is only a case study, she serves as an important example of how mass media recognition can affect activism. Ultimately, this thesis asks: does Adichie’s celebrity role help or potentially hinder her authority to raise social awareness? And if the celebrity role involves second parties, will they disrupt her activist messages when filtered through mass publicity?

To answer these questions of authority and activism, this thesis employs Thomas Huckin’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a measurement tool for power dynamics between a written text’s¹ author and its reader. For non-written texts, such as speeches, photos, or videos, multimodal theories of CDA, specifically multimodal discourse and cinematography theory, work instead. CDA dissects language into four levels: the word/phrase level, the sentence/utterance level, the textual level, and the higher level. Breaking down structure, syntax,

¹ From here forward, any use of the word “text” (unless specified as written text, visual text, etc.) encompasses all mediums, including but not limited to: written words, spoken speeches, audio and video recordings, etc. “Text” is also interchangeably used with “work.”

tone, and pronoun choice from highest to minutest level can elucidate power dynamics. The method of analysis can discern how “effective” Adichie is as an activist, especially since Huckin declares the purpose of CDA as to incite social change...encourage (readers) to address and, ideally, act on important social problems” (1).

Ultimately, this thesis assesses the dynamics of authority through three lenses: Adichie with her audience, Adichie with second parties, and Adichie with the medium and platform themselves. In each chapter, I evaluate one medium – written, audial, or visual – in which I aim to answer: how does this specific medium uniquely restrict or assist Adichie’s ability to convey ideas persuasively, and thus be an activist effectively? Mediums are communicated through platforms, such as print, the Internet, radio, new media, television, and so on – so how do those support or compromise her authority, as well? Exploring multimodal pieces separately will reveal how they also function as a collective message of social awareness.

The first chapter focuses on Adichie’s two TED Talks – first, as a neutral written speech, and second, as a video. Cinematography theory is employed with the video to assess how editors disturb authority with camera angles. Chapter 2 looks at interviews across different platforms: as audio on National Public Radio, and as a multimedia spread in *Vogue U.K* magazine. The interviewers here represent more-involved second parties than the ones in Chapter 1. The third and final chapter circles back to print, comparing two versions of “Cell One,” a short story published in *The Thing Around Your Neck* book and *The New Yorker* magazine.

Defining Authority

To provide a foundation for the chapters, I’ll start with the etymology of “authority,” which branches into contradictory meanings. “Author” and “authority” share the same Latin origin: *auct*, or invention, opinion, influence, command. Respectively, *auctor* and *auctoritas*

mean inventor/master/leader and knowledge of an area. Thus, being an author means both (or either) to be the originator of content and (or) to possess utmost authority on a subject.

However, I contend that “author” and “authority,” though derived from the same root, can be mutually exclusive. From the French, *auctorité*, the word encompasses definitions of prestige, permission, right, dignity – definitions that include approval of others. I propose that authority is not just in-ground; it must be determined by others. An author does not simply gain authority by writing a book; readers must validate the ideas and be convinced that the author truly is the expert.

Interestingly, another word that shares the same Latin root, [auction](#), is defined as a sale to bidders: the practice of giving things up. Following the paradoxical origin of “authority,” this thesis argues that one gains authority by relinquishing it – either by sharing it with second parties, or handing it to audiences for judgment. In Adichie’s case, as celebrity, she shares her authority each time she steps into the media’s spotlight, and as a writer, her audiences are the ones to determine exactly how much authority her messages have.

Sociologist Max Weber distinguished three “pure” forms of authority in his 1958 posthumously-published essay, “The three types of legitimate rule.” One form, traditional authority, derives from long-established customs and social structures – the status quo. Positions of traditional power include government officials, the law in general – and in the case of this essay, mass media, including the second parties they encompass, such as journalists, interviewers, editors, publishers, and publicists. In their essay about “The Culture Industry,” Theodor Adorno and Jay Bernstein define mass media as “confine(ing) itself to standardization and mass production... The bread on which the culture industry feeds humanities remains the stone of stereotype” (95, 119). Real-life examples of the homogeneity they cite include western

standards of thinness and beauty, typecasts of women as submissive, stereotypes of Black people as less educated – tropes the media cultivates and perpetuates through “film, radio, and magazines (which) form a system” (95).

On the other hand, to be a charismatic authority means to challenge traditional authority. Historically, charismatic leaders included activists such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., or Nelson Mandela because they fought unjust conventional systems. In popular culture, charismatic figures can be celebrities who “challenge” traditional mass media by struggling to maintain selfhood under pressures to conform to the “stone of stereotype” (Adorno and Bernstein, 119). Charismatic authority is akin to fame, so celebrities gain authority by building fan followings. Similarly, activism cannot gain momentum without large followings. After all, to be an activist is a “struggle with tradition... (where) art can find expression for suffering” (Adorno and Bernstein, 103). So, Adichie understands that building a celebrity identity will immensely assist her activist goals. That is, Beyoncé fans who hear Adichie in “Flawless” or *Vogue* readers who see her photo shoot lend themselves to listening to her messages about feminism and racial equality, too.

However, while charismatic authority aims to challenge traditional authority, charismatic authority is also dependent on the traditional. It’s a collaboration: celebrities need the help of the mass media industry to amass followings larger than they could cultivate themselves. For instance, Ifemelu in *Americanah* accrues a sizable blog following where she is the sole authority – the content creator, editor, and publicist. However, she eventually responds to requests to give public speeches, where her online following swells and more people read her posts about race. Likewise for Adichie, by first agreeing to be interviewed, photographed, or videotaped, she obtains a platform – in a magazine, on YouTube, on the radio – to relate the activist messages

from her novels to her own personal stories. In speaking about herself, she creates “charisma,” a celebrity personality, a brand of sorts. In cyclical form, as she builds intrigue in herself, the media asks for more interviews and public appearances.

Each time when agreeing to the media’s requests, Adichie submits to the other requirement of the industry: to share her authority with second parties. To be interviewed involves an interviewer; to be photographed involves a photographer; to make a speech involves an audience to listen, cameramen to record, and video editors to repackage the material for publicists to broadcast to a new audience online. There is no such case where Adichie can be in mass media and retain full authority. Therefore, the paradox of authority – “to relinquish is to retain” – is the exact nature of the mass media industry.

The second parties of the mass media industry capitalize on Adichie’s “charisma”; her distinct personality and her identity as a woman of color becomes a commodity. As Dyer puts it, “Stars are involved in making themselves into commodities... The people who do this labour include the star him/herself as well as make-up artists, hairdressers, dress designers...publicists...gossip columnists, and so on” (4). Ultimately, Adichie has decided that the commoditization of her identity is worth the larger platform to voice concerns of social change. Overall, this thesis argues that in fulfilling the paradoxical definition of authority, Adichie satisfies the definition of activism: balancing quality and quantity, shared authority and publicity.

CHAPTER 1: TED Talks

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu grows from common-person activist to viral sensation once her blog amasses traction. She first welcomes her popularity when more people read whatever she wishes to write, and she guides discussion in the comments. Online, her brutally-honest words

feel revolutionary and refreshing. When she moves from behind her computer screen to conduct a real-life speech though, the new audience receives her as too radical, even calling her lecture “BALONEY” (Adichie, 305). Thus, she adjusts accordingly, catering to her digital and live audiences respectively: “During her talks, she said: ‘America has made great progress for which we should be very proud.’ In her blog she wrote: *Racism should have never happened and so you don’t get a cookie for reducing it...* She began to say what (live audiences) wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog, because she knew that the people who read her blog were not the same people who attended her diversity workshops” (305). When she starts appeasing them, the authority transitions from her own shoulders to theirs.

Likewise, the audiences who read Adichie’s novels are quite different from those who attend her TED Talks, so it’s plausible that Adichie, too, adapts her words in writing versus in public speaking. Is Adichie, like Ifemelu, also less critical of progress toward racial equality in her speeches? Must Adichie’s audience be coddled like Ifemelu’s, or are they more receptive to harsh truths?

Section 1

CDA of the “Single Story”: Author and Audience in Speeches

As a representation of the diversity lectures Ifemelu gives, Adichie’s 2009 TED Talk, [“The Danger of a Single Story”](#) illustrates the perils of perpetuating stereotypes. Adichie recounts personal stories where people homogenized her African identity based on “single-sided” norms of Africa as exotic, less-civilized, or poverty-stricken from popular media. Thomas Huckin’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) dissects the power dynamics between a text’s

author and its audience, so measuring nuances of authority in this Talk can classify how audiences respond to live² social criticism.

CDA is categorized into four levels: the higher level, which pertains to structural organization; the textual level, which highlights extended themes; the sentence/utterance level, which focuses on syntax; and the word/phrase level, which picks at pronoun choices. I will focus on just the textual and sentence/utterance levels, which have smaller “tactics” within them. At the textual level, the tactic of framing “universalizes” examples to help audiences relate more closely to Adichie, and the tactics of heteroglossia and irony emphasize contrast for persuasive effect. Finally, at the sentence/utterance level, transitivity shows transferences of power through pronoun shifts.

Starting at the textual level, Adichie framing in a nonconventional way. Huckin cites Parenti, Mumby, and Clair who define framing as “the slant or ‘spin’ an author gives to a text” (10). Huckin himself disputes that “The ability to cast a story in a certain light is one of the most powerful weapons at an author’s disposal” (10). Whereas many speakers blame others to prove their points though, Adichie frames herself as the villain instead of the victim. Before even halfway through her speech, she admits her own fault: “I, too, am just as guilty in the question of the single story... I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans, that they had become one thing in my mind: the abject immigrant” (8:20). By using the active voice and first person “I,” Adichie takes full responsibility for her own actions. Instead of pinning western society or Caucasians as the culprit, she pinpoints instances of ignorance on her own

² The authority dynamic illustrated here is not meant to be representative across all mediums – only for live speeches. CDA of the “Single Story” TED Talk only analyzes the speech as a written text – not in video form.

part, implying that anyone, regardless of race, can be guilty of racial discrimination. The fact that she acknowledges her own flaws allows her to be perceived as the prevailing voice of reason.

Adichie also frames herself negatively from another culture's perspective. She says, "If I had not grown up in Nigeria, and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of...incomprehensible people...unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner" (5:55). By recognizing how she is just as vulnerable to the "single-story" mindset as any western individual, Adichie creates a semblance of equality with her audience – empathizing even with their wrongs. When an American student falls prey to stereotyping, Adichie introspects: "This is not because I am a better person than that student, but because of America's cultural and economic power... I did not have a single story of America" (11:29). Even as the Black woman, the typically *discriminated* identity, by identifying herself among the *discriminators*, she debunks any notion that racial equality may mean superiority of the marginalized race.

Adichie's cognizance of her own oppression leads to her reading a gruesome quote by John Locke that bestializes Africans as monsters, to which she responds: "Now, I've laughed every time I've read this. And one must admire the imagination of John Locke" (7:04). She first purposefully discomforts her audience by portraying a traditional "western hero" in conjunction to old-world racist extremities. She then utilizes humor and irony, as many other activists popularly do to comment on Africa and race.

One such example is Kenyan Caine-prize-winning writer Binyavanga Wainaina, who, in his article [How to Write about Africa](#) on Granta.com, deliberately exaggerates literary tropes that dehumanize Africans. When offering sarcastic advice on how to write about Africa "sensitively," he instructs:

Do not mention rice and beef and wheat; monkey-brain is an African's cuisine of choice
... Your African characters may include naked warriors, loyal servants, diviners and seers
... Or corrupt politicians, inept polygamous travel-guides, and prostitutes you have slept
with ... Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death
is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals.

Wainaina virtually captures all the single-stories Adichie mentions she has been subject to throughout her life. It's clear that he portrays these ideas to such an extreme that feel ludicrous. While sarcasm is usually not present in Adichie's novels, it works effectively when she argues through spoken word because it indicates that she isn't offended by Locke's outlandish claims. Instead, she implies how silly they seem, and when her response meets laughter, it's clear the audience appreciates her humor. Adichie doesn't need to explicitly condemn the white race or western culture; rather, she earns the respect of her audience implicitly.

Another element at the textual level is heteroglossia: the coexistence of different points of view in one text – like a pro-con debate of sorts. Huckin cites theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (“The Dialogic Imagination”) as the original coiner of the term, and he claims that “Identifying (the) different voices enables the analyst to point out intertextual linkages, thus situating the text more firmly in a sociocultural context” (Huckin, 9-10). Simply upholding her speech's title, Adichie must engage more voices beyond her own so the audience doesn't receive the “single story” the whole talk warns against. To prove her point that racism is still prevalent today, Adichie includes voices that participated in her own marginalization and tokenization as an American African (or NAB). In one instance, she recounts that to her freshman year roommate, “There was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals” (4:50). In another instance, she

remembers, “The professor told me that my characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man. My characters drove cars. They were not starving, therefore they were not authentically African” (7:31). The stark contrast between Adichie’s progressive voice and the subtly-racist remarks of her roommate and professor brings awareness to the multidimensional, complex issue at hand. Adichie acknowledges the contrast between western and eastern cultures, especially between her primarily-white audience and her own Nigerian female identity, and she gains authority by mediating equality between them.

Finally, at the sentence/utterance level, Huckin defines transitivity as “the agent-patient relations in a sentence... It answers the question, Who is doing what to whom? In most cases, the semantic agent (or actor) in a sentence is depicted as having more power than the patient. If a text consistently has the same agent from sentence to sentence, it may reflect a perspective favoring that agent’s status” (8). Importance always lies on the pronoun that is the subject of a sentence, so by shifting pronouns, Adichie indicates a transference of focus:

“Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person... Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story” (10:11).

Adichie begins with third-person narration: “power” acts like a general, impartial “it” with no personal impact on listeners. But when Adichie shifts to second person, “you” could acutely specify each audience member watching; it could generalize to the collective audience; or it could broadly address greater society. The ambiguity of whom “you” refers to, though, is less important than the fact that Adichie uses it. She points fingers – not of blame, but to incite action. The “you” here states a fact (that you have an entirely different story), but that translates

into telling “you” to think deeper into positive African history, to open “your” mind beyond African stereotypes. The point of second person is to be personal, and the same goes for first person plural, “we”:

“I’ve always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or person without engaging with all the stories of that place and that person. The **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” (13:44).

Here, Adichie broadens from a singular “I’ve” to a collective “we” and “our”: pronouns that share the burden of racial ignorance and intolerance. With this division of weight comes the division of responsibility: again, Adichie constructs equality by holding each member of society accountable for the prejudice we *all* contribute to and the prejudice we must *all* help eradicate. However, even though she includes the first person plural, the **subject** of her final sentences after the colon are “it,” which refers to “the consequence of the single story.” So, Adichie disperses the blame (of robbing dignity, not recognizing equal humanity) from the “us” to be shared with the elusive “it.” This tactic is consistent with her implicit methods of using humility, not guilt, to persuade the audience.

Toward the end of the Talk, Adichie uses rhetorical “what if” questions to renounce her own position as the “the expert speaker” at the front of the room, and she fearlessly admits that like everyone else, she still has questions, too:

“What if before my Mexican trip, I had followed the immigration debate from both sides?... What if we **had** an African television network that broadcast diverse African stories all over the world?... What if my roommate knew about my friend Fumi Onda, a

fearless woman who hosts a TV show in Lagos, and is determined to tell the stories that we prefer to forget?” (14:08-16:46).

Throughout her series of ten “what if” questions, Adichie shifts from speculating about herself (first person “I”), to everyone as a society (plural “we”), to specific individuals (third person “my roommate”). These speculations again level her with the audience, where her listeners may share the same questions about race and admire her for pondering aloud.

While CDA predominantly examines power pejoratively – when writers and speakers demean their readers and listeners with aggressively dominant voices – with marginalized populations, commanding attention over an audience affords speakers an agency they may not have had before. This is why Adichie’s identity matters: as a Black woman speaking in an American city (Long Beach, TED’s annual conference location) to a mostly-white audience. She candidly addresses the lack of racial equality progress she has seen, a topic that may certainly shock or displease her western audience.

Yet, the ugly truths Adichie dispels aren’t negatively received like in Ifemelu’s speech, evidenced by the standing ovation and the video’s ten million-plus total views online. Adichie’s positive reception may be attributed to how she doesn’t solely detail the faulty judgments she has *been* subject to, but she admits she has been *the* subject of wrongfully perpetuating stereotypes, as well. At first, this tactic of humility and equality may seem like the exact coddling of audiences that Ifemelu (and Adichie) frown down upon. But, even while humble, Adichie isn’t any less critical of racial progress; in no second of the TED Talk does she ever assuage that equality is complete. She simply states the harsh truths in a more welcome way: as a universal culprit instead of an individual accusation. That’s not coddling – just a kinder rhetorical strategy to get the audience on her side. And when she finally persuades them, she regains the authority

she first relinquished to them – the authority paradox. As a result, Adichie’s “Single Story” Talk dispels her own “singular” identity: she is more than first and foremost a Black woman; she has equal-part authority as writer and activist.

Section 2

“We Should All Be Feminists”: Shared Authority in Video

Whereas Chapter 1 examines a TED speech as a neutral script, this chapter analyzes another of Adichie’s Talks (TEDx Euston), but as a video. In “[We Should All Be Feminists](#),” I introduce a factor that complicates the measure of authority: the second party. “Feminists” not only hit a viral 2.3 million views on YouTube alone, but Adichie’s words shattered record sales after being sampled in Beyoncé’s “Flawless,” which sold almost 830,000 downloads in just three days. Since her success, Adichie also adapted the talk into a mini-book – 64 print pages of a modified transcription of the speech. Adichie couldn’t have reached such high viewership by herself, without the help of the TED organization, publicists to share the talk, and managers to connect her with Beyoncé. So though she hands authority over to those second parties, is that a worthy sacrifice for the higher circulation?

Unlike with text, the video medium offers the immediacy of both image and sound. In the introduction to *Heavenly Bodies*, Dyer categorizes terms into private and public identities (8): “racial” is associated with private, embodied by how Adichie identifies herself as a NAB; “ethnic” is listed under “public,” outlined by how society identifies Adichie, most likely through Black stereotypes. However, video makes the private public. Onscreen, it’s no secret that Adichie is a Black woman upon first sight. Audibly, her foreign accent deduces her as an American African, not a native of this country. On the other hand, in Adichie’s written text – in which a picture-less and voiceless name represents her – a few ignorant individuals may not

immediately discern that Adichie is Black. On the contrary, in video form, audiences never forget Adichie's identity as woman of color. Thus, the prevalent reminder of her identity on film dangerously asks: do audiences receive Adichie as a Black woman first, or do they hear the content of her ideas and categorize her as a writer, speaker, activist first? While no concrete measure exists to answer, the unanswerable question may be more unsettling.

Another unique function of video is its ability to recreate physical presence at the actual event. Shifts in angle clearly indicate editing in videos, but in written text – in Adichie's stories and magazine interviews – it's much more difficult, or even impossible, to locate exactly which parts are edited. In "[Listen and Learn](#)," a *New Yorker* feature article on the TED organization, writer Nathan Heller divulges the editing style of the Talks:

TED favors tight shots for sensitive moments – “to gaze into a speaker's eyes” – and to make an intimate frame for small Web-player screens. Most lectures begin with introductions, throat-clearings, and lame jokes, but TED prunes all that out. TED's videos start with a clamorous, animated opening; a swell of applause is added, and then they cut to what editors find to be the first interesting moment of the talk. Awkward silences, microphone troubles, factual errors on slides, the dribbling of water on shirtfronts, stumbles onstage – all such infelicities are elided. Wide shots or reaction cutaways speed up ponderous talks or slow down rushed ones.

Through editing, the video doesn't depict a typical physical experience of being a seated attendee at the event; it compiles the various angles from which the eight cameras (consistent at every TED event) filmed, offering more of an “all-access” experience tailored for the at-home online viewer. The video captures the perspective not of the audience, but of the editor, for whom Adichie is not the subject of an auditorium's attention, but the object of the camera's point of

view. The editor then pieces together a narrative of angles to recreate Adichie onscreen as she/he creatively sees fit. Because Adichie can't control how her own image is presented, authority transfers from Adichie to the editor – the second party. She doesn't voluntarily relinquish her authority this time; she's almost forced to give it up since her job is not to edit her own Talk.

Inadvertently so, Adichie and her message become “ventriloquized” through the editor. The order, juxtaposition, and timing of angles that the editor pieces together illustrate the power dynamics between Adichie and the audience – much like CDA does. In one instance:

(Medium Close-up) I think very often of my dear friend Okoloma. May he and others who passed away in that Sosoliso crash continue to rest in peace. (Wide angle). He will always be remembered by those of us who loved him. (Low angle). And he was right that day many years ago when he called me a feminist. I am a feminist.

When the camera points upward at Adichie from below the podium (low angle), the frame places Adichie at a sort of skyscraper angle. Thomas Van Rompay (2008) designates this phenomena as the verticality schema of cinematography, where an object that rises higher upward is perceived as more dominant, bold, or impressive. Accordingly, Joan Meyers-Levy and Laura Peracchio (1992) theorize that when low angles are coupled with positive messages, audiences actually perceive subjects more favorably. In this segment, straight-on angles frame the telling of the tragic plane crash and Okoloma's death, while the low angle is reserved exclusively for the empowering part of the story – the last sentence where Adichie defines herself as a feminist.

While some camera angles positively frame Adichie, other juxtapositions don't always yield the same effect. In another instance, a cut from Adichie speaking to a close-up of audience members automatically associates the listeners' reactions with what Adichie says in that same moment:

Now, when a (Nigerian) woman says, “I did it for peace in my marriage,” she is usually talking about having given up a job, a dream, a career. (Close-up of women of color in the audience).



Figure 1.1

The juxtaposition of the ethnic audience with an anecdote about Nigerians lumps Africans together like the “single-story” warns against. For all the editor knows, they may be another ethnicity of African, such as Ethiopian, or perhaps not even Black at all. But the editor still stereotypes two “ethnic-looking people” in attempt to demonstrate audience engagement, when inadvertently showing tokenization instead.

The final cut of angle choices can cast Adichie in both a positive or negative light, as these two examples have indicated, but most prevalently, it restricts the viewing scope for the audience – what Adorno and Burnstein call a “withering of imagination.” They declare, “Film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination – contained by the film’s framework but unsupervised by its precise actualities... It trains those exposed to it

to identity film directly with reality” (100). This restrictive nature of the frame not only hinders Adichie in how her message comes across, but it limits audiences from putting their own interpretive spin on the message.

The video medium also captures audience reactions to guide those watching online. Just as sitcom laugh-tracks dictate what “should” be funny or important (applause, cheering, laughter), the video raises consciousness of an ever-present audience, which can provide similar reaction instructions to viewers watching on YouTube. When viewers are made aware of audience behavior, it may impact how they receive Adichie’s words – either helping or hampering their understanding of her meaning:

But anyway, since feminism was un-African, I decided I would now call myself a happy *African* feminist. At some point, I was a happy, African feminist who does not hate men and who likes lip gloss and who wears high heels for herself but not for men.

(Audience laughter).

The laughter here alludes to how viewers have already picked up on Adichie’s sarcasm, and it notes to future audiences to interpret her message as ironic. Even through the laughter, the camera doesn’t cut away to show the people’s reactions; it stays put on a medium close-up of Adichie’s face and torso. By maintaining focus on Adichie, the content of these words are enhanced by her facial expressions and body language. In this manner, the camera positioning buttresses Adichie’s authority. In another fashion, the edited camera positioning doesn’t effectively guide the audience:

We *police* girls. We praise girls for virginity, but we don’t praise boys for virginity. And it’s always made me wonder how exactly this is supposed to work out.

Audience laughter; Adichie laughs

Camera pans to audience

Audience starts clapping and cheering

because – I mean, the loss of virginity is usually a process that involves – (hand gestures to both sides).

While the audience laughs on their own accord first, it's after the camera focuses on the audience that they erupt in louder cheers. From the look of the video, it seems like the camera can anticipate audience approval. That's obviously not what happens in real life, but when seeing the camera pan to the audience in advance, viewers prepare themselves to react.

In filmmaking, an age-old saying goes: “Editors are the final writers.” While Adichie may have written her own speech for the TED Talk, once it is on the Internet, the video itself – the story told through editing – controls how engaged online viewers feel. On YouTube, viewers have the ability to pause, or even discontinue, watching her speech. This is why theorist Walter Benjamin criticizes the video medium in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”: “The audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera” (680). According to Benjamin, mass digital reproduction (like distributing Adichie’s speech to the World Wide Web) creates an inauthentic or delusional relationship between the actor and viewer – between Adichie and her audience. And Benjamin is not entirely wrong; the “editor” before the video itself is even edited is the TED organization, who according to Heller’s *New Yorker* article, enforces a 136-page rule book upon every event hosted. Along with capping every Talk to 18 minutes maximum, “curators” editorialize speeches to “follow one of several narrative arcs (some have three acts, others are cast as detective stories, others are polemics), and curating is about...shaping each lecture... Allusions, metaphors, jargon, jokes – anything that

might appeal to an audience of coastal Californians but leave online viewers in Lebanon baffled – are often flagged and cut, a process that can bleach lectures to an odd cultural beige.”

However, this process of mass digital reproduction that Benjamin laments for destroying authenticity is the exact process that makes activism more possible in the 21st century. Without the Internet, recorded speeches like this TED Talk couldn't be spread widely beyond the audience of a couple hundred present at the event. The video medium offers a worthy compromise: for Adichie's message to be slightly disrupted by editors and restrictions, she attains a larger platform – not just the TED stage, but the TED YouTube channel, which has rewarded her with millions of views (and counting) to date. According to Heller's reporting, “The conference has grown famous for making its speakers famous... Today, the average TED video gets forty thousand views within twenty-four hours.” In going viral with both Talks and being sampled by Beyoncé, one of the world's largest pop stars, the recognition Adichie's received from these speeches largely contributes to her celebrity-author status. By giving up her authority to the editors and organization, Adichie regains it all when she influences more people.

CHAPTER 2: Interviews

Section 1

CDA of NPR interview: Limitations of Audio

As demonstrated by Adichie's [National Public Radio “Fresh Air” interview](#) with Terry Gross from June 2013, the authority exchange on the radio medium is similar to that of video because both are subject to editors before airing. Again, both audio and film editing most likely don't involve Adichie's collaboration, so she cannot decide which of her quotes stay in or are left out. Where the radio and video mediums differ though, is that in taped speeches, Adichie's voice

seems like a monologue, while an interview by definition includes a voice next to her own – a voice whose job is to question and contend hers.

Adichie shares her authority with Gross just by being on a broadcast hosted and executively produced by someone who's also a celebrity in her own right. *Gross* brings Adichie on *her* show. “Fresh Air” is technically labeled as an “interview-format radio show,” but the segment actually feels more akin to casual book club banter. Gross doesn't ask many questions; the two women just build discussion based on points the other raises. Again by using CDA, I assess the dynamics between the interviewer, Gross, and interviewee, Adichie. In their sharing of time, space, and ideas, how does Adichie grapple with authority with such an involved second party?

The 27-minute segment centers on *Americanah*, Adichie's book where Ifemelu's narrative partly parallels Adichie's own experiences navigating her “new” Black identity in the United States. In one part of the conversation, when Gross and Adichie try to trace the origin of Black identification:

Gross posits: “**I think** for white people too there's this burden of guilt that's lifted – **I think** there is a sense of collective guilt that white people carry for enslaving African Americans...” (7:16).

Adichie responds: “...**I do think** there is white guilt in the U.S. but **I don't think** it's very helpful. But **I think** that what American blacks and American whites should take away from the table is the idea of personal responsibility” (8:10).

At the sentence/utterance level, both women use “**I think**” to preface their statements – a CDA strategy of topicalization where a sentence's emphasis depends on which pronouns are used and where they are placed. The phrase “I think” indicates personal opinion. Gross first sets the object

of her “I think” on white guilt. While Adichie does address this white guilt, she shifts the object of her own “I think” back to a collective responsibility. Adichie isn’t necessarily debunking what Gross says; she just declares that the white guilt Gross poses isn’t useful. Anyway, simple agreement and disagreement doesn’t signify contention of authority. Shifts in authority emerge from who sets the conversation topic, so when Adichie opens the discussion up to universal responsibility, she gains authority in that brief moment. Adorno and Bernstein state, “The reputation of the specialist (the interviewee), in which a last residue of actual autonomy still occasionally finds refuge, collides with the business policy of the... industrial (the interviewer) producing the culture commodity” (102). Adichie, as the interviewee, can ultimately only follow her interviewer’s direction; she doesn’t have any real “autonomy” to determine the core conversation topics, only to build off of the ones Gross initiates.

The rest of the “Fresh Air” segment follows a similar continuation of “I” statements because only Gross, with authority as the host, can break this pattern by asking questions instead of posing thoughts. When Gross doesn’t pose a concrete query, Adichie can only respond with “I” statements in response to Gross’. “I” statements are a means of diverting attention back onto oneself, so every new first person statement tugs and pulls at authoritative voice in one direction. Thus, when most of the whole interview follows the “I” statement format, the two women don’t seem to be in conversation with each other, just tangentially speaking about themselves.

Later in the interview when discussing Black hair, Gross says, “To hear you growing up in Nigeria where you and your mother straightened your hair, **I presume** to look more western” (18:45). To use “I presume” takes “I think” to a higher level: to presume is to assume – to believe one has authority to conjecture outside of oneself – an authority Gross seizes. In response, Adichie explains: “**I don’t think** that women in Nigeria were consciously aware; I

don't suppose that they sat down and thought ‘and now we will try to look white.’” (18:55).

Adichie is obviously the expert on Nigerian hair here, yet she still doesn't “presume” anything. In fact, she uses “suppose,” a synonym for “presume” in a negative syntax: she **doesn't** broadly generalize like Gross does. Her use of negative “I think” also changes the direction of Gross' initial point – again, a small moment of authority for Adichie.

Besides Gross, the other disrupter of Adichie's authority is the audio medium itself. Adorno and Bernstein explain: “(Radio) democratically makes everyone equally into listeners... It thereby takes on the deceptive form of a disinterested, impartial authority” (95, 129). In any interview, reporter may intend to come off as objective, but on a platform where sound is the only basis of judgment, listeners must fill their gaps of knowledge with schemas and assumptions. For example, in discussing white guilt again, Adichie says, “I feel like white Americans to start off need to say things like ‘oh it's not my fault,’ and I'm like ‘well of course it's not your fault’” (8:30) At the word/phrase level, Adichie changes register: she code-switches from her formal, sophisticated voice to a more colloquial one, from “I think” to “I'm like.” Her use of the “I'm like,” said in no particularly distinctive tone, leaves the connotation slightly ambiguous to listeners. Without facial expressions or body language to discern, as there are on film, the phrase could be interpreted as glib, nonchalant, sarcastic, or an array of other options. Within the medium of audio, Adichie can't control the reactions of her audience the same way she can when people can her.

Furthermore, the lacking visual context masks Adichie's identity as an American African. Videos unveil her Black skin color, but audio only reveals a prominent accent – one that common listeners can't typically place. Context clues in the interview quickly identify the accent as Nigerian, but to audiences, being Black doesn't matter so much as being foreign. Adichie's

particular accent as a Black woman doesn't align with the stereotypical "ghetto" or "sassy" Black voices outlined by popular media. She simply sounds "different" from what American listeners on an American broadcast are accustomed to hearing, especially adjacent to Gross (with a Jewish, albeit still American dialect). Basic developmental psychology has proven that people naturally identify more with voices they're familiar with. A recognizable accent coupled with the title of "host," Gross doesn't necessarily "take" authority away from Adichie, but there's an inherent, implicit teeter of authority based on how their voices sound.

However, as demonstrated in this thesis thus far, Adichie's willingness to offer control to second parties like Gross in turn gives her a larger platform from which to share – from the TED YouTube channel and now to NPR, one of the most popular and respected radio companies in the country. The Peabody Award-winning "[Fresh Air](#)" broadcasts to more than 450 local NPR stations, so Adichie's ideas can be heard by almost 4.5 million national listeners.

Section 2:

CDA of *Vogue U.K.* spread: Discourse of Multimedia Magazines

The Interview: CDA of Narrative Journalism

Farhad Manjoo's [article](#) in Slate magazine cites that an average of 60% of online readers make it through only slightly more than half of articles. Therefore, unlike when listening to radio, consumers often skim magazines for the effect of the photos and the gist of articles; they take away an impression of the subject and her/his dynamic with the reporter. While the NPR interview seems like a conversation between Terry Gross and Adichie, British journalist Erica Wagner's [interview with Adichie in *Vogue U.K.*](#) embodies Wagner's voice, as the article writer, more than Adichie's. The CDA tactic of framing, at both at the higher (structural) and textual (syntax) levels, outlines this conflict of authority. The magazine feature, published both on the

website and in the April 2015 print issue, also consists of color photos taken by Nigerian photographer Akintude Akinleye, for which Adichie posed exclusively.

Wagner weaves her interview into a summary of Adichie's background, family, literary accomplishments, and activist initiatives in 3000 words. The story is just as much about Wagner as it is about Adichie though: Wagner opens and closes the piece with anecdotes about her personal experience traveling to Adichie's Nigerian hometown, eating lunch with her family, getting drinks with her friends, and sharing a nail-polish color. Following primacy and recency effects in social psychology³, an article's lede and conclusion leave the most lasting impressions, so a reader's main takeaway could be Wagner's perception of Adichie rather than Adichie's own words. The article's body consists of quotes and facts of Adichie – arguably more important than any personal anecdote Wagner offers. So, at the CDA higher level, Wagner frames Adichie's story within her own “overarching” narrative.

In addition, Wagner frames Adichie's quotes with personal context like “When I ask her” and “she told me,” so her omnipresence throughout the piece divides the attention between two subjects. Therefore, not only is the focus on Adichie halved, but Wagner's authority multiplies when she becomes both subject *and* writer. Her use of first-person framing as the reporter isn't unique to this article over the course of *Vogue U.K.*'s history, and it's not distinctive to *Vogue U.K.* as a magazine either. Even Ifemelu in *Americanah* recognizes when she works as a journalist, “the idea of interviewing someone and writing a profile is judgmental... It's not about the subject. It's about what the interviewer makes of the subject” (415).

³ The serial position effect states that people remember the first and last pieces of information presented best, while they remember middle parts worst.

Another way Wagner inserts herself into Adichie’s narrative is by “editorializing,” or subjectively contextualizing, Adichie’s quotes. Objective reporting only states inarguable facts, and to maintain objectivity, reporters usually don’t use verbs other than “say” (or occasionally “explain”) when quoting a subject. Contrarily, Wagner introduces Adichie’s quotes framed by phrases like “she shrugs,” indicating doubt or uncertainty. In another example, Wagner writes: “‘In Nigeria I’m not black,’ (Adichie) says simply. ‘We don’t do race in Nigeria.’” In a sentence where Adichie’s voice should stand alone, her ideas are instead ventriloquized through Wagner’s narration. Adichie can’t control how her claim is presented since her tone is limited by the “simply” adverb Wagner writes.

Objective reporters also often block off quotes into their own paragraph to ensure they aren’t framed out of context. On the contrary, Wagner doesn’t use this technique. Through the entire article, she embeds Adichie’s quotes into long narrative paragraphs:

For the past eight summers (Adichie) and her Nigerian publisher have hosted a writing workshop in Lagos. These days there are 2,000 applicants for 20 places – she wants to keep it small, ‘otherwise it loses something.’ **It’s clear that this is a project dear to her heart: she loves teaching, she says. “I want to make it valid, to dream about books and writing. Because in Nigeria it’s very hard; people will say to you, what do you mean, ‘writing’?”**

When reading quickly, it becomes difficult to discern which thoughts are Adichie’s and which are Wagner’s. First, Wagner doesn’t clearly cite ‘otherwise it loses something’ as a quote from Adichie; the phrase seamlessly flows after Wagner’s own statement, as if it could be her own opinion, too. In the second part of the paragraph (**bolded**), speakers become ambiguous when the layers of voices muddle together. There’s Wagner’s voice (red), Wagner paraphrasing Adichie

(yellow), Adichie's direct statement (green), and Adichie quoting someone else (blue).

Essentially, the structure of the article is *subjective* to Wagner's opinion. Adichie's individual voice rarely stands untouched by Wagner's use of framing, which restricts Adichie's authority as the subject of this article. This style of block paragraphs (instead of blocked-off quotes) is quite common in *Vogue U.K.*, but it means that because readers must rely on the interviewer.

Beyond higher, structural instances, framing at the textual level allows the writer to cast her own connotation on a subject (Huckin). Wagner first describes Adichie: "What was so striking was her own confidence and authority. She very much held her own, and spoke fluently and powerfully." Wagner's use of "striking" suggests an element of surprise – as if it's uncommon for a woman of color to possess these positive qualities. Wagner personally identifies as female, so it is unlikely she purposely intends sexism. However, she just may not be aware of how the audience receives her tone – an example of a microaggression, an (often inadvertent) undertone that implicitly subverts the agency of the person it's directed at.

Wagner later utilizes "testimonials,"⁴ a social psychological principle that frames a smaller argument in a stronger one, which means to make the smaller argument more persuasive. Wagner first cites Beyoncé, whom many in pop culture even refer to as "Queen Bey": "I was immediately drawn to (Adichie) ... Her definition of a feminist described my own feeling." Accordingly, Wagner coins Adichie as "Beyoncé's favourite feminist," a title that automatically paints Adichie as a more noteworthy feminist, since she is now in association with the "Queen" herself. Wagner also quotes Lupita Nyong'o, an Academy Award-winning Nigerian actress

⁴ The Yale Attitude Change Model (often used for advertising and political campaigning) outlines conditions under which people will most likely be persuaded. According to the "normative effects" of the model, people are more likely to be persuaded if they feel an argument is "normal" – or personally relatable. A testimonial is a normative effect, since quotes or endorsements from familiar figures (often celebrities) make people more comfortable agreeing.

currently opted as the lead in the *Americanah* film adaptation: “For the first time I felt that someone (Adichie) had found the words to express sentiments, analyse situations about the rich and varied African immigrant experience, in a way I never could.” When Beyoncé and Nyong’o, two very well-respected, African-American celebrities, “endorse” Adichie’s feminist work, readers who may not have heard of Adichie can then better relate to her in association with popular figures they recognize. Ironically, neither Beyoncé nor Nyong’o have any authority in Adichie’s discipline of writing, but Wagner’s testimonial tactic still poses two more “famous” figures to buttress Adichie as a feminist. On the other hand, in Adichie’s TED Talks and books, her *own* words and authority convince readers to believe her messages of feminism.

Furthermore, The *Vogue U.K.* article suggests a discord between how Wagner frames Adichie’s ideas and what Adichie really means. In the interview, Adichie is quoted: “I really do think Beyoncé is a force for good... Suddenly (young people in our celebrity obsessed world), well, suddenly they are thinking about (feminism).” Adichie doesn’t seem to have a problem with her words appearing in popular culture, and she in fact supports celebrity endorsement if it means greater awareness of gender equality. Just before this quote though, Wagner writes: “The collaboration (to sample Adichie’s TED Talk in Beyoncé’s “Flawless” song) is not something Adichie has discussed much, wary that too much talk of pop music would shift the focus away from what she cares about.” Wagner’s narration suggests that Adichie notices the danger of feminism becoming too “fashionable.” Of course, unless Adichie is directly asked, her real opinion of mainstream feminism cannot be certain. Thus, this segment obstructs Adichie’s real thoughts: does Adichie support mainstream feminism as she is quoted, or is what Wagner, the interviewer who did speak directly to Adichie, correct? While Adichie’s voice must be ventriloquized through Wagner’s narration, this exchange of authority again provides her greater

exposure in a popular magazine like *Vogue U.K.* Wagner doesn't actually make explicitly negative judgments of Adichie, so even though Adichie's agency is slightly disrupted, she still benefits from Wagner's praise.

The Photos: From Subject to Object

Along with the interview, Adichie posed for a fashion shoot at her Nigerian home. For visual images, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's theory of multimodal discourse serves as a "CDA for pictures," where choices of color, crop, and composition all convey certain dynamics between the subjects within the image, and the subjects with the audience. They explain how like language, color, too, follows a grammar that communicates meaning, and magazines must stay within these rules to maintain consistency.

In the online version of Adichie's *Vogue U.K.* feature, the four photos along the left-hand sidebar all picture her standing – a conventional stance of power (as opposed to sitting). However, while most of her body is pictured in each, her eyes always appear downcast or distant. Her indirect gaze suggests shyness or aloofness, which clashes with her confident posture. Thus, the images send incongruent messages about Adichie's authority to readers.





Figure 2.1

In photographing Adichie, the magazine inherits the responsibility to define what each of Adichie’s identities look like: how *Vogue* believes a feminist, an American African, a celebrity author and activist “should” dress and pose. Perhaps through Adichie’s contrasting stance and glance, *Vogue U.K.* means to depict the idea of balance: strong, yet soft. Through this idea, Adichie as a feminist is bold through her stance, yet still stereotypically feminine, donned in the color Kress and van Leeuwun call the definition of femininity (pink). Even when she appears in bolder green and red (top row photos left to right), similar hues in her backdrop – the green bushes and red-tinted wall – mute the colors’ vibrancy. As an American African, Adichie is just as much eastern as she is western; she wears audacious tribal patterns (top row photos), but American fashion has influenced her style, too (vintage-cut dress in the last photo). It’s questionable whether Adichie’s true persona as an American African feminist would agree with *Vogue U.K.*’s idea of balance, but she has no authority over what story the four chosen photos tells. The overall “look” is decided by editors, who – even if not pre-meditating every nuance of color and composition – subject Adichie to the magazine’s creative vision: strong but soft.

As a consequence, these four photos as part of *Vogue U.K.*’s vision, brand Adichie as a style “icon” in a renowned fashion publication. Magazines must be sold, and visual images –

specifically, chic photographs of celebrities – are one of the primary attractors of buyers and readers. In discussing the market function of famous people, Dyer states, “Stars sell newspapers and magazines” (4). Those who recognize and admire Adichie will most likely pick up the article, whether attracted by her picture in print or through an online advertisement. In this manner, *Vogue U.K.* takes authority over Adichie as their commodity, crafting her “look” to uphold their commercial and economic aims.

The way Adichie’s image is sold can be compared to how books are sold based on the visual appeal of their covers. On the “Africa is a Country” [blog](#), Elliot Ross published a collage of 36 African novel covers that looked virtually identical, regardless of their content or specific African origin. The age-old saying cautions “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” but social psychology⁵ confirms that humans do just that; they make and solidify snap judgments of Africa as one-dimensionally tribal or exotic when continually exposed to these stereotypes (Devine, 1989). Thus, as the “cover” of the *Vogue U.K.* article, Adichie is subject to first-glance judgments where she either propagates or debunks stereotypes as a woman of color. But, covers and magazine images are inanimate objects – they can’t control whether or not they uphold stereotypes or not. The editors who sustain the “strong but soft” creative direction decide that. As an idle image, Adichie doesn’t have an authoritative voice unlike she does in her interview.

Accordingly, though Adichie may have been aware of taking photos both standing and sitting during the shoot, she ultimately didn’t choose to place the sole sitting photo as the last one in the spread.

⁵ Devine’s Dissociation Model of Prejudice states that the brain automatically triggers snap judgments at first appearance, which solidifies into stereotypes with repeated exposure.



Figure 2.2

Sitting suggests the exact opposite of standing: a mitigation of authority. Whereas the sidebar photos all picture Adichie outside, this is the only one of Adichie inside a domestic sphere. Adichie almost melds into her surroundings as another artistic object, along with the books and paintings, as part of the home décor. The combination of seated posture and domesticity together depict submissiveness and hominess – pejorative tropes of women of color. However, Adichie donned in vibrant red – the color of passion, fearlessness, strength, according to Kress and van Leeuwun – again create balance.

Ultimately, authority in a multimedia interview-and-photo spread like this depends on who made which choice – between Adichie, Wagner, Akinleye, and the final *Vogue U.K.* editor. In a similar debate of choice, in a [panel](#) hosted by The New School in New York City in 2014, writer and activist bell hooks attributed Beyoncé’s “pseudo-feminism” to her sexualized 2014 *Time* magazine [cover](#) where she wore a white bikini under a sheer dress. hooks labeled the singer an anti-feminist “slave,” arguing, “(Beyoncé) probably had very little control over that cover, that image.” Writer and transgender-rights advocate Janet Mock countered, “I don’t want to strip

Beyoncé of that agency, of choosing this image, of being her own manager,” positing that Beyoncé very well could’ve chosen out her own outfit. The discussion between hooks and Mock placed agency and feminism contingent on the element of choice. If the *Time* magazine creative editors and stylists decided Beyoncé’s outfit, this means she had less control over her public image. On the other hand, if Beyoncé collaboratively or independently picked her clothes for the cover, this indicates that she held authority over how she was portrayed.

In many instances of multimodal journalism, readers often don’t know who controls every decision. But in this *Vogue U.K.* case, most decisions of creative control are unambiguous. Readers do know, according to Wagner in the article, that Adichie took charge of her own look for the photo series, from hair, to makeup and wardrobe: “The dress (Adichie) wears for the shoot is one she designed herself” and “Adichie’s favourite make-up artist, Stella, arrives to get her ready for the photographs.” What Adichie didn’t pick are the quotes that appear in the final piece, since this violates a strict law of journalistic ethics that Andrew Seaman, chair of the Society of Professional Journalist’s ethics committee, outlines in a [blog post](#) (following Sean Penn’s violation of this code in his *Rolling Stone* El Chapo interview), “Allowing any source control over a story’s content is inexcusable... The practice of pre-approval discredits the entire story.” In applying this rule to photos, Adichie also probably didn’t select the final photos for the spread, nor did she order them. These final two aspects of control – choosing quotes and choosing photos – are the editor’s job in collaboration with Wagner and Akinleye, respectively.

Ultimately, in terms of decision-making, Adichie has less control than the second parties do, of which there are now three: the interviewer, the photographer, and the editor. After all, this spread is *Wagner’s* article *about* Adichie. These are *Akinleye’s* photos *of* Adichie. But, even though she shares her authority among Wagner’s narrative framing, and even though her full

feminist appearance may have been diluted through Akinleye's photos, small nuances of second-party subversion don't completely negate Adichie's overall message. This is not to say these small compromises of authority aren't worth analyzing; they're important because if the core of a message is sacrificed while translated to popular culture, then the activist mission isn't actually helped. Activism is just determining when the sacrifice is reasonable – where the balance lies between wide publicity and quality argument. Small leniencies that Adichie permit are worthwhile in exchange for *Vogue U.K.*'s circulation of nearly 200,000 young women, all of whom embody the target audience of feminism.

CHAPTER 3: Print Literature

Igbo English in “Cell One”: Novels and *The New Yorker*

Adichie's third book, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, opens with the short story “[Cell One](#).” The compilation of 12 vignettes was originally published in April 2009 by Fourth Estate in the U.K. and Alfred A. Knopf in the U.S. Two years earlier, “Cell One” appeared in a January print issue of *The New Yorker* as well as on the magazine's website. An unnamed young female narrator observes the corrupt Nigerian prison system through visits to her older brother, Nnamabia. The coming-of-age tale doesn't only follow the protagonist's understanding of morality, as she copes with how her brother's crimes landed him in jail, but she questions if even the worst actions warrant the inhumane punishment.

For the purposes of this chapter, “the *New Yorker* version” refers to the written body of text in both the print and digital magazine, since they are the same. Regardless of on paper or online though, “Cell One” isn't a case of medium: all versions are in written text to be read, not heard or. “Cell One” is a case of platform: book versus magazine.

In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the story sits among others telling of injustices in Nigeria and difficulty navigating Blackness in the western world. It functions as one voice contributing to a collective message. It's marketed as a package, assuming that if a reader buys the book, she/he will read all the stories, not just the first. As a magazine piece though, "Cell One" stands alone, not explicitly related to any other piece in the magazine – bearing the responsibility to leave its independent impact. Thus, as part of a book, the story reaches a different readership than the *New Yorker's* audience demographic. While no public data exists on the book-reader demographics, the average *New Yorker* subscriber (across print and online) is age 50 with an average yearly household income of \$93,000. This chapter asks: how do differences between the magazine and book versions impact Adichie's voice and authority? To answer this question, I analyze the function of Igbo English (IE), which is included in the book and selectively excluded in the magazine version.

Nigerian scholar Christopher Anyokwu defines IE as a linguistic "global interpenetration" in his article "Igbo Rhetoric and the New Nigerian Novel." IE partially intertwines an ethnic tongue (Igbo) with English: for example, "*Nekwa ya!* Watch out!" and "*Ekwuzikwana!* Don't say that!" appear in both versions (Adichie, 17, 9). Anyokwu categorizes examples like these as the interjection form of IE at the word level, the English translation directly next to the Igbo exclamation. He explains how while English narrates the plot and the majority of the dialogue, the Igbo component of IE "motivate(es), introduce(es), guid(es), emphasiz(es), and affirm(s)" (86). According to him, without Igbo, language in a story falls flat without motivating factors or stress on words.

Historically, post-colonial writers employed IE to thwart cultural appropriation of their language, using IE to claim agency over English, as well as their indigenous tongue. Anyokwu

cites Bill Ashcroft, “The crucial function of language as a medium of *power* demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adopted to the colonized place” (89). Adichie’s texts are primarily in English and geared toward western (American and British) audiences. But, her use of IE allows her to claim a personalized authority over the English language.

Upon establishing this fact, one of the most important (yet subtle) differences in the *New Yorker* version is that there’s no mention of language switches. Both book and magazine versions include the same IE interjections, but in only the book does Adichie mention when a character “(says) in Igbo” or “(says) in English.” In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the narrator recounts of her brother:

Nnamabia stared at my father with wounded eyes and said, ‘I know I have caused you both terrible pain in the past, but I would never violate your trust like this.’ He spoke in English, using unnecessary words like ‘terrible pain’ and ‘violate,’ as he always did when he was defending himself (4).

The same excerpt in the *New Yorker* article reads:

Nnamabia stared at my father with wounded eyes and said that he may have done horrible things in the past, things that had caused my parents pain, but that he had done nothing in this case.

In the magazine version, Nnamabia isn’t actually quoted with a line of dialogue, so the story never discerns in which language he speaks. Not only does this lack of language specification deprive the scene of context, it strips the narrator, and by extension, Adichie, of her agency to speak for her characters. In another example, language shifts have more important consequences when not present. In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the narrator describes:

“Nnamabia smiled, his face more beautiful than ever, despite the new pimple-like insect bite on his forehead, and said in Igbo that he had slipped his money into his anus shortly after the arrest at the bar... He bit into a fried drumstick and switched to English.

‘General Abacha was impressed at how I hid my money’” (11).

The *New Yorker* piece reads:

“Nnamabia smiled, his face more beautiful than ever, despite the new pimple-like insect bite on his forehead, and said that he had slipped his money into his anus shortly after the arrest.”

The first sentence in both versions are almost identical *except* for the language distinction.

Nnamabia uses Igbo to divulge his “dirty secret,” the embarrassing details only for his family to hear since is he speaking in public. When he switches to English, his words convey pride, available for all to hear. The shift from Igbo to English conveys a deeper characterization of Nnamabia’s personality and provides more vivid context of the setting. Without it, the semantics of the scene changes. The rest of the *New Yorker* article follows a similar pattern: practically identical text save for only language specification. Therefore, it can be generalized that the book version develops characters and settings more richly.

Interestingly, because the version in the magazine was actually published first, it’s not that the language specifications were edited out; they were edited *in* to the book version. So, it must be questioned if the book’s additions occurred because Adichie had more editorial control. For the magazine, it’s ambiguous how much she and the *New Yorker* editor collaborated to produce the published product. For her book, Adichie mostly likely worked alongside or back-and-forth with her editor before the final publication. This isn’t to say Adichie had more or less

control between the book and magazine versions of “Cell One”; she still had to compromise with an editor on both platforms, just in different ways.

Anyokwu posits that IE engages the audience more intimately when she/he becomes a “co-creator” with the author; the reader can choose to translate the Igbo beyond the English. As demonstrated in previous chapters, this is how Adichie mediates the transfer of authority between her intention and the audience’s reception. But now, a second party – the *New Yorker* editor – displaces Adichie as the mediator between reader and writer because the editor hits “publish” on the final story. Ironically, it is also through a mediator (a second party, most likely her publicist) that Adichie ends up in *The New Yorker* to begin with.

With written text, “mediators” aren’t always apparent to readers. After all, Adichie holds the title of “author”; her name is the only one under the article, so unlike in interviews, authority doesn’t feel shared. Also, written stories read like monologues, so unlike in videos that picture the audience, Adichie seems like the sole voice. Thus, where interviews and videos negotiate authority between Adichie, the audience, and the interviewer, this same negotiation of control doesn’t seem explicit – or even existent – in written text; it’s hidden. However, publishing just obscures negotiation. In submitting to magazines, Adichie still consults with the editor beforehand; even when publishing her own book, a publishing company still gives her an editor.

But, as payoff for her sacrifice of authority, *The New Yorker* is one of the most prestigious magazines in America, which grants Adichie high readership for her story, as well as a platform for a demographic different from her book readers. As Adorno and Bernstein state, “The modern culture combines are the economic area in which a piece of the circulation sphere otherwise in the process of disintegration...still tenuously survives” (104). Books, unfortunately, only remain relevant and sustain lasting impacts with high circulations. While there is no reliable

way to determine the exact circulation of a book⁶, if profit can serve as a measure, “99% of titles printed will never sell enough copies to recover all the costs associated with creating and publishing them” (*Forbes*). This is why celebrities often get book deals – not because they may be good writers, but because their fan followings will devotedly read anything they say. There’s a difference between literary celebrities and celebrities who write. Stars like Mindy Kaling or Lena Dunham define the latter, and while Adichie is a writer first, she could also identify as the latter. People may check out her books retroactively after they’ve watched her TED Talks or heard her with Beyoncé. It may be a sad truth, but selfhood must be circulated in order to be validated. By willingly working outside of her discipline of writing – with multimodal mediums and digital platforms – Adichie only draws more attention to her writing. By subjecting herself to second parties – allowing editors to take over her work and converting herself into a celebrity – Adichie fulfills her activist goals as she assembles a larger following and platform.

⁶ In an [article](#) for *The Atlantic*, Ester Bloom reports, “If a lay consumer wants to find out whether a particular novel has sold 10,000 copies or only 150, there is no reliable way to do so.”

CONCLUSION: Fitting the Mediums Together

Historically, the art that holds the most lasting impact – those by Michelangelo and Da Vinci, for instance – were all commissioned by a larger second party: in those cases, the Church, the culture industry of the Renaissance. Writing patrons, such as the English Royal Academy and the French Literary Society, were also akin to modern day agents or publishers.

In January of 2015, Adichie published a [short story](#) on Medium.com based on Olikoye, a Nigerian leader who opened wider access to vaccines and family planning classes in the '80s. However, *Slate* writer Katy Waldman reveals in an article literally titled, "[Chimamanda Adichie's New Story Is Gorgeous. I Wish It Weren't Also Propaganda](#)," that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation commissioned Adichie along with 30 other artists to promote the importance of vaccines. Waldman berates art commission as an initiative that simplifies a complex issue into more digestible pieces for mass consumption. Her description of commission seems quite similar to giving a TED Talk – also a compromise of authority with TED regulations that must appeal to mass audiences. The Gates are simply an umbrella organization like TED or modern-day patrons to make lasting art. While Waldman critiques Adichie for exploiting her celebrity status, she ultimately describes Adichie's task as "fashion(ing) a narrative that might 'break into new audiences who may otherwise not be paying attention to the issue' of vaccination." In which case, Adichie fulfills just another activist goal by using her fame to raise awareness of an important healthcare issue.

As this thesis has outlined in the five previous chapters, her Medium.com story exemplifies just another way Adichie's uses her charismatic authority to produce effective activism. She does so by building a symbiotic relationship with the mass media industry, with whom she shares her authority. By willingly walking into interviews, consenting to be

photographed or videotaped – subjecting herself to publishers, reporters, editors, publicists – Adichie relinquishes her control to these second parties. She permits them to dilute the “purity” of her voice when they make feminism fashionable; she allows herself to be commoditized as a celebrity when they make her more famous. But, with fame, she obtains a larger platform from which to not only voice, but megaphone her activist ideas to a wider audience, thus, regaining and reconstructing her authority. After all, what is the point of feminism if not everyone believes in it, or even knows what it means?

Adichie’s art functions for social change, so reproducing her work contributes to the eradication of ignorance. As Adichie’s messages are shared, they become ingrained in society: feminism is gaining prevalence and more people are becoming aware of racial microaggressions. Over time, what society deems “charismatic” now (feminism as trendy, racism forgotten as an ever-present issue) will later become tradition – laws enacted to bridge gender pay gaps and racial inequality.

In conclusion, I reassess the larger questions: Is Adichie’s activist impact based on quality – “pure” authority of her ideas? Or is her effect based on quantity – the vastness of the audience she reaches? On the basis of Adichie’s case study, it seems that no medium and no platform, can perfectly maintain full quality *and* quantity: it’s a compromise and a balance.

This imperfection of mediums indicates that print and digital genres are not complete without each other. Separately, each only tells one side of the story – a “single story.” There will always be caveats of within every medium, so each must act as part of a larger whole, complementing the others like puzzle pieces. Where digital may be more diluted yet widely broadcast, print elaborates more on ideas but is limited to niche audiences. Adichie’s novels can stand alone, but they don’t have the capacity to reach as vast a viewership as just one of her TED

Talks does. While her speeches, interviews, and online articles can stand as separate entities, they work better as a collective, together enriching the original literature.

Putting the parts together creates a more comprehensive outline of a complex social matter. Adorno and Bernstein claim, “In any sound film or any radio broadcast something is discernible with cannot be attributed as a social effect to any one of them, but to all together. Each single manifestation of the culture industry inescapably reproduces human beings as what the whole has made them” (100). Philosopher Aristotle supports: “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Consuming the multimodal parts of Adichie’s work – her speeches, her interviews, her ancillary articles – complete part of the activist goal. But only the whole body of Adichie’s work composes a full representation of her messages promoting feminism, racial equality, and Nigerian national peace.

Traditional academic instincts often discount popular culture as ideally autonomous from literature. However, Adichie violates the unwritten rule that “serious” writers should be dismissive towards more widespread forms of communication. Consuming Adichie’s body of text – beyond her novels – only enhances readers’ understandings of the activist messages in her traditional literature.

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