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# Situating the Voice of Rhetoric for College Writing: A Paulo Freire's Reading of Adichie's Speech on "The Danger of a Single Story"

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**Situating the Voice of Rhetoric for College Writing: A Paulo Freire's Reading of Adichie's  
Speech on "The Danger of a Single Story"**

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

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## Abstract

Many writing instructors use personal literacy narratives as a rhetorical site and an approach for teaching college writing in the context of definition argument. Rhetorically, students have had difficulty in defining what exactly they want to say about their personal literacy narratives where they have to clearly identify themselves and argue persuasively on issues they choose to raise in the assignment. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire's careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship reveals its fundamentally narrative character, arguing that "education is suffering from narration sickness" (71). The "narration sickness" in the education system suggests that rhetoric situated in the form of narrative can present a serious problem when the teacher takes control of telling a story or interpreting a text to students. For example, published in 2009 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk entitled "The Danger of a Single Story" is a case in point. No doubt, Freire's pedagogical theory ushers in an opportunity and possibility of discussing the relationship between academic discourse and human discourse among other contesting theories literature, linguistics and rhetoric professors use in writing classrooms these days. In this thesis I argue that by situating Freire's the voice of rhetoric in the reading and interpreting of Adichie's TED talk, teachers of college writing should strive to give their students the liberating experience of expressing and transforming themselves in their own voice.

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## Introduction

College writing or composition is an essential part of the curriculum for higher education in the United States. Not only are first-year students required to take a college writing course at any community college, college or university but also most of English faculty members including adjuncts and graduate students get to teach it. It is assumed that many professors in different areas of expertise, like creative writing, literature, linguistics, and rhetoric and composition, may adopt, if not the same textbooks (contents), similar writing theories upon which they base their pedagogical practices. It is also assumed and expected tacitly that while taking an introductory writing course located and run by the English Department, first-year students will learn to use academic discourse and arrive at the goal of writing across the curriculum and across academic disciplines; they will go on to make a difference in their lives and succeed in writing academic papers for different classes during their college years. However, such unexamined assumptions do not often agree with the reality that many students continue to struggle with academic discourse – at worst, lose the freedom of personal voice and identity – after taking the writing course, especially those students situated in socially and culturally diverse environments.

In her article “Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing within the Academy,” Lillian Bridwell-Bowles argues that “If we are to invent a truly pluralistic society, we must envision a socially and politically situated view of language and the creation of texts – one that takes into account gender, race, class, sexual preference, and a host of issues that are implied by these and other cultural differences” (349). Bridwell-Bowles’s argument suggests that the language and texts used for college writing should include multi-cultural perspectives. She questions whether academic discourse is sufficient and the key for survival and success,

believing that linguistic and rhetorical flexibility may help students to write better (351). Without the consideration of social and cultural differences academic discourse shaped by a single language and rhetoric can pose a serious problem for the relationship between the teacher and students, education and humanity.

Paulo Freire begins his masterpiece *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with the problem of humanization and de-humanization and situates his rhetoric in the political struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed, stressing what he calls a “concrete situation” where “the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is established.” Freire sees the contradiction as the binary opposition between “subjectivity and objectivity in constant dialectical relationship” (50). Freire’s rhetorical insight on pedagogy, I argue, has given a fresh perspective for readers to look into the authority of the teacher in relation to students in the classroom. Freire’s careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship reveals “its fundamentally narrative character,” and he argues that “education is suffering from narration sickness” (71). According to Freire, the “narration sickness” in the education system creates a rhetorical situation where the teacher basically takes control of telling a story or interpreting a text to students as the latter become passive listeners mechanically memorizing the monotonous, lifeless narrated content which has nothing or little to do with the reality of students’ lives. Consequently, the students’ voice was silenced when it comes to telling, reading and writing stories about their own lives and the world.

Freire’s idea of the problem of “narrative education” has drawn my attention to a recent story which was introduced to me during my teaching assistant orientation. The story has ever since been used as one of the reading materials for teaching college writing to my first-year students, a TED talk published in October 2009 and entitled “The Danger of a Single Story” by

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie that subsequently appears on many YouTube video clips as well.<sup>1</sup> As a speaker, Adichie talks about her personal journey of becoming a reader and a writer in both Nigeria and the United States though she had lived through oppressive, underprivileged life situations which discouraged her from becoming a successful writer. However, as far as rhetoric is concerned, I have thought about the implications of Adichie's "single story" on my teaching and my relationship with students. I have wondered how Freire's idea of rhetoric can be used to interpret Adichie's story for my college writing teaching, and how the college writing teacher and students should work together to resolve the conflict between professional discourse (academic discourse) and human discourse.

For instance, in the interesting depiction of her fresh encounter with her American roommate and professor in the United States, Adichie seems to indicate how she wasn't expected to have her own voice in front of her American audience while writing her novel, and how she overcame obstacles, feeling liberated when she found her voice to express herself:

And so, I began to realize that my American roommate must have throughout her life seen and heard different versions of this single story, as had a professor, who once told me that my novel was not 'authentically African.' Now, I was quite willing to contend that there were a number of things wrong with the novel, that it had failed in a number of places, but I had not quite imagined that it had failed at achieving something called African authenticity. In fact, I did not know what African authenticity was. The professor told me that my characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man.

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<sup>1</sup> As of April 2018, nearly 15 million people have viewed Adichie's video talk in 46 languages at TED website, not to mention the number of people watching it on YouTube.

My characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African. (07:33-08:20)

From the professor's perspective, Adichie's characters are not real Africans because they do not fit into his concept of "African authenticity" – therefore, they are not credible as if they have lost their African identity. In other words, it would seem that Adichie's characters were not supposed to drive cars, to be educated, and to have enough food to eat today because Africa has been so impoverished that people there could not possibly have had what Western people have. Sadly, the idea of "African authenticity" here has become a way of stereotyping African people and perhaps African students. In Freire's terms, the professor unfortunately dictated how Adichie should create the characters in her novel and perhaps she has lost her authorial voice despite the fact that he was out of touch with reality of the modern African world.

No doubt, Freire's pedagogical theory ushers in an opportunity and possibility of discussing the relationship between academic discourse and human discourse among other contesting theories that literature, linguistics and rhetoric professors use in writing classrooms these days; in other words, it is difficult to totally separate college writing teaching from literary, linguistic, or rhetorical theories – or to be exact, from something philosophical about these theories, which have somehow shaped how and what college writing courses are to be taught. Also, Freire raises our critical consciousness of the relationship between the teacher and students, and between the two discourses where rhetoric is situated. But how do we resolve the conflict between the two discourses? In order to deconstruct such relationship, Freire calls for "a true solidarity" of the oppressed to struggle for their liberation by acquiring "a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle" (51).

For the purpose of my thesis, I have come up with several questions regarding Freire's rhetoric and Adichie's "single story":

1. Where is Adichie's "single story" situated in terms of Freire's rhetoric?
2. As college writing instructors, how should we interpret and position Freire's rhetoric and shape our professional discourse while reading and interpreting Adichie's "single story"?
3. Where should college writing students locate their human discourse and Freire's rhetoric in their reading of Adichie's "single story"?
4. How can both the teacher and students arrive at the goal of Freire's rhetoric on liberatory pedagogy while reading and interpreting Adichie's "single story"?
5. Should writing instructors teach academic discourse in the context of human discourse such as Adichie's text on "single story"?

Furthermore, the thesis of my research project is: By situating Freire's voice of rhetoric in the reading and interpreting of Adichie's speech on "The Danger of a Single Story," teachers of college writing should strive to give their students liberating experience of expressing and transforming themselves in their own voice.

## Chapter 1: A Single Story and Identity Crisis

At the beginning of each semester I assign my first-year college writing students to watch Adichie's TED talk entitled "The Danger of a Single Story." I welcome Adichie's talk partly because it is inspiring material for teaching about personal literacy narratives, and partly because it gives the students an opportunity to engage themselves in reading and writing about different peoples and cultures around the world. Also, I like the idea of using personal literacy narratives as an approach or studying strategy for teaching college writing. As David Barry and Michael Elmes remark, "narrativity emphasizes the simultaneous presence of multiple, interlinked realities, and is thus well positioned for capturing the diversity and complexity present in strategic discourse" (430). I basically agree with their remark on using narratives for teaching college writing and diversity. Nevertheless, I have found that my students often encounter a problem while writing about Adichie though they generally give positive responses to Adichie's talk in our classroom discussions. The problem becomes evident as they try to relate their personal literacy narratives to Adichie's stories in their first argumentative (definition argument) essay. Rhetorically, the students have had difficulty in defining what exactly they want to say about their personal literacy narratives where they have to clearly identify themselves and argue persuasively on issues they choose to raise and concern them in the assignment.

Writing a definition argument paper may not be as easy a task for students as many writing teachers would like to admit when it comes to relating their personal literacy narratives to Adichie's stories rhetorically. It seems that after reading and responding to the transcript of Adichie's speech, many students can only relate it to the obvious, something on the surface, as if it were no more than an issue of stereotyping people of different races. Though some students may see other issues in Adichie's text, it is possible that they fail to see the central issue Adichie

poses in the context of definition argument, a lesson that many of my colleagues have shared and taught in the English Department. And yet, both writing teachers and students are reminded of the dynamic nature of the rhetorical triangle – speaker (writer), subject (text), and audience – that the ancient Greeks recognized; the interaction of these three elements, each of which is necessary for an act of communication, are the key to the understanding of how an audience is persuaded (Faigley 1-2). For the persuasive equation, students must take rhetorical situations into consideration besides working on the interactive relationships of those triangular elements. They have to evaluate and analyze their rhetorical situations before taking a default position, while writing for diverse audiences and communicating with them with clear purpose.

Concerning the purpose of the definition argument assignment, the students can certainly write to entertain, inform, and persuade their audience. In *Writing Today*, Richard Johnson-Sheehan and Charles Paine consider purpose more specifically in terms of the author of a text, suggesting that most texts written in college or in the workplace often fill one of two broader purposes (informative and persuasive); however, under each broad purpose, they identify a host of more specific ones (qtd. in *The Purdue OWL*). The suggestion calls for the attention of writing instructors, including that of student writers, that the purpose of their writing assignment may not be singular at all; if necessary, it is possible to conflate both purposes that are informative and persuasive. Here, the Purdue Owl Online Writing Lab gives readers some perspectives and informs them how they should look at such matter:

Authors and audiences both have a wide range of purposes for communicating. The importance of purpose in rhetorical situations cannot be overstated. It is the varied purposes of a rhetorical situation that determine how an author communicates a text and how audiences receive a text. Rhetorical situations rarely have only one purpose. Authors

and audiences tend to bring their own purposes (and often multiple purposes each) to a rhetorical situation, and these purposes may conflict or complement each other depending on the efforts of both authors and audiences. (*The Purdue OWL*)

In other words, authors must clearly know their purposes and rhetorical situations which are inseparable besides skillfully communicating their texts with audiences. Specifically, for persuasive purpose of a definition argument paper, student writers need to select or define a rhetorical situation where they find the pros and cons of a controversial issue concerning their personal literacy narratives, like Adichie's stories, and make persuasive arguments for audiences.

While some students struggle with writing the assignment because they are not familiar with the persuasive purpose of it, the process, and what it takes to make a good argument, others are caught in the dichotomy between the subjective and objective in the presentation of their viewpoints though using the personal pronoun "I" instead of the third person (for example, "he or she") is absolutely necessary for personal literacy narratives. Namely, the students must identify themselves for their audiences since they are writing about their own lives and literacy history. Unfortunately, after setting foot in the journey of writing their personal literacy stories, many students fail to arrive at a critical juncture where they can see clearly what is at stake in their rhetorical situations and personal literacy narratives.

Conversely, in her TED talk, Adichie begins with the title "The Danger of a Single Story," which suggests that something "dangerous" in the story she is going to tell. The reader may even ask why it is "dangerous" to look at the story as "a single story." As a speaker, Adichie is keenly aware of the rhetorical situations of her stories and audiences, meaning that she is not just telling one story but many. She makes sure that she owns her stories when she first tells her audience about her personal literacy narratives:

I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call "the danger of the single story." I grew up on a university campus in eastern Nigeria. My mother says that I started reading at the age of two, although I think four is probably close to the truth. So I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books. (00:12-00:38)

As the reader may notice, Adichie begins her speech with "a few personal stories" in contrast with "the single story," and before her audience, she presents several rhetorical situations: first, she has more than one personal story to tell; second, she is from Nigeria, an African country; third, she read British and American stories when she was four years old. These rhetorical situations pose questions that most people can be asked to answer, questions like these: Who are you? Where are you from? What are your personal stories? What kind of stories did you read and write when you were a child? Though these questions sound plain and simple, they are profound when it comes to the issue of her identity. As a matter of fact, the audience who are mainly Americans may wonder how she knew English so well to read those British and American children's books, and why she does not mention African books.

Because Adichie is black by appearance, it is perhaps not difficult for many in her audience to assume that she is an African-American. On the contrary, the fact that she does not sound like an American when she speaks suggests that she could be either a foreigner or an immigrant (or a naturalized American citizen). If she had not introduced herself, the audience would not have had a clear picture of who she is because she appears to speak British English with an accent. However, the question of who she is – is indispensable to the rhetorical situation of her personal literacy narratives. Like the setting of a novel, the elements of one's identity,

such as place of birth, nationality, mother tongue, and so on, are essential to telling personal literacy stories. For example, Adichie describes how she had learned to read and write:

I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, (Laughter) and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. (Laughter) Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to. (00:39-01:12)

Clearly, Adichie's stories are situated in Africa, and more specifically, she tells the audience that they took place in Nigeria since she had never been outside the country. Adichie implicitly speaks about the different ways of life between the Nigerian and the British, emphasizing that "we never talked about the weather" though British people like to do it for the sake of conversation. And yet, the reader may wonder why Adichie does not mention the Igbo people, language and culture she grew up with in Nigeria. Instead, she describes the fictional white characters she read and wrote about. What has gone missing in her idea of African stories? What is an African story in her mind?

The question of what an African story is can be a good starting point for reading Adichie's stories. Like my students, if Adichie were to write a definition argument paper on an African story, she would rhetorically situate her personal literacy narratives in Africa and give an unambiguous definition to the African story. She would first start with the quest for her African identity as far as her personal literacy narratives are concerned. Also, she would argue that her

stories mainly took place in Africa, not in the United States, though she has studied and lived in the United States for some years, and that she was writing about African stories, not African American or British ones. Nevertheless, her audience may notice an inseparable link between her personal literacy narratives and African stories (fiction as well) because what she wrote is not purely African, and because of British and American English and cultural influence on her upbringing. Adichie admits such Western influence in her early life when speaking of a story of her “desperate desire to taste ginger beer,” a drink that originated from the United Kingdom:

What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify.

(01:37-01:44)

The fact that she could not personally identify herself with the foreign characters in the books she read had affected her the way she wrote her stories and viewed her world. No doubt, it is a matter of her national identity. Is it possible for one to experience the danger of losing one’s identity while writing about one’s personal literacy narratives? It appears that Adichie must have experienced the loss of identity, and more seriously, she must have encountered the crisis of her identity including the identity of African characters in the stories she wrote.

Closely related to the issue of identity in her personal literacy narratives is the English language she has learned in Nigeria, an African country that used to be a British colony. Adichie must have learned English at school and possibly at home with her parents since it is the official

language for education.<sup>2</sup> However, besides language, music can be considered a signifier that represents one's national identity. Adichie's encounter with a curious American roommate is a good example though the situation of their conversation may appear awkward:

... I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. (04:13-04:41)

That her roommate was in a state of being "shocked," "confused," and "disappointed" does not sound positive at all though Adichie might not feel obliged to answer her roommate's questions. Did she appear to have intentionally avoided talking about Nigeria's colonial history? The request for her "tribal music" may sound politically incorrect or even condescending today. She could have mentioned her native (Igbo) language and music though she might not listen to the kind of music her roommate was referring to – instead, she showed the popular music of a famous American singer, Mariah Carey, who is actually of African, Venezuelan descent. Adichie is not hiding or being ashamed of her ethnic identity. Rather, she knew that she was experiencing an identity crisis when telling her personal literacy stories especially in the context of a Western world.

Rhetorically, where is her identity situated on earth if she is to be a world citizen, and if presumably everyone has the same concept of world citizenship? According to scholars, unlike many countries in the West and Asia, African countries historically did not develop written

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<sup>2</sup> According to Ethnologue, "The number of individual languages listed for Nigeria is 527. Of these, 520 are living and 7 are extinct. Of the living languages, 510 are indigenous and 10 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 20 are institutional, 78 are developing, 350 are vigorous, 28 are in trouble, and 44 are dying" ("Nigeria").

languages but oral ones, and traditionally African peoples are good at telling stories handed down orally from generation to generation. In *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Walter J. Ong says that “In primary oral cultures, where there is no text, the narrative serves to bond thought more massively and permanently than other genres,” seeing the relation between oral memory and the story line – that “Narrative itself has a history” (150). Adichie certainly sees the narrative history of her stories as she starts to question the existence of herself and her fictional characters in the world, pondering over an African identity for her literary works. She searches for African writers to emulate, ones with whom that she can identify. She reveals her thought about this and appears to situate her personal identity in African literature:

But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized. (02:15-02:35)

As a writer, Adichie identifies herself with famous African writers such as Achebe and Laye because their novels portray the people and way of life in Africa.<sup>3</sup> For example, Achebe’s novels center on the life and traditions of Igbo society to which Adichie belongs in Nigeria, and on the clash of Western and African values during and after the colonial times. Adichie is keenly aware of her ethnic identity and values in relation to those of the Western world.

To be an African writer who has an ambition to be on the world stage, Adichie has to write in English to communicate with peoples of the world who speak the language. She has mastered the English language over the years, capable of using powerful words. She must have the right to use the language to write freely. In the foreword to Freire’s *Pedagogy of the*

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<sup>3</sup> Heather Hewett speaks about Adichie’s works, pointing out that “in Nigeria, as throughout Africa, writers and literary scholars have defined literary tradition in opposition to colonialism and [the] EuroAmerican” (76).

*Oppressed*, Richard Shaull rightly says, “The word takes on new power. It is no longer an abstraction or magic but a means by which people discover themselves and their potential as they give names to things around them. As Freire puts it, each individual wins back the right to say his or her own word, to name the world” (Freire 32-33). In her quest for her African identity, Adichie undoubtedly finds the power of language to express herself through writing and naming her world in which she and her fictional characters live.

Adichie has found her new identity in the English world and literature. The English language has become part of her identity; in a sense, Nigeria has adopted English to be its official language, which she speaks about her personal literacy narratives. As a matter of fact, English has helped her define her African stories in relation to English books she has read. Also, those African writers she identifies with have enlightened and saved her from the danger of a single story. As she puts it,

Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination.

They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.

(02:36-02:58)

In her mind, a single story that depicts her personal literacy history does not fully do justice to her identity and knowledge of the world. However, reading those American and British books broadened her horizons and made a closer connection with the world. Otherwise, she might not have known the world outside Nigeria. Especially, she celebrates and reaffirms her place – existence – in literature. As Freire says, “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the

world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (83). Adichie’s life has gone through a transformation because she has successfully overcome her identity crisis in both her personal literacy narratives and literary works.

In Adichie’s stories about her personal literacy and literary experience, the audience has learned that she has found her identity and existence in Nigeria and African literature through reading and writing in the English language. Rhetorically, she has searched for ways to express herself and her world through speaking, reading and writing African stories. Scholars have noted “a biographic link between Adichie and her fiction of the diasporic inclination, especially since many of her characters are young female characters in their prime” (qtd. in Sackeyfio104). While experiencing an identity crisis, Adichie realized that the single story of Africa alienated her – her existence – from the reality of the world in which she lives. She eventually found her existence in the literary world through African writers like Achebe and Laye who show her the way.

Likewise, college student writers can ask questions about their own identity and existence in the world while writing about their personal literacy narratives. In their rhetorical situations, they can ask themselves if they have ever experienced a crisis or something critical in the history of their education from kindergarten to college that has impacted their lives. Though they may not have the kind of identity crisis as Adichie experienced in the single story of Africa that impeded her from telling and writing her stories about Africa, they have their own unique stories to tell about similar impediment in their personal literacy journeys.

## Chapter 2: Adichie's Identity and Default Position against "A Single Story"

In our college writing textbook, *Huskies Write: A Writer's Guide to Composition and College Life with Read, Reason, Write*, Dorothy Seyler says, "While *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* create the traditional three-part communication model, Aristotle adds another terms to enhance our understanding of any argument 'moment.' The term *kairos* refers to the occasion for the argument, the situation that we are in" (74). To apply the idea of *kairos* to the stories we read in class, stories such as David Foster Wallace's "This Is Water David Foster Wallace 2005 Kenyon College Commencement Speech," Jimmy Santiago Baca's "Coming into Language," and Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story," my students and I look into the critical situation of each story where we identify the author's default position and worldview. These three very different stories are good, profound texts for literacy narrative studies, encouraging college students to have multicultural perspectives in reading literature for teaching writing.

Christina Tshida, Caitlin L. Ryan, and Anne S. Ticknor argue, however, that "It is not enough to simply offer multiple perspectives through additional texts; our students must be critical of the ways, even within multicultural literature, that single stories get taken up, circulated, reinforced, resisted, or challenged ..." (32). In order to help "move the additive model away from simple relativism where all stories are equal," they believe that teachers should instead invite students to have "a critical examination of the sources of those different stories and the implications for their circulation among readers" (32). Though personally I do not have a preference over those three texts chosen for my students to write about their personal literacy stories, I agree with Tshida *et al* and take careful note of the historical context of Adichie's stories and the purpose of conducting a critical examination of her text as a case for this study.

Likewise, before writing personal literacy narratives, each student needs to have a critical examination of Adichie's text and have a default setting for a position in a definition argument paper. A well-grounded default position will help him or her narrate personal literacy narratives in a rhetorical situation where he or she can view himself or herself, others and the world in perspective. Rhetorically, the students have to know how to define the terms (words) in question they each choose to argue about according to their individual default positions; otherwise, they may end up with only "a single story" to tell about their personal literacy stories and with a one-sided worldview in which they situate their rhetoric for their definition argument. However, though the students have unique personal literacy stories and identities that are so different from those of Adichie's, I wonder if they can really relate theirs to Adichie's well; for example, like Adichie arguing about the problem of "a single story," they can clearly set their default positions to lay out their definition argument for their personal literacy narratives.

Without exception, Adichie must have a default position for her stories in relation to herself, Africa and the world. She has to define what the story of Africa is. She realizes that everyone has a default position regardless of his or her background or personal identity, but that such default position can have a serious conflict with those held by other peoples who are from different countries and who do not share the same languages, beliefs and cultures. For example, she sees what is at stake in a single story of Africa while defining her terms. This is evident when she talks about her American roommate's default position in their conversation:

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, 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. (04:49-05:20)

By definition, the word *patronize* means “to talk to (someone) in a way that shows that you believe you are more intelligent or better than other people” (“Patronize”). Obviously, Adichie was not on an equal footing because of her roommate’s patronizing attitude toward her, and such a condescending default position does not contribute to building good human relationships that are based on equality, understanding and respect for each other. For Adichie, her American roommate’s preconceived notion of Africa can be seen as “a single story of catastrophe.” The single story about Africans does not leave them any room for complex human feelings but the feeling of pity from someone considered superior to them.

Adichie’s striking remark on the patronizing pity and having “no possibility of a connection as human equals” casts dark clouds on her existence and the poor human condition under which she herself and her fictional characters live. One can only imagine that the single story of Africa is a world of oppression where human beings are deprived of complex emotions and equal rights to exist. Freire speaks of such “unauthentic view of the world” in which the oppressed live as they “feel like ‘things’ owned by the oppressor. For the latter, to *be* is to *have*, almost always at the expense of those who have nothing. For the oppressed, at a certain point in their existential experience, to *be* is not to resemble the oppressor, but to *be* under him, to depend on him. Accordingly, the oppressed are emotionally dependent” (64-65). Speaking of human existence and ownership, Freire’s view on the unequal relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed suggests a kind of oppressive world like that of the single story portrayed by Adichie, in which humans are treated as “things” or sub-humans not being able to stand for themselves but depending on the mercy of those who rule over them.

Adichie's depiction of the single story of catastrophe raises a serious question of whether equality for Africans is possible in the context of democracy even though Nigeria has been liberated from British colonial rule since 1960. It is assumed that there would be no more social or racial inequality or discrimination among different human beings and races after imperialism ceased to exist, but history often proves the assumption wrong. Adichie describes how American people thought and looked at her when she first came to the country:

I must say that before I went to the U.S., I didn't consciously identify as African. But in the U.S., whenever Africa came up, people turned to me. Never mind that I knew nothing about places like Namibia. But I did come to embrace this new identity, and in many ways I think of myself now as African. Although I still get quite irritable when Africa is referred to as a country .... (05:22-05:54)

Adichie might have been caught off guard by the reality of a new world like the U.S. with which she came to contact. She is constantly reminded of the fact that she has a different identity from that of Americans though she can racially identify with African Americans, a thing that is perhaps self-evident or taken for granted by many people of other races. While Adichie welcomed her "new identity," people surrounding her imposed a false identity on her. For example, the misinformation about Adichie's country (e.g. Namibia – a country that does not exist, or Africa being referred to as a country instead of a continent) displays the people's ignorance about Africa today. In a rhetorical situation like this, Adichie's default position was opposed to that of those ill-informed people who seem to hold a very different, distorted view about her African identity.

Adichie's admission to not "consciously identify herself as African" suggests, however, that at first she might not have a clear default position, but that later she began to believe that her

African identity was in jeopardy after she first came to the United States. In Freire's terms, people like Adichie must first "deal with the problem of the oppressed consciousness and the oppressor consciousness, the problem of men and women who oppress and men and women who suffer oppression. It must take into account their behavior, their view of the world, and their ethics" (55). As a foreign student, Adichie had to learn to identify herself as an African from Nigeria – not an African American – because there are many peoples from African countries who do not share her national background and languages such as English and Igbo. Also, she needed to be careful enough not to conflate the story of African colonial history with that of slavery in America as far as political oppression is concerned. She might have attempted to avoid mentioning the sad part of Nigerian colonial history even though her country has been liberated from colonialism for quite a while. Perhaps, her African identity would have helped to explain her new situation when she encountered people like her American roommate who might not have any knowledge except the single story of Africa.

Nevertheless, her repeated frustrations with the new people surrounding her seem to reinforce the single story of her African identity that has created confusion in her mental state. She is divided by the real and false identities. As Freire puts it, "A particular problem is the duality of the oppressed: they are contradictory, divided beings, shaped by and existing in a concrete situation of oppression and violence" (55). Here, Adichie appears to experience the same problem in the situation though the reader is not to take the "violence" at its face value; for example, hurtful or abusive language can be seen as verbal violence. As Freire goes on to explain, "Any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with the individual's

ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human” (55). For Adichie, the situation of a false identity projected on her is a wake-up call to the new reality. She must find ways to speak up for herself. If necessary, she must readjust her default position.

Adichie knows that without freedom of expression and equality between different human beings, her default position for story telling will be confined to only a single story of catastrophe in Africa that will affect the way people outside of Africa think about her identity, personal literacy narratives, and literary works (fiction). She takes stories about Nigeria and Africa seriously, realizing that her default setting has to begin with who she is and where she comes from. Later, Adichie appears to have gained new understanding of her new world, the United States, having a different way of looking at herself and her default position in relation to that of her roommate when she says,

So, after I had spent some years in the U.S. as an African, I began to understand my roommate’s response to me .... 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 beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves .... (05:56-06:34)

Because she was born and has lived in Nigeria, she believes that she has authentic knowledge about her identity, country, culture and Africa; on the other hand, she rejects those “popular images” or stories which do not totally represent Africa, who she is as an African, and a human being in the world. As Pam Steeves, Vera Caine, Marilyn Huber, and Janice Huber put it, “Throughout the ages and across cultures stories continue to express the fundamental nature of humanity. Stories are not to be treated lightly as they both carry, and inspire, significant obligations and responsibilities: stories must be cared for as they are at the heart of how we make

meaning of our experiences of the world” (214). For Adichie, the “popular images” that portray a single story of catastrophe about Africa and African people do not do justice to reality and humanity – they are not authentic, meaningful representations of Africans but stereotypes.

Adichie probably did not know that when she came to the United States, there would still be stereotyping and discrimination against people of different races, ethnicities, and identities. Despite the history of American slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, the problem of stereotyping Africans in popular images is often left unchecked or unchallenged. However, Adichie is quick to respond to stereotyping with subtlety and irony as she points it out:

I recently spoke at a university where a student told me that it was such a shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in my novel. I told him that I had just read a novel called ‘American Psycho’(Laughter) and that it was such a shame that young Americans were serial murderers. (10:51-11:14)

Adichie’s audience humorously laughs at her exchange with the student, perhaps thinking that she taught the student a lesson on the spot. Unfortunately, Adichie has little choice but to defend herself in the face of ignorance and stereotyping, and taking a resolute default position she makes it clear that she will not shy away from fighting against the single story of Africa that stereotypes her African identity and national character.

Adichie knows that if the single story of catastrophe in Africa dominates the painting of the entire picture of Africa, so to speak, then such story will only continue to persist and encourage stereotypes. Though Adichie cannot come to terms with the single story of Africa, she has to admit that there is some truth about the catastrophic situations in Africa. She is not trying to hide the negative aspects of reality as she positions her rhetoric between positive and negative

stories of Africa. She openly talks about the political and economic trouble in Nigeria and Africa:

Of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes: There are immense ones, such as the horrific rapes in Congo and depressing ones, such as the fact that 5,000 people apply for one job vacancy in Nigeria. But there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them. (13:25-13:44)

In the single story of Africa, Adichie sees biases in the description of catastrophes that result in stereotyping Africa. This stereotyped version of the single story of catastrophe seems to fit into Freire's diagnosis of the symptom of narrating sickness in education by simply repeating the content of the same story. For Adichie, it is important to put those catastrophic and non-catastrophic stories of Africa in perspective as well, or it is impossible to shine some sparks of light in the midst of darkness.

Sibylle Gruber correctly explains the single story of a catastrophic Nigeria or Africa: "a story that gets told over and over again, about a people or a country, with little knowledge of the people or country, will lead to stereotypes, half-truths, and prejudice. It will never allow us to get to know a multifaceted person, or a diverse community, country, or continent" (39). Imagine that a single story of Africa such as this will certainly not impress anyone living outside of the continent. At worst, what if an author of single story of Africa chooses to write only negative stories about Nigeria? It would make readers wonder why the author even wants to write those negative stories that only to cause misery or oppression to the people of a nation.

Conversely, though fiction as a genre seems to give an author freedom to tell and write stories, it certainly does not condone the act of any single-story authors to write stories that involve real people and culture of a country; otherwise, inauthentic or false stories will only

perpetuate oppression and catastrophe. In an emotional appeal to her audience, Adichie speaks of the reality of the single story:

I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of 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.  
(13:45-14:08)

Here, Adichie's emotional speech must have caught her audience's attention, and they would take seriously her words about the single story which dehumanizes people and their dignity.

Considering the rhetorical situation here, Freire insists that "the authentic solution of the oppressor-oppressed contradiction does not lie in a mere reversal of position, in moving from pole to the other. Nor does it lie in the replacement of the former oppressors with new ones who continue to subjugate the oppressed – all in the name of their liberation" (57). Rather than advocate for only positive stories to be told or written about Africa, Adichie prefers to strike a balance between catastrophic and non-catastrophic stories for the oppressed as an authentic solution; as a writer, she chooses to take a default position that will eventually liberate her from the single story of Africa.

Therefore, if Adichie chooses to let the single story of Africa continue to take its course, then the reality of oppression will only persist rather than disappear. As Freire rightly states, "reality [that] becomes oppressive results in the contradistinction of men as oppressors and oppressed. The latter, whose task it is to struggle for their liberation together with those who show true solidarity, must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle" (51). Freire's statement seems to sum up Adichie's situation where she must have a

critical consciousness of the reality as the praxis of her struggle finds true solidarity among Africans and peoples of the world. No doubt, in her default position, Adichie is in search of a way to free herself from the bondage of the single story of catastrophe amplified by the popular images created and portrayed in the Western world. That is, those popular images present only a one-sided and partial version of the reality, and they are not completely correct or authentic.

### Chapter 3: Adichie's Struggle with Power of the Single Story

Many student writers who struggle with the situation of their rhetorical discourse while writing their personal literacy narratives and definition argument experience the conflict between academic discourse and non-academic (human) discourse. In *Aristotle's Voice: Rhetoric, Theory, and Writing in America*, Jasper Neel (1994) argues that much of the voice of academic discourse, as far as rhetoric is concerned, originated from that of Aristotle, pointing out that both writing professors and first-year college students encounter the conflict between the two extremes – professional discourse and human discourse as they pit against each other (89). Namely, the two conflicting discourses appear to form a dichotomy between academic discourse and non-academic discourse. One can imagine that if such conflict is not resolved, the power struggle between the two extremes is likely to exacerbate, and consequently professional voice dominates human voice, or vice versa, allowing rhetoric no room for any freedom of expression in an academic setting.

By the same token, in her rhetorical discourse, Adichie struggles with the situation where the power of single story takes control of all African stories when telling her personal literacy narratives and worldview to her audience. In my view, the conflict between these two opposing discourses can be best illustrated in Adichie's case, as mentioned earlier in my introduction of this thesis, where she began to realize that her “American roommate must have throughout her life seen and heard different versions of this single story, as had a professor, who once told me that my novel was not ‘authentically African’ ...” (07:33-08:20). From Adichie's perspective, is the idea of “African authenticity” so entrenched and pervasive today in the academic discourse on university campuses that most professors and students have seldom challenged and questioned it?

Adichie's struggle with the idea of African literature and the professor's idea of African authenticity reminds her of the single story of Africa. While discussing the development of African literature, Heather Hewett says that "struggle characterizes the formation of all canons, including Nigeria's" (76). Adichie realizes that African authenticity alienates her from the reality of the African world, and in Freire's terms, her situation can be seen as a conflict between oppressors and the oppressed originating from colonial times in Africa. If a teacher has the absolute right and knowledge to teach students how to write about a particular nation, people, race, ethnicity, and culture, like those in Nigeria, then for Adichie there will be no possibility of other stories about Africa but one single story of colonial Africa. At worst, the teacher renders valuable contents lifeless in the process of narrating them, while speaking of empirical dimensions of reality as if it were a motionless and static reality – a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. Then, the outstanding characteristic of this narrative education results in the sonority of words, not their transforming power (Freire 71). Thus, such narrative education will dominate the entire atmosphere of academic discourse that maintains the status quo of the situation of the oppressed.

Adichie rejects the rhetoric of a single story that runs counter to the rhetoric of her personal literacy narratives as well as her African novels, both of which are inseparably knitted together. She has raised the question of African authenticity because the single story about Africa told by the West has misrepresented her identity and world, which is a wake-up call for her audience. On the contrary, a true representation of Africa has everything to do with the authenticity of her existence. As Freire insightfully states,

the oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although

they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided ... between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. This is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed which their education must take into account. (48)

Freire's statement seems to adequately describe Adichie's conflict as a "divided" human being. She could have chosen to be silent about the issue of African authenticity, but it will not erase the problem of the tragic dilemma she faces.

Who is at fault for the problem of narrative education as far as the single story of Africa is concerned? Since Adichie does not think that African authenticity accounts for the full picture of Africa, are there any other stories about the continent, its people and cultures? Freire proposes that "To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (47). Adichie may have attempted to trace the causes of the single story of Africa, and she must take the courage of speaking them out for Nigerians at home and English speaking audience abroad:

This single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from Western literature. Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Locke, who sailed to West Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as 'beasts who have no houses,' he writes, 'They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts.' (06: 35-07:05)

Locke's portrayal of the black Africans as "beasts" in his fictional world unfortunately suggests a sad reality of dehumanizing people of different races. For Adichie, the depiction of Africans is a single story of negation about Africa, but it raises concern for humanization that leads at once to "the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as a historical reality" (Freire 43). As such, history has become a place of enquiry into the origin of the single story of Africa.

Adichie denounces negative caricatures of Africans in Western literature, caricatures that are not authenticating but stereotyping Africa. Perhaps some readers may be tempted to suggest that one should not take Locke's fiction about Africans seriously because it is not a good idea to conflate the genre of personal literacy narratives with that of literature. The rhetoric of the single story of Africa presents a sort of a double vision of Africa between truth and fiction, and it calls into question whether it is permissible for a writer to fictionalize a human race negatively other than his or her own. Nevertheless, Adichie seems to take Locke's wild imagination about Africans seriously – surprisingly with humor:

Now, I've laughed every time I've read this. And one must admire the imagination of John Locke. But what is important about his writing is that it 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, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are 'half devil, half child.' (07:05-07:31)

The tradition of telling African stories certainly casts a negative light on the African world Adichie has known and experienced, and it all appears to be dark imagination rather than bright reality. The implications of such a sinister, single story are at least twofold: first, the creation of a master narrative that a dominant race tell stories about a less dominant race; second, it is of one

single narrative (voice) instead of multiple ones about Africa that beg for freedom of speech. Adichie berates the hegemony and colonial/imperialistic undertones, urging her audience to resist the comfort of a single story about any place or people (Akomolafe 726). The rhetoric of master narrative of Africa has resulted in the power struggles, if not racial tension, between oppressors and the oppressed as Adichie explores the origin and power of the rhetoric of single story of Africa.

In “Revisionary Histories of Rhetoric: Politics, Power, and Plurality,” James A. Berlin (1994) points out that traditional rhetoric like Aristotle’s rhetoric has a “monolithic” character because it situates in the golden age of the past or the future; Berlin sees the histories of rhetoric as “unified, coherent, and rational” (112). In contrast, he specifically mentions that progressive rhetoricians considered John Locke the bringer of great tidings, being able to transcend the falsehood of the Aristotelian syllogism; they treated Locke as a “hero” who had started “an intellectual revolution” (114). According to Berlin, there is no “objectivity” in rhetorical discourse because “all historians are interested, writing their narratives from a particular ideological position,” and because “it is impossible to become a *tabula rasa* innocently recording the raw data of the historical record.” For Berlin, the data are subject to different interpretations (121). Further, Berlin ideologically positions rhetoric in the “master narratives that authorize their continual power and privilege,” and as he puts it, “the attempt to make sense of history will always be undertaken by dominant groups” (124). Berlin’s mention of “monolithic” character of traditional rhetoric suggests one single voice dominates other voices in any political climates. Historically, Berlin seems to imply a dichotomy between master narratives and slave narratives in the midst of rhetorics that are subject to interpretative formulations or frameworks.

Pedagogically speaking, one may wonder the implications of Berlin's idea of rhetoric when situated in an academic setting where slave narratives (or narratives by less dominant, oppressed or underprivileged groups of people) are not encouraged in a democratic country. In other words, there is a hierarchical relationship between these two different kinds of narratives. And yet, it seems that the dominant voice, be it a professional or academic one, will silence the human voice of the latter narratives that struggle to be heard. Adichie would have felt the presence of the power struggle between master and slave narratives and identified Berlin's idea of "monolithic character" of rhetoric as that of single story of Africa, considering the slave history in Africa and British colonial rule in Nigeria, like African-Americans who have lived through the history of American slavery and the Civil Rights Movement.

To illustrate what she sees in the relationship between power and narratives, to readers' surprise, Adichie appears to find a word in her native language for the rhetoric of the single story of Africa as follows:

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. (09:37-10:11)

Adichie sees a close link between the single story and power, and the Igbo word *nkali* she introduces clearly explains the hierarchical relationship between who has the power to tell the single story and who is being told about it. Also, as scholars put it, "the single narrative is constructed and told by those in power with the intention to have the dominant discourse

accepted as the ultimate truth of the collective whole” (García and Longo 7). Politically, the power of rhetoric that manifests itself in the single story of Africa resembles the power of narrative education Freire talks about in the context of oppressors and the oppressed. However, when narrators abuse the power of telling stories, they create false narratives about a people’s character and identity and therefore propagate falsehood and injustice that destroy humanity and life.

Furthermore, Adichie sees the single story of Africa as a catastrophic, inauthentic reality that does not promote humanity but stereotypes Africans. When addressing the process of telling a single story, she says, “So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become” (09:27-09:36). Additionally, the “one thing” seems to allude to what Freire says about the negated vocation of people (call to humanity) or dehumanization – namely, humanity being “stolen” and “distorted” (43-44). As Freire makes it clear, oppressors look at “humanity” as “a ‘thing,’ and they possess it as an exclusive right, as inherited property” (59). Clearly, Adichie would understand what Freire means here: “The oppressed, as objects, as ‘things,’ have no purposes except those their oppressors prescribe for them” (60). As a result, telling the single story of Africa repeatedly becomes oppressive to African people who have no choice but listen to it; they suffer from it because the same story reinforces unauthentic African narratives.

Freire notably finds a fundamental *narrative* character in the teacher-student relationship, describing the teacher as a narrating subject and the students as listening objects. He says that as a narrator, the teacher assumes the task of filling “the students with the contents of his narration – contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance” (71). With the authority of academic discourse, the teacher

treats students as objects or passive receivers of knowledge, dominating the voice of the narrative education. Consequently, to reiterate Freire's words, "education is suffering from narration sickness" (71). The teacher leads students to memorize mechanically the narrated contents. At worst, the narration turns the students into "containers" or "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teacher; unfortunately, this narration sickness becomes what Freire calls the "banking concept of education"<sup>4</sup> which projects "an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression," negating "education and knowledge as processes of inquiry." Freire argues that such narrative education is apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, and therefore "individuals cannot be truly human" (72). Adichie would recognize that the single story of Africa disseminated on university campuses is a kind of narration sickness because it dehumanizes Africans and negates their existence.

Adichie realizes that the power of single story deprives Africans of their right to humanity, and consequently they become disinherited from the world and reality. The result of single story is not transforming but dehumanizing power for Africans when single-story tellers (oppressors, teachers) take control of narrative education. For Adichie, the power of telling stories is never just about words but lives of other persons. She says,

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the

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<sup>4</sup> Freire says, "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (72).

failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story. (10:12-10:51)

Adichie's statement on "the definitive story" is worth noticing. By definition, the word *definitive* means "firm, final, and complete; not to be questioned or changed" ("Definitive"). If the definitive story is like the single story she has addressed, then the power of it is not to be "questioned or changed." Such absolute power in the situation of a rhetorical discourse puts the narrative education of a democratic country in question, not to mention if the definitive story only consists of inauthentic words about an African person, people, or country. Thus, as Freire rightly puts it, speaking true words can "transform the world," but inauthentic words are "unable to transform reality" (87). Adichie would agree with Freire about African humanity being distorted due to narration sickness and false narrative characterization of Africans.

#### Chapter 4: More Than the Single Story as Liberation

While first-year college students work on their short definition argument assignment in the context of personal literacy narratives, writing instructors may notice that the definition argument can be changed or expanded to other types of argument such as causal, evaluation, or problem-solution argument, and so on. Also, unlike a narrative (story) that has a beginning, middle, and ending, the definition argument does not seem to provide an ending except a conclusion. It would seem that the writing assignment that combines definition argument and personal literacy narratives would stop short of being complete without a satisfying closure for a well-rounded lesson that includes the purpose of a problem-solution for its rhetorical discourse. That is, while tackling the problem of narration sickness, as found in our study of Adichie's stories addressing the issue of single story of Africa, we can closely examine Freire's proposal for the *raison d'etre* of libertarian education as a resolution of the contradiction between the teacher and students (72). In a way, we can use Freire's concept of libertarian education to reposition rhetoric in the narrative education as we discuss Adichie's text and give the students freedom to communicate with the teacher and the world.

The rhetoric in Adichie's stories is certainly not limited to the situation of definition argument when it comes to looking at the whole text of her stories about Africa that raises the basic questions: Who am I as an African? What is Africa? What is an African story? and What is "African authenticity"? These are pressing rhetorical questions that Adichie must have asked and attempted to answer herself in terms of her identity, existence, personal literacy, literary works and worldview. Additionally, she must have faced the central question about the situation Freire poses: "How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?" (48). Like student writers who have to give definitions to critically

contested words in their personal literacy narratives, Adichie has to define hers as well in her African stories – for example, her professor’s version of “African authenticity” which demonstrates the power of a single story of Africa, a monolithic voice embedded in academic discourse, in the Western literary tradition.

In her rhetorical discourse, however, Adichie is not seeking to present a one-sided story that ends with addressing merely the problem of single story that stereotypes Africans. Rather, she is looking for ways to define and situate her rhetoric in multiple stories of Africa though the problem of single story must be addressed first. For example, as Julia López-Robertson, Susi Long, and Kindle Turner-Nash describe, even school teachers admit the problem caused by the single story:

The words of Nigerian novelist Chimimanda Adichi resonated with us as she spoke about the ease with which we all define others by single stories until we take the time to look beyond stereotypes. This provided an important backdrop to our recognition of the power that teachers hold to either perpetuate single stories or interrupt them by providing counter narratives that make visible the rich resources that children and families bring to schools. (93)

In my view, Adichie is concerned not only about telling counter narratives about herself and Africa but also about many forgotten African stories though she does not deny the facts told in different versions of a single story. As a matter of fact, she seeks to transcend the narration sickness in education and transform the way the single story of Africa has been told since it began.

In her vision for transforming narrative education, Adichie does not mean to just shift from negative to positive stories. Instead, she wants to find a middle ground for her default

position where she can have voice to give authenticity to her African stories, while liberating herself from the bondage of the single story. On the other hand, she points out the negative impact of the single story that creates stereotypes that misrepresent her identity:

All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. 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 (12:57-13:24).

As Adichie implies, incomplete stories that portray any groups of people at the expense of biases and stereotypes put their existence and humanity in jeopardy.

The problem with stereotypes caused by the single story which dominates other non-negative stories in Adichie's case raises concerns about what college should do to stop it. As Freire states, "education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression" (78). Unless educators recognize that stereotyping is a form of oppression, the problem is likely to be exacerbated by unchallenged inaction and injustice to humanity. Therefore, for her, rejecting the single story is a way of stopping stereotyping and liberating Africans from the oppressive situation, essential to the health of narrative education to take place.

In "Kairotic Rhetoric in Freire's Liberatory Pedagogy," Anthony R. Petruzzi explores the situation of Freire's rhetoric in his concept of libertarian education, arguing that *kairos*, an important component of critical consciousness, discloses Freire's hermeneutic perspective on rhetoric. According to Petruzzi, Freire views *kairos* as "a qualitative moment of transformation that gives critical consciousness its dynamic ethical and liberatory dimensions" (349). Petruzzi's

argument on Freire's idea of rhetoric suggests an interpretative situation where an author or narrator is involved in writing a text or telling a story to readers or listeners. Freire's rhetoric of critical consciousness would give power to a more balanced interpretive aspect of stories for both the teacher and students.

Similarly, in Adichie's rhetoric of critical consciousness for Africans, it is the interpretative situation where multiple and diverse narratives allow both positive and negative stories of Africa; on the other hand, recognizing and seeking "interpretive possibilities" will not happen "if we tell only the same stories" (Vasudevan 1166). For example, Adichie proposes: "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'" (14:09-14:32). In her proposition, Adichie suggests that Africa does not have a television network today to speak for Africans, and in her critical consciousness, she believes that diverse African stories will present a fair and balanced picture of Africa rather than the single story which has taken control of rhetoric and narratives about Africa.

Further, as an African writer Adichie seeks to have her voice heard through multiple stories about Africa because single story stereotypes and distorts her identity, personal literacy narratives and literary works. Nadia Behizadeh points out that Adichie warns of a single story applying to education, and "many scholars have emphasized the importance of multicultural education that recognizes and celebrates student diversity, allowing many stories to be heard" (1). Also, from the standpoint of pedagogical narrations, multiple stories open up "opportunities for dialogue and contestation, one way to resist the domination of single stories and myths" (Hodgins 10). Liberating rhetorical discourse becomes possible when the situation of authentic dialogue between the teacher and students is encouraged and allowed to take place in college.

Freire says that “liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors – teacher on the one hand and students on the other” (79). In other words, such education with open dialogue breaks the dichotomy and contradiction between the teacher and students: “She is not ‘cognitive’ at one point and ‘narrative’ at another. She is always ‘cognitive,’ whether preparing a project or engaging in dialogue with the students. He does not regard cognizable objects as his private property, but as the object of reflection by himself and the students” (80). Contrary to the monologue or voice of the single story, Adichie would appreciate dialogue between the teacher and students discussing possibilities of multiple stories about Africa and agree with Freire on such liberatory narrative education.

In the process of telling her stories, Adichie also attempts to liberate herself from the single story and to restore her African humanity and dignity. As she puts it, “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity” (17:37-17:55). Adichie recognizes that the power of stories can have both positive and negative effects on the humanity of a people depending on the purpose or intention of a storyteller. Her rhetoric for liberation in the situation of Africans’ struggle with the status quo of traditional way of story-telling is one that echoes Freire’s for the liberation of the oppressed from narration sickness though he stresses that humanization is for all. For example, according to Freire,

In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both. This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. (44)

Unlike Adichie whose speech seems to focus more on the humanity of the oppressed, Freire's view on regaining humanity is for not only the oppressed but also oppressors because he realizes that the conflict between two very different human races (or ethnicities) and cultures is never one-sided and it takes people from both sides to dialogue and solve problems.

Perhaps, from a non-African perspective, American and international students in my writing class might have difficulty thinking totally in Adichie's terms, or even in Freire's terms about the narrative education for the oppressed in a post-colonial era. Does Adichie's rhetoric of personal literacy narratives situated in Nigeria, Africa, apply in the United States and the rest of the world? Her audiences notice that toward the end of her speech she repeatedly mentions her American roommate's lack of knowledge about Africa: "what if my roommate knew" about the female lawyer, Nollywood, her ambitious hair braider, and the millions of other Nigerians ... (15:34-16:46). Presumably, rather than thinking that she was more knowledgeable than her American roommate, Adichie appeals to her American audience during those teachable moments that her African stories about her Nigerian identity, country, culture, and people are different from those of the single story told and taught in the Western world.

Nevertheless, Freire warns of the oppressed and their liberation by oppressors in a postcolonial age by saying that "The man or woman who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into *communion* with the people whom he or she continues to regard as totally ignorant, is grievously self-deceived" (61). Freire's insightful statement about

the “communion” between oppressors and the oppressed has far-reaching implications because liberation is never self-centered or one-sided.<sup>5</sup> Rather, Freire emphasizes the importance of liberation for both parties because it is possible that the oppressed become oppressors if the power struggle is not resolved democratically.

Moreover, Freire’s view on the liberation from oppressive power on human condition is not limited to a single story of racial conflict between black and white people. As a matter of fact, political oppression has historically happened to people of the same race or different ethnic groups before, during, and after the colonial era as well. For example, Kwadwo A. Okrah points out “single-story misconception” by saying that “African immigrants get upset when black Americans base their perception about them on a “single ‘story’ of poverty, famine, disease, tribal wars, etc.” (36). By the same token, it is unlikely that Adichie would approve the single story of catastrophe here if black Americans have the misconception.

In Adichie’s critical consciousness for liberation from the single story of Africa, she is aware of her world and American audiences today who are very diverse – after all, the United States is said to be a nation of immigrants who are from all over the world. She admits her mistakes when it comes to a single story about other peoples. For instance, she implies that she had incorrect views about immigration and Mexicans:

But I must quickly add that I too am just as guilty in the question of the single story. A few years ago, I visited Mexico from the U.S. The political climate in the U.S. at the time was tense, and there were debates going on about immigration. And, as often happens in America, immigration became synonymous with Mexicans. (08:22-08:53)

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<sup>5</sup> According to Freire, “... almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or ‘sub-oppressors.’ The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors” (45).

Adichie realizes that she is not totally free from single stories of other peoples of whom she has limited knowledge or understanding, and that after all, immigration is a complicated issue that does not just involve Mexicans. From Freire's perspective, humans exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom because they are aware of themselves and thus of the world, and because they are conscious beings (99).

Adichie becomes more conscious of her presence in the United States, a big country with diversity of people, race, and culture. Later in her speech, Adichie appears to show that she has become more knowledgeable about reading many American novels and has been free from the single story of America: "This is not because I am a better person than that student, but because of America's cultural and economic power, I had many stories of America. I had read Tyler and Updike and Steinbeck and Gatsby. I did not have a single story of America" (11:30-11:54). For Adichie, the single story of a people misrepresents their identity, and they must find ways to liberate themselves from the narration sickness.

Back in her country, Adichie has to deal with not only a literacy problem but also narration sickness in Nigeria. She wants to solve Nigerian people's literacy problem through narrative education. She has unreservedly tapped into the richness of African oral tradition of telling stories, believing that Nigerians can learn to tell their own stories through reading and writing. To do this, she has found literature to be a place to get started though not without encountering some difficulty. For example, she talked with her publisher about the difficulty and how to encourage Nigerian people to read literature: "Now, the conventional wisdom was that Nigerians don't read literature. He disagreed. He felt that people who could read, would read, if you made literature affordable and available to them" (14:33-14:55). Adichie knows that she must first tackle the literacy problem of Nigerian people and then help them engage in telling and

writing their stories. She encourages them to write new or forgotten African stories, instead of the single story of Africa.

The single story of Africa reminds Adichie of her frustration with the Nigerian government's failure and Nigeria's poor infrastructure. However, one day, after publishing her first novel, Adichie received an unexpected comment from a Nigerian reader:

I was not only charmed, I was very moved. Here was a woman, part of the ordinary masses of Nigerians, who were not supposed to be readers. She had not only read the book, but she had taken ownership of it and felt justified in telling me what to write in the sequel. (15:15-15:32)

This touching incident must have given Adichie confidence in Nigerian readers and led her to believe that Nigerians can regain their readership and take ownership of their African stories – to be free from the single story.

Feeling encouraged, Adichie began to teach Nigerians how to read and write stories, a successful literacy event which becomes evident as follows: “I teach writing workshops in Lagos every summer, and it is amazing to me how many people apply, how many people are eager to write, to tell stories (16:47-17:13). The writing workshops seem to illustrate Freire’s problem-posing education<sup>6</sup> that encourages “creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation” (84). Adichie could not have been more proud of her students going through the transformation in her writing workshops and the freedom they have to write African stories.

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<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Freire says that “banking theory and practice, as immobilizing and fixating forces, fail to acknowledge men and women as historical beings; problem-posing theory and practice take the people’s historicity as their starting point” (84).

Toward the end of Adichie’s speech, Adichie appears to reveal her African vision for the world— a vision of telling multiple, forgotten stories of Africa in the rhetorical situation of narration sickness. In her critical consciousness of the global vision, Adichie has attempted to create a new genre of telling stories about Africa by glorifying the works of African and African-American writers such as Chinua Achebe and Alice Walker, as a way of broadening her global vision for African literature and perhaps bridging the gap between Africa and the West through her literary works. Also, specifically, for the creation and liberation of a new Nigerian literature, Adichie tries to find ways to help with Nigerians’ narrative education – in Freire terms, “a humanist and liberating praxis posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation ...” (86).<sup>7</sup> That is, to turn the pedagogy of the oppressed into the pedagogy of liberation in Nigeria, and Adichie must make sure that Nigerians are ready to learn to read and write about their own African stories.

In her vision for Africans, Adichie aims at a kind of revival for African literature in which Africans are free to tell their forgotten stories: “Now, 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?” (15:33-16:05). Also, to promote the literacy in Nigeria and materialize her vision, Adichie conducts free workshops for Nigerians as she talks about her non-profit organization, Farafina Trust:

We have big dreams of building libraries and refurbishing libraries that already exist and providing books for state schools that don’t have anything in their libraries, and also of

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<sup>7</sup> “Problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become Subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables people to overcome their false perception of reality. The world – no longer something to be described with deceptive words – becomes the object of that transforming action by men and women which results in their humanization” (Freire 86).

organizing lots and lots of workshops, in reading and writing, for all the people who are eager to tell our many stories. (17:14-17:35)

In addition, like Alice Walker, Adichie imagines herself reading stories to her students in Nigeria as she emulates Walker by drawing the audiences' attention to a passage from Walker's book: "They sat around, reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained" (qtd. in Adichie, 17:56-18:16). On the other hand, Adichie implies that there is a lost paradise where people read and write the single story about Africa, and it raises the question of what would be the best representation of Africa through story-telling in literature.

Adichie aspires to have a liberated narrative education for Africans who have lost their freedom to tell their own stories as a result of the dominating power of the single story of Africa, a reminder of what Freire says under such rhetorical situation: "Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people" (81). Adichie envisions a world in which people would be free from single stories, and she ends her speech by declaring her default position again, "When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise" (18:17-18:29). For Adichie, to deal with the problem of narration sickness in education is to get rid of the single story by situating her rhetoric in multiple stories instead, as she reaches out to her audiences and the world. She hopes to help Africans learn how to read and write their stories and, to create a new genre especially for African literature in which Nigerians have freedom to tell many of their forgotten stories.

## **Chapter 5: Achiche's Text, Freire's Pedagogy, Academic Discourse vs. Human Discourse**

Many college writing students often struggle with finding narrowed, controversial topics for short argumentative essays – even for those highly charged political issues such as drug, abortion, religion, and race. This is not to say that these issues are not important; conversely, they personally are. As a matter of fact, they can be so political and personal that some students do not feel comfortable talking about them with classmates, and sometimes even college writing instructors feel challenged by such issues that involve biases or stereotypes of particular groups of people. Nevertheless, educators have authority or power to teach and narrate in the classroom and must be aware of the rhetorical situations the students face. As Freire states, “Often, educators and politicians speak and are not understood because their language is not attuned to the concrete situation of the people they address. Accordingly, their talk is just alienated and alienating rhetoric” (96). Freire’s statement suggests that in order to avoid alienating their students, educators should make sure that their rhetoric does not cause narration sickness when expounding their worldview with oppressive pedagogy. Adichie’s situation of personal stories is a case in point when we see her professor had only the “single story” of rhetoric to offer. Likewise, in our first-year college writing courses, as writing instructors we usually expect students to write in academic discourse, while many of them may struggle with their rhetorical situations where they have to position themselves in the contexts of telling their personal literacy narratives to audiences. Here the tension between academic discourse and human discourse prompts us to ask: Where should students situate the rhetoric of their personal literacy narratives in academic discourse? In this chapter, I argue that writing instructors should give room to

students to express themselves through writing while making effort to strike a balance between the two seemingly competing discourses.

Even though more and more universities in liberal arts education have hired and assigned professors specializing in rhetoric and composition to be in charge of college writing programs, it would seem incorrect to say that academic discourse is solely situated in the specialty if we are to trace the history of rhetoric dating back to the era of Aristotle. In *Aristotle's Voice: Rhetoric, Theory, and Writing in America*, Jasper Neel (1994) states that “if composition studies continues to develop into a ‘true’ discipline, the time will come early in the next century when composition studies majors, or perhaps writing majors, will appear in every college” (33). However, Neel is not totally optimistic about the future of the discipline, arguing that “composition studies as I envision it will always have an uneasy situation in the university because it never aims higher than the practical and productive ...” (33). As a rhetorician, Neel’s argument seems to cast doubt on where exactly rhetoric or academic discourse should be situated when it comes to composition studies. Further, Neel says that “Aristotle was not, of course, free to situate rhetoric *anywhere*; nor could he give it *any* form” (184). Neel is aware that most professors or instructors who teach rhetoric and composition today, like Aristotle, are situated this way (not totally free) on campus, and that first-year students, as learners of rhetoric and composition, may not have freedom as much as they desire when it comes to speaking their voices through writing in the domain of human discourse.

For instance, in his article “Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues,” Peter Elbow begins by talking about his “dilemma”: “I love what’s in academic discourse: learning, intelligence, sophistication – even mere facts and naked summaries of articles and books; I love reasoning, inference, and evidence; I love theory. But I

hate academic discourse” (1). Some, or perhaps many, writing instructors and students may have Elbow’s dilemma and ask whether academic discourse should be the only thing to be taught in college writing at all. However, it is the concern Elbow may share with writing instructors about poor and underprepared students who take first-year college writing courses though he is not ready to totally dismiss the necessity of teaching academic discourse. As Elbow argues,

Discourse carries power. This is especially important for weak or poorly prepared students – particularly students from poorer classes or those who are the first in their families to come to college. Not to help them with academic discourse is simply to leave a power vacuum and thereby reward privileged students who have already learned academic discourse at home or in school – or at least learned the roots or propensity for academic discourse. (2)

Elbow’s argument on the issue of power raises the question of equality or fairness in our education system as to why privileged students are taught academic discourse whereas the underprivileged are not before going to college. Hence, his argument indicates that there is an imbalance or a struggle of power between the two groups of students.

Critics echo Elbow’s argument and see the situation as one of power struggle rather than one that can be problematized. For example, in “Teaching Discourse and Reproducing Culture: A Critique of Research and Pedagogy in Professional and Non-Academic Writing,” Carl G. Herndl points out that “there are a number of problems with the limited, descriptive focus of research in professional writing. Among them is the fact that research describes the production of meaning but not the social, political and economic sources of power which authorize this production or the cultural work such discourse performs” (351). Herndl seems to indicate that research-oriented professional writing neglects the sources of power that are important to

students' lives. To further illustrate his point, Herndl mentions Freire's pedagogy<sup>8</sup> in this situation: "To be oppressed in Freire's theory is not only to have your economic and political rights violated, but also to be submerged in what he calls a 'culture of silence' by the misrecognition of your relation to the social and ideological" (351). For Freire, students become oppressed when they are "silenced" by a writing theory such as academic discourse that does not really address the reality of their world.

In his pedagogy, Freire cautions educators about teaching an academic discourse that runs counter to students' critical consciousness to recognize their own situation. According to Freire, "we must never merely discourse on the present situation, must never provide the people with programs which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes, and fears – programs which at times in fact increase the fears of the oppressed consciousness" (96). Freire encourages teachers to abstain from imposing their worldview on students in the classroom, saying that "educational and political action which is not critically aware of this situation runs the risk either of 'banking' or of preaching in the desert" (96). Writing instructors may appear out of touch with students' situation when they teach only a discourse that does not meet students' educational need and address their human situation. For instance, Elbow gives one reason to teaching nonacademic discourse in freshman writing courses, arguing that "life is long and college is short. Very few of our students will ever have to write academic discourse after college. The writing that most students will need to do for most of their lives will be for their jobs – and that writing is usually very different from academic discourse" (1). Writing teachers may wonder why teaching academic discourse should dominate an entire curriculum or

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<sup>8</sup> Herndl considers Freire's pedagogy as "the radical pedagogy" which "shares the assumption of social rhetoric that discourse is epistemic" (351).

even diminishes students' critical consciousness about the reality of their lives when the teachers' rhetoric unrelentingly rules over students' rhetoric.

Speaking of "rhetorical authority," however, Patricia Bizzell expresses doubt about whether Freire's "critical consciousness" is indeed what she wants to be accomplishing with her teaching in a review of her work, *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*. In an effort to defend her position against Nancy McKoski's accusation of being "inflexibly advocating the induction of all students into a monolithic academic discourse," Bizzell asserts,

I no longer believe that academic discourse and critical consciousness are causally linked.

I am still willing to teach academic discourse, but I am even more unhappy about the prevailing demand for all students to use nothing but traditional academic discourse in school. I have attempted to argue more forcefully in my recent work for the need to diversify the kinds of discourse that can be used in the academy and in the larger culture.

(51)

Bizzell situates her rhetoric in diverse cultures, seeking to expand her pedagogy beyond the existing traditional academic discourse, and in her liberatory educational agenda, she wants to forge "a more collective, pluralistic, inclusive national discourse" (51). With so many races, cultures, and languages in the United States, Bizzell clearly sees the need for a more inclusive and many-storied discourse for college writing students.

In "Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing within the Academy," Lillian Bridwell-Bowles looks for an alternative discourse or a more personal voice for her students to write outside the dominant discourse, arguing that "our language and our written texts represent our visions of our culture, and we need new processes and forms if we are to express ways of thinking that have been outside the dominant culture" (349). She goes on to say that "old patterns

of argument, based on revealing a single truth (a thesis), using all the available means of persuasion, run counter to new theories of socially constructed knowledge and social change” (351). Additionally, she makes mention of Geoffrey Chase, who employs Freire’s theory, teaching students to “resist the conventions of academic discourse . . . not for the sake of mere opposition, but in order to work for social change” (352). It would seem that the rhetoric of academic discourse does not allow students of different social and cultural backgrounds the freedom and power to express themselves through writing about the reality of their world and therefore silence their human voice. Alternatively, in Freire’s terms of critical consciousness,<sup>9</sup> situating a rhetoric that allows students to engage both academic discourse and human discourse in the context of Adichie’s text gives them freedom to tell and write their many personal literacy narratives but also voice their arguments.

Speaking of including personal narratives (human discourse) in first-year college writing, scholars often have their different visions of teaching academic writing all along the line. Jane E. Hindman’s article, “Making Writing Matter: Using ‘The Personal’ to Recover[y] an Essential[ist] Tension in Academic Discourse,” clearly highlights the tension between the two competing discourses. On the one hand, some professors have envisioned a discourse by re-introducing “human agency and difference into academic discourse,” a professional discourse not used as a means to achieving domination or mastery, or a common discourse shared by academic and national communities which accept “authority created by collective discursive exchange” (qtd. in Hindman 88). On the other hand, many other professors reject “proposals that academics use ‘the personal’ as a way to renounce mastery and share a common discourse.”

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<sup>9</sup> According to Freire, “those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world” (79).

They argue that “historically, scholars have submitted to the discipline’s view of the self as an unauthorized subject; we have been trained to see authors’ revelations of their personal lives as self-indulgent at worst, irrelevant at best” (Hindman 88). These professors appear to hold the traditional view, insisting that college students should be discouraged from writing about their personal lives because they are irrelevant and self-indulgent, as if college writing is all about teaching and learning academic discourse that takes precedence over any other discourses. Unfortunately, they may alienate their students and therefore result in failing to teach the discourse successfully. However, as far as human discourse is concerned, how is it possible to look at Adichie’s personal stories when placed in the context of an argument (academic discourse)? Is it absolutely necessary for writing instructors to treat personal narrative writing as something subjective and contrary to academic discourse that requires students to view everything objectively as in a debate?

Many scholars hesitate to take teaching academic discourse for granted as if it is the only authoritative discourse acceptable for college writing. In their article, “The Who, What, and Why of Scholarly Personal Narrative Writing,” Robert J. Nash and Sydnee Viray point out, “We believe that SPN (Scholarly Personal Narrative) is a methodology of academic writing whose time has finally come in the academy, especially for marginalized students whose voices have been silenced” (6). It is more than likely, as Freire reminds educators, that these students are often ignored and alienated by writing teachers whose pedagogies of academic discourse have become rather an obstacle to students learning than helping them express themselves and make meaning of their lives. At worst, the contents of academic discourse have little to do with students’ life experience. As Elbow puts it, however, “I want to argue for one kind of nonacademic discourse that is particularly important to teach. I mean discourse that tries to

render experience rather than explain it ... we help students learn to write language that conveys to others a sense of their experience – or indeed, that mirrors back to themselves a sense of the own experience” (2). If a nonacademic discourse such as that of personal narratives helps students to render their experience or even encourage them to have their own voice, then we may wonder if a unified or a universal discourse such as academic discourse, as many college professors still believe today, is absolutely essential to teaching college writing.

College professors are often expected to meet the goal of teaching academic writing across the curriculum and the disciplines. It seems logical to assume that there is a universal academic discourse for writing instructors teach across academic community. In “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (re)ENVISIONING ‘First-Year Composition’ as ‘Introduction to Writing Studies,’” Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle noticeably reports the result of their research into a universal academic discourse that can be transferred from one writing situation to another for teaching first-year composition (FYC); however, they admit that “more than twenty years of research and theory have repeatedly demonstrated that such a unified academic discourse does not exist and have seriously questioned what students can and do transfer from one context to another (552). The non-existent universal academic discourse suggests underlying different beliefs and practices writing instructors have when it comes to teaching FYC. Also, the assumption that such universal academic discourse can be transferred from one writing situation to another after college students learn the discourse must be challenged. Further, Downs and Wardle conclude that their “pedagogy explicitly recognizes the impossibility of teaching a universal academic discourse and rejects that as a goal for FYC” (553). Perhaps writing instructors should reconsider if teaching academic discourse should be the only writing skill they want students to learn.

Similarly, in “Teaching the Conventions of Academic Discourse,” David Russell argues, there is no ‘autonomous, generalizable skill or set of skills called ‘writing’ that can be learned and then applied to all genres or activities” (qtd. in Thonney 347). In a way, academic discourse can be viewed as a genre, and many first-year college students are required to learn it in the classroom. Mary J. Reiff and Anis Bawarshi examine “how students negotiate between the resources of their previous writing experiences and the expectations of new academic contexts” (313).<sup>10</sup> From the start of teaching academic discourse, writing instructors should take note of students’ previous writing skills they learned at high school, assess the situation and see if students can really transfer the skills to what they are going to learn. Linguistically speaking, Louise Olivier argues that “The acquisition of academic discourses can be considered to be similar to the acquisition of a second or additional language” (45). Apparently, learning and acquiring an academic discourse takes time, not to mention for non-native English speaking, disadvantaged, or marginalized students.

As a matter of fact, many college students have not encountered or were taught academic discourse before taking writing courses, so they don’t really have any previous experiences and resources to draw on. For example, according to a research report <sup>11</sup>, “A number of students from both UT (University of Tennessee) and UW (University of Washington) indicated the significance of these previous genre performances, with 34% of UW students and 31% of UT

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<sup>10</sup> Reiff and Bawarshi say: “By examining how the genres students perceive as needed or appropriate in a given rhetorical situation inform their access to and use of prior resources, we hoped to explore the processes, strategies, and metacognitive reflections that prompt or guide transfer” (315).

<sup>11</sup> Reiff and Bawarshi conducted their student survey with “a list of 40 loosely defined genres” (e.g. personal essay/narrative, argumentative essay, opinion paper, book report, letter writing, etc.): “Of the students who participated in the UT and UW surveys, at least 50% of the UT respondents reported writing in 27 of the 40 genres provided, while at least 50% of UW respondents reported writing in 34 of the 40 genres” (320-21). Additionally, “For UT students, the top genres reported written in academic domains were research papers (96%), summaries (89%), reports (87%), and personal essays (85%), while for UW students, the top genres were five-paragraph essays (95%), lab reports (92%), and lecture notes (92%)” (321).

students noting the importance of genres written in high school, such as research and persuasion papers, critiques, essays, and reports” (Reiff and Bawarshi 322). The statistical information here suggests that over 60% students from two universities may not have had previous genre knowledge to transfer or relate to the academic discourse they were learning. It also raises the question of whether academic discourse outweighs human discourse as far as genre performances are concerned and evaluated by writing teachers. With respect to this issue, Elbow argues:

We need nonacademic discourse even for the sake of helping students produce good academic discourse – academic language that reflects sound understanding of what they are studying in disciplinary courses .... I’m all for students being able to write academic discourse, but it bothers me when theorists argue that someone doesn’t know a field unless she can talk about it in the discourse professionals use among themselves. (3-4)

In a typical college writing class, experienced writing instructors realize that mastering academic discourse is not an easy task because most of the students are not English majors; they come from all disciplines. It is highly unlikely for the majority of college students to acquire academic discourse in one or two semesters whereas scholars and professors themselves know that they have spent years to craft and perfect the discourse.

Therefore, instead of looking at the tension between human discourse and academic discourse as a contradiction in terms, writing instructors may allow students freedom to have their own voice and express themselves beyond what the traditional rhetoric and discourse permit while teaching first-year college writing. In doing so, as we bring Adichie’s text into the situation of students’ personal literacy narratives, they open the door for the possibility of engaging academic discourse with human discourse. Ideally, it serves the purpose of either

bridging the gap or striking a balance between those two competing discourses as far as rhetoric and discourse are concerned, allowing the first and third personal pronouns, or subjective and objective voices to interact.

## Conclusion

Our reading of Adichie's stories in light of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* undoubtedly sheds light on our understanding of her Nigerian identity, default position against the single story of Africa, struggle with the domination of the single story, and liberation from the single story. In our Freirean analysis of Adichie's speech, we have looked into the problem of the single story that has deprived Africans of their humanity and dignity and that reflects the narration sickness of college education today. Adichie has advocated and advanced the idea of telling multiple, unforgotten stories of Africa instead of the single one as a solution of freeing Africans from the domination (power) of the single story – from the traditional way of telling African stories. While seeking to strike a balance between positive and negative stories about Africa in her literary works, she has become a liberating force and voice for the crisis of African identity and literacy education and literature.

Likewise, college writing students can learn from reading Adichie's stories and look into education situations in the course of telling and writing about their personal literacy narratives. Also, college writing instructors should seriously take note of Adichie's idea and stance against the single story of Africa, making sure that they do not let traditional academic discourse become "a single story" of writing theories upon which they base their pedagogical practices to achieve the goal of writing across the curriculum or disciplines. To reiterate Freire's important statement that the teacher-student relationship reveals "its fundamentally narrative character," as that "education is suffering from narration sickness" (71). Writing instructors should be conscious of any narration sickness in their pedagogical theory and practice while seeking a rhetorical discourse that balances academic discourse and human discourse. They can advance rather than impede student writers from expressing themselves in their personal literacy narratives in which

they learn to identify themselves, see the crisis of their college education in rhetorical situations, and gain liberating experience of expressing and transforming themselves in their own voice.

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## Appendix

### Transcript: “The Danger of a Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript)

00:12

I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call "the danger of the single story." I grew up on a university campus in eastern Nigeria. My mother says that I started reading at the age of two, although I think four is probably close to the truth. So I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books.

00:39

I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples,

01:04

(Laughter)

01:06

and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out.

01:10

(Laughter)

01:12

Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.

01:26

My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer, because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was.

01:36

(Laughter)

01:37

And for many years afterwards, I would have a desperate desire to taste ginger beer. But that is another story.

01:44

What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of them available, and they weren't quite as easy to find as the foreign books.

02:15

But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.

02:36

Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.

02:59

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So, the year I turned eight, we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing." So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

03:43

Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

04:13

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she

could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey.

04:42

(Laughter)

04:45

She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

04:49

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, 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.

05:21

I must say that before I went to the U.S., I didn't consciously identify as African. But in the U.S., whenever Africa came up, people turned to me. Never mind that I knew nothing about places like Namibia. But I did come to embrace this new identity, and in many ways I think of myself now as African. Although I still get quite irritable when Africa is referred to as a country, the most recent example being my otherwise wonderful flight from Lagos two days ago, in which there was an announcement on the Virgin flight about the charity work in "India, Africa and other countries."

05:55

(Laughter)

05:56

So, after I had spent some years in the U.S. as an African, I began to understand my roommate's response to me. 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 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. I would see Africans in the same way that I, as a child, had seen Fide's family.

06:35

This single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from Western literature. Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Locke, who sailed to west Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as "beasts who have no houses," he writes, "They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts."

07:05

Now, I've laughed every time I've read this. And one must admire the imagination of John Locke. But what is important about his writing is that it 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, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are "half devil, half child."

07:32

And so, I began to realize that my American roommate must have throughout her life seen and heard different versions of this single story, as had a professor, who once told me that my novel was not "authentically African." Now, I was quite willing to contend that there were a number of things wrong with the novel, that it had failed in a number of places, but I had not quite imagined that it had failed at achieving something called African authenticity. In fact, I did not know what African authenticity was. 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.

08:21

But I must quickly add that I too am just as guilty in the question of the single story. A few years ago, I visited Mexico from the U.S. The political climate in the U.S. at the time was tense, and there were debates going on about immigration. And, as often happens in America, immigration became synonymous with Mexicans. There were endless stories of Mexicans as people who were fleecing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border, that sort of thing.

08:54

I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then, I was overwhelmed with shame. 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. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself.

09:26

So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.

09:37

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.

10:12

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. 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.

10:52 I recently spoke at a university where a student told me that it was such a shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in my novel. I told him that I had just read a novel called "American Psycho" --

11:08 (Laughter)

11:10

-- and that it was such a shame that young Americans were serial murderers.

11:15

(Laughter)

11:19

(Applause)

11:25

Now, obviously I said this in a fit of mild irritation.

11:28

(Laughter)

11:30

But it would never have occurred to me to think that just because I had read a novel in which a character was a serial killer that he was somehow representative of all Americans. This is not because I am a better person than that student, but because of America's cultural and economic power, I had many stories of America. I had read Tyler and Updike and Steinbeck and *Gaitskill*. I did not have a single story of America.

11:55

When I learned, some years ago, that writers were expected to have had really unhappy childhoods to be successful, I began to think about how I could invent horrible things my parents had done to me.

12:08

(Laughter)

12:10

But the truth is that I had a very happy childhood, full of laughter and love, in a very close-knit family.

12:17

But I also had grandfathers who died in refugee camps. My cousin Polle died because he could not get adequate healthcare. One of my closest friends, Okoloma, died in a plane crash because our fire trucks did not have water. I grew up under repressive military governments that devalued education, so that sometimes, my parents were not paid their salaries. And so, as a child, I saw jam disappear from the breakfast table, then margarine disappeared, then bread became too expensive, then milk became rationed. And most of all, a kind of normalized political fear invaded our lives.

12:57

All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. 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.

13:25

Of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes: There are immense ones, such as the horrific rapes in Congo and depressing ones, such as the fact that 5,000 people apply for one job vacancy in Nigeria. But there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them.

13:45

I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of 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.

14:09

So what if before my Mexican trip, I had followed the immigration debate from both sides, the U.S. and the Mexican? What if my mother had told us that Fide's family was poor and hardworking? 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."

14:33

What if my roommate knew about my Nigerian publisher, Muhtar Bakare, a remarkable man who left his job in a bank to follow his dream and start a publishing house? Now, the conventional wisdom was that Nigerians don't read literature. He disagreed. He felt that people who could read, would read, if you made literature affordable and available to them.

14:56

Shortly after he published my first novel, I went to a TV station in Lagos to do an interview, and a woman who worked there as a messenger came up to me and said, "I really liked your novel. I didn't like the ending. Now, you must write a sequel, and this is what will happen ..."

15:11

(Laughter)

15:14

And she went on to tell me what to write in the sequel. I was not only charmed, I was very moved. Here was a woman, part of the ordinary masses of Nigerians, who were not supposed to be readers. She had not only read the book, but she had taken ownership of it and felt justified in telling me what to write in the sequel.

15:33

Now, what if my roommate knew about my friend Funmi Iyanda, a fearless woman who hosts a TV show in Lagos, and is determined to tell the stories that we prefer to forget? What if my roommate knew about the heart procedure that was performed in the Lagos hospital last week? What if my roommate knew about contemporary Nigerian music, talented people singing in English and Pidgin, and Igbo and Yoruba and Ijo, mixing influences from Jay-Z to Fela to Bob Marley to their grandfathers.

16:06

What if my roommate knew about the female lawyer who recently went to court in Nigeria to challenge a ridiculous law that required women to get their husband's consent before renewing their passports? What if my roommate knew about Nollywood, full of innovative people making films despite great technical odds, films so popular that they really are the best example of Nigerians consuming what they produce? What if my roommate knew about my wonderfully ambitious hair braider, who has just started her own business selling hair extensions? Or about the millions of other Nigerians who start businesses and sometimes fail, but continue to nurse ambition?

16:47

Every time I am home I am confronted with the usual sources of irritation for most Nigerians: our failed infrastructure, our failed government, but also by the incredible resilience of people who thrive despite the government, rather than because of it. I teach writing workshops in Lagos every summer, and it is amazing to me how many people apply, how many people are eager to write, to tell stories.

17:14

My Nigerian publisher and I have just started a non-profit called Farafina Trust, and we have big dreams of building libraries and refurbishing libraries that already exist and providing books for state schools that

don't have anything in their libraries, and also of organizing lots and lots of workshops, in reading and writing, for all the people who are eager to tell our many stories.

17:36

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

17:56

The American writer Alice Walker wrote this about her Southern relatives who had moved to the North. She introduced them to a book about the Southern life that they had left behind. "They sat around, reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained."

18:17

I would like to end with this thought: That when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.

18:30

Thank you.

18:31

(Applause)