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The Benefit of a Single Story: An Analysis of Teju Cole's *Open City*

In our work this semester delving into the complex circumstances of crossing borders, whether real or imagined, we have encountered numerous different perspectives about what it means, or what can be found, when one ventures beyond such borders. More often than not, those perspectives are naturally singular and reflect only a small view of a situation that is much more complex than the protagonist's (or narrator's) focalization makes it out to be. In considering solely these viewpoints, we gain an extremely limited view of what the reality of certain circumstances really looks like. Such an understanding can turn out to be extremely problematic, as by exposing ourselves only to a certain narrative, we become ignorant to broader ideas and devalue other points of view. This concept can commonly be referred to as "the danger of a single story," a term noted by the writer and activist Chimamanda Adichie.

Though the danger of a single story might be most prominent when considering the oft-singular narratives of historically treasured works (Shakespeare, Romantic Writers, etc.), where the perspectives almost always emerge from wealthy, white, European men, contemporary literature continues to grapple with the issue. However, it seems that contemporary works have found a safe niche within single stories as opposed to a space of ignorance. In Teju Cole's *Open City*, a singular perspective is presented to feign the notion of a single story, yet Cole's

characterization of the narrator, Julius, encourages a contemplation of what is beyond his single story in order to build up positive awareness rather than harmful ideology.

To begin with, the initial idea of what the danger of a single story is came from Chimamanda Adichie's 2009 TEDTalk in which she explicates the different aspects of literature that cultivate single stories. Adichie explains that a single story is when an author seeks to "show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become" (Adichie). This is problematic because it leaves the author with power over the subject of the story, which offers them the ability to take their story, manipulate it, and "make it the definitive story of that person" (Adichie). For example, the narrative of an impoverished Africa is pervasive in the United States, leading Adichie to have to educate her misinformed roommate upon arriving at a U.S. university to pursue an undergraduate degree. Her roommate had only heard about Africa and Africans with a context of poverty and primitivity, creating a singular image of Adichie that was simply inaccurate.

That portrayal, while certainly publicized through news media and other such projects, is also the responsibility of an author to address. While perhaps authors could previously brush off this complication of storytelling, they are now faced with the dilemma that while stories can "be used to empower and to humanize," they also "can break the dignity of a people" (Adichie). As Adichie experienced, creating a single story "robs people of dignity," "makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult," and "emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar" (Adichie). By working against the historical trend of single stories, authors can not only "repair that broken dignity," but come to the realization 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"

(Adichie). By refusing to participate in that kind of narrative, authors can be fully awake to the plethora of compelling perspectives and stories (an author's "paradise") that can be created.

Yet, a key aspect of single stories that Adichie does not comment on is who focalizes or narrates the story. It can be assumed that such figures, at least in the single stories she is referring to, have some kind of authority and power over the reader. The audience does not question this perspective, which leads to them soaking in the ideas and thought processes behind it and falling prey to the danger of a single story - ignorance. Therefore, it can be reasoned that adopting an unreliable, biased, unauthoritative, or dislikable focalizer (as opposed to one that seems moral and trustworthy), the issue of a single story can be eliminated. By including characters that are highly complex and grapple constantly with various important issues, authors can present multiple perspectives just based on the questionable actions of said characters. In doing so, they allow room for multiple interpretations of a narrative, preventing a single story and making way for an intricate and realistic story that encourages the audience to consider a wide range of narratives, rather than yielding to one.

Of the works from this semester, the one that was most blatant and active in its non-traditional and productive use of a single story is Teju Cole's *Open City*. Certainly, upon first glance, this story does not seem to be one that could present anything but a singular narrative. The protagonist, Julius, embarks on casual journeys around New York City and imposes his self-contemplation and knowledge upon it - a factor that is often obnoxious due to his supposition that his status as a psychiatry resident and highly educated individual gives him the authority to make such impositions. It seems that his often-ignorant and self-supporting actions and thoughts would encourage a story created in solely his image, yet his characterization

inspires the opposite. Julius is portrayed to be an incredibly annoying wiseacre whose self-assumed superiority repeatedly pushes the boundaries of obnoxious behavior. This results in him resembling just the kind of untrustworthy and dislikable focalizer that is not only necessary to encourage the audience to question his thoughts and actions, but also to suggest broad and varied truths that should be taken seriously instead.

For example, early on in the text Julius speaks with a prison inmate who almost immediately identifies with Julius's Africanness and supposed Christianity, factors that allow the inmate to open up and share his story. The audience learns that his name is Saidu, and he immigrated from Liberia in Africa to the United States following experiences of violence. Saidu shares the tale of his migration while Julius patiently listens until the prison guard monitoring their exchange calls an end to the visit. As they separate, Saidu says "Come back and visit me, if I am not deported," to which Julius comments "I said that I would, but never did" (70). Rather, Julius leaves simply to regale his significant other, Nadege, with a story about how he listened to Saidu and became "the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle," an identity that is simply "the idea" of himself (70). Julius fails to recognize that Saidu is seeking community by way of pursuing conversation with someone like himself, instead electing to focus on his own nonexistent, idealized, thoughtful and caring image of himself. For all his abilities with reading and understanding the psyche's of his patients, Julius is clueless when it comes to analyzing those he comes in contact with. Julius chooses to focus on himself instead, creating a singular narrative of his own experiences.

Still, Cole constructs this narrative to carefully ensure that Julius's single story is not harmful. The audience can clearly see Julius's self-centered behavior and inability to properly

empathize or sympathize with others, and thus they are aware of how problematic a narrative focalized through Julius is. In other words, Julius's perspective can be deemed the problematic perspective we might gain from a traditional, dangerous single story, as his narrative solely cultivates the continued image of him as the superior, interesting figure of this novel. However, Cole also places interactions like the one with Saidu in direct contrast with these examples of Julius being egocentric, and so the truly compelling and heartening story from Saidu is more blatant in its depth and significance. By portraying the single story of Julius in the wrong, Cole allows the audience to clearly see beyond the single story and into the ranging stories that, when collected together in this novel, create a more accurate vision of life across borders.

This is further proved in a similar situation when Julius encounters another man later in the story. Julius enters a post office and converses with the counter clerk there. Soon after Julius approaches him, the clerk exclaims, "Say, brother, where are you from? 'Cause, see, I could tell you were from the Motherland. And you brothers have something that is vital, you understand me. You have something that is vital for the health of those of us raised on this side of the ocean" (186). Julius quickly refuses to be called brother, sharing that his name is Julius, and does not comment on the clerk's opinions on what the "Motherland" symbolizes. Rather, he listens patiently as the gentleman begins to speak his own verses and shares intense poetic creations, all the while completely failing to respond with any kind of warmth or encouragement. Instead of realizing that this man before him is seeking the same community that Saidu was, in addition to a validation of his creative capabilities, Julius is completely ignorant and removed. He is so put off by this clerk's obvious need for fraternity that he makes "a mental note to avoid that particular post office in the future" (188). Though it is quite literally Julius's profession to converse with,

understand, and assist people with the concerns of their minds, he simply cannot give the people he encounters any significant attention.

This interaction, and the one with Saidu, are off-putting to an audience who can sympathize with the obvious yearning of the mail clerk to engage more with his creativity and identity as an African-American as opposed to just African. Julius portrays not only a significant disability when it comes to genuinely interacting with this man and validating his emotions and thoughts, but conveys to the reader that he is inept when it comes to needs of those around him, regardless of his various travels around New York City and the world, and his encounters with people in each location. However, this inability to empathize that is portrayed through Julius's interactions with these men is actually part of a single narrative that manages to cultivate a more thorough understanding of the world. Julius speaks with Saidu, a man who shares his difficult story of immigration and desire to ingratiate himself within United States society, as well as the mail clerk, who yearns for the "Motherland" and assumes that there is something special that comes alongside being fully African (read: born in Africa). By perceiving Julius's failure to sympathize, the audience is pushed to do so instead, which leads them to have empathetic reactions to the contrasting stories of Saidu and the mail clerk. By working through Julius's single story, the audience gathers an understanding of other, diverse stories, and thus benefit from the single story by way of its ability to help them focus on the varied perspectives in the world around them.

Though Julius and his self-absorbed attitude most commonly encounter people and their diverse stories in public, he also interacts with his patients in a similarly unthinking way. When Julius attends a party and the guests listen to him about his experiences as a psychiatrist, Julius

explains that he “indulged them, and told them stories about [his] patients, about the alien visitations and government surveillance, the voices in the walls, the suspicions of family conspiracies” (201). Though perhaps it is understandable that one might share the wild things they encounter in their job, Julius goes one step further the share that “There is always a fund of humorous tales from the horror of mental illnesses, particularly in the ranks of the paranoid...Paranoid schizophrenia lent itself especially well to such narratives, and the sufferers of the disease were good storytellers because they engaged in world building” (201-202). Mental illnesses, including paranoid schizophrenia, can generally be assumed to be devastating and burdensome ailments that are not unlike standard illnesses of the body. The fact that Julius turns the experiences of patients who suffer from mental illnesses into jokes to cater to his friends builds upon his questionable character. Again, since the audience can see that negativity within Julius’s story, they can view the stories he shares with the kindness and sympathy that Julius should have. They understand that mental illnesses can be ranging in their effects and produce different experiences, and thus a broader image of mental illness is gained from Julius’s singular narrative.

Of course, no behavior Julius partakes in throughout this novel is as shocking as his encounter with Moji in the early morning hours after their evening with friends. Moji quietly and calmly approaches him on the apartment terrace, where they can have a moment alone, and shares that “in late 1989, when she was fifteen and [Julius] a year younger, at a party her brother had hosted at their house in Ikoyi, [Julius had forced himself] on her” (244). Julius’s response to his actions, at the time, was to act “like [he] knew nothing about it, had even forgotten her, to the point of not recognizing her when [they] met again” (244). However, this does not mean that he

did not torment her. “Indeed, [he] had been ever-present in her life, like a stain or a scar, and she had thought of [him], either fleetingly or in extended agonies, for almost every day of her adult life” (244). After she continues on for several minutes about her experience of being a victim of sexual assault and the aftermath of the crime, Moji claims, “I don’t think you’ve changed at all, Julius” (245). The gravity of this statement hangs heavy as their fellow partygoers soon wake up, and Julius quickly leaves the apartment.

Throughout this entire interaction, Julius is silent. Moji predicts that he will say nothing, and she is correct. All that Julius does is leave the gathering, and their conversation isn’t discussed or even mentioned in the remaining pages of the novel. This point of the novel is arguably the most obvious exposition of Julius’s ignorance and essential meanness. He completely negates the importance of Moji’s story in his own narrative, and in doing so, he emphasizes the complexity of the novel’s single story from his perspective. While many readers may want to shut the book or walk away from it for a moment out of frustration for Julius’s actions, the fact that he is so wildly maddening is key. Had Julius simply listened to Moji and apologized, carefully working through the situation with her, the narrative that abusers always do such things would be created. However, that’s not realistic. As can be seen by the activity of the recent #MeToo movement, it often takes an entire public vilification for an abuser to release an even remotely apologetic statement. By presenting the single story of Julius and his avoidance of confrontation with Moji, the audience can gather a wider perspective on situations of assault.

In this sense, the single story that Teju Cole presents through Julius is incredibly clever and beneficial to the reader. Rather than trapping them within the singular narrative, Cole writes Julius as a means of evoking strong reactions from the audience that enable them to better

analyze the work as a whole. Though Julius relatively ignores the two men who seek to bond with him on the basis of Africa and Africanness, the fact that he does so brings light to the serious theoretical contemplations these two men have about fraternity and the value placed on crossing certain national or cultural borders. In Julius's ignorant jokes about his patients, he contrasts the intensity of mental illness and the things it can drive a person to do, think, or feel, and thus further draws attention to the need for careful support and thoughtfulness when it comes to working with individuals who suffer from mental illnesses or working through one's own mental illness. Finally, by acting like Moji's expressions of her deep struggle following Julius's criminal actions are simply inconsequential to Julius's story as a whole, the audience can understand what the right course of action should be, and what kind of response (Julius's) should be condemned.

In short, when the audience is given such a dislikable and complex narrator as Julius, they are set free from focusing solely on the ways of their protagonist by being pushed to empathize with the diverse and compelling stories of everyone the protagonist encounters. By writing from a perspective of someone who is so lost within themselves, Cole portrays the complexity of the endless stories beyond ourselves and releases us from the danger of a single story by twisting it to become a beneficial view into the mind of someone who exemplifies what not to do in almost any circumstance.

#### Works Cited

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Cole, Teju. *Open City*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2012.

and student of the bizarre world of serial killers. Filled with stories, trivia, quizzes, quotes, photos ...

1 The Idea of a 'Third World'. 1. 2 Theories of Imperialism and Colonialism. 22. 3 Modernization The First Humans " Origin and Early Evolution of the Genus Homo : Contributions from the Third Stony Brook Human Evolution Symposium and Workshop October 3 " October 7, 2006. 218 Pages 2009 5.59 MB 5,299 Downloads New! Evolution of the Genus Homo : Contributions from the Third Stony Brook Human Evolution Symposium Never Split the Difference: Negotiating As If Your Life Depended On It. 375 Pages 2017 1.32 MB 225,222 Downloads New! Also, these stories help audience realize that she was also a victim of single stories, which helps them relate to her better as they feel like they are getting information from an experienced person. 5) She alluded to American Psycho to prove her point that power instructs how stories are told, who tells them, when they're told, and how many are told.

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16 Research showed that one third of US high school students did not read books for fun in 2016.