

**In Review: *The Danger of a Single Story* by Chimamanda Adichie; *Home* by Warsan Shire, *The Hierarchy of Refugee Stories* by Caitlin Chandler and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by Le Thi Diem Thuy**

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**Re-presentations, Stories and Memory Work**

Chimamanda Adichie, Warsan Shire, Caitlin Chandler, and Le Thi Diem Thuy have painstakingly engaged in work that impresses upon us the importance of telling stories. Their projects are in the spirit of work of scholars such as Pugliese (2002), Childs (2009), Pratt (2012) Abrego (2014) and Espiritu (2014) who also refuse single stories that violently cast immigrants and other marginalized people as ‘threats’, ‘lazy’, ‘dirty’, ‘violent’ and other harmful descriptions that have largely structured the conditions of their lives. As Solmaz Sharif reminds us in his poem “Look”: “it is important what you call a thing” (pp.1).

These readings resonate at a deeply personal level. The authors have encouraged a reflection on how we have been complicit in allowing stereotypes to circulate to the extent that they become articulated as ‘truth.’ As Chimamanda reminds us, “the problems with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete” (*The Danger of Single Story*). I share my own story of crossing borders to show that while a large part of my reason for relocating to the United States is to pursue higher education, an even more significant reason is because of the violence I experienced in my homeland and a fear that remaining would not only worsen psychological harm but could lead to both physical harm and financial loss likely to result from a potential civil suit; a suit that would be the result of naming my abusers publicly - a naming that under Jamaican law can be argued as defamation. Without sharing this part of my story, the

version that circulates is that I came here because the quality of and access to education is better. And while that is a case that could be made, it is not the sole basis for my relocation. This version, however, impacts the way I can navigate spaces; but it also reproduces the narrative of the U.S. as the place where dreams come true, as opposed to the ‘lesser of two evils.’ Further, it forecloses the incidence of sexual violence in my homeland and the weakness of legislative frameworks that in large parts retraumatize and reproduce violence against survivors of sexual and other forms of violence. It thus disallows conversations and practical initiatives that could rearticulate what an ethical approach to attending to sexual violence cases could be.

In my reflection, I find myself asking what if I had not had the educational background/capital to afford me a place in the University in the States? What then would I have done? Would I have stayed in Jamaica or would I have entered the US on my visitors’ visa, overstay my time, file for asylum or try to marry a U.S citizen? And how different would my experience be, not as an international student but as an “illegal,” a “refugee” an “asylee”? The difference would lie not in who I am as a person but the circumstances under which I entered. And while there is still so much violence against persons like me who are “othered,” there is a palpable sense of the difference in the experience that is brought about based on how people enter and how they can remain. Abrego (2014) documents some of these social and material differences in her comparative analysis of migrants who enter the U.S on visitors’ visa then overstay and those who rely on smugglers to cross the border.

The stories told by Adichie, Chandler, Shire and Le elucidate those aspects of the migrant experience foreclosed in the hypervisible and homogenizing narrative of the immigrant. To quote Shire at length :

No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land...no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark...no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck feeding on newspaper unless the miles traveled means something more than journey...no one chooses refugee camps or strip searches where your body is left aching or prison, because prison is safer than a city of fire and one prison guard in the night is better than a truckload of men who look like your father no one could take it no one could stomach it no one skin would be tough enough...no one would leave home unless home chased you to the shore unless home told you to quicken your legs leave your clothes behind crawl through the desert wade through the oceans, drown, starve, be hungry, beg, forget pride, your survival is more important.... (Home).

These lines paint a damning picture of the unthinkable experiences and “choices” migrants must make while simultaneously pointing to the fact that the place of escape does not always offer ‘refuge’ but perpetuates inhumane atrocities against the already physically and systematically oppressed. However, at the crux of this piece is the idea that people do not just leave because they want to leave or because the United States and other receiving countries are ready to embrace them but because to stay is both a literal and figurative death. This perspective is also elucidated by Le Thi Diem Thuy when she writes “I would come to see running as inseparable from living” (117).

The preceding notwithstanding, I find Shire’s use of the word ‘survival’ limiting, particularly in the context of the violence that almost seems absolute for migrants that invoke Agamben’s notion of ‘bare life’ or Arendt’s “rightlessness.” Because while your physical life is spared the social and material deprivation, dispossession and maligning begs the questions about

the quality of life, safety, and security, what it means to survive as opposed to live. Nevertheless, Shire's piece disrupts the homogenizing narrative about who crosses borders and the 'benevolence' of the receiving country .

In a similar vein, Adichie's *Danger of a single story* applies to the immigrant experience both concerning rethinking what we know about the United States and other receiving countries but also what we know about those seeking to migrate. In Adichie's words: "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." Fide's story in Adichie's account is a particularly poignant piece of her speech. Talking about the houseboy who her mother often described as poor Adichie recounts:

...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.

Further, in talking about her experience as a student who had just moved from Nigeria, Adichie recounts:

... [my roommate] asked me if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove. 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.

The failure to recognize immigrants as human beings is perhaps what allows the dehumanizing narratives to persist even in 2018. We need not look further than the recent decision of U.S. officials to teargas a Caravan of migrants, including young women and children, attempting to cross the border to the United States. Instead of bringing public awareness to the conditions in their homelands that have necessitated their fleeing, the U.S. Government and the President have painted them as “bad people” deserving of the violence they experienced at the border.

It is counternarratives such as those highlighted in these texts that have mobilized individuals and groups who have drummed up support for the migrants. Such actions underscore the importance of telling stories, of allowing people to speak for themselves but also of being deliberate about denaturalizing what has been purported as “truth.” Adichie captures this by saying:

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.

Adichie's use of the word danger in her address is crucial as it shows how harmful homogenizing narratives can be. The Danger of a single story is a call to action and a request for reflection on how our own actions and inactions have power in and over the lives of others.