theories and methodologies

The Movement of Specificity

NIRVANA TANOUKHI

If you want to know about Africa, read our literature—and not just Things Fall Apart.

—Chris Abani

Fearful Repetition

CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE SUMMARIZES THE CURRENT DILEMMA OF THE PERIPHERAL WRITER IN THE TITLE OF HER RECENT TED TALK: "THE DANger of a Single Story."[1] The talk's masterly braiding of ethos, pathos, and humor epitomizes the winning formula of this distinctively metropolitan media genre. But Adichie's rhetorical ingenuity interests us not as a cultural spectacle—the scene of a young African writer's anointment by metropolitan brokers as an upcoming "world writer"—but for what it structurally illuminates about the kind of minoritarian literary consciousness that gave birth to the concept of world literature. The speech begins by taking the audience down a well-trodden path, the story of Adichie's beginnings as a young writer in Nigeria—specifically, the naïveté of her childhood compositions: "All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out." How deluded and childish it now seemed to Adichie, this business of putting cloudy skies and sumptuous apples in an African story. Luckily, African novelists like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye already existed to dispel her original disorientation, so that she learned to replace the landscapes of British and American fiction with familiar settings where "people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature."

In the TED forum, this familiar story of the young peripheral writer discovering the catharsis of self-recognition through literature proves cathartic yet again, drawing writer and audience together into harmonious play. But the Nigerian episode proves to be a mere preamble (or confusing setup) to the true subject of Adichie's

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PMLA 128.3 (2013), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.3.668 Published online by Cambridge University Press

talk, which turns from the rewards of self-representation to the burden of authenticity. As if to soften the abrupt shift from a poetics of identity to a call for the deconstruction of identity, Adichie piles up anecdotes. For example, there is the story of her writing teacher who (outdoing Achebe and Laye) urged her to make her African characters more "authentic" (more typical of the uneducated and malnourished African majority). Then there is the story of her American roommate at Harvard who was disappointed that Adichie's favorite music was Mariah Carey and not something "tribal." And, perhaps most poignant, the story of Adichie herself, who upon visiting Guadalajara and watching "the people go to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing" was "overwhelmed with shame" to discover that even she had been susceptible to "the single story" of the Mexican as abject immigrant. In the accumulation of stories, the reversal goes unnoticed. The desire for difference, which in the Guadalajara story elicits shame (and knowing silence in the TED audience), in the Nigerian story signals the heroic birth of a writer (minutes earlier, triggering applause). And while in the Nigerian story the presumption of sameness exemplifies the colonization of minds (the fallacy of Nigerian characters with blue eyes), in the Harvard story the roommate's incapacity to conceive of sameness (that an African girl too might listen to Mariah Carey) signals the expansive mentality of empire.

The reversal goes unnoticed because Adichie is a great storyteller. But also because right after she brilliantly dramatizes the simultaneous desires for sameness and difference—and makes the TED crowd mimic and enact its contradictions by swinging obligingly between extremes—she proposes that such contradictory longings be not resolved but sidestepped altogether. Instead of asking the writer to navigate the expanse between the individual and the universal, Adichie argues that the reader should take on this responsibility. How? Very simply, by reading more. "It's impossible to engage properly with a place or a person," she declares, "without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person." So rather than make the writer responsible for determining the optimal balance of the individual and the universal—the optimal scale of representation—the reader must commit to accumulating multiple accounts of a place and its people. This means that writing more, writing their own stories, does not protect Africans from simplification or misrepresentation because, says Adichie, "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make [a single story] the definitive story of that person." And so Adichie begins echoing the central mantras of the "world literature movement"—to read more, more open-mindedly, and more broadly. However, unlike recent humanist calls to broaden horizons, her plea to readers is pragmatic and openly self-interested. A multiplication of literary referents for Africa, while it may educate the reader, is primarily intended to secure the writer against readers. If only the American reader (like a woman Adichie mentions in another anecdote) would agree to read more, one violent character in Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* would not have to stand for all African men.

And yet, as Adichie's own experience attests, it is not reading a second, third, or fourth story about Mexico that disabused her of a uniform perception of that place or its people. She had to see Mexicans "work[ing], smoking, laughing" to shed her cultural misconceptions. Reading many (or all) stories turns out not to be a solution at all. In fact, Adichie herself points out that the danger lies elsewhere: "Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." So it's not the singularity of the story but its repetition ("over and over again") that transforms what begins as the lively pursuit of specificity into a fixed template of a culture. A good story—that

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.3.668 Published online by Cambridge University Press

introduces characters with brown eyes and skin brown as chocolate, a landscape with consistent sunshine, and trees that bear mangoes instead of apples—could make it impossible to (later) tell a different story about the same place. The trap, if one exists, is that a writer's success breeds repetition. That no sooner do writers accomplish the task of making a convincing or compelling depiction of a *particular* people and place than they must immediately confront the possibility that their story will be so *generalized* as to become the sanctioned representation of the life of a country. And then the very setting originally concretized (with mangoes and "kinky hair") to distill the experience of a particular social world can become a uniform, barren landscape, an instrument for the violent reduction of its diversity. In short, when Adichie calls for broader reading she is mainly seeking a guarantee that works originally conceived to capture "the specific" (what Lukács called "the typical") will not calcify into "the authentic" (what we call "the stereotypical"). Adichie's byzantine rhetorical structure conceals its strategy in plain sight: that readers should prevent stereotypes by reading more—but only so that *the writer may be freed to engage in the production of specificity.*

Specification and Innovation

Thus we pinpoint the problem evaded whenever "read more" is proposed as an antidote to metropolitan provincialism. Namely, the problem that specification—the imperative to tell a story well-contextualized in a particular time and place—can be compromised by literary form's susceptibility to repetition. That what begins as a robust contextual strategy may transform into an automatically enacted contextual scheme. This scheme's automatic enaction can be explained, partially, by literary formalism. "All works of art, and not only parodies, are created either as a parallel or an antithesis to some model," writes Viktor Shklovsky in his *Theory of Prose*, which means that literary change is not a progressive tradition segmented by acts of innovation. Instead, it is an uneven and inconclusive process, where old models are superseded by new forms or refunctionalized through lively variations, interrupting form's drift toward automation. Uneven and inconclusive because, while the birth of new forms is occasioned by the vapidity of older models that have "outlived their artistic usefulness," innovation does not ensure the disappearance of the old. In fact, to the extent that the old motivates novelty, repetition and innovation work together to propel transformation (20).

Adichie complicates this picture by suggesting that the engine of literary change is not innovation but innovative specification, which makes the tendency toward repetition more "dangerous" than a comingling of the living and the dead. When we repeatedly bring to the Latin American novel the expectation of magical realism, or repeatedly return to *Things Fall Apart* as the authoritative African novel of postcolonial modernity—that is, when an old model has not only resisted its dethronement but also continued to accrue authority—the pressure of the authentic is felt. This protracted accretion can be described as a vampirism of literary value and, more important, as a hardening of what is "specifically" African, Nigerian, or Igbo. Thus, what is daunting and seemingly impossible about superseding *Things Fall Apart* (1958)—not only for the Chimamanda Adichie of *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) or the Chris Abani of *Graceland* (2005) but also for the Chinua Achebe of *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) or even *No Longer at Ease* (1960)—is that "replacing" *Things Fall Apart* would entail nothing less than renovating the coordinates of African specificity. The magnitude of the task would finally explain why it matters when a novelist replaces apples with mangoes, or why the same novelist should experience the "danger" that apples, as a consequence, might be

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.3.668 Published online by Cambridge University Press

banished from African stories forever. And it begins to makes sense, if specification is part and parcel of innovation, that the process I have described as innovative specification would begin in the setting now recognized as a novel's internal context—setting not as a place with a real geographic referent, nor even as a kind of place, but as a text's internal strategy of emplacement.

In itself, Adichie's plea seems to amount to little more than wishful sentimentalism. For no reader (let alone the indifferent metropolitan) would conceivably commit to engaging "all the stories" of a people or place. Yet, as I have shown, it is the plea's structure that provides the most crucial insight: that literary history, certainly from the viewpoint of the periphery, is the story of how places are specified, how depictions of particular places are made. In this conception of world literary history, repetition, even as it inaugurates the emergence of a "strong" form, threatens to convert new settings into commonplaces. Envisaged as such, the problem of literary change concerns not only what motivates or shapes innovation but also what conditions the unevenness of innovative specification. In place of the old question of why forms are born, a new question emerges: how do certain formal strategies of specification fade, while others appear made to last?

That the shape of this question is comparative is not surprising, when a conception of literary change rethinks specificity in terms of specification. One need only remember Georg Lukács's delicate juggling of aesthetic categories in the 1950s and 1960s—his serial placement of the aesthetic categories of individuality (*Einzelheit*), particularity (*Besonderheit*), and universality (*Allgemeinheit*) to inaugurate specificity as "*the* central category of aesthetics." Although Lukács made the relation between categories so flexible that all nodes in the series "constantly pass[ed] over into one another," comparison demanded a further loosening of their "dialectical inter-relationship." The necessity of acknowledging the variety of existing aesthetic forms and their mutual validity—in short, the comparative imperative—required that the "central" category of aesthetics be in no way fixed. Thus, while at first Lukács places the category of particularity firmly in an intermediary position—"In aesthetic reflection the middle term *literally becomes the middle*, where the movement in question is gathered and centered in a single point"—this quickly changes. As soon as Lukács revises the model to account for aesthetic relativity, the conceptual ordering of the three categories begins to erode:

> [G]iven the generally accepted relativity in the sphere of particularity, in relation to both the universal and the individual moments . . . this relativity can in principle find expression from any particular point . . . mean[ing] that the field of particularity either below or above the selected middle-point can . . . suddenly pass over without contradiction into the universal or individual . . . can traverse the path to universality as the case may be. (225)

Gradually, the midpoint becomes "a field," the fixed term becomes "a leeway," while the middle category becomes "an intermediary domain" (225). All of which forces Lukács (as if anticipating Adichie's dilemma) to acknowledge that specification is precarious, that "characterization in terms of the typical does not of itself *guarantee* any genuine sublation of individuality into specific particularity" (224; my emphasis). In the absence of guarantees, Lukács recognizes that "the decisive thing is the movement" not the moment of specificity.

Necessary Detours

That innovative specification is unpredictable, however, does not make it a mysterious process. If specification originates, as I have suggested, in the construction of an internal

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.3.668 Published online by Cambridge University Press

context (a world set inside the literary text), it is the critic in the act of interpretation who sustains that movement, by "continuing" the work thus begun.[2] Take, for example, Alex Woloch's use of Balzac's *Père Goriot* to theorize the typical. Like Lukács, Woloch dramatizes the dialectic of moment and movement, to produce a powerful critique of individualism that reveals "individuality" as the effect of a narrative process of individuation. Woloch observes how, in *Père Goriot*, "Balzacian typification moves from stating that a large number of people share a given characteristic with a particular individual to suggesting that this characteristic . . . is shaped by the existence of a large number of people" (254). Thus typification is revealed as a movement, from the initial presentation of a character as "a series of abstract qualities" to a concretization of this abstract identity. By pushing a character type into concrete encounters within a network of people, narrative dynamics ensure "the dispersion of the type back into the social plurality from which it is sprung" (250). The movement of typification seems to enact a contradiction that generates individuality itself—the fact that being an individual apart from others is also a function of one's embeddedness in the group. Balzac's Parisian men, for example, who emerge as individuals to the extent that they are able to differentiate themselves from other men, can be "fold[ed] back" into the larger group by the very desire for self-differentiation, which they share with many others. Woloch prefers "switch-point" (to Lukács's "middle-point") as a metaphor for the delicate structure that enables a mysterious manipulation of causality, in Woloch's words an "inversion of figure and background" (259, 254). Yet just like Lukács, Woloch recognizes typification as an inconclusive process. Character typification intensifies the dialectic of individuality and sociability, prolonging its drama in anticipation of a final synthesis in one protagonist or two "co-protagonists." But this drama, as evident (for Woloch) in the muted competition for the "space of the protagonist" between young Rastignac and old Goriot, often concludes while remaining inconclusive (resulting, e.g., in a major minor character). The "switching" back and forth, because continuous in typification, gives form to a social reality from which only a few major characters can emerge, while others seem destined to be "mere" types, flat characters, or stereotypes of a class. But how, the question arises, are men drawn to compete in the first place?

Things get interesting, for our purposes, when Woloch's interpretation of Balzac elaborates how *Père Goriot* motivates competition. Here the setting as a principle of inclusion—"seven residents who find themselves living together in a dilapidated boardinghouse" (246)—triggers competition by drawing characters into a coherent sphere of sociality. Setting, while it seems banal and neutral to narrative causation, motivates characterization by imposing a logic of inclusion. And this is not all. It seems that for Rastignac to distinguish himself from the average young Parisian, Maison Vauquer must stand in for the Parisian horizon chosen by Balzac. That is, for Rastignac to become a hero, Paris itself must undergo characterization. Which is not to say that places and people are typified in the same way, for Maison Vauquer's typicality in relation to other hotels evidently entails no competition: "It is not just that the hotel is monstrous like many other hotels, but that it is monstrous in part because there are so many others like it" (254). If anything, then, the character of a setting is a function of the generalizability of its type. Unlike the qualities of Rastignac or Madame Vauquer, the hotel's monstrous quality has only to be pervasive enough to represent the ethos of "Paris as a whole"—which turns out to be ruthless competitiveness. The function of place typification, therefore, as a necessary part of character typification (memorably analyzed in Auerbach's *Mimesis*

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.3.668 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[468–73]), works simultaneously through inclusion and exclusion by circumscribing the field in which characters compete (as Parisians, not Toulousains or Marseillais). Setting as a complex, scale-making device renders the competition possible and plausible because, after all, a potential protagonist can jostle for position against many (but not all) men. Following Balzac, or perhaps simply on a good hunch, Woloch draws setting into the structure of narrative causation, thereby expanding the sphere of specification beyond class consciousness (Lukács) to place awareness. Woloch's own "major detour, toward Paris," punctuates the critic's participation in the movement of specificity (248).

Innovation is inconclusive, said Shklovsky, and specification is unpredictable, said Lukács. But what is certain is that literature, especially in its modern guise, has invented a mechanism and a rhythm by which innovative specification is perpetuated, in part, by periodically bringing the process to a halt. As does Woloch, for instance, when, having to contextualize Balzac's style, he finally declares Balzacian typification typical of "an *essential* tension within [presumably all] literary characterization" (260; my emphasis). Woloch's chosen end point (the category of universality) displays a tendency that is characteristic of interpretation in the West, toward generalization (or universalization) in the movement between internal and external criticism. A tendency that has certainly been more characteristic of the "Western" institution of literature than of its postcolonial counterpart, where the same movement inclines more often toward specification (or "localization"), as often happens under the rubric of "alternative modernities." (This difference, or current division of labor, could in turn be attributed to historical reasons; but that is a much larger topic, for another time.) For now I would stress that such end points are cultivated pauses that—be they reflective, recuperative, or strategic—provide fresh openings for writers, critics, and readers to parse out universals and particulars, to recalibrate social and cultural distance, or to make meaning. Thus, if a contemporary approximation survives for what Lukács once described as "the moment of specificity," the moment when "the movement in question is gathered and centered in a single point," it is embodied in these pauses (221).

This is all to say that world literature, be it deemed an engine of universalization or of specification, must be theorized not only from the bottom up or top down (as center-periphery models have done) but also, perhaps more important, from the inside out and outside in.[3] For it is these latter movements that explain how some settings become specific contexts (Africa as a metonym for war and starvation) while others become universal commonplaces (Paris as a paradigm of modern ambition). Without a conception of literary history and of comparative practice attuned to the movement of specificity, we cannot begin to historicize the new (or old) forms of estrangement that surround us, as they surround Adichie's British expatriate in Nigeria:

> They were in the orchard now, in the dense interweaving of orange trees, and Richard felt a strangeness overcome him. . . . The orange trees, the presence of so many trees around him, the hum of flies overhead, the abundance of green, brought back memories of his parents' house in Wentnor. It was incongruous that this tropical humid place, with the sun turning the skin of his arms a mild scarlet and the bees sunning themselves, should remind him of the crumbling house in England, which was drafty even in summer. (*Half* 96)

Notes

1. TED is an annual global conference where major figures in the fields of technology, entertainment, and

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.3.668 Published online by Cambridge University Press

design are given eighteen minutes to present their topics live to general audiences, usually in an informal storytelling mode. Adichie's talk was part of TEDGlobal, a "sister conference" created in 2005 and oriented toward international topics. In 2009 Ted Talks became truly global, as TEDx began licensing semi-independent local franchises. Since 2006 Ted Talks have been offered for free viewing online to a growing global audience (www.ted.com).

2. I echo René Girard, who wrote, "Literary interpretation must be systematic because it is the *continuation* of literature" (3; my emphasis).

3. "Inside-out" criticism would overcome the divide between internalism and externalism, a goal variously declared but arguably yet unfulfilled in the disciplinary debate about literary globalization. By "externalism" I mean a tendency to prioritize the problem of a literary work's moment of passage into a multinational field of reception, either after its publication through "traveling" or in anticipation of the work's traversals during its creation. In contrast, I associate internalism with approaches that in overcapitalizing on the metaphorization of world (in relation to world literature) have found material processes of globalization expressed in dynamics of world making by literary form. Such a move is limited to the extent that it enacts a globalistic perversion of the classical theory of reflection.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.3.668 Published online by Cambridge University Press