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Beyond the Single Story of African Realism: Narrative Embedding in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract: This article seeks to contribute to critical readings of realism's mimetic claims by tracing how framed narration, or writing-about-writing, establishes reliability in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's seminal novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). Conceptions of typicality are used almost interchangeably in scholarly discussions about realism and Africanness without a critical framework that untangles the myriad links between them. To fill this lacuna, I provide a theoretical exploration of how typicality and typification, as two modes of characterization, connect fiction and reference in Adichie's novel. Focusing on the diegetic layering in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, I show how Africanness and realism are negotiated as two kinds of typicality that work, counterintuitively, to undercut stereotypes. Building on Adichie's now-famous concept of the "single story," I use narratological terminology to think through the tension between typicality and specificity, and its particular stakes in African literature. Using this terminology, I trace how the writing of the protagonists Ugwu and Richard oscillates between fictional and referential, public and private, and oral and written representations. I thus show that realism, through framed narrations, establishes a kind of verisimilitude that is far from mimetically naïve.

Keywords: realism, typicality, African fiction, narrative embedding, orality, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chinua Achebe

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.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,
"The Danger of the Single Story"

I. Introduction

This article attempts to conceptualize the single story that haunts contemporary Anglophone African fiction by analyzing the narrative embedding in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's seminal realist novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). Drawing on Adichie's centrality to the unfolding canonization of African literature, I use her novel to investigate how self-referentiality in the context of realism, a genre known and critiqued for its mimetic claims, counters the thick web of entanglement around the idea of the African, or Africanness—as collective identity, as construct, and as stereotype.

Moreover, I relate the dynamics of realism within the text to "the single story," a phrase coined by Adichie in her TED Talk "The Danger of the Single Story" to denote the dominance of a single narrative to the point of becoming a stereotype. "The single story" has since become a concept ingrained in the ongoing critical debate about the idea/construct of Africa in literature and beyond. My aim is to trace how what Mieke Bal would call "embedded narrative texts" in *Half of a Yellow Sun* are created by acts of writing-within-writing (framed/nesting narratives) and writing-about-writing (self-reflective writing) that highlight the stakes of the historical realist novel in Africa.

I begin by contextualizing laden terms such as typicality, Africanness, the single story, and realism before focusing on a close reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The novel contains several instances of embedded and self-reflective texts around the works of two protagonist-writers: Ugwu, who gradually transforms from a barely literate houseboy to a writer, and Richard, who repeatedly attempts to write about Igbo history and the Biafran War. Finally, in what turns out to be a reversal of roles between the two characters, Ugwu authors the segments of *The World Was Silent When We Died* that are nested within the novel, appearing to be a book of history about the Biafran War. I draw on the narrative model developed by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* to explore these embedded narratives as constructions of diegetic layering: the plot (events and characters) is the diegetic level; the embedded narrative is the metadiegetic level; and the historical, "real," or referential background is the extradiegetic level.

Through a close reading of the novel, I argue that embedded narration allows typicality to become more than single stories, where emblematic representations stand in for a nuanced understanding of certain concepts or constructs. While there is some overlap between the single story and typicality, the single story is necessarily reductive, while typicality—specifically within the study of fictionality—offers an avenue for conceptualizing meaning-production, an endeavour in which categorization is inevitable. Categorization in this context refers to a process of differentiation—between people, cultures, historical periods, genres, etc.—while typicality is the creation of certain generalized characteristics to make sense of such categories. Thus, in order to avoid spinning the same wheels of arguing for/against the use of realism, or the English language, or the educational and political role of fiction, I propose a counterintuitive move: to trace the single stories that *Half of a Yellow Sun* negotiates. Narrative embedding and self-reflective writing (writing-about-writing) become vehicles for exploring how different kinds of typicality play out within the framework of fictionality and, as a result, move beyond their single-story selves.

As such, my point of departure is the intersection between realism and Africanness, two terms that are weighted with heavy critical baggage precisely because of the difficulty of distinguishing their discursive history from their popular use. For this reason, I explore how both terms are characterized by a tension between their inherent complexity and the single stories that haunt them. Below, I trace various single stories in critical debates on Africanness and realism, suggesting we explore the single story though a distinction between typicality and typification: the former connotes extradiegetic (in the so-called real world) characterization, the latter diegetic (within the text) characterization.[1] I suggest that the friction between the single story, typicality, and typification is instrumental in understanding how Adichie's novel negotiates historical referentiality and how this friction establishes the narrative's reliability.[2]

Ostensibly, speaking of realism in terms of typicality and typification echoes the oft-repeated view of realism as a naïve attempt at truth-telling; as Matthew Beaumont describes, realism's claim to verisimilitude has become the foundation of a widely accepted assumption of an

"unproblematic relationship between reality and its representations" (2), which I refer to as the single story of realism. I do not suggest that this is the only, or most widely acknowledged, critical reading of realism; the ongoing debates around the genre, including in the writings of Fredric Jameson, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Pam Morris, and Simon Gikandi, illuminate the complexity of the relationship between realism and so-called reality. I focus on the roles of typicality and typification because both terms suggest a simplistic correspondence between reality and representation.

Questions regarding representation take on a particular meaning when considering political and historical realism in the African context. Gikandi traces how realism fulfilled "colonial writers' desire for a reality effect in which the colonized could be rehabilitated as sovereign subjects" ("Realism" 316). African authors in the era of independence thus "wrote back" using realism as "a strategy for giving the nation a reality effect that would rescue it from the phantasm of the colonial library" (319). As Louise Bethlehem writes about the South African context, the association of realism with a political impulse resulted not only in a reality effect, but in a mimetic fallacy: "Writers and readers collectively assume that literature and life in South Africa maintain a mimetic or one-to-one relationship, that writing provides a supposedly unmediated access to the real" (366). The result, as Susan Z. Andrade maintains in her article "The Problem of Realism and African Fiction," was a critical shift away from realism: "[T]he literary critical pendulum has now swung violently: anti-mimeticism is valued more than mimeticism; it is understood to be sophisticated and complex" (183). Andrade refers to the single story of realism as a genre, which does not question its own transparency nor its complicity in the colonial project and therefore remains stranded in its referential illusion. Andrade builds on Kwame Anthony Appiah's famous critique of the realist novel as unsophisticated and naïve—"nativist," in his terms ("Post" 350–53)—due to its nationalist elitist ideology, nominating postrealist and postnativist writing as avenues for challenging this naïveté.

Because of the difficulty of separating realism-the-genre from an intuitive correspondence between reality and reference, I read diegetic

layering as an avenue for exploring how narratological models might inform theories of Africanness while shedding new light on the functions of framed narration. To this end, I draw on Elaine Freedgood's investigation of realism and its "twin commitments to fictionality and reference" (92): one is the domain of diegetic events and individual characters, the other the domain of extradiegetic histories and collective narratives. Freedgood positions what she calls "fictionality" as an element that consciously mediates referentiality and so-called reality against what I refer to as realism's single story: the conflation between realism and reality, corresponding with Roland Barthes' referential illusion, in which the details of the narrative seem to "*denote* the real directly, [yet] all they do—without saying so—is *signify* it" (234; emphasis in original). This process, in which the signification becomes the thing itself, is particularly salient when discussing Africanness as a construct inextricably tied to various registers of typicality and single stories.

Links between typicality and typification are central in understanding how realism negotiates reliability against its inherent claims to mimeticism. Alex Woloch criticizes realism's mimetic claims, suggesting they rely on a paradoxical epistemology of representing social (and thus totalized) structures though individual representations that are necessarily fragmented and distorted. Tony Davies further discusses how the two types of characterization, typification and typicality, are seen as fundamental to realism's mimetic impetus and reliability, tracing the idea to a contested statement by Friedrich Engels: "Realism . . . implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances" (Engels qtd. in Davies 145). As such, realism is perhaps the genre most closely associated with typicality as synonymous with typification, even though, as I suggest above, they are not: typicality refers to the referential world, typification to the fictional and diegetic realm. Importantly, Davies interprets typicality not as "some featureless distillation of the statistically average" but rather as a vehicle for "truthfully convey[ing] the human and historical significance of a narrative" (145). In his reading, typicality establishes representativeness not by standing in for a multi-dimensional referentiality—that is, by

creating single stories or naïve mimeticism—but through the inevitable negotiation of examples that stand in for totalities.

Nirvana Tanoukhi's work contributes to the conceptualization of typicality in the African context. In her essay "African Roads," she suggests that "a distinction between specificity and typicality is but a sample of the intricate stakes of producing Africanness through novelistic form" (456). Moreover, in the article "The Movement of Specificity," Tanoukhi relates Woloch's ideas to Adichie's TED Talk and reflects on the different uses of the term typicality: "[W]hen Adichie calls for broader reading she is mainly seeking a guarantee that works originally conceived to capture 'the specific' . . . will not calcify into 'the authentic' (what we call 'the stereotypical')" (670). The two statements refer to the connections between categories of specificity and typicality because of the position of Africa in the asymmetrical North/South power structure. Tanoukhi uses the example of mangoes and kinky hair from Adichie's TED Talk as metonymic representations that move from being specific (distinct from a Eurocentric tendency to consider its own specificity—in this case, blonde hair and apples—as universal) to becoming typical, because of the way such representations easily become emblematic/authentic representations of Africa.[3]

Indeed, Tanoukhi addresses the paradoxical need of African authors (of whom Adichie speaks) to represent the "simultaneous desires for sameness and difference" ("Movement" 669). In this context, Tanoukhi speaks of character typification as similarly fluent because it "intensifies the dialetic of individuality and sociability" (672) and "works simultaneously through inclusion and exclusion" (672–73). Tanoukhi argues that in debates on world literature, these tensions have a special resonance for African literature because generalizations about African writing tend to take on the form of stereotypes ("Africa as metonym for war and starvation"), whereas generalizations about the West are put in terms of universality ("Paris as a paradigm of modern ambition") (673).

To make sense of the many tensions Tanoukhi addresses, I use Adichie's novel, a framed narrative that also contains self-reflective sections, to explore the intersection between three kinds of typicality: typification, the typicality of realism-as-mimeticism, and the typicality of Africanness as

emblematic of an entire continent. As Tanoukhi suggests, the inherent connection between social settings (typicality) and fictional representations (typification) holds specific stakes in the novelistic construction of Africanness. As I will demonstrate, narrative embedding in Adiche's novel offers an addition to Tanoukhi's interpretation by distinguishing these categories. It gives a narrative framework to think through African literature as a category that is not merely constructed around Africanness as a referential entity that balances specificity and typicality but as an important addition to critical theorizations of the relationship between text and context in realism writ large.

To start engaging with the charged term "the African" without essentializing it into a single story of itself, I draw on previous conceptualizations of Africa as a category, for instance Ato Quayson's definition in "Obverse Denominations: Africa?", which captures the constructedness of Africanness: "*[B]lackness* (read here: Africanness also) is first and foremost a location within a structure of determinations. This structure writes itself in history as a series of cross-cultural encounters in which blackness has always had a particular quality of impoverishment and evolutionary backwardness as its signature" (586; emphasis in original). Two points stand out: the claim that Africanness is a construct and the idea that this construct writes itself through cross-cultural encounters. Appiah, Achille Mbeme, and V. Y. Mudimbe, like Quayson, emphasize the concomitant relationship between literary representations and the determinations that arise from them, particularly because of the inevitability of juxtaposition with the West/global North. For instance, in his seminal text, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, Appiah claims that "African literature is a useful, albeit constructed category" since "the social-historical situation of African writers generates a common set of problems. But notice that it is precisely not a metaphysical consensus that creates this shared situation" (81). Appiah's mention of a common set of problems, along with his adamant claim that Africans "do not have a common traditional culture, common languages, a common religious or conceptual vocabulary" (26), leaves Africanness as little more than a historical construct, generated merely by encounters, processes, and discourses.

And yet, as Mbembe points out in his book *On the Postcolony*, representation (as text) and reality (that which the text represents, "referentiality" in Freedgood's terms) are, after all, not *only* constructed, and not separate, either. In other words, even with the endless chain of signifiers that underlies representation, there must be a rock bottom from which we can conceive meaning: "On the pretext of avoiding single-factor explanations of domination, [academic] disciplines have reduced the complex phenomena of the state and power to 'discourses' and 'representations,' forgetting that discourses and representations have materiality" (Mbembe 5). Materiality is important; it functions as a sort of anchor that ties referentiality to the past as well as the present. Relating Mbembe's reminder to Appiah's statement, Africanness is not merely a historical and discursive construction that generated a common set of problems but an identity that people on the continent relate to in myriad ways. In this sense typicality is more than the background against which the text negotiates historical and social referentiality; it is also the untraceable, complex web of significations in which fictional texts convey meaning.

II. Narrative Embedding in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Double narrative embedding, which combines nested narratives with often-humorous self-reflective ruminations, has been part of the African realist tradition since the publication of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and, indeed, has become an important element of the African realist novel. In one of the final passages in Achebe's novel, the white district commissioner writes a book titled *The Pacification of the Tribes of Lower Niger*. In it, Okonkwo, the novel's protagonist, receives only a "reasonable paragraph" (164). However, as Gikandi points out, "[t]he ultimate irony . . . is that although the Commissioner has the final word in the fictional text, Achebe—the African writer who has appropriated a Western narrative practice—writes the colonizer's words and hence commemorates an African culture which the colonizer thought he had written out of existence" (*Reading* 50). Achebe thus uses the commissioner's book metaleptically to reflect on the role of writing as a means of dominating the discourse in the colonial situation.

I use the term metalepsis in this context to consider narrative embedding as a way of conceptualizing the role of the real author vis-à-vis the text. While Genette used the term to describe slippages between diegetic levels, between "the world in which one tells, [and] the world of which one tells" (236), Freedgood extends the term to discuss slippages between fictionality and referentiality. Writing specifically about historical fiction, she argues that metalepsis is created as a rupture of referentiality: "[R]eference, historical or otherwise . . . *is* metalepsis [which] we make use of unconsciously" (94; emphasis in original). As Freedgood points out, in historical realism, the texts' realist form enables this kind of metalepsis because of the significance of referentiality—the historical background against which the text is deemed plausible and consistent. The metalepsis, then, lies in the metadiegetic slippage that allows Achebe-the-author to become part of our reading of *Pacification*: our projection—from our contemporary point of view—of the novel's seminal status onto the text is so central to our reading of it that it becomes part of the novel. Through the metaleptic dynamics created by characters themselves writing, we ridicule the district commissioner all the more for giving Okonkwo only a "reasonable paragraph" because we know that Okonkwo is by now one of the most well-known protagonists in world literature.

Yet Freedgood refers to this kind of metalepsis in instances in which the referential—the historical background—becomes part of the fictional without directly addressing the text's written form. In instances of writing-about-writing, this kind of metalepsis becomes more specifically focused on the fictionality of the text because it refers concretely to its written aspect and representational impulse. The passage in *Things Fall Apart*, for example, illuminates how a written culture is trying to negotiate its place within a largely oral culture. *Pacification* heightens the feeling of orality in Achebe's narrative. Critics such as Eugene McCarthy, Jarica Linn Watts, and Quayson (in "Comparative Postcolonialism") have paid significant attention to orality in Achebe's works, particularly the association of Africanness with orality; as F. Abiola Irele observes, in African societies "we have a pervasiveness of the spoken word" (54). And as Gikandi notes, the typicality that the metalepsis plays on is precisely

the tendency to split the world into a binary of African versus Western and, correspondingly, oral versus written (*Reading* 79).

Of course, the single story of orality as authentically African is rendered incomplete by Achebe's novel because, ironically, the novel we have just finished reading is a written account like *Pacification*. Yet the embedding of a fictional, written account from the commissioner's ignorant point of view also gives Achebe's novel a sense of interruption and foreignness: we feel that *Things Fall Apart* is a story very much unlike *Pacification*, and this difference grants the main narrative a sense of orality. The juxtaposition between the two pieces also inserts an extratextual awareness of the novel's written form into our reading, thereby providing *Things-Fall-Apart*-the-novel with a role in its own process of meaning-making.

Things Fall Apart has since become part of the referential background of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* not only because of the success of both authors and books but also because Adichie adopts the narrative strategy of a fictional book-within-a-book. The embedded text in her novel, called *The World Was Silent When We Died*, chronicles the Biafran War (much like the novel itself) and has been widely accepted as a conscious echo of Achebe's work: John Hawley calls it a "ghost of Achebe" (20), and Andrade refers to it as an "authorial sleight of hand [that] echoes and reverberates the ironical ending of *Things Fall Apart*" ("Genealogies" 92). Indeed, *The World Was Silent* recalls Achebe's commissioner's book in many ways: the two embedded fictional texts are both works of historical nonfiction, written about the periods with which the novels are concerned; both books become central at the ends of their novels, overturning readers' expectations about who gets to inscribe history and how the process of writing history unfolds; and, significantly, both highlight the tendency to draw the authors of the novels into our reading of their texts.

Appearing as short installments scattered throughout the novel, *The World Was Silent* reads as the work of Richard, *Half of a Yellow Sun*'s British protagonist, who struggles with his desire to write about Igbo culture. Only at the end of the novel do we learn that Ugwu—the

houseboy turned teacher, soldier, and family confidante—wrote the manuscript. Thus, on the surface, it seems as if Adichie reverses Achebe's example by giving the African protagonist the last—and, significantly, the written—word. But the parallel between the embedded books in Adichie's and Achebe's novels is infinitely more complex, especially in light of the divergent literary contexts in which the texts were written.

III. From Achebe to Adichie: Changes in Historical Context

African literature has gone through significant changes over the five decades between the publication dates of the two novels, and their extradiegetic and referential backgrounds are arguably important components of the way they are often read. When Achebe allows the white man to write history, he does so not only as a humorous way of writing himself into his narrative but also as a reflection on the era's historical status quo: at the time, it was indeed the white colonials who almost exclusively documented in writing the lives of Africans. In an interview repeated in Gikandi (*Reading*), Achebe describes this sentiment: "Reading *Heart of Darkness* . . . I realized that I was one of those savages jumping up and down on the beach. Once that kind of enlightenment comes to you, you realize that someone has to write a different story" (xvii).

Because the historical positioning of Achebe's text is well-known, Madhu Krishnan reads the irony of *Pacification* as secondary to its more serious reflection on the power relations captured in writing: "[T]he District Commissioner's musings highlight the long-standing anxieties surrounding literacy and orality in African literatures, writ large. . . . [T]he oral, the 'authentic', disappears, written over by a disinterested modernity" (30). But while Krishnan certainly addresses a valid aspect of the much-discussed irony of *Pacification*, I suggest that her characterization of the "chasm between oral and literate cultures assumed by Achebe's District Commissioner" (30) does not sufficiently account for the extratextual echoes created by the commissioner's book and the way that Achebe's role in bridging this chasm becomes part of the novel. In other words, in addition to Achebe's well-known inclusion of oral

elements in his fiction, his own success has contributed to the growing inseparability of written and oral modes of representation in African literature—what Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo describes as "the close affinity that exists between the oral and written modes in African literature and culture" (19).

Acknowledging the "affinity" rather than the "chasm" between oral and written modes in African textual production also draws on recent attempts to consider the "evanescent local traditions that coalesce into increasingly syncretic new wholes" (Quayson, "Signs" 73).[4] In this case, Achebe's role in bridging the gap between oral and literate cultures is not only negotiated by the content and style of *Things Fall Apart* but also enhanced by the novel's success—its extradiegetic realm. The embedding of the self-referential commissioner's text is precisely the moment in which the text itself hints at such a reading.

Therefore, when Adichie invokes Achebe's district commissioner, she brings a double layer of extratextual significance into her novel: first in the act of embedding itself, different from and yet strangely reminiscent of *Pacification*, in that the act of recalling the ironic infamy of this commissioner brings his typification/typicality into Adichie's engagement with the question of race. Second, by writing more than five decades after *Things Fall Apart* and drawing on its success, Adichie's diegetic layering, like Achebe's, is a reflection on the act of telling stories and the oscillation between oral and written mediums of storytelling.

Unlike Achebe, however, Adichie is concerned not with inventing an African discourse or "writing back" but rather with the movements between specificity and typicality that underlie the growing complexities in representing Africanness. Accordingly, Adichie's text focuses on the intersections between various dualities and power relations that reflect on the tension between single stories, typicality, and typification. She draws the three seamlessly together through the text's self-reflective meditation on how writing is related to social hierarchies. She explores these power relations, which allow her to reflect on the dialectic between class, race, and gender roles that are assumed by the two writers in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Richard and Ugwu.

IV. The Negotiation of Typicality and Typification in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Half of a Yellow Sun is narrated in the third person and focalized through three characters whose stories are interconnected; as the story unfolds, the centrality of writing within this triangle grows. And though Richard and Ugwu both eventually become protagonist writers/authors, they follow different paths to their calling. Throughout the novel, Richard's identity is tied to his writing, and the embedded writing in the novel is most pronounced in his plotline. Ugwu, on the other hand, becomes a writer only after the war. In fact, Ugwu is barely literate when, in the book's first pages, he arrives at the household of Odenigbo and Olanna, a university professor and his wife, who are among the novels' protagonists. Having completed standard two—second grade—Ugwu can read only rudimentary English (Adichie, *Half* 13). Reading and writing Igbo is never brought up as an option for literacy because of the structures and logic of the colonially founded Nigerian educational systems. Ugwu is quickly enrolled in the university staff's primary school but still sees writing as a mark of foreignness: "Ugwu was even more amused that Mr. Richard wrote his answers down in a small book with a leather cover. . . . The *mmuo* [masked spirits] themselves might even laugh at the sight of a pale stranger scribbling in a notebook" (109).

During the first part of the novel, Richard and Ugwu follow dichotomous—and stereotypical—roles of the African (oral) informant introducing the white man to native tradition, with the white man writing as a foreigner. However, such a reading is quickly overturned, particularly in light of the extradiegetic echoes that draw Adichie into the interpretation of the text—not in the sense of authorial intent and motivation but rather as an individual standing in for certain social categories. Much like Richard and Ugwu who are fictional characters that stand in for extradiegetic collective categories, Adichie-the-person remains unknown as an individual (almost as if she, in this context, is fictional) yet known for the social categories she represents: Nigerian, woman, elite. These extradiegetic categories necessarily entail a negotiation of typicality—ideas and belief of what each category signifies.

But while such ideas, like Adichie, remain outside the realm of the novel-as-text, what is important here is the process of typification—the way certain typical narratives are interpolated into the representation and characterization of fictional protagonists. Just as I suggest that Adichie takes on certain traits of fictionality by being unknown as an individual yet representative of collective categories, she also undergoes a process of typification.

For instance, one might ask how gender relates to the question of authorial authority: Olanna, the third and only female protagonist in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, does not get to write her story—it is Ugwu who inscribes her war memories. But if we move to the extradiegetic realm, Adichie overturns the gender asymmetry, as she is, finally, the female writer who has the last word—much like Achebe in the Western/African duality. Moreover, as I note elsewhere, considering the extradiegetic realm also brings up the question of class since Adichie represents "the elite in the educated/uneducated class divide" (Wenske 84), while Ugwu, who gets the last word in the novel, stands in for the working class.

The metaleptic rupture between fictional and real author deconstructs the typical and dichotomous relationship between these dualities. In fact, the novel's inclusion of an African protagonist writer—unlike what happens in *Things Fall Apart*, which separates the protagonist and writer—suggests that Africanness is moving away from orality as the most (or only) authentically African voice, allowing written and syncretic modes of production to emerge as equally "African." As such, *Half of a Yellow Sun*'s invocation of Achebe's commissioner does not straightforwardly project a reversal of authorship between the European and African writers but rather highlights the novel's negotiation of various categories of typification and the ways in which the characters embody the metaleptic rupture between typicality and typification in historical realism. The change in Adichie's protagonist-writers compared to the one-dimensional typicality of Achebe's commissioner is a testament to the long road African literature has travelled since the 1960s.

In her portrayal of both Richard and Ugwu, Adichie's employment of realism through free indirect discourse renders her characters utterly humane, sympathetic, and distinctive. But it is perhaps the overall

impression that they are not typical characters in the sense of an African/European binarism that allows them to embody realism's constant tension between typicality and typification. They do not represent an average (if such a vague concept can even be approximated) but rather individual examples, as well as the ways the negotiation of typicality within typification establishes reliability in the sense of negotiating their collective categories in a coherent manner. As part of this negotiation, the two protagonists' writing processes are closely linked to the duality of the collective/individual and the public/private. I examine these dualities by reading Ugwu and Richard's writing processes in the context of the social categories they inhabit.

V. Narrative Embedding in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Ugwu's journey toward becoming a writer is, ironically perhaps, made possible by the war in which he serves as a child soldier, a war that upends the rigid social hierarchies of newly independent Nigeria. Having acquired some education while he was a houseboy, Ugwu is able to become a teacher at Olanna's makeshift war school, signifying his metamorphosis into a man of "Book."[5] As a poignant reflection of the relationship between teaching and writing, Ugwu's stint as a teacher also shows that "Book" is not an avenue for social mobility but rather a marker of class hierarchy. Indeed, some of the women refuse to send their children to be taught by Ugwu because of his class status: "'Is he not your houseboy?' Her voice was shrill. 'Since when has a servant started to teach, *bikokwa?*'" (Adichie, *Half* 366). Thus, when Olanna gives Ugwu the role of teacher, she is challenging the idea of education-as-status, replacing it with education-as-knowledge. This echoes one of the first lessons Odenigbo teaches Ugwu before sending him to school, in which Odenigbo distinguishes the official narratives one needs to know to get certification from others' forms of knowledge: "There are two answers to the things they will teach you about our land: the real answer and the answer you give in school to pass. You must read books and learn both answers. I will give you books, excellent books" (13–14). As the novel itself is precisely such a book that "teaches you about the land," Odenigbo's words seem pertinent to the novel in which his

character is embedded, foreshadowing the educative impulse that later guides Ugwu's writing about the war.

The same idealism that guides both Ugwu and Olanna as teachers later morphs into Ugwu's personal urgency to write. His writing oscillates between the public act of writing-as-collective-memory and the private act of focusing on the intimate details of his own—and his closest friends'—experiences: "Finally he started to write about Aunty Arize's anonymous death in Kano and about Olanna losing the use of her legs, about Okeoma's smart-fitting army uniform and Professor Ekwenugo's bandaged hands" (498). Rather than simply describe the events and people that Ugwu writes about, the novel goes into detail about his writing process: "He listened to the conversations in the evenings, writing in his mind what he would later transfer to paper. It was mostly Kainene and Olanna who talked, as though they created their own world that Master and Mr. Richard could never quite enter" (499). Ugwu's motivation to capture the personal is also evident in the title of his book. He originally wants to name his book after *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which inspired him during the war: "Yes, sah. It will be part of a big book. It will take me many more years to finish it and I will call it 'Narrative of the Life of a Country'" (530). His proposed title oscillates between public and private by adapting the narrative of a single life into the narrative of an entire country. Yet even though Ugwu's writing has an implied public orientation, his writing process is described as private: Ugwu does not consider his audience but is entirely immersed in the process of documenting personal memories. This becomes apparent when his methods are contrasted with those of Richard, who is much more conscious of his audience.

Ugwu's title, "Narrative of the Life of a Country," oscillates between the individual and the collective by adapting the narrative of a single life into that of an entire country and describing the war through an ensemble of personal stories. In contrast, the title that Richard chooses when he starts writing his war narrative, *The World Was Silent When We Died*, has two collectives—us versus them—suggesting the narrative is more concerned with public narratives than private ones. The impression that *The World Was Silent* is not concerned with using private stories to tell a

collective story is strengthened by the installments scattered throughout the novel. All except the first and last installments discuss various aspects of Nigeria's history: the role of British rule in the polarization of tribes (Adichie, *Half* 146–47); the impact of World War Two on independence (195); the economic problems of the post-independence era (256); the starvation in Biafra and its global significance (297); and other nations' evasion of responsibility in protecting civilians during the Biafran War (324).

Yet when Ugwu hears this title, his reaction—remembering his role in a gang rape—shows the intuitive connection he makes between collective and personal, public and private: "Later, Ugwu murmured the title to himself: *The World Was Silent When We Died.* It haunted him, filled him with shame. It made him think about that girl in the bar, her pinched face and the hate in her eyes as she lay on her back on the dirty floor" (496). It is therefore telling that Ugwu eventually chooses Richard's title for his own narrative, after Richard tells him that he has stopped writing his book. The fact that Ugwu uses the title is revealed at the very end of the novel, when the last installment from *The World Was Silent* ends with the words "Ugwu writes his dedication last: For Master, my good man" (541). The reversal in authorship also reflects on the other installments: even though they describe the historical processes that led up to the war, they are intricately tied up with the personal stories Ugwu has collected. Though we never learn how the historical and personal are related in the fictional book, the connection Ugwu makes between them highlights his development as an author and his increasing focus on the global historical forces that caused the war.

Likewise oscillating between private and public, the connection Ugwu makes between the title when he first hears it and his own moral downfall during the war suggests that he harnesses his shame to make the "we" of the title both more personal and more inclusive. The use of the "us/them" dialectic calls into question who is included in both categories: Is the text addressed to the world, to Nigeria, to Biafra? Consequently, is "we" inclusive or exclusive? Are foreigners who were in Nigeria during the war, like Richard, included? Are the Nigerians on the other side who died during the war? Or are "we" the Biafrans only?

I raise these questions not to answer them but rather to suggest that the indeterminacy of Ugwu's "we" reflects on issues of commonality and, as a result, typicality/typification. Because we are never told which collectives are included in "us" or "them," the unknowability brings up the collectives that may be included while highlighting the fact that "we" guess at them. Ayelet Ben-Yishai suggests that "[o]ne of the things that realism does—and does very well—is to create a commonality over time" (202). In other words, by underscoring the collectives in both the diegetic and metadiegetic narratives—specifically those collectives that move beyond the typical categories of African/Western—the text replaces the typical of referential single stories with typification of characters as a means of reliability; coherence between narrative and reference is established by highlighting that the unknowability of "we" on a narrative level echoes the uncertainty around collective categories in general. The use of the plural "we" hints at a construction of commonality that simultaneously borrows from and undermines the referential categories that, though unknown, are hinted at through the tension between typicality and typification. This may seem paradoxical, but it is echoed in realism's oscillation between fictionality and referentiality, which establishes the referential frameworks through which the text is contextualized: "[R]ealism makes meaning by participating in the creation of 'the real' that is at the root of its name" (Ben-Yishai 202).

At the same time, there is a significant dissonance between the public that is the foundation of the installments and the strong emphasis on the private through which Ugwu's writing process is embedded in the novel. This discord is most clearly discernible in the repetition of a central occurrence—Olanna's train ride away from the massacres in the north, when she encounters a woman who is carrying her daughter's severed head in a calabash—from three points of view. The moment is first described in the (metadiegetic) installment of *The World Was Silent* in which Ugwu writes about it: "For the prologue, he recounts the story of the woman with the calabash. . . . Olanna tells him the story and he notes the details" (Adichie, *Half* 103). The story appears a second time, when Olanna's experience is recounted as part of the plotline: "Olanna was thrown against the woman next to her, against something on the

woman's lap, a big bowl, a calabash" (187). Finally, Olanna reiterates the scene to Ugwu as he is chronicling her experiences for his book: "Then she described the head itself, the open eyes, the graying skin. Ugwu was writing as she spoke, and his writing, the earnestness of his interest, suddenly made her story important" (512).

The differences between the three accounts suggest that the repetition of the episode constructs not only the meaning of the scene itself but the meaning of its representation, particularly the process of turning private experience into public history, memory into record, and speech into writing. When Olanna experiences the scene, the description is physical, presented in actions and dialogue; Olanna caresses the calabash and looks into it. But when she reiterates the scene to Ugwu, the language is more descriptive and less detailed: for instance, "open eyes" replaces "rolled-back eyes"; "the graying skin" replaces "ashy-grey skin."

The changes between the accounts thus mirror the dynamics of narrative embedding. The correspondence between narration and reference is put on display and the text becomes a performance of storytelling. According to David Lodge, narrative embedding thus functions as "a mimesis of an act of diegesis, diegesis at a second remove" (95). Here we have trauma at a second (or third) remove, mediated by Ugwu/Adichie. Yet this distance allows an extremely disturbing event to become subtle and truthful, giving it both the reliability of truth and the palatability of narrative. The different versions also illustrate the impossibility of fully connecting—or fully separating—the communal historical process from the individual representations that stand in for it. While realism occupies this gap, it can never fulfil this role completely, and this inability is reflected in the slippages between typicality and typification.

VI. Richard's Self-Reflective Writing

The dialectic between the public and the private also underlies Richard's attempt to define his identity through writing. Throughout *Half of a Yellow Sun*, readers are led to believe that Richard is the author of the installments of *The World Was Silent*, which are all narrated in the third person and attributed to an unknown "he." Richard is initially the only author in the novel, and the title *The World Was Silent When We Died*

is the one Richard chooses for his book. More subtly, the installments' public and political orientations are strikingly similar to those of an article Richard writes for the *Herald*—the only instance in which the novel quotes Richard's writing directly: "It is imperative to remember that the first time the Igbo people were massacred, albeit on a much smaller scale than what has recently occurred, was in 1945. That carnage was precipitated by the British colonial government. . . . [T]he notion of the recent killings being the product of 'age-old' hatred is therefore misleading" (Adichie, *Half* 209). The vague phrase "[i]t is imperative to remember" conveys a kind of objectivity that contrasts with the free indirect discourse of the novel itself. While the novel focalizes the subjectivity of a cast of protagonists, the phrase "[i]t is imperative" impels readers to ask why, by whom, and to whom this truism applies. The contrast between the diegesis (the novel itself) and the metadiegesis (the embedded article) thus enhances the sense that the novel's fictional narration is more reliable that the embedded article's nonfictional, referential claims.

Indeed, the contrast is felt when we become privy to Richard's follow-up article, in which the free indirect discourse highlights the process of writing, rather than its product:

> He began to write about Nnaemeka and the astringent scent of liquor mixing with fresh blood in that airport lounge where the bartender lay with a blown-up face, but he stopped because the sentences were risible. They were too melodramatic. They sounded just like the articles in the foreign press, as if these killings had not happened and, even if they had, as if they had not quite happened that way. The echo of unreality weighed each word down; he clearly remembered what had happened at that airport, but to write about it he would have to reimagine it, and he was not sure he could. (211)

The text's recognition of the author's subjectivity and his dilemmas—for instance, not wanting to sound "too melodramatic" or not being able to describe the killings accurately—emphasizes writing's imperfect ability to capture experience, thus heightening the novel's verisimilitude.

The third-person narration in the passage highlights the self-referentiality of writing-about-writing by making Richard not only the writer but the subject of writing, illustrating Peter Brooks' claim that "framed narration offers a way to make explicit and dramatize the motive for storytelling" (259). The difficulty of narrating scenes that are not just emotionally difficult but also seem to reinforce stereotypes about Africa thus becomes a challenge for both Richard and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Moreover, the self-reference of Richard's writing generates a metaleptic rupture between diegesis and extradiegesis: the novel-itself is the real written text, while Richard's writing is merely fiction (even if nonfiction-within-fiction).

The process that Richard goes through in his writing (and its failure) mirrors Ugwu's transformation from orality to writing and the personal to the public. Ugwu looks first at the present (his personal experiences) and from them draws on the past (his nation's and tribe's public history). Richard first sees the past and then recognizes his own position in history. Richard's negotiation of collective identities is captured in the novel's emphasis on and use of the plural form as a way to construct commonality, which ironically both draws on and debunks typicality. For instance, the typicality of the white characters—not Richard, but his first girlfriend Susan and their British friends—is poignantly underscored by Susan's references to Nigerians as "these people" in her derogatory remarks: "It's quite extraordinary, isn't it, how these people can't control their hatred of each other. Of course, we all hate somebody, but it's about *control*. Civilization teaches you control" (Adichie, *Half* 194; emphasis in original). Later, she asks Richard: "Will you make sure always to use a rubber? One must be careful, even with the most educated of these people" (296). Her vocabulary strongly draws on the single story through which Africa, the West, and the meeting between the two remains one-dimensional and incomplete. Yet rather than perpetuate this single story, incorporating representations of such stereotypes actually enhances the novel's reliability. These quotes, positioned against their referential background of Nigeria in the 1960s, convey a sense of plausibility because Susan typifies typicality: her views are

representative of the era yet unreliable in the context of the much more nuanced contemporary narrative.

Against this (stereo)typical backdrop, Richard's character easily stands out. The text describes his modesty and cultural sensitivity as atypical of whites in Africa: "[H]e did not have that familiar superiority of English people who thought they understood Africans better than Africans understood themselves" (45). Richard's atypicality, juxtaposed with his collective identity, is negotiated through his writing, which addresses topics ranging from colonialism to Igbo history to contemporary politics. His first attempt to write about Nigeria is a book called *The Basket of Hands*. He describes it as a portrayal of the two-sidedness of the colonial enterprise: "It's about labor. The good things that we achieved—the railways, for example—but also how labor was exploited and the lengths the colonial enterprise went to" (292). Richard refers to the colonial powers as "we," demonstrating his feeling of complicity in the imperial past.

Tellingly, after his partner Kainene burns *The Basket of Hands*, Richard distances himself from the colonial "we," learns Igbo, and settles into life in Nigeria. This change is reflected in his writing. Richard's second book, *In the Time of Roped Pots*, shifts his focus away from imperialism and his position as an insider to Igbo history. Yet Richard's description of Igbo-Ukwu art, archeological findings of bronze castings from the ninth century (Adichie, *Half* 77), betrays his feelings of being an outsider to the Igbo world: "The details are stunning. It's quite incredible that these people [the Igbo] had perfected the complicated art of lost-wax casting during the time of the Viking raids" (141). The irony of Richard's use of the term "these people" is not overlooked by the other characters; Okeoma, a poet whose character is based on Christopher Okigbo, one of Nigeria's most prominent poets who was killed during the Biafran War, promptly replies: "You sound surprised, as if you never imagined *these people* capable of such things" (141; emphasis in original).

This is not the only time Richard succumbs to the single story he is battling against: at the end of the novel, when Kainene goes missing, Richard has a confrontation with Madu, Kainene's old friend, which sparks an outburst of blunt racism: "Come back, he wanted to say, come back here and tell me if you ever laid your filthy black hand on her"

(537). One may argue that Richard's racist mental outburst is evidence of an inability to transcend the typicality of the West/Africa binarism, but I offer a reading that takes into account the long and winding road that Richard goes through in the novel, both on a diegetic and metadiegetic level.

Richard's third and last book, *The World Was Silent When We Died*, shows, paradoxically, how his writing allows him to inhabit the fine line between insider and outsider. When he comes up with the title, Kainene asks him: "We? The world was silent when *we* died?" (469; emphasis in original), to which Richard replies: "I'll make sure to note that the Nigerian bombs carefully avoided anybody with a British passport" (469). But after the war, during an encounter with Ugwu—and after reading Ugwu's notes on his book—Richard tells Ugwu that he has stopped writing his book because "[t]he war isn't my story to tell, really" (530). The only way Richard can truly take on his new identity as Biafran/Nigerian is by recognizing that, as a white person, he is an outsider in the Biafran War, even though he was physically present in Biafra. Richard's exclusion from telling the story of Biafra becomes his inclusion in a more equal Nigeria. Moreover, his typification (as both same and different) vis-à-vis the collectives he represents (the British in Nigeria, and white racism in general) interpolates the typical into the specific. Recognizing the omnipresent tension between the dualities entailed in the encounters between Europe and Africa shows that atypicality, like typicality, is essentially incomplete.

Moreover, Richard's negotiation of these identities, through his self-reflective writing-about-writing, draws the extradiegetic realm into the diegesis: we cannot ignore the fact that, even if it is "not his story to tell," Richard does, in fact, tell part of the Biafran story since he is a protagonist in Adichie's novel (particularly since the novel's success also, metaleptically, makes Richard famous). I suggest that identifying Ugwu as the author of *The World Was Silent* is thus not a simple case of giving a black character (or a working class character, or even Adichie as a woman) the final and written word but rather a reflection on writing as process-not-product, and that this is a new way of conceptualizing the ever-shifting balance between the oral and the written.

Indeed, Richard's writing is presented via free indirect discourse (with one exception to serve as contrast), that is, we have access to it only through the discussions of and meditations on it by other characters; the novel contains no quotes from his manuscripts and articles written during the war. For example, readers have access to *In the Time of Roped Pots* not through direct quotation but only through the dialogue about it between Richard and Okeoma. As a result, the focus of Richard's writing shifts away from what he has actually written to his writing process.

I argue that what is significant about this kind of embedding is not only the subjectivity it creates but the contrast that *Half of a Yellow* Sun establishes between writing and not-writing. This contrast, combined with the association of Africanness with orature, infuses the narrative with an awareness of orality: Richard is an oral character despite being a writer because his work is inaccessible to us—we know him only through his dialogue and thoughts. Moreover, his writing is not just inaccessible to the reader but destroyed: one manuscript is burned by Kainene, the second is lost during the war, and the last is abandoned. The only writings Richard publishes are his articles for the press and the propaganda directorate of the Biafran government. Thus, the reversal of orality and writing is, in a sense, complete: if the culture of orality is often lamented as all but lost because of the introduction of books and writing, here the written is lost because of its very rudimentary physicality. Manuscripts are lost because they can be burnt, while culture cannot be lost because it is carried on by people. As such, orality in *Half of a Yellow Sun* follows the zeitgeist of the orality-literacy debate: as Daniela Merolla argues, current research has shifted "from dichotomies to a cognitive continuum where orality and literacy have many common aspects and where 'performance' is central to oral communication" (82).

Traces of orality also linger in the embedded sections of *The World Was Silent When We Died*. The third-person narration in the sections is strikingly different from the free indirect discourse of the rest of the novel: the sentences are short, often collapsing complex historical processes into a few words, and start with a description of authorship:

> Installment 2: "He discusses the British soldier-merchant Taubman Coldie" (147).
>
> Installment 3: "He writes about Independence" (195).
>
> Installment 4: "He argues that Nigeria did not have an economy until Independence" (256).
>
> Installment 5: "He writes about starvation" (297).
>
> Installment 6: "He writes about the world that remained silent while Biafrans died" (324).

The style of the installments—their emphasis on process, the repetitive chorus with which they begin, their brevity—gives Ugwu's writing an oratorical quality. Significantly, we are never told whether Ugwu publishes his book, and so its embedding underscores the limited ability of writing to capture lives lived and historical processes. It leads us to wonder this: if Ugwu's written account is not published, does it return to its original private and personal role? The main point, however, is that, as I mentioned above, we do not know whether it is published. The installments' unfinished form thus situates the novel precisely in-between orality and writing, the public and the private, and typicality and typification. It suggests that what we do not know about Ugwu's writing stands in for the immeasurable and unquantifiable significance of the text (and fiction) in general.

As with the district commissioner in *Things Fall Apart*, whose embedded book, *Pacification*, gives the rest of the novel a sense of orality, the embedded writing in *Half of a Yellow Sun* makes the writing in the novel and the meditations on writing appear to be tales of not-writing, not-being-written. Whereas orality is often embedded in writing through the inclusion of proverbs and folk stories, nested writing embeds orality through a self-reflective exploration of the relationship between memory and representation. Realism's position in this duality has often been considered in terms of its written form and thus has been pitted against an orality that is positioned as authentically African (Krishnan 31). As one way to break up this dichotomy, the

embedding of writing through free indirect discourse breaks up the seeming contradiction between orality and writing that the typicality of Africa versus the West entails.

VII. Conclusion

Narrative embedding in *Half of a Yellow Sun* draws on typicality—specifically the dualities that underlie the West's conception of Africa—to undercut the single stories of Africanness and realism. In fact, the novel's temporal structure—which moves back and forth between the early and late 1960s—further underscores the text's manner of movement, shifting back and forth between dualities to reflect on the links between form and content. The movements in the novel's timeline are also related to the narrative's written form: readers are able to move backwards and forwards in the text just as the narrative moves back and forth in time. As a result, the texts' movement in time, along with the oscillations between the public and the personal, fictional and referential, past and present (which, of course, are both in the past from readers' point of view), all become the shift between Ugwu's orality and his writing, and Richard's writing and his orality. Indeed, their lives within the diegesis take on a quality of orature precisely because their writing remains inaccessible to the reader. Consequently, the image of Africa that emerges in between these temporal movements is deeply intertwined with the balance between the individual and collective, thus establishing *an* Africanness to replace the notion of a single, and singular, such idea.

Though realism has fallen from grace in some critical circles, perhaps even more so in postcolonial contexts, my readings have demonstrated how the genre enables a self-referential engagement that is far from naïve or unaware of its own biases. Instead, it offers avenues for conceptualizing the distinctions between three overlapping forms of typicality: typification, the typicality of realism-as-mimeticism, and the typicality of Africanness and the single story. The link I make between realism and Africanness is not meant to suggest that narrative embedding is unique to African fiction or that realism is the most appropriate genre for historical, social, and political texts. Instead, these connections highlight a specific dynamic between diegesis and referentiality that is created

around the single story and suggest that it might be useful to theories of realism and embedded writing in other contexts as well.

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Notes

1 For example, a distinction between typicality and typification can be found in *Half of a Yellow Sun* in Richard's response to an article about Nigeria in *Time* magazine: "Time magazine titled its piece MAN MUST WHACK, an expression printed on a Nigerian lorry, but the writer had taken whack literally and gone on to explain that Nigerians were so naturally prone to violence that they even wrote about the necessity of it on their passenger lorries. Richard sent a terse letter off to Time. In Nigerian Pidgin English, he wrote, whack meant eat" (208; emphasis in original). The extradiegetic characterization here is in reference to Nigerians, who are portrayed in international media as being typically violent. The diegetic characterization, on the other hand, is in Richard's response: by undercutting the referential typicality, Richard's character takes up a specific positionality that becomes his character. Through Richard's negotiation of referential typicality, the reader comes to expect his views and behaviors when encountering other extradiegetic characterizations (that is, typical narratives) that bleed into the diegesis through historical realism's commitment to reference.

2 Booth, who writes extensively on narrator reliability, describes it as follows: "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks or acts in accordance with the *norms of the work*, unreliable when he does not" (158–59; emphasis added). Because of the centrality of the notion of "the African" in what is read as African literature, I believe that the negotiation of Africanness and the collective categories associated with it form part of the norms of Adichie's novel: the conventions against which readers and critics judge reliability.

3 Tanoukhi quotes Adichie's argument on how important it was for her to write about kinky hair and mangoes instead of blonde hair and apples in order to show that people like her—Africans—could exist in literature. Yet Tanoukhi

writes: "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" (670; emphasis in original). In other words, kinky hair and mangoes were Adichie's way of portraying the specificity of the African experience, yet they slowly became emblematic—and thus incomplete—metonyms for African life.

4 Quayson explores these new syncretic modes in his investigation of text in the public sphere, terming Oxford Street in Accra, Ghana an "archive of discourse ecologies" (72).

5 The term "Book" is used repeatedly in the novel, mostly by Arize, Olanna's cousin, to refer to Olanna as highly educated: "It is only women that know too much Book like you who can say that, Sister" (51); "She must have your brain and know Book" (163); "Because of too much Book, you no longer know how to laugh" (165). Moreover, "Book" indicates the status of the elite, as seen when Odenigbo and Olanna are stopped at a roadblock: "The officer stopped and gestured to Odenigbo. '*Oya*, book people, go. Make sure you change those number plates'" (521).

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